

Nuns Epiharia Moisescu and Magdalena Nicolescu, Authors of Church Hymns in 19th – 20th Centuries

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Abstract: *In an attempt to substantiate the translation and transcription of liturgical works from the Romanian space of 19th century, besides Maccarius Hieromonk, Anton Pann and one of his labour continuers, composer and psalm book teacher Stefanache Popescu, his apprentices, Nuns Epiharia Moisescu and Magdalena Nicolescu can be mentioned with honours. The monastic life where they were active turned them towards the thorough study of church music and only increased their wish, issued from their reverence to the Mother of God and the saints, to follow the not so easy path of composition. Their songs enriched the liturgical heritage with the Vespers and the Matins for the Services dedicated to celebrate the Dormition of the Virgin, the Protection of Our Most Holy Lady the Theotokos, Saints Gregory Deccapolisen, Demetrius Bassarabov and Saint Martyr Philophteia, pages that facilitated the continuity of service, achieving in those times the link between the treasure of the past and the heritage to be left for the future.*

Key-words: *church songs, psaltic music, liturgical heritage*

1. Introduction

I hereby propose an article about the existence of Nuns Epiharia Moisescu and Magdalena Nicolescu in the acoustic perimeter of Romanian church songs, not only from the perspective of lectern reader but also from that of church music composer. In the Muntenian space at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th composers are mentioned and important psalm readers that fully contributed to completing and enriching the liturgical heritage, in which context the diligence of the two nuns who dedicated themselves to composition is too little pointed out.

Without such works that inter-connected the manuscripts of the past and the prints of the second half of the 20th century a very long period existed when

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such services worked by the nuns were contained in leaflets which, unfortunately, were not always complete. Printing complex works with texts found in the Minei was sustained by the musical support created in accordance with the indications required by the Typical Rule and added by the knowledge, talent and inspiration of each nun composer, and this meant a new page in the development and growth of Romanian church music of that time.

2. Nun Epiharia Moiescu

2.1. Short biography

Nun Epiharia Moiescu was born in 1864 (Tudoran 1938, 54) in village Sacele, Brasov County and died in 1943 at Bistrita Monastery, Valcea County. In 1900 she was lectern singer in Tiganesti Monastery, a position in which she managed to print the first composition. In administrative terms in 1911 she was appointed Principal of the Children's Home (orphanage) Saint Catherine of Bucharest (Lăzărică 2014, 48) and in compositional terms she received approval to print the *Manual of Church Songs*. A year later she moved for good to Bistrita Monastery, Valcea County, where she remained thirteen years; in 1925 (Bârdan 2013, 9) she was appointed Abbess of Hurezi Monastery, where she resided fifteen years. She returned to Bistrita Monastery in 1940, remaining there until the end of her life (14 September 1943), being buried in the monastery's graveyard.

2.2. Compositional activity

2.2.1. The service of Homophore of the Mother of God

In the Romanian space the feast of the Homophor of Our Most Holy Mother was brought about through the Slavonian channel of the Orthodox liturgical service in the 19th century by St. Bishop Pachomius of Gledin, being selected as church patron of the Procov Hermitage of Neamt Monastery. In the October Minei printed in 1892 we read that on the first day, besides St. Roman Melodul, "in Russia they celebrate the Homophor of the Mother of God with night vigil, wherefrom we also took this habit in our monasteries. Therefore, we placed its service (....) as shown by the Typical rule following it". This edition constituted a source of inspiration for Nun Epiharia Moiescu, who in 1900 received approval from the St. Synod of the Independent Romanian Orthodox Church to print the Service for the Homophor of Our Most Holy Mother in psalter notation.

2.2.2. *Assumption of the Virgin Mary*

The typical rule of St. Sava Monastery generalised everywhere in the orthodox space (in the 13th-14th centuries) provides vigils in monasteries including Vespers, Litya and Matins (Pruteanu 2020, 2) which have been kept up to date, valid also for the celebration of the Assumption. In the August Minei of 1894, the fourteenth day marks the beginning for the ante-celebration of the Dormition, then on 15 August from the *Great Vesperine* (Latin equivalent of the evening prayer, Vespers) up to the Stichera of Glory of Otrina (Matins), the entire service follows the typical rule.

In 1911 Nun Epiharia Moisescu received the St. Synod's blessing to print a *Manual of Church Songs* where she arranged the service next to other useful songs, some authored by her professor Ștefanache Popescu, both for didactical purposes but moreover for good service during such an imperial feast.

3. Nun Magdalina Nicolescu

3.1. Short biography

The 19th-20th centuries represent the biographical dates of Nun Magdalina Nicolescu, which covers a too long time and it determined me to make in-depth research of the testimonies about her activity. My conclusion of all the data gathered is that 1867 could be her year of birth, and April 1944 represents the date following which there is no more mention of her existence. We know that in 1902 and 1906 she printed the three important works that consecrated her among church music composers, and in 1911 we find her mentioned to be in Zamfira Monastery as "first psalm reader" (Nicolae M. Popescu, 1933, 101). 1933 recorded the devout nun as Abbess of the same monastery, obedience she accomplished until 1937. In the following time interval until 1944, it is possible she withdrew to Suzana Monastery, further serving the lectern and teaching the psalm singing to sisters and nuns of this convent.

3.2. Compositional activity

Specification: On 28 February 1950 the Saint Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church decided to generalise the cult of saints with relics in our country (of whom St. Demetrius the New (Bassarabov) celebrated on 27 October, St. Gregory Deccapolisen celebrated on 20 November and St. Martyr Philophteia celebrated on 7 December). The special service dedicated to such event took place in October 1955 (Pacurariu M. 2006, 6).

3.2.1. *Service of St. Demetrius Bassarabov*

In the October Minei of 1929 it is mentioned that “such service was not before in church Minei except for particular brochure and, by blessing from Archbishop and Metropolitan of Moldova, Meletie (1846) it was placed after the service of St. Nestor”. In 1779 Metropolitan Gregory 2nd printed the service of Saint Pious Demetrius the New, composed at his bidding by Metropolitan Filaret of Mira, a variant resumed in 1801 (Vasilescu 2013, 2).

After a significant time, in 1902 we notice the occurrence of the Service for St. Demetrius Bassarabov signed by Nun Magdalena Nicolescu, a work that “was well received and put in practice in the cultic houses of God” (1906, 8) of that time and in its turn constituted a source of inspiration to date.

3.2.2. *Service of St. Martyr Philophteia*

In the December Minei of 1873 it is mentioned that “the Service of St. Philophteia was not found in church Minei but in separate leaflet, and by blessing of Archbishop and Metropolitan of Moldova Meletie (1846) it was placed after the service of St. Ambrosius”. The general utilisation of the cult of St. Martyr Philophteia inspired the Protopsaltis of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iasi, Alexandru Gheorghita in 1975, after the pattern of songs left by Dimitrie Suceveanu and with the text from the Minei printed in 1970 “to put on psalter notes the main songs dedicated to her, since nobody else attempted it until then” (Gheorghita 1975, 3). This statement is wrong because in 1902 the Service of St. Martyr Philophteia was printed “still in psalter notations” signed by Nun Magdalena Nicolescu.

3.2.3. *Service of St. Gregory Deccapolisen*

The Service of Saint Gregory was printed for the first time in 1692 in Bucharest by bailiff Serban Greceanu, then in 1753 the *Special Book of Saint Gregory Deccapolisen* was issued, the most complete publication about the Saint’s Life and Service.

In 1758 it was issued in the *Anthology* printed in Ramnicu Valcea, mention found in the *Foreword* to the *Anthology* edited by Neamt Monastery in 1825; and the Father Superior of Bistrita Monastery printed in 1859 in Bucharest the Volume comprising the service for Vespers, Matins, Canon, Accatist, Life and Paraclissus of Saint Gregory (Micle 1999, 54). After almost half a century, in 1906 the Service dedicated to St. Gregory was printed, written with love and talent by Nun Magdalena Nicolescu.

4. Semantic, hermeneutic and stylistics features of the holy services

The semantic dimension of the religious discourse is repeatedly found in the permanent communication between the human character represented by the praying being and the divinity represented by the Holy Trinity, the Holy Virgin or the saints whom prayers are for, an extremely profound communication, solemn and moving but at the same time warm, comforting and personal. In the fore-mentioned works we can find many semantic dimensions, which define on the one hand the pains, vigils, fasting, prayers, the fight with the evil, the beatings or tortures they were put through, or the good deeds that led to sainthood the celebrated ones and, on the other hand, the respect we pay them and our demands for pardon and help expressed in the verses contained in the Vespers and Matins.

Hermeneutics by its definition attempts to explain the meaning of a communication, as a science using rules and principles, and as art utilising constructions, variations which, placed in context need the depth of emotional intelligence. Realising and integrating the stichera from any fore-mentioned compositions' significance in the understanding of the praying being represents orthodox hermeneutics between assuming the text by pure spiritual experience from individual prayer and the direct interpretation – exegesis of the lives of such saints.

The semantic and hermeneutic elements of the texts in the five services are put to value with particular attention by observing the tradition of Byzantine hymn creation, the composition rules according to the prosodic form of hymns created from the very first centuries, recommended mode-es whose rules impose the diastema structure, the dynamics, agogic, the modulations and, last but not least, the cadential structure so as to bring about a finality of confession and salvaging prayer.

Out of the four styles specific to church music we have irmologic whose correspondent in Western music is *moderato* and stihiraric-like by the *andante* correspondent, which for each voice (eh) used provides particular features of modal scale, ambitus, agogic and cadence structure. In close connection with the styles, by the nature of poetical-musical structures we also meet a few forms of church music in these works. The Vespers and Matins songs are composed mostly of stichera – verses providing small-size hymns comprised in thematic cycles specific to the liturgical context they are used in, most often times sung in sticheron style, but not exclusively. The troparion is in the shape of short prayer where we find the celebrated liturgical event, invariably followed by kontakion having the same poetical structure and performed with the same voice (eh). The automela or podobia is detached from the troparion, and it constitutes a pattern melody which can be sung with a different text, being used in the evening stichera,

the Stichoavna stichera and those from the Laudations and idiomela, which have their own text and melody, usually used for Litya stichera.

The chant structures for Vespers and Matins are approximately the same, when we speak about imperial feasts or saints' celebrations, with polieleu (laudatory song consisting of psalms 134, 135 and 136, sung at Vespers). What distinguishes them and provides particularity, besides the celebrated event, is certainly the melodic approach of each liturgical moment by the song voice and its particular features.

If we speak about the stichera of "Lord, I am calling Thee" or of the evening stichera, we will have each time a proposed podobia depending on voice, so that all stichera will have diastema, cadential structure and even its modulations. The following short example (with two musical sentences for stichera and one for the model) will help us see the concept resemblant to the principle of the theme with variations from Occidental music, which are worked on in general. They are the stichera from the service of St. Martyr Philoptheia, and their model is one of the podobias of voice 8 "O wonder most glorified" under linear transcription, adapted after Makarios Hieromonk (a), while variants (b, c, d, e) are transcribed after Nun Magdalena Nicolescu (Figure 1).

a) O prea slăvi tă mi nu u ne, o în fri co șa a a tă tai nă
O prea slăvi tă mi nu u ne, o în fri co șa a a tă tai nă

b) O prea slăvi tă mi nu u ne sprân cea na cea i na a al tă
O prea slăvi tă mi nu u ne sprân cea na cea i na a al tă

c) O prea slăvi tă mi i nu u ne că prea slăvi ta Fi i i lo te ia
O prea slăvi i tă mi i nu u ne că prea slăvi ta Fi i i lo te ia

d) O prea slăvi tă mi nu u ne pre Fi lo te ia prea a lă u da a tă
O prea slăvii tă mi nu u ne pre Fi lo te ia prea a lă u da a tă

e) O prea slăvi tă mi i nu u ne în cer și i pre pă mânt
O prea slăvi i tă mi i nu u ne în cer și i pre pă mânt

Fig. 1. Fragment of evening hymns

Idiomela is used for the peak moment of Vespers, namely the Litya, which has its own text and melody. We find similitudes as regards the Hail sung after the stichera, taking into consideration the text which the melodic robe of the indicated voice will be built on. In this case Anton Pann, whose is the transcription, wrote

using the 2nd voice, while Nun Epiharia Moiescu used his plagal, without leaving the domain of the chromatics wrote in the 6th voice (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Fragment of Hail in the Litya

The Stichoavna stichera begin with a hymn and their model is still a podobia, while towards the Matins’ ends we have the stichera intercalated with the laudatory psalms 148, 149 and 150, reason why their name was coined “Laudation” stichera. The table below (Fig. 3) provides the ensemble structure of the five services dwelt with.

Nun Epiharia Moiescu		Nun Magdalina Nicolescu		
HYMNS FOR THE GREAT VESPERS				
Assumption of Mother of God	The Homophore of the Mother of God	Saint Dimitrie Basarabov	Saint Grigorie the Decapolitus	Saint Martyr Philoftheia
Evening hymns				
Hymns on 8 mode 1; Podobie mode 1 „O! Glorified Wonder ” (four hymns sung twice)	Hymns on 8: - 2 (twice) Podobie mode 1 „O! Glorified Wonder ” -2 (twice) Podobie mode 4 „Like a brave man”	Hymns on 6 mode 4; Podobie mode 4 „Like a brave man” (three hymns sung twice)	Hymns on 8: 3 - before the feast Podobie mode 1 „What you are joy 5 - of the saint Podobie mode 4 „That's from above”	Hymns on 8 mode 8; Podobie mode 8 „O! Glorified Wonder ” (four hymns sung twice)
Glory even Now on the eightmodes	Glory even Now mode 8	Glory even Now mode 2	Glory even Now mode 6	Glory even Now mode 8

Nun Epiharia Moiescu		Nun Magdalena Nicolescu		
the Litya				
Four hymns mode 1, mode 2 x2, mode 3	Four hymns mode 3, mode 4, mode 2	Two hymns mode 1 and mode 8	Four hymns mode 1	Three hymns mode 1, mode 2, mode 7
Glory even Now mode 5	Glory even Now mode 2	Glory even Now mode 5	Glory even Now mode 4	Glory even Now mode 7
The Stichoavna				
Three hymns mode 4; Podobie „Come and praise the peoples”	Three hymns mode 2, mode 5, mode 7	Three hymns mode 1; Podobie „Too praised martyrs”	Three hymns mode 2; Podobie „When on the cross ”	Three hymns mode 2; Podobie „When on the cross ”
Glory even Now mode 4	Glory even Now mode 2	Glory even Now mode 6	Glory even Now mode 8	Glory even Now mode 5
Tropar mode 1	Tropar mode 4	Tropar mode 8	Tropar mode 3	Tropar mode 8
Glory even Now mode 8	Glory even Now mode 8	Glory even Now mode 8	Glory even Now mode 4	Glory even Now mode 8
HYMNS FOR THE THE MATINS				
Laudation hymns				
Hymns on 4 mode 4; Podobie mode 4 „Like a brave man”	Hymns on 4 mode 8; Podobie mode 8 „O! Glorified Wonder ”	Hymns on 4 mode 1; Podobie mode 1 „What you are joy”	Hymns on 6: 3 - before the feast Podobie mode 1 „What you are joy 3 - of the saint Podobie mode 4 „Like a brave man”	Hymns on 4 mode 1; Podobie mode 1 „What you are joy”
Glory even Now mode 6	Glory even Now mode 6	Glory even Now mode 2	Glory even Now mode 8	Glory even Now mode 5

Table 1. *The structure of the five religious services written by nuns*

5. Conclusions

Nun Epiharia used to say: “it is not the ability that decided me to that, as others knew the Psalter much better than myself, but the great love I had and still have for the Most Holy Virgin Mary and for our Lord” (1911, 6), and Nun Magdalina confessed that: “I have tried to provide the music with the character of songs found within our national church (...), with particular comforting flowers which can be heard in our monasteries (1906, 8)”.

These quotations provide the self-sustained conclusion the two nuns, by the zeal and perseverance of their labour provided real service to the Church, enriching the liturgical heritage “according to artistic requirements, corresponding to the Church rhythm and epos” (Ștefanache Popescu 1902, 3).

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