

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION IN FELICIA DONCEANU'S COMPOSITIONAL WORK

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Abstract: *A sensitive personality, through built on an extremely solid genetic background, and absorbed by the desire of expressing – by means of music – her existential principles, her dreams, her connection with the Divinity, and, last but not last, her exhortation to morality, to meditation and to patriotism, Felicia Donceanu does not shy away from communicating to the audience - both by means of the music and beyond it - the deep transcendental connection being created, day by day, between her and The One inspiring and accompanying her step by step -namely God.*

Key words: *religious, poetic verse, aesthetic, stylistic.*

1. The religious dimension in Felicia Donceanu's compositional work

“I would not want my words to sound like a blasphemy, but I could define my relationship with God as one of great friendship, because *He* is the One guiding me, supporting me, *He* is a part of me. I am walking along the street, and in those moments we are talking, the ideas are coming into my mind, and the communication with *Him* feels very familiar to me. It seldom happens for me to actually stay and pray. When I go in the church, I am concerned about the atmosphere - I prefer it when there is nobody there - and then, my thoughts come together, then I can focus, I feel both protected and free; it is a plenary feeling. And I return to the idea that it is *Him* Who makes me do all these things, it is from *Him* that they come. I believe this explains why, very many times, I have been told that my music comforts people, that it communicates a comforting feeling”. [3]

Under the influence of such feelings, the musician has offered her audience numerous sonorous moments of an exceptional profundity, full of demiurgic resonance, arisen out of her love for God and for her fellows, a feeling described in creations of spiritual-religious essence, encountered in most of the composition genres approached by her – choral music, lied, vocal-symphonic music, vocal-instrumental chamber music, music for children etc.

2. The influence of the poetic verse on the aesthetic and stylistic factors

In her desire to create, by music, the cosmic and metaphysical dimension of the demiurgic space, Felicia Donceanu has turned to the expressive power of the word and everything that represents the poetic art, using in some creations her own lyrics or religious and lay texts coming from Romanian, Old Greek and Latin, over which she has added - with a particular art

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- sonorities of a thrilling expressivity. Thus, she has created states of deep prayer, gratitude, praise, repentance and imploration, all these revealing, in this case, the spiritual apparel of her own being, but also the features of her soul.

Just as in the case of the other works of the author, where the two major arts - the literary and the sonorous one - are combined, revealing both deep artistic reflexions, inspired out of the “sisters” of the musical art (the dramaturgical, visual, choreographic ones etc.), where the word (with its meanings and significance) has priority in the creation of the sonorous act, also, in this dimension of her artistic work - namely, the religious one -, the same principle is observed: the stylistics and aesthetics of the poetic verse and all its components (rhythm, accent, musicality, motif, phrase, poetic discourse, form and architecture etc.) – as a starting point, as a support and adaptation in the composition of the musical language. From this perspective, depending on the stylistic and aesthetic nature of the selected religious verse, there have arisen works with Byzantine, Gregorian and lay influences, following step by step the numerous characteristics of the religious music. Again, the “word” influences the evolution of the composition of Felicia Donceanu’s works, generating sonorous structures in accordance with its configuration, and, acting directly on the melody and on the type of intonation, on the rhythm and on the musical versification, on the harmony and polyphony, on the quality of the voice, on the form and architecture, on the dynamics and agogics.

3. Influence of the Latin language on the compositional pattern

Juxta Crucem dolorosa for men chorus and solo mezzo soprano, on a religious text in Latin, *Lamento* for soprano, two violas

da gamba, clavecin and percussion, on a religious text in Latin, *Stabat Mater* for women voices and harp, on a religious text in Latin, are just a few of the works following the meaning of the Latin and lay lyrics with religious subject - achieved under the influence of the Gregorian, neo-Classic and post-Romantic structures - all of them captured in an extremely personal, original and plastic compositional pattern, with a particular psychological effect. The melody line of these creations is mainly modal, namely diatonic, and uses, in general, pentatonic structures, its construction avoiding, most of the times, the characteristics of the tonal system and the chromatically charged or the enharmonic sections. Also, melismas are used to a limited extent in the melodic line, and through the general interweaving – of slow character – remind of the Gregorian concept of “cantus planus” (plain song – Lat.), and in some sonorous zones borrow elements of the lay music with Romantic influences, which influences are felt through the perspective of the programming of the works, and through the accentuation of the melodic–vocal line, of lyric or dramatic character, too. The rhythm is generally balanced or has somehow a free character, here and there, being often focused on great values of the sounds (quarter notes, eighth notes and the exceptional divisions in the close vicinity of the two), without sudden oscillations that could estrange the creations from the religious expressivity zone. Also, the harmonic segment bears the influences of the Gregorian, neo-Classic or post-Romantic compositional typologies, their shared element being the diatonic modal. Polyphonic moments are often used in these works, obtained both through the classic procedures of the imitative and linear polyphony, and through modern procedures, intending to make use of the timber of the instruments. The form of the

works closely follows the structure of the poetic lyrics, the latter often generating free sonorous, monopartite, bipartite or tripartite structures. The voice is carefully used in the scores of these creations, almost on a vocalist level, in a free and easy register, only to deeply reveal the significance of the lyrics. The voice-instrumental section extremely expressively completes the religious landscape of the works, giving the composition, here and there, a certain Renaissance character.

4. Poetic and compositional Byzantine echoes

The religious framework turns into a Byzantine one in the following works: *Invocatio* – a poem for soprano, violin, piano and chamber orchestra, on a religious text and using some quotations from the poetry of Ovid, *Potentissimo Dio* – a hymn for chorus a capella on Petru Cercel's lyrics, *Prayer for Virgin Mary* for soprano, clarinet, violin, violoncello and piano, on a religious text, *Prayer* for tenor and for piano, on a religious text, *Pater Emon* for voice and percussion, on a text in Old Greek, and all the versions of the *Lord's Prayer*. The music in these creations gives priority again to the poetic verse, inserts special moments of Byzantine influence, displaying their religious expressivity, on the level of the melody, rhythm, harmony, voice quality, form-architecture and dynamics-agogics. Their general character is a modal-diatonic and chromatic one, using structures inspired from the diatonic Byzantine and chromatic modes, and gives priority to the construction of the vocal melodic line.

The sonority is focused on the revelation of a single melodic line, accompanied vocally or instrumentally, using an accompaniment with Byzantine features. The Byzantine structures, the mode or the

modal scales used are modified through a subtle process to the diatonic scale, displaying mild melismas, placed in a complex rhythm, focused on an alternating metric background. The sobriety of the artistic message comes from the construction of the modal language, treated both harmonically and polyphonically, avoiding, most of the times, the classic structures of the tonal system. The rhythm connects, in general, the high values of the sounds; it is developed on the basis of the variational classic procedures and follows, step by step, the construction and significance of the selected verse. The musical versification is exposed in a complex form, most of the time - an alternant one, often generating polymetria moments. The polyphonic writing, found in some moments of the works, is created in a traditional or free, linear and imitative mode, thus revealing a particular attention given to the composition of the horizontal plans. The timber and the vocal-instrumental dimension are exploited extremely well by the musician, being the main aesthetic factor used in the construction of the atmosphere with a religious character. The form and the architecture of the works follow the same trajectory of the form and architecture of the poetic text, generating monopartite, bipartite, tripartite or free structures.

5. *The Lord's Prayer* for a cappella choir by Felicia Donceanu – poetical and compositional connections

The compositions *The Lord's Prayer* signed by the composer Felicia Donceanu were born at the turn of the year 1990, when the historical events offered the Romanian people dramatic and unforgettable moments. "I have written this composition around the Revolution. It was a very special moment. In Timisoara there was a cousin of mine, Dominic, a

very pious man... he was shut during that time. But he had a burst of despair, when he saw so many children dying, as he himself had children. He was much younger than me, but we were born on the same day. I was discussing with him on the meaning of the words from *The Lord's Prayer*. In the old times, this work was not sung very often. In the discussions we insisted on the syntagm *Your will*, actually this is how I end my composition, this is the motivation of my componistic gesture. Because we cannot impose our will; all that happens is the Lord's Will because we cannot impose our will; all that happens is the Lord's will. We need to accept His will, being aware of it. A man who is concerned, thinks, but accepts God's will... I cannot think of the variant *do not lead us into temptation*, because it is not God Who plans this, it is not Him that leads us into temptation. Into temptation we are led by an unclean force. This is why I think I can say *Do not let me into temptation...* And the term *the Cunning one* [instead of the Evil one]... cunningness seems to me more dangerous than evilness. This term has been imprinted long ago in my mind, when I was a child and I heard people in the countryside speaking about it".¹ Without making a direct connection to these events, we can say only that they actually constituted the context and the environment in which this music was born, back then when every Romanian felt the need to pray. At the same time, *The Lord's Prayer* represents for mankind the supreme image of love, altruism and teaching offered by Jesus Christ to mankind for salvation, "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray like this..." [4], a divine composition turned into a song by the Romanian and the universal music on very

many occasions along the Christian history.

Starting from the contemporary and remote historical facts concerning the Christianity, the composer Felicia Donceanu felt the need to pray, to pay homage to the divinity and to thank for the gifts meant for her in her life, which have helped her express herself, caress and give joy to the people around her by means of her music. Many times, the words cannot encompass or express the huge love for the people and for God, even painting, music or the other arts cannot fully describe this feeling, although they directly address the human soul, the author directly speaks to the human soul. However, the author has imparted in different ways her spiritual gifts, driven by the same feeling of deeply felt love for God, her fellows and life in all its complexity, offering on the gift "bestowed on her" – also in *The Lord's Prayer*. Thus, the author realized partitions having the same name for different interpretative formulas, out of the very desire that "every man" may pray along with her: The Lord's Prayer for Mixed A Capella Choir (*Tatăl nostru pentru cor mixt a capella*), adapted for children's choir and men's choir, The Monody The Lord's Prayer for Voice with Instrumental and Percussion Accompaniment (*Monodia Tatăl nostru voce - ison instrumental si percuție*), Pater Emon for Mezzo-soprano, Cello and Percussion (*Pater Emon pentru mezzosoprană, violoncel si percuție*), The Lord's Prayer for Voice and String Orchestra (*Tatăl nostru pentru voce si orchestră cu corzi*). Analyzing this aspect, we can say that Felicia Donceanu is aware of the gift bestowed on her by God, expressing a deep gratitude for it and feeling a the need to daily offer something in her turn and to love everything around her.

The message of the choral prayer *The Lord's Prayer*, transmitted in various orchestral variants by Donceanu, resounds

in the conscience of every listener; all those who listen to her music and pray along with the author remain stunned in front of its greatness, being almost involuntarily propelled in a demiurgic world, in the Creator's, the Heavenly Father's world. At the same time, all these works do not address a certain moment of the day or a specific area – such as the ecclesiastic one, concert halls or celebration days, but rather address any moment of our existence, the resounding pulsation of the prayer seeming to be a permanent echo of our own revelations. “For Felicia Donceanu, the signal of our time exhorts to a solar culture, able to lift man's spirit, and this culture cannot exclude religious music. For this artist who is a believer <Christianity meant, in the world's history, more than all the wars and revolutions together!>... The identification of Felicia Donceanu's compositions with the <euphony of the Orthodoxy> gives her life and her work a unique human value.” [2]

From a religious perspective, *The Lord's Prayer* is one of the main moments of the Holy Liturgy, being placed like a climax in the second part of the divine service, being interpreted in a homophonous or harmonized manner by all the participants to the service, according to their musical training. We need to recall the fact that beginning with the 19th century and to this day, numerous variants of Liturgies have been produced, and so *The Lord's Prayer* has been sung in extremely various ways in the same Byzantine style, depending on the authors of the scores. The beginning of the 20th century brought to light numerous choral works written according to the style of the classical Holy Liturgy, the Romanian composers specific for this period - Francisc Hubic, Teodor Teodorescu, Gavril Galinescu, Gheorghe Cucu, Ioan Chirescu, Sabin Drăgoi, Ioan Popescu-Pasărea, Zeno Vancea, Dimitrie Cuclin, Paul Constantinescu, Ioan

Chirescu, Nicolae Lungu etc. – approaching different typologies of psaltic creation. “After 1990, a series of liturgies and also a series of creations inspired by the Byzantine melos and based on liturgical texts have been produced. In the Library of the Composers' and Musicologists' Union of Romania we have found: *Liturghia* (The Liturgy) by Liviu Comes, *Liturghia* (The Liturgy) by Dumitru D. Stancu, *Liturghia* (The Liturgy) by Valentin Timaru, *Liturghia valahă* (The Wallachian Liturgy) by Tudor Jarda, *Liturghia Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur* (The Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom) by Serban Nichifor, *Liturghia* (The Liturgy) by Dragos Alexandrescu and so on.” [1] At the same time, during the same historical period, after 1989, one can find a series of composers who have preferred to produce compositions in different vocal or vocal-instrumental formulas under the influence of the verses of *The Lord's Prayer*, such as Dumitru G. Kiriac, Dragos Alexandrescu, Sorin Vânătoru, Zaharia Popescu, Mircea Neagu, Dan Voiculescu, Irina Odăgescu, Cristian Alexandru Petrescu, Valentin Gruescu, Serban Nichifor, Marcel-Octav Costea, all these works reminding one way or the other the Anton Pann's resounding psaltic melos of *The Lord's Prayer*.

“A hypostasis that immediately gathered the public's adhesion, for the very fact that it manages to evoke the Byzantine spirit of *The Lord's Prayer*, in the essence of the state of recollection in oneself, of going away from the external things to realize the inner meditation unto the communion between earth and heaven, is the one composed by Felicia Donceanu (January 28, 1990).” [1]

6. Conclusion

Certainly, each of the works with a religious character has its particular artistic universe, the compositional means and

procedures used by the musician being extremely varied and adapted to the depth of the intended message, and having a fascinating power on the human conscience, breaking us off from the contingent reality and leading us towards a transcendental dimension, with a cathartic effect on our souls. “Felicia Donceanu... has also composed a lot of religious music, which falls into the <Orthodoxy euphonia> category..., and has generated a work with a confessional tone, penetrated by an inner lyricism, and in her religious works we can often feel, a certain austerity, a certain austere and hieratic splendour.” [1]

Notes

ⁱ Felicia Donceanu in an interview realized on June 6, 2006 by the masteral student Adina Pernesiu, in the dissertation work - *Limbaje si arhitecturi în creația corală a Feliciei Donceanu* (Languages and Architectures in the Choral Creation of Felicia Donceanu), Bucuresti, 2006.

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4. *** *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 6:7 – 9.