

A COMPOSER'S SELF PORTRAIT. PRAYERS FOR THE CHOIR BY LEONARD DUMITRIU

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Abstract: *the present paper is a composer's confession of the creating process that lead to the six Prayers for the choir; it is equally an exercise in self-analysis based on candidness, lucidity and the decision to take the responsibility for "musical deeds" that have already been done. The unavoidable nature of subjectivity and the aspiration towards objectivity are intertwined, as the author, in his double identity, wishes to describe the stages that lead to the completion of the scores. The compositional technique for choir is considered through the angle of its components, in phrasings devoid of any musicological dryness.*

Key words: *Leonard Dumitriu, prayer, harmony, polyphony, choir compositional discourse.*

1. Introduction

The composer in our contemporary world benefits from an exceptionally important opportunity: absolute freedom of choice! The music of past ages has been so well and so extensively composed that compared to 150 or 200 years ago, we are now much freer in selecting a musical path to walk along as creators of "musical goods"! Being free, however, implies a great responsibility! An example chosen from today's social world is the way Romania has developed in the years following 1990, in other words, the way the Romanians acted after the fall of a dictatorship that is generally not regretted. Have the people had the wisdom to take advantage of this freedom so many aspired to? It is not the purpose of the present paper to offer an answer to this question.

We shall equally refrain from pondering on the manner in which our compatriots and fellow composers reacted to the freedom bestowed upon them.

The present paper is the author's attempted confession of the way he had thought it appropriate to create choir music in the year 2013!

2. Argument

I am not a very famous composer, partly because of my own nature and way of being, sometimes quite self-defeating in that I am not pugnacious and do not advance my own aims. However, I sometimes assume this with stoicalness, sometimes with self-irony. Before embarking on a new project, I usually ask myself a number of questions generally related to what I intend to achieve. What I

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know for sure – and I can unflinchingly confess it – is that I have long given up the wish to be original at all costs. I strive – and this is no exaggeration – to make my music sound as good, as balanced, and harmonious as possible. When my pieces are intended for a choir ensemble, such concerns are given even more prominence.

At the end of the year 2013 I realized that, without having any design in this respect, my production over the past 12 months as a composer had been mainly destined to choirs. More than that, the choir pieces circumscribe the spiritual horizon and are written on the texts of several prayers used in the Orthodox cult.

It is for the first time when I attempt to approach as a composer this profound austere territory of manifested Orthodox spirituality. I started with a choir piece thinking it would be an isolated enterprise. After I completed it, I felt I needed to continue and so I went on to create five more *Prayers* for a mixed choir (male and female voices) on texts (a term that is somewhat inappropriate in this context) from the *Book of prayers and teachings of the Orthodox faith* published at the Neamţ Monastery in 1984 and printed with the blessing of his Most Reverend Teoctist Archbishop of Iaşi and Metropolitan Bishop of Moldavia and Suceava.

I am fully aware I can be criticized, harshly even, for not having resorted to the Byzantine tradition in composing the six prayers, as the great Paul Constantinescu did in his own creation. Their performance in public may certainly take place in a church, but they can equally be part of a programme in a lay musical institution. These pieces display harmonic and polyphonic elements from the Western European tradition, without, however, indicating any relation to the sound patterns specific of the Catholic or Protestant Church. Prestigious Romanian predecessors of high repute have done the

same, a good example in this respect being Marţian Negrea in his *Requiem* for soloists, choir, and orchestra.

3.1. Prayer

This is the title of the first piece, the only one that does not retain the actual title of the prayer whose text it uses, which is *Heavenly King*; it opens the series of *Trisagion* present in the prayer book mentioned above. The piece was commissioned by my distinguished colleague Assistant Professor Dorina IUŞCĂ, PhD, to be included in the programme of a choir ensemble and performed on Palm Sunday on April 28th 2013.

Fig. 1. *Prayer* (an excerpt)

It took me about two hours to compose this piece during the morning of February 18th 2013. It may well surprise the readers to learn that I was overwhelmed by a moment of inspiration! The melody-creating imagination effortlessly bore fruit, in a natural sequence of rhythm, voice registers, dynamics and

agogics, which were appreciated by the singers who performed the piece a few weeks later.

The main feature is simplicity, which can be traced in the melody (undulating and mainly gradual), in the harmony (the supporting pillars are easily recognizable), polyphony (short and efficient canons), the voice treatment (the voice parts are mainly devised in pairs), registres (approachable and favorable to expressive emission). Even if it is only two minutes and a few seconds long, the *Prayer* is a successful choir piece, which pleases both the interpreter and the audience.

3.2. A prayer for our benefactors

This is the second choir piece of the series of prayers. Its wonderful message is found among the other prayers for various situations, on page 49 of the *Book of Prayers* printed with the blessing of his Most Reverend Teoctist ex-Archbishop of Iași and Metropolitan Bishop of Moldavia and Suceava, now His Beatitude Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church. As it is a prayer with a clear address, all those it was dedicated to were mentioned in the subtitle, as all these persons' names are forms of the name Vasile: my father Vasile DUMITRIU, Vasile SPĂTĂRELU, my Professor of composition, who both passed away, Mr. Vasile BURLUI and Mrs. Vasilica STOICIU FRUNZĂ, two persons who have constantly helped me along my life.

I can say in all confidence and awareness of my choice of words that the music of this *Prayer* is one of the most accomplished creations of the author of these pages. There certainly are factual arguments to support this statement, but the strongest two arguments are subjective in nature: the overwhelming impression this prayer had on me and, even more subjectively, the time when it was composed, which is the Week after Easter

of the year 2013 (to be more precise, the days between May 8th and 11th of that week). It took me a few days to create this choral poem, which is about eight minutes long.

It was very difficult to adapt the musical sentences to the phrases of the text, which are comparatively long. As is well known, breathing control is last among the concerns of lectern singers, but I had to pay great attention to this element. Composing a musical sentence for the choir that is based on the natural breathing rhythm is a basic requirement of the compositional technique, which is taught and which, at the same time, must be "sensed". This element was paid due attention, I was, however, concerned to avoid the excessive fragmentation of the text.

There is balanced interlacing of harmonic musical fragments and those resorting to polyphony, but they undergo a process of permanent transformation. In a piece of such length I was naturally obliged to take into account the optimal gradation of dynamic culmination as well as the appropriate proportioning of the moments that can be placed at the other end of the expressive range, in *pp* and *sotto voce*. I considered that the dynamics and agogics were the best vehicles to transmit my feelings during the time when the piece was composed; the type of choir that can best render them should be of about 45 – 50 singers.

The most interesting and even surprising aspect of this music is its harmonic layout. It is characterized by a constant flow of chords, which is placed under the sign of multiple interpretations. The audience might be tempted to claim that vertical relations pertain to tonality, yet no sonorous centre can be clearly identified. Which is the origin of this somewhat unusual composition? I cannot produce a logical or adequate answer to this

question... It is just that inspiration was the God-sent gift which I made use of in those moments, along with my knowledge and skills acquired in the years of compositional and interpretive practice.

To conclude, *Prayer for our benefactors* is a piece which is both “good” and “beautiful”. In their general meaning, both terms are particularly subjective and hold a significant amount of conceit. I hope, however, to be forgiven for my lack of humbleness or objectivity.

Fig. 2. *A prayer for our benefactors* (polyphonic excerpt)

3.3. A prayer of parents for their offspring

A wonderful prayer addressed to the Heavenly God is to be found on page 47 of the *Book of prayers* published at Neamţ Monastery in 1984. The words are beautiful, filled with profound meaning, and yet so deeply human and vibrant! Their message inspired me to create a musical piece that fuses the explicit

meaning of the text with the implicit meaning of the sounds. The compositional labor took longer than initially anticipated: it was composed between July 25th and 29th 2013.

Fig. 3. *A prayer of parents for their offspring* (bars 23-31)

I could not say about this piece whether I consider it a success or not. My confessed doubt and torment does not refer to the compositional technique for choir music, the good horizontal and vertical coordination of voices, the expressive gradation of the melody, the rhythm and intensity rising to culmination. I believe these elements that are part and parcel of the compositional skill are well structured. But was I really so much inspired that, on hearing my music, God might smile protectively and be pleased to receive the musical prayer that I addressed Him? This is a question that is troubling me, for so far I have not been able to find an acceptable answer. It may well be that the feelings experienced by the singers when they approach the piece for study and perform it for the audience, as well as the public's reaction will alleviate my torment.

3.4. The prayer of hours by Saint John Chrysostom for the night hours

When I chose *The prayer of hours* to compose music on, a solution emerged that I had not thought of before. The previous three prayers for choir had made use of a mixed choir. The fact that the first part of this prayer is destined to be said during night time, while the second is meant to be read during daytime, made me write two pieces, one for female voices and the other for male voices. Thus, the first part of the *Prayer of hours* was conceived as the text for a piece for female voices. September 11th 2013 was the day when this composition was created.

My purpose was to avoid diminishing the vocal body of the female voices, which are placed from the medium to acute register in the general musical range and therefore have fewer harmonics; I consequently decided not to use *divisi*. I have scrupulously concentrated my musical imagination on the soprano and alto

voices; they were given melodic and rhythmic lines that are easily approachable in terms of voice. In this way, I offered them the possibility to focus on the expressive quality of the music and also on the deep message of the text.

Since the text is comparatively long, I was concerned with the appropriate distribution of intensity; the fact that the music is distributed to two voice parts only increases the degree to which they are employed during the performance. There are very few pauses, which are vital in performing choir music, so the soloists' endurance is put to the test. The rhythm of the music is undoubtedly subordinated to that of the text and it is so conceived of so as to ensure, along with the tempo, the appropriate utterance of the lyrics. The musical sentence is also appropriately subordinated to the text; thus, the musical sentence requires extensive breathing. The following is an example of how the musical sentence is structured: "O Lord Jesus Christ write my name, the name of Your servant, in the book of life and give me a good end."

The musical score consists of three systems of music, each with a Soprano (S.) and Alto (A.) part. The lyrics are in Romanian. The first system (bars 31-32) starts with a fortissimo (ff) dynamic. The second system (bars 33-34) also starts with ff and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The third system (bars 35-37) starts with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic. The lyrics for the first system are: "Doam - ne, li - su - se Hris - toa - se,". The lyrics for the second system are: "scri - e - mă pe mi - ne, ro - bul Tău, în car - tea". The lyrics for the third system are: "vie - jii și mi dă - ru - ieș - te sfăr - șit bun.".

Fig. 4. *The prayer of hours by Saint John Chrysostom for the night hours*
(bars 31-37)

The contrary movement prevails, in an attempt to use the register of the female voices adequately. In the end, on the word *Amen*, each voice was further divided into two sections in order to obtain a full luminous major chord upon A.

Regarding the harmonics, I continued using the oscillating technique previously employed in all the other prayers. However, I consider that closeness to a sonorous centre is more easily distinguishable in the vertical structure of this choir piece; this may also be due to the difficulty in creating fluctuations by means of no more than two voices.

Even if this is chanted at midnight, I constantly felt a light flowing from the text of this wonderful prayer written by the mellifluously mouthed saint, so the music I created is clear and serene.

Fig. 5. *The prayer of hours by Saint John Chrysostom for the night hours* (final excerpt)

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3.5. The prayer of hours by Saint John Chrysostom for the daily hours

What first surprised me on reading this prayer is the austere nature of many of the words in the first verses, such as: contriteness, temptation, death, tears, humbleness, and sins. In the second, another set of words can be found: submission, kindness, love.

I mentioned earlier that the choir I created this piece for is a formation of male voices, which can be subdivided into three, four or even five or six sections; my choice was to divide the musical discourse into a maximum of four distinct lines. With their richness of harmonics and generous compass, the male voices offered me the possibility to re-create the feelings and states existing in the text. The beginning is in *pp*, with the request of refraining from increased intensity for six bars.

Fig. 6. *The prayer of hours by Saint John Chrysostom for the daily hours* (the beginning)

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Male voices can introduce small light and shade, *sotto voce* effects, a head register or a muted voice, and they can also support gradual increments of intensity and the more intense light and shade. Many such moments are introduced in the music of this prayer; the unexpected changes of light and shade are accompanied by changes in the registers, with a fan-like sound effect, which opens and closes easily.

The musical score consists of six systems, each with a vocal line (Tenor 1&2 and Baritone & Bass) and a piano accompaniment line. The lyrics are in Romanian. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf*, *f*, and *senza dim*, and articulation like accents and slurs. The lyrics are: "Doam-ne, să-deș-te în mi-ne ră-dă - ci - na bu-nă - tă - ți-lor și fri-ca Ta în i-ni-mă mea. Doam-ne, în-vred-ni - ceș-te-mă să Te iu bes-cu tot su-Ńe-tul și gân-dul meu și să fac în-tru toa-te vo-ia Ta. O Doam - ne."

Fig. 7. *The prayer of hours by Saint John Chrysostom for the daily hours* (bars 26-36)

Naturally, in this case, the harmonic layout is bolder in comparison with the prayer intoned by the female voices, while the rhythm and tempo serve the same purpose, that of modelling diction and focusing on the capacity of communicating the deep meanings of the text. The fluctuating harmonic layout raises many difficulties in interpretation in that both the conductor and the vocalists have to consider very wisely the relations between sounds as their components of chords. Emission is also challenged by this compositional technique of choir work, since correct intonation is vital for an accurate performance.

The following example illustrates the previous statements and can offer the competent reader an idea of what the music sounds like.

This piece was composed immediately after the previous one, more specifically on September 16th and 17th.

3. 6. A prayer at the completion of work

There could not be a better ending for the series of pieces *Prayers for choir*, which had been left somewhat unfinished and unpolished after the pieces composed in September. Thus, on December 16th I wrote the music for the text of *A prayer at the completion of work*, which carries a message of extreme simplicity, sincerity, and depth. I returned to the formula of the mixed choir as a corollary of the entire series.

With the exception of one more "excentric" moment, the harmonic layout is light and clear, thus rendering the satisfaction of man thanking his Creator for the support offered in completing a certain activity. My feelings on composing this piece were of serenity, comfort, satisfaction but mainly of thankfulness, gratitude. The final piece of this series of choir pieces is similar to the first; the

similarity is discernible in its reduced length, the light character, the simple yet efficient compositional technique. Without any design, the series is thus rounded which begins delicately in *Prayer*, becomes tumultuous in *A parents' prayer for their offspring* and ends in contentment and gratitude in *A prayer at the completion of work*.

Fig. 8. *A prayer at the completion of work*
(final bars)

4. Conclusion

I find it difficult to repeat a banal statement uttered so many times before and well known by everyone: any musical piece must “come out” of the scores where it is “closed” and become alive through performance by the human voice and “bear fruit” in the conscience of the audience. As for the six *Prayers*, they need more than that. Although, except the first piece, they have not yet been brought to public attention, God does know how much they are worth better than any mortal, the composer, and author of the present lines being no exception. People’s judgment, if and when it comes, will by necessity be limited, irrespective of the plausible or depreciating nature of the opinion vented.

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