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**Choral Church Music in Maramureş  
PhD Thesis**

**Abstract**

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## Contents

INTRODUCTION .....	
CHAPTER I:	
THE CHURCH MUSIC OF BYZANTINE TRADITION IN MARAMUREȘ, FROM ITS BEGINNINGS UNTIL THE PRESENT DAY .....	
I.1. The orality of the Church Music from Maramureș and the Ukranian Influences	
I.2. The Role and Importance of the Monasteries in the Development and Affirmation of the Religious Music in Maramureș	
I.3. The Present Situation of the Religious Music in Maramureș, in the Religious Life of the Parish and in the Theological Schools.....	
CHAPTER II:	
THE APPEARANCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE RELIGIOUS CHORAL MUSIC IN THE ROMANIAN COUNTRIES AND TRANSYLVANIA.....	
II.1. Currents and Styles in the Romanian Liturgical Choral Music.....	
II.1.1. The Current of Byzantine Influence.....	
II.2. The Characteristic Features of the Choral Creation from Maramureș.....	
CHAPTER III:	
THE LAIC AND RELIGIOUS CHORAL MUSICAL CULTURE IN MARAMUREȘ.....	
III.1. The Choral Movement in Maramureș.....	
III.2. Laic Village and City Choirs in Maramureș.....	
III.2.1. “ <i>The Chant Reunion</i> ” from Baia Mare.....	
III.2.2. The Choir from Ardușat.....	
III.2.3. The Choir “ <i>Chioaru’s Voice</i> ” from Șomcuța Mare .....	
III.2.4. The Men Choir from Finteșu Mare.....	
III.2.5. The Choir from Buciumi.....	
III.2.6. The Choral Association “ <i>The Music’s Friends</i> ”.....	
III.2.7. The Choir “ <i>The Free Dacians</i> ” from Libotin.....	
III.2.8. The Choir “ <i>Capella Rivulina</i> ”.....	
III.2.9. The Choir “ <i>Harmony</i> ”.....	
III.2.10. The Men Choir “ <i>Cameratta Transylvanica</i> ”.....	
III.2.11. The Choir “ <i>Euroart</i> ”.....	
III.3. Religious Village and City Choirs in Maramureș .....	
III.3.1. The Liturgical Choral Music in Maramureș .....	
III.4. The Village Church Choirs in Maramureș.....	
III.4.1. The Church Choir from Tâmaia .....	
III.4.2. The Choir of the Orthodox Church from Recea .....	
III.4.3. The Choir from Dumbrăvița.....	
III.4.4. The Men Choir from Vălenii Șomcuței.....	
III.4.5. The Choir from Arieșu de Câmp.....	
III.4.6. The Choir from Mireșul Mare.....	
III.4.7. The Church Choir from Rogoz.....	
III.4.8. The Choir from Lăpușel .....	
III.4.9. The Church Choir from Săsar.....	

III.4.10. The Choir from Tăuții de Sus.....	
III.4.11. The Choral Ensemble “ <i>Flowers from Chioar</i> ”.....	
III.5. Church Choirs from the Cities of Maramureș .....	
III.5.1. The Choir from Seini .....	
III.5.2. The Choir from Târgu Lăpuș .....	
III.5.3. The Religious Choir of the School and Parish Tăuții Măgherauș...	
III.5.4. The Choir of the Church “The Dormition of the Virgin Mary” from Sighetu Marmatei .....	
III.5.5. The Choir “ <i>The Annonciation</i> ” of the Cathedral “ <i>The Saint Archangels Michael and Gabriel</i> ” from Sighetu Marmatei .....	
III.6. The Choirs from the Bishopric Centre of Baia Mare .....	
III.6.1. The Choir of the Church “ <i>The Dormition of the Virgin Mary</i> ” – The Old Cathedral .....	
III.6.2. The Choir of the Church “ <i>The Saint Apostles Peter and Paul</i> ” .....	
III.6.3. The Choir of the Church “ <i>Saint Nicholas</i> ” .....	
III.6.4. The Choir of the Church “ <i>The Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ</i> ” .....	
III.6.5. The Choir of the Church “ <i>The Twelve Apostles</i> ” .....	
III.6.6. The Choir “ <i>Saint Joseph the Confessor</i> ” of the Orthodox Theological Seminary .....	
III.6.7. The Choir of the Church “ <i>The Annonciation</i> ” .....	
III.6.8. The Choir “ <i>Doxology</i> ” of the Episcopal Cathedral “ <i>The Holy Trinity</i> ” .....	
III.6.9. The Priests’ Choir “The Archangels” of the Orthodox Bishopric of Maramureș and Sătmar” .....	
III.6.10. The Choir “ <i>Saint John the Damascene</i> ” of the Department of Theology Baia Mare .....	

CHAPTER IV:

CONDUCTORS AND COMPOSERS OF RELIGIOUS CHORAL MUSIC FROM MARAMUREȘ. Analysis of several representative choral works .....

IV. Conductors and Composers of Religious Music from Maramureș .....	
IV.1.1. Gheorghe Velea .....	
IV.1.2. Liviu Borlan .....	
IV.1.3. Iustin Podăreanu .....	
IV.1.4 Ion Săcăleanu .....	
IV.1.5. Valentin Băințan .....	

CHAPTER V:

THE LAIC AND RELIGIOUS MUSICAL REPERTORIRE OF TH CHOIRS IN MARAMUREȘ .....

V.1. The Role of the Conductor in Forming the Choir and Choosing the Repertoire .....	
V.2. The Ukranian-Russian Influence on the Choral Music in Maramureș .....	
V.3. New Development Perspectives of the Choral Music in Maramureș.....	

CHAPTER VI:

IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF THE BISHOPRIC OF MARAMUREȘ AND SĂTMAR – CHORAL ACTIVITY .....

VI.1. The Re-establishment of the Orthodox Bishopric of Maramureș and Sătmăr

VI.2. Important Choral Events from the Life of the Bishopric of Maramureș and Sătmăr .....

CONCLUSIONS .....

BIBLIOGRAPHY .....

**Key words:** choral music, Maramureș, the Holy Liturgy, The Romanian Orthodox Bishopric of Maramureș and Sătmăr, the Episcopal Cathedral, choir, conductor, repertoire, carols, religious, Doxologz, Archangels, Angelli, Gheorghe Velea, Liviu Borlan, Iustin Podăreanu, Ion Săcăleanu, Valentin Băințan, Nicolae Lungu, Nicu Moldoveanu.

## Abstract

The *Choral Church Music in Maramureș* is a current theme of debate for the clergy of the Romanian Orthodox Church and a point of interest for those who are involved in chanting as part of the liturgical service as singers, psalms, choir conductors, chorists and, last but not least, believers.

Our thesis wishes to be the confession of an apostolate to the mastership of the cultivation of church choral art on all levels in our contemporary musical culture from Maramureș. The approach of a subject centered on the choral church music, especially on that of the Holy Liturgy, is a real challenge but also an opportunity for reflection, that leads to a new level of understanding the church musical culture from Maramureș and not only.

We are interested in the choral church repertoire and in the musical compositions on sacred themes of composers from Maramureș, and the choral religious arrangements from this area although we are talking about a reduced number of such works.

Our thesis which comprises an ample research (which involved a thorough liturgical study with elements from byzantinology, history and musicology), emphasizes both the diachronic elements of the Christian chanting within the nowadays Romanian territory, and the synchrony of complex events generated by a troubled past (and at times inconsistent) of the people from Maramureș, faithful to their origins and their beliefs.

Even though the national Orthodoxy started from the models of the Greek and Slavonic Chants, as Rev. Prof. PhD. Nicu Moldoveanu says “the Greek were peerless in the art of chanting”, the Church was concerned with keeping the *origins* of the church music based on scripturistic, patristic and canonical sources. Thus it has been decided the profile of the basic forms of Liturgy and of the other genres that psalms, priests and deacons sing nowadays with interpretative skills or try their inspiration in musical creations. What must be underlined in this context is the fact that within the Orthodox Church chants have been performed each Sunday in the altars, in the lecterns and in the Church’s choir, and the Romanian music accomplished a distinctive, creative and original appearance.

The object of the doctoral research is the intrinsic reconstitution of the evolution of the choral religious art in Maramureș, in the cultural-historical context from the

appearance of Christianity and of the church music within the proto-Romanian space and the Maramureș of “free Dacians” until today.

Choral music has gained an important place within the liturgical service and within several services of the Orthodox Church and besides the fact that it is an endless emotional source for the faithful, the church chanting in common must be perceived as the expression of God’s wish: “Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises” (Psalms 46:6).

If until recently the church music in Maramureș was unknown with a genuine potential maintained as a vivid flame or as a permanent breath by all the social categories belonging to different environments, today, through the research performed lately, it becomes an integrant part of what the church culture means. The intensification of the studies regarding our musical past, the taking over and the critic revaluation of the artistical enheritance are determined by the fact that this “contemporary” culture is based on the tradition which we have enherited from our ancestors.

The six chapters of our thesis follow the itinerary of the church music to the very spring in the hearts of the people from Maramureș, passing through moments of stability, interference and resistance against the obscure forces, to whom the unity of living of the believers from Maramureș inspired respect and appreciation.

We will speak about *the beginnings of the church music in Maramureș*, about *the chanting and the choral movement in Maramureș*, then we will speak about *the choral creation*, especially about the religious one, about *conductors and composers from Maramureș who have influenced it* decisively and, last but not least, we will speak about *the repertoire* broached by the choirs from Maramureș.

In the thesis’ structure we started in the first chapter, entitled *The Church Music of Byzantine Tradition in Maramureș, from its Beginnings until the Present Day*, from the *orality of church music*. I spoke about the monodic music, emphasizing the role and the importance of the monasteries in defending and developing it, and in the end of the chapter I presented the present state of this type of music. *The arguments used to support my ideas are historical, musical, religious, direct and indirect*, through which I emphasized the vast force of Christianity on the Romanian territory in general, and in the Maramureș area in particular.

The beginning of the church music in our country is tightly linked to the appearance and the spread of Christianity in this part of the world, mentioned in archaeological documents, cult objects, inscriptions, testimonies, martyrical acts, mentions of bishops, churches.

The autochthonous church music is part of the Orthodox culture, presenting the *characteristic features of our nation*, but also of the different regions in which the specific element must be taken into account. This is the direction towards which the doctoral research went to regarding the history and the beliefs of the people from Maramureș, the evolution of the church music within the Romanian territory, the process of “Romanization” of the church chants (from the Byzantine monody to the Slavonic chanting translated in monasteries and churches around the country), to the analysis of the church choral art.

The chant in the churches from Maramureș interpreted monodically for centuries by specially trained psalms, met in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the challenge of the choral liturgical chant through interferences firstly with the Western choral chant, and then, through direct influences of the choral church music from the other Romanian provinces, which has achieved a great progress through our famous composers.

*In the second chapter – The Appearance and Development of the Religious Choral Music in the Romanian Countries and Transylvania* – with the respective subchapters, we refer to the birth of the choral music from the monodic music, we speak about the symphony of the joined choral music with the monody inspired by the word and their significance in the generating liturgical text, with deep meaning and pure feelings. We presented some retrospective reflections on the appearance and the development of the choral church music as well as on the currents of creation, with a particular insight on the traditional Byzantine current, which can be noticed in the characteristics of the creations from Maramureș.

Regarding the laic and religious musical culture in Maramureș, about which we spoke in the *third chapter – The Laic and Religious Choral Musical Culture in Maramureș* –, it is the expression of the spiritual resources of the people from this part of the country, expressing their vitality and vigour, their joy of living and their moral health. Turning our attention towards the choral music, we dedicated this chapter to the role of

the choral music within the spiritual universe of the faithful from Maramureș, paying a special attention to the laic and religious choirs from Maramureș, presenting their activity in detail as well as the repertoire that they broach. We presented all these aspects in a rich chapter, underlining the way in which the metamorphosis of the monodic music into choral church art took place, an art meant to draw as many faithful as possible into the liturgical participation.

The subject of the thesis particularizes a dimension of the choral art, studying thoroughly the support of the church music circumscribed in the area of the Byzantine monody, from where it draws its vim and which it expresses at the level of ample sonorities, in shapes and expressions of rich diversity.

The penetration of the choral music in the Orthodox Church from Maramureș, with the influences to which it was submitted by the Catholics, Calvins and Orthodox of Russian-Ukrainian structure, is the object of the research concretized in the present thesis entitled *Choral Church Music in Maramureș*, with the need to emphasize its value, consistency and ancestral roots. Within the thesis we presented in detail the causes, stages and consequences of this transformation and the impact of the choral church music on the spectacular evolution of the laic and religious musical life from Maramureș.

In the third chapter, regarding the choral art in Maramureș, we mentioned, as a presentation, some of the most remarkable choirs in the area, which entered history through their performances (both in the country and abroad) and some other choirs which are still “active”. Their role was to create a close relationship with the common chanting and to sensitize the interpreters and listeners in their moments spent on stage and the faithful when they sing in a church.

Following Nicolae Steinhardt’s reflection upon the music’s power to bring the souls together<sup>1</sup>, we searched within the resources of national church music, choral and monodic, for the specific elements which transform the Oriental, Greek or Slavonic seam and the choral religious creation into a food for soul, in which Christianity had and has an instrument of intimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> “Classical, modern, psaltic or in Cunțan style, music depends only in the auditive sensitivity of those who are listening to it, and on its capacity to resonate with their souls”, Nicolae Steinhardt, *Dăruind vei dobândi*, Rohia Monastery, Polirom Publishing House, Iassy, 2008, p. 539.



In the *fourth chapter* entitled ***Conductors and Composers of religious choral music from Maramureș***, we chose a few famous conductors and several religious creations of the composers from Maramureș (although shy enough). We discovered imposing personalities, involved in the development of the choral phenomenon as well as a valuable music ,full of sensitivity, profoundness and hope, but also, things that require improvement or even reform.

We presented the biographies of these personalities as well as their artistic and professional activity and, another aspect of the research is represented by the musicological analysis of several religious choral works from the creation of the composers from Maramureș.

We stopped on the personality of professor and conductor Gheorghe Velea, the animator of the cultural phenomenon in general and of the choral one in particular in Baia Mare. The time when Gheorghe Velea activated in Baia Mare (1960-1979) was the only period when the city had its own department of cult music within the theatre. We also presented the composer and conductor Liviu Borlan, the gratest composer from Maramureș, whose creation we anlysed in detail, Ion Săcăleanu, renowned conductor and soloist, who had his greatest performances together with the choir “The Friends of Music”, professor Valentin Băița, whose name is linked to the success of the men choir from Finteșu Mare and professor Iustin Podăreanu, the one who had the most important influence on the religious choral music from Maramureș through the choir “Angelli” of the Seminary, through the Choir of the Old Cathedral which he conducted, through the choir of the parish The Annonciation and through his activity as a professor at the Theological Seminary.

We decided to present some of the creations of the composers from Maramureș, which are not very well known, analysing briefly fragments that remained in the Liturgies and the religious creations of the composer Liviu Borlan and of professor and conductor Iustin Podăreanu. We chose these personalities because the value of their work is remarkable even though, unfortunately, the number of the composers from Maramureș is rather small. For the future, this thing can be improved through the works of the graduates of the Music Conservatories and of the young theologians interested in the choral art.

On the *fifth chapter*, entitled *The Laic and Religious Musical Repertoire of the Choirs in Maramureș*, on another level of the choral music from Maramureș, we presented the laic and religious musical repertoire. Here, besides the specific features of the choral music, we mentioned the repertoires broached by the choirs and the principles of choosing the repertoire for services, choral and religious concerts, the competences and the functions of the conductor of a religious choir, the interpretation of religious creations (interpretative aspects) and other elements regarding the theme of a choir conductor permanently involved in an aspiration to a higher level of vocal interpretation.

Of the Romanian choral creations, in Maramureș the Liturgy of Timotei Popovici is most preferred, also parts of the Liturgy in D Major by Gavriil Musicescu, a great admirer and expert of the Russian religious creation, and in contemporaneity, we noted a preference for the Liturgy of professor Nicolae Lungu in ichos 5 and 8 as well as fragments from the Liturgy by Gheorghe Cucu.

We also spoke about influences which should be avoided, presenting the creation of Gheorghe Parascineț, with religious works (including liturgical works), which use techniques from the Slavonic chant, different from those proposed by the composers which used the authentic Byzantine seam, techniques and influences that we do not encourage.

The thesis' content underlines the participation and contribution of certain musical personalities to the fixation of a repertoire that is adapted to the Orthodox theology, a precious thesaurus of Christianity and a model for the liturgical music.

With this aim we created repertoire cards for the religious choirs, as well as for the laic choirs, having in view to amass some efforts and notorious artistic achievements in learning a vast and diverse liturgical repertoire from a stylistic and point of view and taking into account the period of creation.

Reviewing the list of church choirs from the villages and cities of Maramureș, we appreciate their number and the technical difficulty of their repertoire.

Within the theological training, I too was preoccupied with the choral liturgical art adopting it as a *modus vivendi* and as an ideal of spiritual fulfillment.

Being involved in the praise of God at the Episcopal Cathedral "The Holy Trinity" in Baia Mare, as conductor of the choir "Doxology", of the choir "John

Damascene” of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Baia Mare, of the Priests’ Choir “Archangels” of the Orthodox Bishopric of Maramureş and Sătmăr, of the choir “Angelli” of the Theological Seminary in Baia Mare, with the blessing of the Archbishop Justinian and of Bishop Iustin of Maramureş and Sătmăr, I searched the definitive features of the choral music from Maramureş, The Episcopal Cathedral from Baia Mare being “the ideal stage for a concert” and the space in which every Sunday and feast we praise our Lord.

I was preoccupied both to widen the choral-repertorial horizon, to study thoroughly the traditional and contemporary creations at a national and local level, and to understand the stylistics of the works with a sacred theme for equal and mixed choirs.

The choirs from Maramureş, and especially those from Baia Mare aim to achieve choral performance, through participations to national and international contests and festivals, presenting annual concerts of high artistic quality on Easter and Christmas.

The central objective of this step wishes for both unity and diversity of the religious choral music from Maramureş, together with the aim of perfection of the interpretative act, present in the profound self of each responsible conductor. Our pleading may serve as a starting point for the conductors who wish to come closer to the religious music, but it may also be an impulse for the interpreters of religious choral music who want to penetrate into the essence of the creations which are sang within the divine service.

This florilegium of feelings generates the knowledge of the repertoires broached by the choirs from Maramureş, the emphasis on the interpretative problems characteristic for the liturgical choral music and the accent born from the relationship between music and the sacred text. Only after establishing a perfect balance between these two elements “prayer becomes music and the music prayer”<sup>2</sup>, according to Blessed Augustin, those who sing pray twice if the listeners become more pious. Thus, the praise of God passes beyond the state of necessity and reaches something that belongs to the ontologic, to the existential, man being called to live in harmony with himself, with the world and with God.

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<sup>2</sup> Gavriil Galinescu, *Cântarea bisericăscă*, Tipografia Alexandru Țerec, Iassy, 1941, p. 92.

We presented in this *final chapter – Important Events in the Life of the Bishopric of Maramureș and Sătmar – Choral activity* – the most important choral events from the cultural life of the Bishopric.

Through this thesis we try to complete the image of the appearance and development of the choral music destined to accompany the Holy Liturgy in the churches from Maramureș, sharing the ideals of several generations of faithful, priests and psalts engaged in the liturgical dialogue. The deep vibration that united them also reflected in the progress of the musical culture in general and of the religious music in particular, which can be concluded from the analysis of the presented works, and which shows the present state of evolution of our religious choral music. These creations establish the fundamental coordinates of the national characteristics in creations, as well as the place and the role of the religious music in the national musical culture.

Being under the sign of evolution, the religious music goes through an ample journey which is possible to comprise only by placing it within precise reference points, and then it may be understood and used by those who are inside the religious music: deacons, psalts, laics, chorists, conductors etc.

Today, when we have the television, the internet and other modern means of communication which we cannot ignore, we must be very careful with the direction to which things tend to evolve. If we accept them, we need new ways of perceiving tradition, in order for the tradition to be able to maintain its essence and originality.

The main research concentrated on the content of chapters 3, 4 and 5, refering in detail to the entire choral activity in the churches from Maramureș, to the laic and religious choirs from the villages and cities of Maramureș, to the activity of the conductors, composers, and last but not least, to the repertoires broached by the choirs. This aspect offers originality to our thesis, and its characteristic features refer to the analysis of several religious liturgical works from the creation of the composers from Maramureș.