Bianca Țiplea Temeş

Byzantine Music Revisited: from Vocal Monody to Electronic Music in the Works of Romanian Composers of the 20th Century. Musical and Iconographical Decoding

In its religious frame, Byzantine ritual could be defined as an organic triad, comprising word, music and image in a semiotic interrelation. The text of the sermon prevails over the artistic components but provides the visual details of the icons. By extension, music synthesises word and image in a refined artistic result. Even when taken out from the boundaries of the context of church tradition, Byzantine music bears, in a latent way, the stamp of visual effects and carries the hallmarks of representation by means of the fine arts. Therefore, a multi-layered approach is required and the analysis of a music piece rooted in Byzantine artistic heritage should not disregard, much less discount, any of the three components.

At the beginning of the 20th century Byzantine melos served as a rich source of inspiration for Romanian composers such as Dumitru Georgescu Kiriac or Gavriil Musicescu, who used it exclusively in their choir music, without betraying its vocal essence. Paul Constantinescu was the first to make a brilliant contribution to the absorption of this purely vocal element into the instrumental genres, starting in 1929 with his *Two Byzantine Studies* for piano trio. In the Western European context, composers of the first half of the 20th century had already taken advantage of Gregorian chant, enhancing the expressive traits of their instrumental works. We think in particular of Respighi, who composed in 1921 the *Gregorian Concerto* and *Tre Preludi sopra melodie gregoriane* for piano, and, secondly, Hindemith; he made extensive use of Lutheran chorales and Gregorian chant in two notable works: *Nobilissima visione* and *Mathis der Maler*.

Paul Constantinescu has been acknowledged as the first Romanian composer who challenged the Byzantine melodic heritage by transferring it to the complex universe of the symphony orchestra. For this reason, he remains as a reference point in Romanian music history. Up to 1963, the year when he completed his last instrumental masterpiece inspired by this ancient melodic legacy – the *Triple Concerto for violin, piano and cello*, the author enriched the Romanian musical heritage with two outstanding works: the *Christmas* and *Easter Oratorios*, two keystones of Romanian music, shaped as a remarkable synthesis of vocal and instrumental mastery. My current research therefore engages in hermeneutics in order to offer a set of decoding clues regarding the integration of Byzantine melos in the music of Romanian composers.

In order not to cast the net too widel and superficially, I shall focus on one single fragment as our test case: the *Annunciation* part of the *Christmas Oratorio*, based on a pericope from the Gospel according to St Luke (Lk. I 26–38). Since the 6th century, this religious feast has been an important constitutive part of Orthodox iconography[1], which received an effective musical response in the liturgical cycle. The Troparion (Apolytikion), Kontakion, Akathist Hymn and the Megalynarion are the main hymnographical elements of the feast. In the 15th century, the iconostasis attained its final shape, with multiple visual registers, reaching the dome. Since then, Annunciation has occupied a central place on the Royal Doors, as a diptych and plays a significant part in Orthodox Mariology. In Catholic churches, countless artists have depicted the scene in a wide diversity of pictorial representations, while Eastern Orthodox Christianity had to follow very strict rules and aesthetic canons, both at the iconographic and hymnographical levels. The limitations imposed on the artist acted as a guarantee for the doctrinal unity within the Orthodox Church throughout the centuries.

The symbolic rendering of the *Annunciation* is static, except for the cases in which a narrative representation is adopted, like, for instance, in the exterior mural paintings of the Romanian monasteries in Bucovina. The dynamic factor consists in chaining together the images representing the phases of the dialogue between Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, according to the following sequence: the messanger's greeting – the revelation of the divine plan – the Virgin's astonishment – the angel's reply – Mary's acceptance. The narrative model, used by Paul Constantinescu in his *Oratorio*, emphasises the dialogue between the two characters, in a dynamic composition. The articulation of the text into its syntactic units configures a structure that recalls the Greek Doric frieze. On the entablature of Constantinescu's piece, the trygliphs are identified with the intervention

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[1]   Sendler, Egon: *Icoanele bizantine ale Maicii Domnului*, Ed. Sophia, București, 2007, p. 44.

of the main characters, accompanied by the choir and orchestra, while the Evangelist's input marks the discursive metopes, the separation between the dramaturgical articulations.

Example 1

Choir Orchestra	Evangelist Orchestra	Archangel Gabriel Choir, Orchestra	Choir (Archangel's echo)	Evangelist Orchestra	Archangel Gabriel Orchestra	Evangelist Orchestra	Mary Orchestra	Evangelist Orchestra	Choir a cappella	Archangel Gabriel Choir, Orchestra	Choir, Orchestra

Doric frieze of the Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi

The musical rendering of Paul Constantinescu's *Annunciation* serves as an ideal symbiotic model between traditional hymnography and modern compositional techniques of that time. By adopting authentic sources from Macarie, Suceveanu, Stupcanu or Anton Pann, and probably stimulated by Ioan Dumitru Petrescu's collection *Les idiomèles et le canon de l'office de Noël*,[2] the composer makes a synthesis between Byzantine modal language and tonal harmony. The diatonic modes are blended vertically with plagal and authentic cadences, with layered chords and cross tuning effects called *scordatura*. He also combines the melodic archaism with the modern contrapuntal techniques adapted to the essence of the monody and, very frequently, derived from the *ison*, or drone, accompaniment. Discrepancies are discovered only in the way the composer tries to simplify the melodic substance, by removing the excessive chromatic elements and the melismata. The opening fragment of the *Oratorio* proves to be relevant in this respect; the melodic line of the *Annunciation Axion* extracted from Macarie's *Heirmologion* is reduced to the essence.

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[2]   *Les idiomèles et le canon de l'office de Noël (d'après des manuscrits grecs des XIe, XIIe, XIIIe et XIVe)* was distinguished with the "Thorlet" Prize of the Arts Academy in Paris.

Example 2. Macarie – Annunciation Axion from *Heirmologion*

Example 3. Andrey Rublyov – *Annunciation* (1405), Cathedral of the Annunciation, Moscow
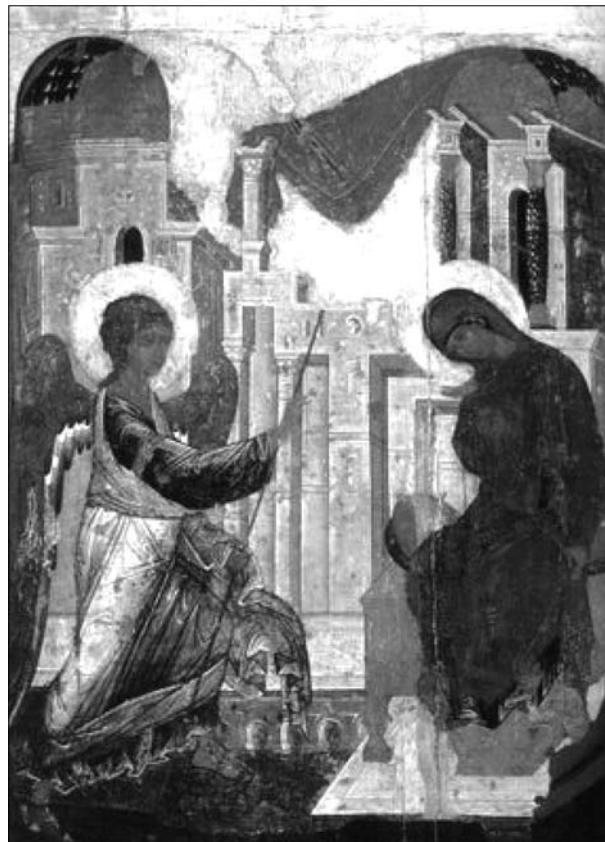
The linear display of the same megalynarion is highlighted by the composer with an instrumental support which turns the *ison* into a static octave reiteration. The *ostinato* formula serves as a basis for the entry of the woodwinds intoning reversed cells of the megalynarion and heterophonic insertions of the melody. Constantinescu's attempt at creating an appropriate orchestral accompaniment to the monody is thus indisputable.

Example 4. Paul Constantinescu – *Christmas Oratorio: Annunciation*, bars 1–13
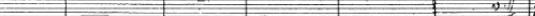
The same concern for the authenticity of the psaltic source is traceable in the manner in which Constantinescu deals with the recitative segments of the evangelist and even the choir, endowed with features of cantillation. In the Byzantine rite, the cantillation of the Scriptures plays an important role in the matrix of symbols. Ekphonetic notation was developed as a mnemonic device and as guide in the chanting of the appointed scriptural pericopes. An overview of the Evangelist's recitative in the *Christmas Oratorio* compared to the *Annunciation* segment in Grigore Panţîru's *Iaşi Lectionary*[3], reveals a striking resemblance, as a convincing testimony of the author's concern for liturgical accuracy.

Example 5. Evangelist recitative (bars 90–105) compared to the eckphonetic cantillation of the *Iaşi Evangelical Lectionary*

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3   Panţîru, Grigore – *Lecţionarul evanghelic de la Iaşi* (ms.160/IV-34), Ed. Muzicală, Bucureşti, 1982, p. 215–218.

Rhetorical exercises from the Early Byzantine period (called *progymnasmata*) indicate that a trained rhetor's arsenal included a wide variety of techniques. Of particular interest is the homilist's use of *ethopoeia* or "characterization", in which the priest assumed a biblical figure's voice, different from his own: this often took the form of a false dialogue involving two or more characters, as in a proto-dramatic sermon. *Ethopoeia* was one of the many rhetorical tools, and dialogue passages in particular must be understood in their rhetorical, exegetical context. Paul Constantinescu seems to incorporate these methods in the score of his *Chirstmas Oratorio*, attributing to the orchestra the role of the orator. By the orchestration strategy that he adopts, the author is able to portray instrumentally the characters of the narrative. One significant example is the dialogue between Gabriel and the choir, where the angel's voice is embodied by the string instruments, and the choir, by strings and winds together.

Example 6. Paul Constantinescu – *Christmas Oratorio: Annunciation*, bars 110–114

Timbral colour also gives Constantinescu the opportunity to express in sounds one of the most distinctive features of the Byzantine iconography: the reverse perspective, a visual convention according to which the objects in the backround appear larger than those in the foreground. A few passages of the work illustrate the uncontested analogical capacity of the author to transfer visual spacial effects to the music. The responsorial segment between angel and choir shows that the main character (Gabriel) is accompanied by a reduced orchestra group of woodwinds and violins, playing *piano*, in contrast with the choir, cast in a dramaturgically secondary role, but placed in a forward position by the strong sonority of the strings, harp and brass instruments. One could hazard the interpretation of this link with reverse acoustic perspective as a synæsthetic metaphore.

Example 7. Paul Constantinescu – *Christmas Oratorio: Annunciation*, bars 301–306

As in Byzantine iconography, the composer occasionally abandons the third dimension, by compressing the orchestra into a unison line, highlighting instrumental vocality, a basic characteristic of the entire *Christmas Oratorio*:

Example 8. Paul Constantinescu – *Christmas Oratorio: Annunciation*, bars 142–150

Through his *modus operandi* Paul Constantinescu seems to assume the role of an "iconographer". He follows the canonical norm at the melodic level while embellishing the score with polyphonic and harmonic elements of the Western European tradition. Used as a pedestal for the melody or as an underscoring of the vocal line, the orchestra employs free contrapuntal techniques, imitative polyphony, mixtures or *ostinato*.

His creative efforts approach the ideas of contemporary Romanian painters, such as Sorin Dumitrescu, whose elements of visual morphology and setting could be considered to be iconographic echoes of Paul Constantinescu's *Annunciation*.

Example 9. Sorin Dumitrescu – *Annunciation*[4]

As a valuable treasure of symbols, the *Annunciation* from the *Christmas Oratorio* also admits a symbolic decoding: it prepares and announces the birth of a higher integrative vision promoted by Romanian composers of the next generations, ushering in a new stage of assimilation of Byzantine chant. Nowadays, the author is regarded as a forerunner in the expansion of the psaltic monody beyond its familiar vocal tradition: both his *Oratorios* mark

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[4] Watercolor on paper, 122 x 96cm, picture reproduced from the Album "Sorin Dumitrescu – *Biserici. O arheologie vizuală a creativității și stilisticii bizantine*", Ed.Centrul de Cultură Palatele Brâncovenești, București, 2007, priest Ioan Bizău's collection, Cluj.

early steps in the direction of transforming the Byzantine melodic heritage into a key-ingredient of instrumental genres.

The heteroclit fusion operated by Paul Constantinescu between psaltic monody and Western composition techniques led to a brilliant outcome that opened a new perspective for Romanian composers of the 20th century. The path he sets out, in this respect, would later on be developed and refined in an impressive array of stylistic tendencies. The whole exquisite lineage of modern composers has expanded the concept, enriched music vocabulary and added different areas of connotation to the use of Byzantine heritage.

Artists of the Transylvanian Composition School maintain the vocal essence of Byzantine music as a basis for choir works: the Liturgies and other religious pieces written by Dan Voiculescu, Valentin Timaru and Constantin Rîpă are eloquent models from this point of view. Seeking for authenticity, Sigismund Toduță inserted in his *Oratorio "Master Manole"* a genuine Byzantine chant with the Greek text, sung *a cappella* by a children's choir. On the other hand, his disciple Cornel Țăranu merges the ancient melodic element with aleatoric techniques in his piece *Testament*. Byzantine vocal material is cultivated also by composers representative of the Bucharest Composition School. Ștefan Niculescu contributes with two important titles to this category: *Invocatio* – Choral Symphony for 12 voices and *Axion* for 6 voices. The instrumental works reflect a wide variety of characteristics. On the one hand, we may detect a nostalgic quest for vocal nature in the resonance of the instrumental sound, as in the piece *Kontakion* for saxophone quartet written by Gheorghe Firca. On the other hand, there are the large instrumental compositions which recreate the Byzantine *topos* but dressed in modern sonorities: the Symphonies No 3, 4 and 5 by Ștefan Niculescu, and several pieces written by Anatol Vieru, Doru Popovici, Myriam Marbé, Theodor Grigoriu, Șerban Nichifor, Nicolae Brânduș or Octavian Nemescu. Consequently, Romanian composers have fully demonstrated their great potential in developing the trend that Paul Constantinescu initiated, which proved to be artistically fruitful.

The contemporary Western European counterbalance in the attempt to return to the source of the religious music is represented by the so called "Holy Minimalists", such as Henryck Gorecki, John Tavener, Arvo Pärt or Giya Kancheli. Representing the trend of New Simplicity, they epitomize extreme transparency with their music, and mark an ascetic return to the sacred. By contrast, Romanian composers tend to transfigure Byzantine melos up to the point at which it becomes almost unrecognisable. A disciple of Paul Constantinescu, Octavian Nemescu is one of the most eloquent examples, with his piece *Metabizantinirikon* for saxophone and magnetic tape, written in 1984.

In the tradition of experimental music, the piece shows the following traits: the melodic linearity is distorted and the typical *ison* is to be found converted in a perpetual background noise, which evokes George Crumbs's "Night of the electric Insects" from the string quartett *Black Angels*.

Example 10. Octavian Nemescu – *Metabizantinirikon*

Linear time
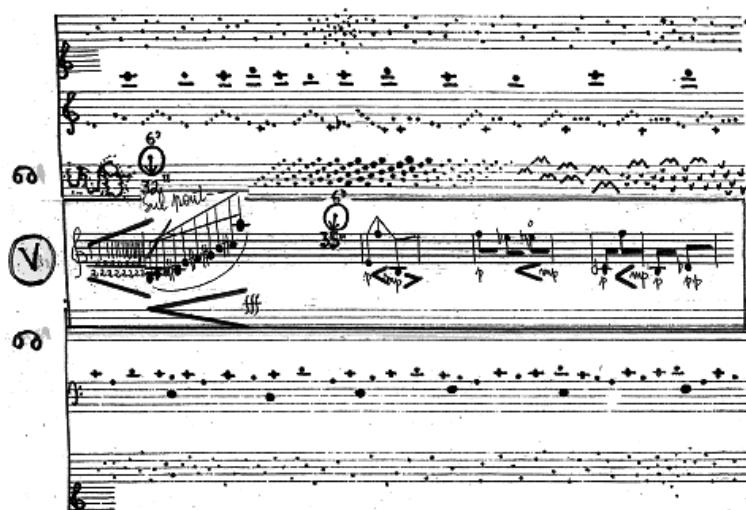
According to Octavian Nemescu's explanations,[5] the work is an attempt at creating a meta-language, centred on the Byzantine modes and cadences. The crickets and the bird noise are supposed to reveal brotherhood with the nature, as a musical proclamation of Mircea Eliade's concept, according to which the Byzantine rite is a hypostasis of a cosmic Christianity. In his piece, Octavian Nemescu achieves a temporal "meta"-polyphony that overlaps the atemporality, linear and circular time, in its triple quality of "time-egg", "time-seashell" and "time-spiral".

**Example 11.** Octavian Nemescu – *Metabizantinirikon*

Time – egg
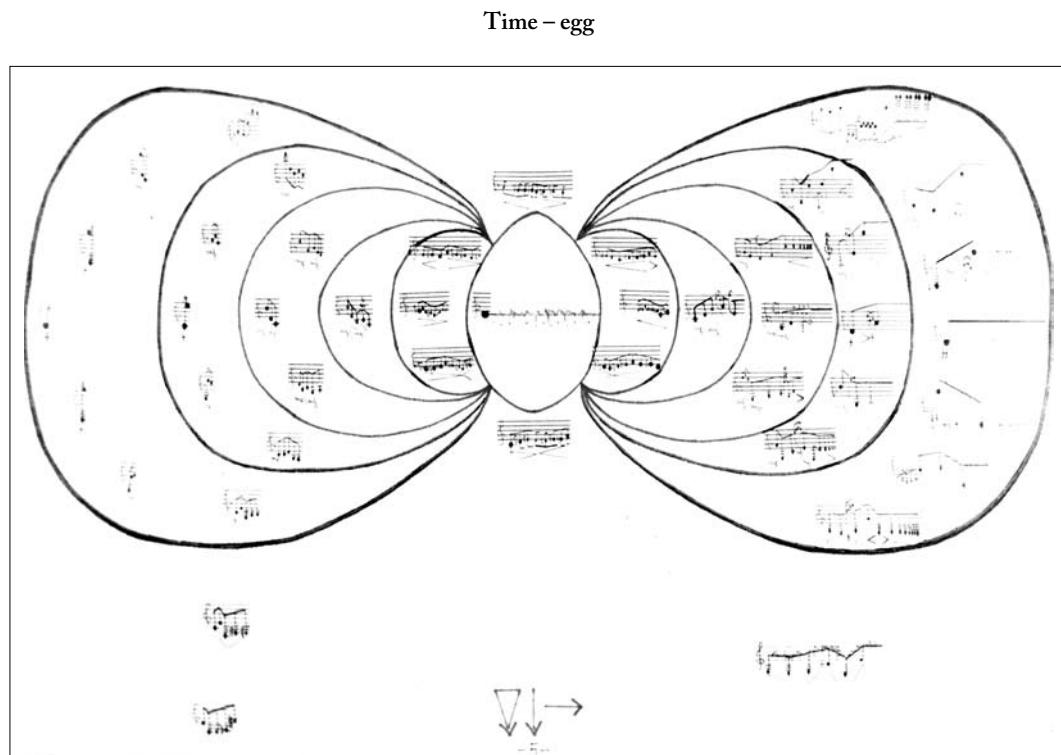
**Time – seashell**

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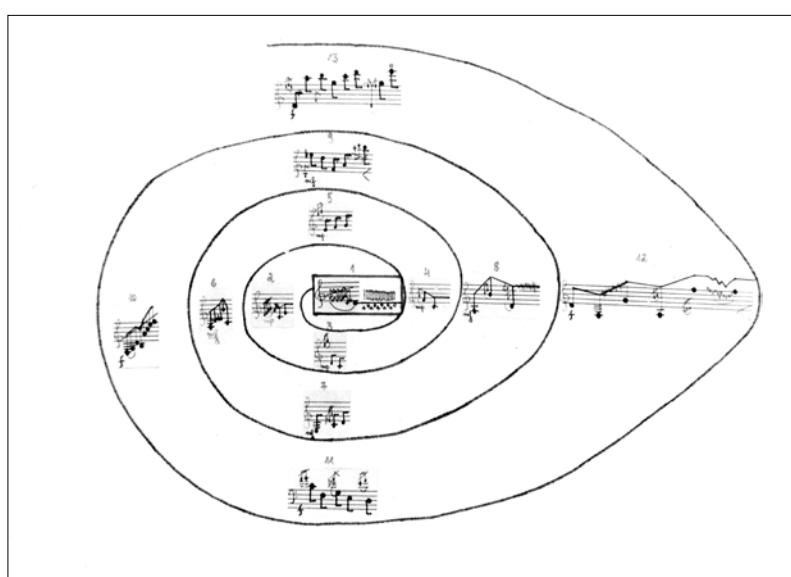
[5]   Letter sent by the author on November 28th, 2009.

Time – spiral
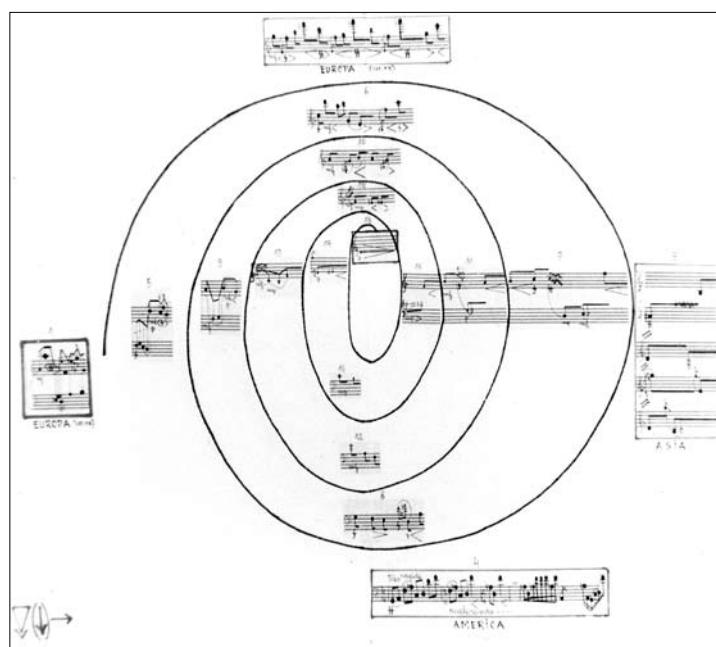

The poliphony of Time
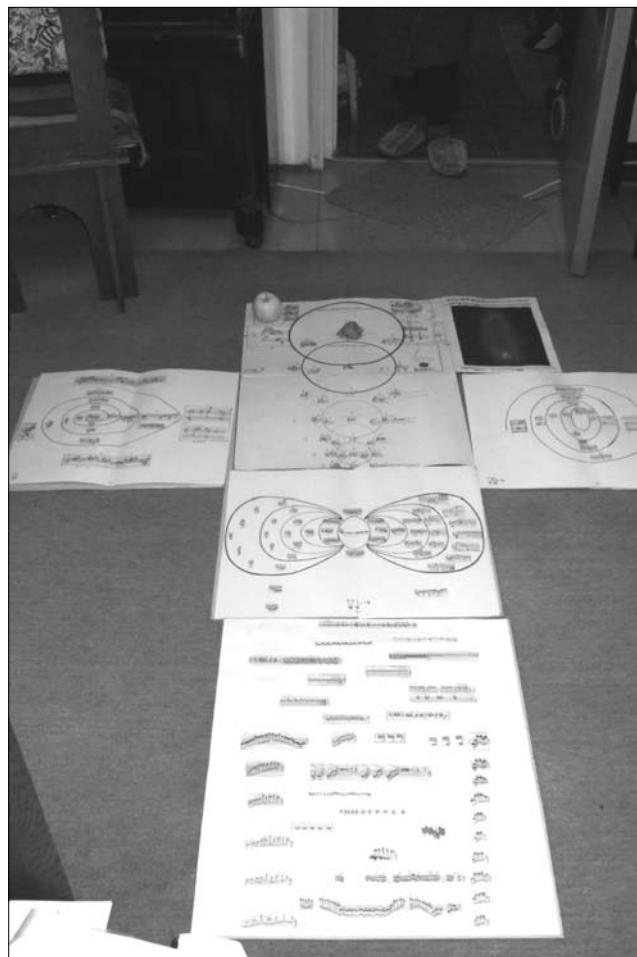
In looking for a pictorial correspondance to Octavian Nemescu's piece, one might choose the art of Marin Gherasim, which also uses Byzantine elements, in a more abstract way, as in his paintings called *Wings* – as symbol of the messanger Angel and *Kairos* – synonymous with the privileged moment and atemporality.

Example 12

Marin Gherasim – *Aripă*[6] (*Wing*), 2001 / Marin Gherasim – *Aripă*[7] (*Wing*), 2001
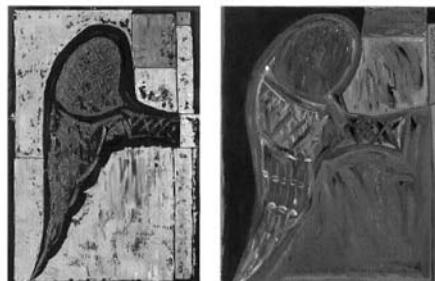
Marin Gherasim – *Kairos*[8], 2001
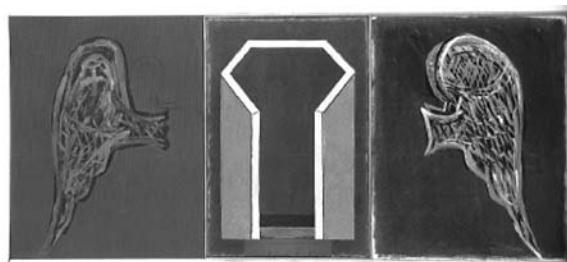
One may identify Paul Constantinescu's *Oratorios* with the primary phase of the incorporation of Byzantine chant into instrumental music. The contemporary stage, called neo-psaltic or neo-Byzantine, provides the intriguing appearance of a palimpsest. The *scriptio inferior* becomes more and more imperceptible, while the *scriptio superior* advocates the originality of Paul Constantinescu's successors. It serves to confirm that the synthesis he made has proven to be functional and viable, creating a paradigm: the convergence between Eastern and Western music culture.

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[6] Oil on canvas, 82x65 cm, picture reproduced from the Album "Marin Gherasim", Ed. Institutului Cultural Român, 2007, p. 142, dr. Sorina Costina's collection, Brad.

[7] Oil on canvas, 82x75, picture reproduced from the Album "Marin Gherasim", Ed. Institutului Cultural Român, 2007, p. 142, author's collection.

[8] Oil on canvas 82x185, picture reproduced from the Album "Marin Gherasim", Ed. Institutului Cultural Român, 2007, p. 164, author's collection.

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Santrauka

Naujas žvilgsnis į Bizantijos muziką: nuo vokalinės monodijos iki elektroninės muzikos XX a. Rumunijos kompozitorių kūriniuose

Pranešime remiantis hermeneutika siekiama pateikti duomenų apie bizantiškojo chloralo integraciją į XX amžiaus Rumunijos kompozitorių instrumentinę muziką. Paulas Constantinescu yra laikomas psalminės monodijos išplitimo pradininku: abi jo oratorijos transformuoja bizantiškąjį melodinį palikimą į pagrindinį instrumentinio žanro ingredientą. Muzikinis *Apreiškimo* (Kalėdų oratorijos įvadinės dalies) pateikimas traktuojamas kaip idealus simbiotinis modelis tarp tradicinių himnų ir modernių to laikotarpio kompozicijos technikų. Pasirinkdamas autentiškus šaltinius (*Macarie, Suceveanu, Stupcanu, Anton Pann*) Constantinescu tarytum atlieka ikonografo vaidmenį – jis gerbia kanoninę normą melodijos lygmenyje ir kartu dekoruoja muziką savais elementais. *Apreiškimo* segmentą taip pat galima simboliškai iššifruoti: jis paruošia aukštesnės integralios vizijos atsiradimą, iškeltą jaunesnės kartos rumunų kompozitorių. Šio kompozitoriaus pasirinktą kryptį toliau plėtojo ištisa modernių kompozitorių plejada – praplėtė koncepciją, praturtino muzikinį žodyną naudodama Bizantijos palikimą. Stefanas Niculescu, Anatolis Vieru, Gheorghe Firca, Myriam Marbi, Cornelis Târanu, Octavianas Namescu – visi jie laviruoja nostalgiškai ieškodami balso prigimties instrumentų garsų rezonanse ir instrumentinių savybių, kurios atkuria bizantinį *topos*, papildytą moderniu skambesiu. Rumunijos kompozitoriai parodė didelį potencialą, plėtodami Constantinescu inicijuotą srovę: sukūrė naują asimiliacinę pakopą bizantiškajame chorale.