



THE CORRELATION OF WESTERN AND EASTERN ELEMENTS IN SERBIAN CHURCH CHORAL MUSIC OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Borrowing the postmodern philosophical tradition of phenomenology, ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice gives primacy of place over space in the case of the frequently discussed problem that determines the opposing elements in this paper:

The most common applications of the terms East and West are as coordinates on maps. Maps are products of a modern sense of space indebted to scientific thought and Enlightenment philosophy. [...] However, East and West are not only spaces or positions or directions on a map. They are places of lived experience. From this perspective, space is not the *a priori* unmarked ground on which places are mapped. Rather, the experience of place is primary.... Only from our experience of place do we eventually create abstract ideas of space, including notions of East and West.¹

However, in the case of direct Eastern and Western influences on Serbian Orthodox choral Music of the first half of the 20th century, it is very important to recognize precisely those diverse impacts, measure them and define the cultural-stylistic balance which created the rather complex modern phrase of this sacred-artistic form.

During the relatively short time between the two World Wars, Serbian society in the sphere of politics, economic and social aspects underwent a fast and fundamental transformation from a patriarchal structure towards a modern urban profile. Open both to East and West, the state invested a great deal in the international education of the younger generations and immediately the progressive new intellectual elite with great enthusiasm began to invest back in the general evolution of the country.²

Through the spirit of this time, one crucial, almost mythological question was raised again: "Are we (Serbs) going to be East in the West, or West in the East or, if we want to have our own place in Europe and the world, we should seek for a *third way*, our own synthesis with roots planted somewhere down in this crossroads of the two worlds?"³ Or to quote the never historically proven legendary saying of St Sava, the founder of the Serbian Church:

1 Timothy Rice, Musical practise and the xeperimental power of place, in: *Beyond the East-West divide Balkan Music and its Poles of Attraction*, Institute of Musicology, SASA, Belgrade, 2015, 11.

2 Katarina Tomašević, *Na raskršću Istoka i Zapada, O dijalogu tradicionalnog i modernog u srpskoj muzici (1918-1941)*, Muzikološki institut SANU, Matica srpska, Beograd/Novi Sad, 2009, 17-18.

3 *Ibidem*, 27.

The East thought we were West, the West thought we were East. (Some of us have not understood our position in this matter, by saying we are neither one nor the other.) We Serbs are by destiny pre-determined to be East in the West and West in the East and to admit over us only the heavenly Jerusalem, and nothing on earth.

The main musical question of the second and third decades of the 20th century, as regards the aspects of a *national style*, was based on domestic or international grounds: first of all, this meant artistic stylization and performance of folk songs, or creative impulses towards “imaginative folklore” without direct quotations, and, secondly, composing according to the models of Western art music.⁴ Influential artists claimed that only the individual transformed artistic reality of one period could bring discoveries without pure repetition.⁵ In the terms of relations to European artistic movements, Serbian culture finally moved from the position of follower to that of active participant.⁶

Through even the same generation of composers the problem of the coexistence of different cultural models and levels of tradition was evident: for instance, Miloje Milojević wanted to see “Serbia on the Western side”, Petar Konjović preferred an “antiwestern orientation”, while Josip Slavenski (as a composer who had nothing to do with church music) considered “Balkan music as unity of western constructivism and eastern intuition”.⁷

A strong distrust of Western culture was the basic idea of the Orthodox Christian writers Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1880-1956) and Fr Justin Popović (1894-1979). Their vision of the cultural and moral revival of the Slavic nations in the Orthodox world was formed as a metaphysical and mystical alternative to the pragmatic and materialistic West.⁸ As the interpreters of the new cultural context, through the path of an anthropological criticism viewed from the field of the literature, they were recognised as representatives of an “Orthodox expressionism”.⁹

The composer Milenko Živković stood for native elements in artistic language and through their modern usage he declared the meaning of contemporary creativity as follows: “We should not be ashamed of the technical primitivism of our expression, since we are aware that we produce our own art, which will be, for all others, new art as well.”¹⁰ Close to the brothers Nastasijević, he fought practically for the domination of the “mother language” as an inevitable ideological aspect of every single artistic work. Like the painter Živorad, a member of the *Zograf* group, the composer Svetomir and the poet Momčilo, Živković believed that nothing important in human values could have appeared by pure chant from outside.¹¹ He was sure that national elements in music were not goals in themselves, but a transitional phase for moving forward, but never without it!¹² He thought that Western music had degenerated, and to this he confronted a flourishing, healthy humanistic art based on the essence of folk art, directed by social needs and the psychological terms of society.¹³

Between 1918 and 1941, Serbian sacred choral music underwent a very interesting and strong development. Through the general process of modernization, impulses were mainly artistic, but still strictly retaining the liturgical functions, at the same time becoming examples of contemporary music expression presented mostly in concert.

Keeping a somewhat “classical” position with regards national art music, the choral works of Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac (1856-1914) already left some of the most beautiful examples of

4 Katarina Tomašević, *Na raskršću Istoka i Zapada, O dijalogu tradicionalnog i modernog u srpskoj muzici (1918-1941)*, Muzikološki institut SANU, Matica srpska, Beograd/Novi Sad, 2009, 21.

5 Миодраг Б. Протић, *Српска уметност и Европа: етичке и естетичке алтернативе, у: Срби у европској цивилизацији*, Београд, 1993, 136.

6 Katarina Tomašević, 27.

7 Ibidem, 24.

8 Predrag Palavestra, *Istorija srpske književne kritike*, Matica Srpska, Novi Sad, 2008, 304.

9 Ibidem.

10 Milenko Živković, *Vraćanje osnovama*, *Zvuk*, br. 3, 1934, 107.

11 Zoran M. Jovanović, *Drustvo umetnika Zograf*, Beograd, 1998, 64.

12 Ibidem, 213.

13 Roksanda Pejović, *Muzička kritika i esejistika u Beogradu (1919-1941)*, Beograd 1999, 212.

the blending of various influences and traditions which run throughout the Balkans. His music contains traditional church melodies, distributed among the voices according to the tradition of vocal renaissance polyphony and combined with the harmonic language which he had learned from examples of Bach's music during his studies in Leipzig, and which he then adopted to the modal character of the melodies he was using. His disciples expanded both stylistic and constructive aspects at a time when almost every composer wrote church choral music.

More than twenty authors composed entire Liturgies (15) and Requiems (12), as well as many (80) single pieces based on different church texts. All the music can be divided into four categories: simple harmonizations and arrangements, music stylistically close to the chant with no direct quotations, free artistic music, and works by amateurs. The "original style" is easily recognized as the most common approach by the best-known Serbian composers: Marinković, Konjović, Manojlović, Crvčanin, Binički, Hristić, Tajčević, Milojević and Živković. The traditional harmonisations and arrangements of chant made by Đorđević, Travanj, Krstić and Ilić are very close to the conservative examples of the 19th century, with only a few exceptions. Then there are the composers who worked closer to the "spirit" of the chant – Joksimović, Šijački, Milošević, Pašćan-Kojanov and Stanislav Preprek. Apart from some examples by Pašćan and Preprek, these are mostly neoromantic, eclectic pieces with no deep artistic value.

The very strong unifying concept of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from the 1930s promoted the utopian idea that all different national, religious and cultural elements should be totally repressed. Thus, at the beginning of the 1940s among Serbian intellectuals and artists there arose a new interest in national cultural values. Some results of this became evident in the field of contemporary Orthodox choral works. The Liturgies by Tajčević (1931), Travanj (1933), Joksimović (1935), Živković (1935), Hristić (1936), Milojević (1937), Crvčanin (1938), Ilić (1937-1940) and Milošević (1940) endeavoured, through new social and artistic conditions, to bring back the quality of the genre as it had been in the time of Stevan Mokranjac. The tragic death of King Alexander Karađorđević in October 1934 in France gave rise to the composition of a certain number of new pieces: the Requiem for female choir by Milojević, and the Requiems by Manojlović and Pašćan-Kojanov. The early Requiem no. 2 by Milojević had its first performance during this period.

For Serbian composers, personal poetics successfully used in the field of secular music frequently also represented the "basic level" of their aesthetic approach to church music. The employment of specific melodic elements from the Serbian Middle Ages was not yet possible because there were no transcriptions of the neumatic manuscripts. But the real problem lay elsewhere, hidden in the complex circle of different elements of modern music as church art, in which important things are not on the surface, but deep down under its potential spiritual nature. The question was certainly not in the sphere of creativity, but in the general attitude of the majority of composers not being ready to sacrifice their own musical personality for the "objective" liturgical style of Orthodox ritual.

In spite of the statement that the liturgical usage of a Church music piece does not depend on the stylistic or constructive procedures employed, but on the mimetic approach to tradition and the Orthodox artistic symbol it defines, it is possible to construct a procedure through the definition of objective criteria and their consistent guidance through analysis.

One can determine the hierarchical relationship between compositional procedures (the dominance of Western or Orthodox elements), as well as the recognition of a typology of the adoption of conventions (the implementation of compositional solutions).

The complex circle of elements used in this period derives from Western romantic and earlier Church choral music, as well as traditional and modern aspects of Eastern Orthodox musical idioms. Serbian composers moved freely through these stylistic fields, usually producing neo-romantic and eclectic pieces, resulting in mature concert-artistic profiles or artistic experimentation.

Dorđević, Travanj, Krstić and Ilić cultivated styles based on traditional harmonizations and arrangements of Serbian Chant, through a variety of artistic conventions, from classical to neo-romantic elements. As far as the hierarchical relation between compositional procedures is concerned, the common tendency was the dominance of Eastern Orthodox choral style. Only in some small details does this musical language differ from the attitude of the dominant approach in the 19th century. As far as the typology of the adoption of conventions is concerned, these authors insisted absolutely on a homophonic style with simple harmonic structures, and very rare modal passages, as indicators of the traditional aspects of the genre.

Composers who were generally interested in an original approach close to the “spirit” of Serbian chant – Joksimović, Šijački, Milošević, Pašćan-Kojanov, Preprek – created their music using a great variety of Western and traditional, Orthodox elements. From the point of view of the hierarchical relations between compositional procedures, it is easy to find a lack of “order”, or priorities, among these different influences. Their stylistic approach employs romantic elements together with typical “national” models (Stanković, Mokranjac) as well as some important characteristics derived from Russian music.

The two most important influences from European choral music of the first half of the 20th century – Western romantic and Russian – as “foreign” elements were apparently an easier solution than the attempt to come closer to the artistic “taste” of Serbian Chant. As evidence for this, the typology of the adoption of conventions witnesses the concept of “confused” compositional techniques between rigorous homophony, occasional and conventional usage of polyphony, and the dominance of Western tonal language with some added modality or repeated simple classical cadences.

The authors united by the free artistic approach represent the most complex stylistic orientation of this period, determined by both Western and Orthodox elements, influences from their secular works as well as a specific relationship with the Serbian church choral tradition. In the terms of observing the hierarchical relationship between compositional procedures, by searching for the dominance of Western or Orthodox elements, most of these composers demonstrated a very high level of “coexistence” between these two principles. On other hand, the typology of the adoption of conventions of some specific technical elements – the treatment of polyphony and the harmonic-tonal aspect – showed not only good balance, but could define the values of their own personal approaches. In highly original pieces in particular, the lack of “chant material” was successfully replaced by a balanced treatment of all the other elements used.

The relationship between the elements of harmony and tonality in many ways can help to define the basic point of the Western or Orthodox “location”, as one of the most typical innovations in Serbian music during the period between the two World Wars. It indicates primarily the relationship between modality and tonality as an example of archaic-modern and, frequently, neo-romantic harmony with many chromatic elements.

The position of modality as a marker for modernity, opposed to the conservative world of chromatic harmony, is particularly the case in the music of Stevan Hristić. Generally using the Russian homophonic tradition, but with great melodic richness and an expansion of diatonic harmony, he gave a new perspective on modality. The delicate alternation of chords ensures a unique tonal colour. The specific simplicity of Tajčević’s modality as a “diatonic sound with a modal flavour” often contrasting with traditional tonality, was also close to Hristić’s language.

This kind of “evolution” of musical language was more acceptable than the extravagant attitude of Miloje Milojević. With its over-emphasis on “effects”, the final stylistic stage of his last work (The Solemn Liturgy, op. 50) can be understood as a “dramatic concert concept”. After a few decades of a good balance between traditional and modern ideas, finally his very typical personal artistic subjectivity overcame the objective limits of the church choral genre.

In his particular case, the hierarchical relationship between compositional procedures reveal dominant Western principles, which can be seen chiefly in the harmony, elements of form and motivic working.

Though in the church choral music of Živković several concepts may be found, the experimental style being the most original, through its typological attitude it reached the level of modernity. Driven by the initial anti-romantic need to compose almost in an avant-garde manner, in a very original way he connected old (quasi-) Byzantine and contemporary artistic practice in his *Byzantine Liturgy* (1935) for men's choir. Živković thus very successfully anticipated the work of some of the famous postmodern world composers of the end of the 20th century.

Giving primacy to artistic elements in this genre, Milojević and Živković, as the most typical modern authors of the Serbian Church choral music, coming close to "real" expressionists, moved religious art away from its traditional narrative and didactic position to a new, experimental one.

The continuous presence of Serbian Chant in the music of Milivoje Crvčanin represents a kind of "traditionalist answer" to the above-mentioned principles. Thanks to his knowledge of chant tradition and the inner "spirit" of the services, Crvčanin followed the basic principle of the liturgical type of music, but with intense and rich artistic elements. Nevertheless, his aspects of new approach could be easily recognised through the "uncanonical" usage of orchestral elements in his concert sacred pieces.

Concerning the relationship with chant, Kosta Manojlović stands close to Crvčanin. Unlike composers with an original style without any quotation of chant, who never experienced the real liturgical dimensions of this genre, Manojlović succeeded in turning the whole stylistic concept not only to his "personal" artistic side, but, much more importantly, to enable people to pray with his music.

Two composers who managed to achieve a perfect hierarchy between stylistic relations, and a good balance between specific compositional techniques, were Stevan Hristić and Marko Tajčević. Tajčević's quality in his general approach can be seen through the different types of music within his output: the artistic-concert kind (Four Spiritual Verses) and functional-liturgical (The Liturgy of St John Chrysostom).

Being a stable Orthodox composer with solid knowledge of Western elements always used in a sensible way, Tajčević's artistic, sometimes very modern response to the new possibilities of the genre, was always seen through the eyes of a traditional artist. Working in a similar direction, Hristić achieved a unique position of balanced functional and aesthetic elements. The basic value of his style lies in the subtle relationship between the "ethical" and "aesthetic" characteristics, which appear as Western elements transformed in an Orthodox way taken initially from Russian practice, which Hristić then organised in his own highly personal and original fashion.

CONCLUSION

Sacred choral compositions by Serbian authors from the period between the two World Wars, mainly through emphasizing aesthetic elements, represent an artistically strong and ambitious creative effort towards new paths in Orthodox Church music. Being reasonably close technically to the West and at the same time, on various levels, keeping an essentially Orthodox musical ethos, some of the music by Hristić, Tajčević and Živković might objectively represent the above-mentioned *third way* between two different cultural worlds. From the time they were written, perhaps even more today, they show a high spiritual-artistic synthesis of the best elements of chant-based mystical Eastern choral music and the glory of God as shown through a constructive Western approach.