

## The Polyeleos *A Good Word* in the Musical Reflection of the composer Horaţiu Alexandrescu

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**Abstract:** *The polyeleos Cuvânt bun [A Good word], thus conceived by the contemporary composer Horaţiu Alexandrescu in order to be sung by male choirs, develops, harmoniously and polyphonically, an old psaltic chant written in the middle of the 19th century by the protopsaltis Kiril Arvinte from Ciolanu Monastery in Buzău and published by the archdeacon and musician Sebastian Barbu-Bucur in his volumes of church sacred chants. The composer creates expressive musical images, that send an inner state of peace and prayer, by rigorously respecting the functionality of the melodic formulas, rhythm and meter of the fifth tone; it is, thus, avoided, the sonoric spectacular which has nothing in common with the orthodox worship space.*

Keywords: *polyeleos, modalism, psaltic, composer, polyphony,*

### 1. Introduction

“The polyeleos (gr. πολὺ ἔλεος, πολυέλεον = much forgiveness, much mercy) is a chant whose text is formed by verses chosen from psalms 134 (*You Servants of God*) and 135 (*Confess to the Lord...*). It is sung at the matins of the feasts of some saints after the second row of sedalen. At the feasts of the Virgin Mary, the polyeleos is composed of verses from the psalm 44 (*A good word resounds in my heart...*)” (Barbu Bucur, 1984, 381).

Horaţiu Alexandrescu is a professor, conductor, composer and musicologist. He was born on May 17, 1955, in Constanţa, and graduated from the “Ciprian Porumbescu” Conservatory of Music, Bucharest, Faculty of Music and Musical

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Composition, Musicology section (1979). He has a doctorate in Musicology from the National University of Music, Bucharest. (2005). The professor had written over 200 works which comprise orthodox sacred choral music and secular choral music for all types of choirs, four cantatas, the opera "Saint Andrew, the Apostle", chamber music, incidental music and musicology works. He is a member of the Union of Romanian Composers and Musicologists, and a founder member of the Romanian National Choral Association.

The polyeleos *Cuvânt bun* [A good word] was written by the composer Horațiu Alexandrescu in 2009, at the request of the Tomis Archiepiscopate. The work is registered by Radio Romania under the interpreting of the male choir *Cuvânt bun* from Constanța, conducted by the Archid. PhD. student Gianin-Cristian Oprea and acquired by the Union of Romanian Composers and Musicologists in 2010. This chant-prayer is being sung during the matins of feasts of the Mother of God.

The psaltic melody on which the musical speech of the work has been built is neumatically marked by the Protopsaltis Kiril Arvinte from Ciolanu Monastery in Buzău, around 1850 and has been published by Archdeacon and PhD Professor Sebastian Barbu-Bucur in his volumes of psaltic music.

The choral work signed by Horațiu Alexandrescu accurately follows the functionality of the ehoi (tone) 5, diatonic and plagal tone of the first tone, also called *plagyos protos*. The work is of religious inspiration and is written for male choir and a tenor soloist.

## **2. *Cuvânt bun* [A good word] – Stylistically Analysis**

The choral embellishment of the psaltic music combines the modal harmony with the polyphony. The melodic and cadential formulas of the fifth tone are carefully and faithfully kept.

The architectonic of the work respects the structure of the prayer-text. Each one of the two verses of the polyeleos has a musical section. The first section **(A)** is related to the verse *A good word resounds in my heart. It says: Rejoice, Queen of Heaven, blessed Mother of Christ, our Lord! Hallelujah!*, and the second section **(B)** to the verse *I say my things to the Lord. Rejoice, Queen of Angels, Mistress of the world*. The author even states these in the score by numbering them. He uses at the end the traditional formula of the prayer, which is *Hallelujah*, that means *God be praised* (hebr. *Hallel Yahve*), which is a musical coda.

|              |              |              |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>A</b>     | <b>B</b>     | <b>Coda</b>  |
| (m.1 - m.39) | (m.40- m.56) | (m.57- m.65) |

One of the features of the composer's entire choral work that have a psaltic character is related to the rhythmic-melodic formulas of the *echoi* that behave like musical motives, having, one or two metric accents.

The melody belongs to the fifth *echos*, also called the hypo-dorian *echos* due to his function as a *first echos* plagal. The scale used is the enharmonic one, usually used for the sticheraric or papadic cadence (see ex.1). Although the usual modal centre of the *fifth echos* is *D*, this time, the work is made on *F*, due to the male choir ambitus.

Example 1. *The scale of the fifth echos* (Panțîru, 1971, 234)

In the vision of the composer Horațiu Alexandrescu, with regard to this choral chant, the voice extension surpasses the interval of a ninth. The bass covers an interval of a perfect twelfth (*E-flat-B-flat*), the baritone covers the decimal (*B-flat-D<sub>1</sub>-flat*), the second tenor evolves in the interval of minor ninth (*C-D<sub>1</sub>-flat*), and the first tenor sings the song also in an interval of major tenth (*E flat-G<sub>1</sub>*). The score of the soloist covers the entire tenth (*F-A<sub>1</sub> flat*). The entire play is dominated by the gradual melodic rhythm, interrupted in some incipient melodic formulas by perfect fifth and fourth jumps, and occasionally, by major and minor thirds. The melody remains faithful to the Byzantine model sung at the kliros of the churches.

The metric fully depends on the text. Although the four quarter notes measure has been initially proposed, during the play, depending of the tonic accents of the words, the metric oscillated between two and three quarter notes. While the short durations (Quaver, Semiquaver) generally, marks the theme interpreted by one of the voices, the long durations (Minim and Semibreve) represents the "isons" that accompany the theme.

In what concerns rhythmic characteristics, one could state that there are imperfect cadences on *A*, *C* and  $F_1$  (corresponding to *ga*, *ke* and *Pa'* from the Byzantine notation) and perfect cadences on *F*. The melodic beauty is given by its simplicity and by the gradual repetition of the cadence formulas by each voice or by the soloist, accompanied by chords of fourth and fifth, a specific trait of the modal harmony.

The first section – **A** (m.1-m. 39) corresponds to the verse *A good word resounds in my heart. It says: Rejoice, Queen of Heaven, blessed Mother of Christ, our Lord! Hallelujah!*, the voices enter in stretto, the theme being successively sung by the bass, the baritone, the first tenor, and, finally, by the second tenor.

Lento=48

The musical score consists of four staves, each representing a different voice part. The tempo is marked 'Lento=48' and the dynamic is 'mp'. The time signature is 2/4. The key signature has three flats (B-flat major/D-flat minor). The lyrics are in Romanian. The first system covers measures 1-4, and the second system covers measures 5-8. The lyrics are: 'Cu- vânt bun A - li - lu - i - a lu - i - a Răs - i - a Răs - pun a Răs - pun Răs - pun'.

T1  
Cu- vânt bun A - li -

T2  
Cu- vânt bun A- li - lu - -

b  
Cu - vânt bun A - li - lu - i -

B  
Cu - vânt bun A - li - lu - i - a

6  
lu - i - a Răs

-i - - - a Răs - pun

a Răs - pun

Răs - pun

Example 2. The first phrase from Section A

The composing procedures are polyphonic and easily identified, certain musical motives easily passing from one voice to another (see *Example 2*).

The chord on the thirds are, usually, avoided, which is, usually, one of the traits of the modal embellishment of the psaltic music.

Another trait of the enharmonic scale of the fifth tone regards the usage of *natural D* ascending and *D flat* descending. Of course, here *D (pa)* is the equivalent of *B(zö)* from the Byzantine notation, which is under the influence of the Syrian *Agem ftoral*, with the above mentioned effect (see *Examples 1 and 3*).



Example 3. *Syrian Agem ftoral*

The polyphonic reflection of the composer suggests the antiphony as a type of execution of some of the Christian chants, even from the first centuries of our era.

Imitations, the entering in stretto of the voices, the succession of the sonoric planes, the continuous dialogue between the voices, all of these form the author's conception in what concerns the religious choral art.

One of the traits of the musical speech is represented by the usage of the ison, a type of chant used nowadays, present in the liturgical chant since the patristic period.

In what concerns the importance of the usage of the ison in the choral creations, Daniela Doroșincă states: "The usage of the ison in the harmonic choral chant begin with the first processings of the psaltic melos, its presence certifying a certain sonority of the Byzantine music ethos. If in the psaltic chant, the ison accompanies the entire melody, oscillating between the tonic, the dominant and other steps that it moulds, in the choral works this is valued on shorter parts, depending on the coloristic effect the composers wish to obtain, being present in more and more different versions" (Doroșincă, 2013, 18-19).

Răs - pun - s - a i - - ni - ma - - mea cu -  
 pun - - s - a - -  
 s - a - - i - - ni - - ma - -  
 s - a - - i - - ni - - ma - -  
 s - a - - i - - ni - - ma - -

vânt - bun A - li - lu - i - a  
 A - li - lu - i - a  
 A - li - lu - i - a  
 A - li - lu - i - a  
 A - li - lu - i - a

Example 4. *The second musical phrase*

Due to the polyphonic thinking of the composer's musical speech, the melody passes from one voice to another, which compels the interpreter to use timbre unity and text articulation. While the melody is predominantly gradually built, the harmonic-polyphonic layer is clear, having long values, the melodic leaps functionally emphasizing the structure of the fifth echo.

The second section – **B** (m.40-56) corresponds to the verse *I say my things to the Lord. Rejoice, Queen of Angels, Mistress of the world*. The melody starts with the bass (m.40-44), who continues it together with the baritone (m.45-47), and amplified under the sonoric tension by the entire choral ensemble, on the words *Rejoice, Queen of Angels, Mistress of the world* (m.48-56).

Gră - iesc eu lu - cru ri - le - me - le

Example 5. *The first phrase from Section B*

The work finishes with a coda (m.57-m.65) on the word *Hallelujah*, the melodic line being, first, sung in unison by the tenors, while the bass voices use long durations of the sounds, a stylistic trait of the psaltic chant, accompanied by the ison.

A - li - lu - i - a      A - li - lu - i - a      A - li - lu - i - a      A - li - lu - i - a

lu - i - a      A - li - lu - i - a      A - li - lu - i - a      A - li - lu - i - a

Example 6. *Coda*

The functional relations are plagal; the author intentionally eliminates the third from the vertical sonoritic structures built on the main steps (string of recitation 1, string of recitation 2, subtone, final), thus, respecting, the traits of the voice.

The procedure represents one of the stylistics methods used by the composer Horațiu Alexandrescu, whose musical creation is strongly anchored in the Romanian psaltic music tradition.



### 3. Conclusions

The polyeleos *A good word* is a theological-mariological synthesis, endowed with a special profoundness, that gathers the prophecies of King David about the Mother of God and the means of worship comprised in the patristic and philocalic writings of the Church. In this context, the harmonic-melodic and architectonic structure of the choral work completes and embellish the profound theological message of the work.

One could state that, through timbre, dynamic and agogic, and, especially, through the sonoric balance that it gives out, the musical speech consolidates the sung prayer and makes the sonoric expression render sensitive the mind and soul of the one who listen to it and prays. Being dedicated to the cultic space, the chant gives away peace, moving minds and hearts.

The choral song *A good word* is one of the contemporary composer Horațiu Alexandrescu's reference works, together with *Taina creștinătății* [The Mystery of Christianity], the carol *Cerb s-a lăudat*' [Stag was boasting], the choral suite *De nuntă* [Of Wedding], comprising folk music themes from Herța- Bukovine, *Versete alese la Taina Sfintei Cununii* [Distinct Verses to Holy Matrimony], *Imnul Heruvic* [The Cherubic Hymn] and *Tatăl nostru* [Our Father], works that have been awarded by the Romanian Patriarchate in 2011, 2015 and 2016, as well as with the opera *Sfântul Andrei, Apostolul* [Saint Andrew, The Apostle], or the cantata for one soloist, children choir and symphonic orchestra *Aducând cântări, mulțime* [Bringing hymns, o people].

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