

The “Babeş-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca  
The Faculty of Orthodox Theology

**Religious Chant and Popular Music Culture  
of Transylvanian Tradition in the Ilva  
Region – Bistrița-Năsăud**

**Summary**

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Religious chant appeared in our country as a necessity, at the time of the emergence and development of Christianity in these realms. As we all know, Christianity was spread in our country by the Apostle Andrew, who, in his mission of confessing Christ, also stopped in Scythia Minor, today's Dobrogea. During the Eucharist gatherings of the first Christians, people sang hymns from the books of the Old Testament, especially the Psalms, after the model set up by our Saviour Jesus Christ, who, after The Last Supper, sang praises with his Apostles (*Mt. 26,30*), a custom borrowed from the religious ritual that the Jews performed in synagogues. Later, the Apostle Paul advised the members of the first Christian communities to "Speak among yourselves in psalms and praises and religious chants..." (*Ef. 5,9*) and "sing to God in your hearts, thanking Him in psalms, praises and religious chants". (*Col. 3,16*).

This singing was meant to bring Christians comfort, peace and a predilection for prayer. Religious chant has the same purpose nowadays, but the way in which people have understood it is different. The music has developed in a completely different manner, depending on tradition and external influences. Time has always been a very important factor in the development of any and all types of musical manifestations.

In the beginning, Christians used various instruments to accompany them in the singing of psalms and religious chants, but over time, due to the Christian persecutions, the instruments disappeared from the Christian cult, being replaced by singing only with the human voice, an instrument which was gifted to us by God and which is not man-made. This was done by renouncing the "noise" made by the instruments in favour of the spiritual gain which is the comfort and solace of the soul, and not the pleasure of the hearing, as the Holy Fathers of the Church vouch. They plead unanimously for beautiful, spiritual singing, done with piety and streaming from the bottom of the soul<sup>1</sup>. Grigore Pletosu, a religious chant teacher at the Border Foundational Gymnasium in Năsăud, wrote in an article: "But in primitive times, religious chant looks more like an imitation of Jewish singing: simple, plain, without twists and close to reading. This model was followed up until the seventh century. Starting around that time, under the influence of Byzantine music, which had many nuances, the Byzantine ways of singing were also permitted in church, after some typical patterns, called voices and troparions"<sup>2</sup>. This music was none other than the singing used within the space of the Byzantine Empire, modelled and adapted to the needs of the Christian ritual. Therefore, this enterprise was lengthy and the millennial culture of the Byzantine Empire contributed to a great extent to its development, which is why we call it Byzantine music. In

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<sup>1</sup> Nicu Moldoveanu, *Istoria Muzicii Bisericești la Români*, Basilica, București, 2010, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Grigore Pletosu, „Șaguna și cântarea bisericească”, *Revista Teologică*, III (1909), 9-10, p. 411.

our country, the emergence and development of Byzantine music is closely related to the development of the religious cult, which was of Byzantine origin, even though the language of the religious service was Slavic.

Nowadays, religious chant accompanies any type of manifestation of the public divine cult, which is why it is of colossal importance to us. For the same reason, religious chant has benefited from special attention from lots of musicians and musicologists<sup>3</sup>, and the Transylvanian religious chant occupies a special place in their research. In this region, religious chant has had a completely different trajectory compared to the other parts of the country. We shall not emphasize here the reasons why the religious chant in Transylvania has developed in such a different manner, but we shall specify this one thing: the religious chant in Transylvania has its roots in the great tradition of Byzantine music, present in all the regions of Romania, representing a natural and specific continuation of it, and its purpose is the same: it has to predispose to prayer, to awaken a holy emotion and religious joy in those who listen to it, and to open their hearts in order to better understand the religious teachings that the Church professes.

**REASON FOR CHOOSING THE TOPIC.** This paper initially had the purpose of doing comparative research of the religious chants in the entire county of Bistrița-Năsăud. Thinking that the area of research was too extensive, we have convened to limit ourselves to a specific area of the county, namely Năsăud. Owing to the fact that the Năsăud Country is known for the beauty and richness of its folk material, we also decided to focus our attention on collecting and registering the religious musical folklore of the region. We then found out that a part of the Năsăud region had benefited from such an endeavor by His Holiness Macarie Drăgoi, especially on the Țibleș Valley, and we chose to direct our attention to the Ilva Valley with its six villages: Ilva-Mică, Poiana Ilvei, Măgura Ilvei, Ilva Mare, Lunca Ilvei

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<sup>3</sup> Nicu Moldoveanu, *Istoria Muzicii Bisericești la Români*, Basilica, București, 2010; Sebastian Barbu-Bucur, *Cultura muzicală de tradiție bizantină pe teritoriul României*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1989; Vasile Stanciu, *Muzica Bisericească Ortodoxă din Transilvania*, Presa Universitară, Cluj-Napoca, 1996; Gheorghe Ciobanu, „Muzica Bisericească la Români”, în *Studii de etnologie și bizantinologie*, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, Vol. I, București, 1974; Timotei Popovici, „Cântarea bisericească”, *Revista Teologică*, Sibiu, 9-10 (1907); Viorel Cosma, *Muzicieni români. Lexicon*, București, 1970; Petru Stanciu, *Cultura Muzicală de Tradiție Bizantină în Centrul Transilvaniei, sec. XVIII – XIX*, Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2010; Romeo Ghircioiașu, *Muzica ardeleană de strană și influențele ei populare*, Ms.dact., Cluj, 1958; Timotei Popovici, *Dicționarul de muzică, cu deosebită considerare la muzica românească*, Sibiu, 1906; Vasile Grăjdean, Sorin Dobre, Corina Grecu, Iuliana Streza, *Cântarea Liturgică Ortodoxă din Sudul Transilvaniei*, Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga”, Sibiu, 2007; Petru Gherman, *Muzica bisericească din Ardeal - generalități*, în vol. „Omagiu Înalt Prea Sfinției Sale Dr.Nicolae Bălan, Mitropolitul Ardealului, la douăzeci de ani de arhiepiscopire”, Sibiu, 1940; Gheorghe Șoima, „Muzica bisericească și laică în Institutul Teologic din Sibiu”, *Mitropolia Ardealului*, 11-12 (1961) etc.

and Leșu. Our wish was to bring to light, save from disappearance and, to the best of our abilities, highlight these folk treasures and the treasures of our Church.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE RESEARCH. Research related to religious chant in particular geographical areas has been conducted over time<sup>4</sup>, and the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the “Babeș-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca has produced doctoral theses on the theme of religious chant from certain areas of Transylvania or of the Metropolis of Cluj, Maramureș and Sălaj.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the present thesis, whose purpose is to emphasize the religious chant in the areas of the Superior Basin of Somesul Mare, more specifically the Ilva Valley, forms part of a greater research project, both historical and practical, of religious chant in our Metropolis, but not exclusively. The paper is nevertheless original, in that it proposes to bring to light not only the religious chant, but also the religious musical folklore which accompanied or still accompanies the religious service of the Church. From this point of view, our paper is a pioneering work within the Doctoral School “Isidor Todoran” of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Cluj-Napoca. It is intended to be a true collection of religious musical folklore and it contains, apart from religious chants, several versions of lamentation songs, lyrics and traditional carols with lyrics and song, gathered from the six villages in the Ilva Valley, which constitute the object of the present research.

There have been other collections of religious musical folklore in this area. Among the most important folk musicologists who manifested their interest for the Ilva Valley is Constantin Brăiloiu who, together with “the royal team” coordinated by the great sociologist Dimitrie Gusti<sup>6</sup>, made some recordings in the Leșu Commune, which we will discuss throughout the paper. Following these recordings, those made two years later in Bucharest on wax cylinders and those on recorder tape made between 1955-1958 with singers from this area, a book came out in 1958, by musicologists Constantin Zamfir, Victoria Dosios and Elisabeta Moldoveanu-Nestor, entitled „132 Songs and Games from Năsăud”. In this book,

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<sup>4</sup> See above.

<sup>5</sup> Brie Mihai Gavril, *Cultura muzicală bisericească de tradiție bizantină din Crișana*, Stan Teofil Ovidiu, *Muzica bisericească de tradiție bizantină din Maramureș și Sătmăr*, Dobre Sorin Vasile, *Muzica bisericească de tradiție bizantină din zona Sibiului*, Draghici Gheorghe, *Muzica religioasă în Dâmbovița și Muscel* Gavrila Ion *Muzica bisericească în ținutul Vâlciei*, Malene Gheorghe, *Muzica bisericească din ținutul Făgărașului*, Codre Ionel Bogdan, *Influențe ale folclorului religios și laic cu muzica bisericească în zona Codrului (Maramureș)*, Covaciu Petrica Aurelian, *Cântarea corală bisericească din Maramureș*, Farcas Vasile, *Muzica bisericească liturgică și de inspirație folclorică pe Valea Mureșului Superior între secolele XIX și XX. Studiu monografic*, Marciuc Sorin Neculai, *Muzica bisericească de tradiție bizantină din Bucovina. Studiu monografic*, Babosan Andrei Ovidiu, *Cultura muzicală bisericească din Țara Lăpușului. Tradiție și continuitate*.

<sup>6</sup> He was born in Iași in 1880 and he died in Bucharest on October 30, 1955. He was a Romanian sociologist, historian, eticist and philosopher. Apart from his activity as a professor at the Universities of Bucharest and Iași, Dimitrie Gusti was a member of the Romanian Academy, which he also led between 1944-1946, he was the Minister of Public Education, Cults and Arts between 1932-1933 and he is considered “the creator of Romanian sociology”.

we find a lamentation from Leșu and two carols, one from Leșu and the other from Ilva-Mică, but also a few from the villages Șanț and Nepos.

The well-known folk music singer Valeria Peter Predescu made an important collection of funeral songs from the Năsăud area, which she gathered in a volume entitled “The Last Song. Lyrics and funeral songs from the burial ritual in the Bistrița-Năsăud County”, which appeared in Bistrița in 2005 and which contains a CD with her recordings.

Another tireless gatherer of songs from the Bistrița-Năsăud County is bishop Macarie Drăgoi. In 2005, two volumes of folklore from his native village, Spermezeu, came out: one entitled “Musical Folklore from Spermezeu” and the other, “Poetic Folklore from Spermezeu”, at the Limes Publishing House in Cluj-Napoca. In the former volume, there are several funeral songs from Spermezeu, while in the latter there are ritual poetic texts, among which some lamentation songs are also featured. He also gathered and put to use lots of carols from several villages in the Țibleș Valley, published in the volume “*Ler Sfântă Mărie*”, also in 2005, in Cluj-Napoca, but this time at Renașterea Publishing House. Both the carols and the songs in the first volume were transcribed into musical notation by Lucia Iștoc, Elena Hlinca-Drăgan and Anca Parasca.

Throughout the years, collections of poetic texts belonging to our research area have been published, but without the musical part. Several of these are: “Lamentations, Meaning Funeral Songs” which was printed in Gherla in 1897 by Ioan Pop Reteganul and which includes the lyrics of lamentation songs gathered particularly from Reteag, in Bistrița-Năsăud County; “Lamentations and Incantations from the Năsăud Region”, published in three volumes by Gavriil Bichigean and Ioan Tomuța, the first 1920, and the third in 1938. Another personality preoccupied with the folklore of Năsăud is professor Liviu Păiuș, who published “The Folklore of the Năsăud Region” and “Someș Region Pages, Studies in Folklore and More” in two volumes which depict the gathering activity of many researchers who were preoccupied with the folklore of Năsăud in particular. Some lyrics for lamentations and carols from Ilva Mare can also be found in the book „*Ilva Mare – plai cu dor*” published at Napoca Star Publishig House in 2009 by Ana Berengea.

We also have to mention the monumental collections of carols by established writers which, although not focusing their research area on the Ilva region or Transylvania, are nevertheless works of reference in what concerns the gathering of folklore. These are: “Romanian Carols, Volume I”, published at MediaMusica Publishing House in Cluj-Napoca, by professor Ioan Bocșa, and the volume “Carols”, collected by George Breazu and published

in 1938. Another extremely important work is “303 Carols with Lyrics and Music”, authored by Sabin Drăgoi.

**THE OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH.** Considering the richness and beauty of the religious music folklore of the Ilva Valley, we hope that our paper will form a part of this vast and important collection of folklore and that its publication will enrich the folk music heritage of Năsăud. Apart from this, the objectives of our paper are:

- 1) Placing the research area in the historical and musical context of Transylvania by:
  - a) Presenting some historical landmarks starting with the archaeological and documentary attestation of this area, up to the present;
  - b) The depiction of the religious music history from the Năsăud area through a brief historical presentation:
    - of the religious chant in Transylvania with its two major centres: Braşov and Sibiu;
    - of Dimitrie Cunţanu’s role in developing the religious chant of Transylvania;
    - of the schools where religious chant has been taught, which influenced the area of the Superior Basin of Someşul Mare;
    - of the personalities that influenced the area from a musical and cultural point of view;
- 2) Bringing to the forefront the texts and the musical material, collected and structured according to three types: religious chants, carols and lamentation songs, through musical transcription and analysis;

**THE STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER AND THE METHODOLOGY.** The paper is divided into four chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by conclusions, bibliography and appendices. It is shaped as a monography, which requires a multidisciplinary approach: historical, musical, theological and ethnological. Therefore, the methodology is adapted to this type of research, using elements which are specific to each discipline. In what follows, we present a summary of the paper, according to the manner in which it has been structured:

**Chapter 1 – The Ilva Valley, part of the Superior Basin of Someşul Mare. Historical Landmarks** – it briefly presents the history of the Ilva Valley and it extends to the localities of Rodna, Maieru and Sângeorz-Băi, from the first documentary attestations and archaeological discoveries up to present time, going through all its stages of development (the first settlements, the invasions of the migratory peoples, the Austrian-Hungarian occupation with its border regiment, the period of the autonomous District of Năsăud, the Nazi



occupation and the communist dictatorship). The chapter ends with a short presentation of religious life in this area, influenced by the realities of the historical context and by the political conditions in which the inhabitants lived their lives. From the methodological point of view, the historical descriptive research method has been employed here, in order to understand the development of the localities in question, from their earliest days up to the present.

**Chapter 2 – Religious Chant, Origin and Development** – it starts with a short presentation of the evolution of religious chant in the Christian space, then focusing on its development in the Romanian space, with an emphasis on Transylvania and Cunțanu’s influence on the religious chant in this area. Finally, we direct our attention to the theological education in Cluj and to the Nușeni School of church singers, seen as decisive factors in maintaining and passing on the Transylvanian musical tradition. The method used in the chapter was that of historic research, combined with elements of analysis and interpretation of the data contained in certain texts and articles, in order to demonstrate that Transylvania has had its own trajectory in what concerns its religious music development in comparison to the other regions of the country.

**Chapter 3 – Năsăud: significant personalities who depicted the local cultural and musical life** – as a component of the public divine cult, religious chant was shaped on the characteristics of the music promoted by the theological schools or the church singers. Giving that the entire area was subjected to the Greek Catholic unification, in the superior basin of Someșul Mare, the religious chant has known strong Greek Catholic influences. An important centre for promoting the “Greek-oriental” music and culture in the researched area was the Foundational Higher Gymnasium in Năsăud, through a few personalities that worked hard to preserve the Orthodox Christian music and values. These personalities were Grigore Pletosu and Augustin Bena, priests and teachers of orthodox religion and religious chant within this school. The present chapter attempts to highlight the personality of these great teachers who worked in Năsăud at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to describe in detail their teaching activity. Iacob Mureșianu, another great musician and composer who, in the brief period spent here, enlivened the cultural life of Năsăud, closes the third chapter of the paper.

**Chapter 4 – Liturgical singing and musical folklore (songs of lamentation and carols) from the Ilva Valley** – represents the most extensive and the most important part of the paper. This is where we amassed the work of collecting, selecting, transcribing and the musical analysis of the material divided according to three types: religious chants, carols and

funeral songs (lamentations). The first subchapter dedicated to religious chant sets out to clarify a hypothesis which I formulated when I chose the research area: how do people sing during the Holy Liturgy in these villages that have fully embraced the Greek Catholic confession? The next subchapters are dedicated to the religious music folklore, which is made up of funeral songs and carols. From the methodological point of view, this chapter was written in stages. The first stage was choosing and registering the informants, selecting the recorded material, the musical transcription of the songs and the transcription of the lyrics. Then followed the musical analysis to classify the material according to the genre and the structure of each individual song. The most difficult stage of all was the selection of the material. This was done by applying the criteria of originality, because of the rich repertoire collected, which also included songs that circulate in all the corners of the country, enjoying immense popularity. Therefore, the methods used for researching the material were: collection, transcription and musical analysis.

I ended the paper with the **conclusions** of the research, then I wrote down the **bibliography** employed and I added a few **appendices** which I deemed necessary.

We hope that this paper will provide a real contribution to the process of discovering the history, the faith, the music, the traditions and the moral values of our forefathers and that it will become a beacon of light in this vast universe of research-based knowledge.

Key words: religious chant, musical folklore, liturgic songs, lamentation songs, carols, Ilva Valley.