

## 6. THE ANTHEM "AXION" IN THE CHORAL VISION OF ROMANIAN COMPOSERS

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**Abstract:** *The "Axion" hymn is one of the most beautiful compositions dedicated to the Mother of God, in the Byzantine church. Originally monodic, the hymn first received plurivocal choral treatment in the space of the Slavonic Orthodox Churches, and from the second half of the 19th century also in the worship of the Romanian Orthodox Church. In the Romanian space, the music of this anthem can be found in three guises: Western, Russian and Byzantine melodic inspiration. Reference Romanian composers - such as Isidor Vorbchievici, Gavriil Musicescu, Ciprian Porumbescu, Eusebiu Mandicevschi, Dumitru Georgescu Chiriac, Ioan D. Chirescu and Nicolae Lungu - composed high-quality music to the lyrics of the hymn Axion estin (It's worth it), leaving To the Romanian Orthodox Church a rich repertoire endowment, to the delight and comfort of the faithful.*

**Key words:** *axion, hymn, monody, polyphony, harmony, choral music, Byzantine, repertoire, style*

### 1. Introduction

In the Byzantine Liturgy, the hymn *Axion* is one of the most beloved and beautiful hymns dedicated to the Mother of God. Its importance also stems from the place it occupies in the liturgical dramaturgy: after the moment of consecration of the Eucharistic gifts (the Eucharistic sacrifice). Its name derives from the first words of the Greek text – *Axion estin os alitos* – which translate as *It is truly fitting* and, according to the liturgical text, it is a hymn glorifying the main attributes that characterize the striking personality of Saint Mary: her perpetual virginity and her quality as Mother of God. Literally, it consists of two sections (stanzas):

- I. *It is truly right to bless Thee, O Theotokos,  
Thou the ever blessed, and most pure, and Mother of our God.*
- II. *Thou the more honorable than the cherubim,  
And beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim,  
Who without corruption gavest birth to God the Word,  
Thou, the true Theotokos, We magnify Thee!*

The *Axion* hymn is the fruit of the Athonite monastic piety<sup>32</sup> of the 10th century, when the current first stanza was added to the *irmos/refrain* of the 9th Canticle of the *Canon of Denia on Holy Thursday*. It was later integrated into the Byzantine Liturgy and became widespread in all Orthodox churches. The *Axion* hymn is sing on Sundays throughout the year, at the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, hence the name *Sunday axion*. On Imperial Feasts, "it is replaced by the *irmos* of the 9th Canticle of the Canon of the Feast".<sup>33</sup>

### 2. Discussions

*The Sunday Axion* was chorally treated by the vast majority of Romanian

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<sup>32</sup> Ene Braniște – *Liturgica specială pentru institutele teologice*, București, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al B.O.R., 1980, p. 280

<sup>33</sup> Sebastian Barbu Bucur – *Axion*, în *Dicționar de termeni muzicali*, Ediția a III-a, București 2010, Editura Enciclopedică, p. 58

composers, creators of worship music. Therefore, we encounter him in all choral liturgies, in any of the hypostases of the musical trends in which they subscribe: of Russian, Western influence and which uses the traditional liturgical chant.

From the religious repertoire of **Russian choral influence**, the representative Sunday axion remains the one written by the composer Gavriil Musicescu in F major, tempo *Moderato* and a 4-metre binary measure. The composer creates a flowing, syllabic melody, mostly in quarter notes, which performs smooth waves, ascending-descending, by gradually moving towards and from the melodic accents dictated by the prosodic accents. By proposing a certain tonal plan, Musicescu structures the hymn in three distinct articulations, on the principle of tonic-dominant-tonic relation: **A** - in F major (meas. 1-16) **B** - in C major (meas. 17-24) & **C** - in F major (meas. 25-36).

*Axions* composed in the **Western style** are characterized by the diversity of musical language from one author to another, with a non-unitary musical discourse, often dramatized, with a melody in the spirit of Italian opera choirs. Such are the *axions* composed by Isidor Vorobchievici, Ciprian Porumbescu, Eusebiu Mandicevschi, Eduard and Andrei Wachmann, Ion Bunescu and others. The choral *Axions* that use the liturgical psaltic chant quote the melodies of the modes / echoes V and VIII. The Sunday choral axions in the V voice use the melodies written by Varlaam the Monk - church singer, 19th century, Stânișoara–Argeș hermitage, by Ioan Popescu-Pasărea (1871-1943) and by Ioan Popescu-Brănești church singer, conductor and composer (1876–1959).

### 3. Results

The song of Varlaam the Monk - *Worthy You Truly Are* – because of the beauty, glow and fineness that characterizes it, it was an early inspiration for the creators of choral liturgies. The defining feature of Varlaam's melody resides in the crisis aspect of the first phrase, which begins in the acute mode diapason's register, on the tonic of echos (*Pa'/e2*), performing ascending-descending sinuous arches, which are preserved in the high zone of the tone scale, with suspensive melodic cadences at stage V (*Ke/b1*). The entire melodic discourse is structured into three large, related articulations of **A Av Av1** type of different dimensions. The last sentence of each articulation has a descending path until the tonic from octave bassa (*Pa/e1*) by filling the whole octavian diapason of the tone.

Chorally used by Ion Bunescu, George Ionescu and Nicolae Lungu, Varlaam's melody has experienced a perfect polyphonic treatment in the latter's view, with a homophonic choral writing, sometimes animated with elements of imitative polyphony. The melody of the Sunday Axion in tone V, by Ioan Popescu–Pasărea, has seen the broadest approach in choral treatment, based on the homonymous melody by Anton Pann. Summarizing 12 ample musical phrases, rich in melismas, Anton Pann/Ioan Popescu-Pasărea's *Axion* is easily recognizable by its unmistakable debut, due to the ascending perfect fourth springboard interval, which places the melodic ictus ad initio.

The gradually descending postcrusic march to the lower base (*Pa*) covers the entire diapason (octave) of the mode, cadencing suspensively to the dominant (*Ke*). Phrases 2, 4, 8 and 10 modulate in the chromatic echo VI. The entire melodic discourse involves a pentapartite architectonics, which takes the form of 5 melodic

articulations of asymmetrical dimensions, each ending with a perfect melodic cadence at the tonic of the echo. This melody has been approached chorally by many authors, knowing the best achievements in the compositions of Teodor Teodorescu, Ioan Popescu-Pasărea, Mihai Berezovschi and Ioan D. Chirescu. Everyone transcribed the melody with the tonic *Pa* on the sound *E1*.

Teodor Teodorescu diatonizes the entire melody, giving up - for choral treatment reasons - the intonations of chromatic mode VI, preserving only the quantity of intervals, not their quality. Therefore, the *Axion* becomes monomodal. The composer approaches a polyphonic writing, in which musical phrases are linked imitatively, in accordance with the Renaissance-type motet technique. Ioan D. Chirescu, in choral treatment of the same song, uses a predominantly homophonic writing, but he inserts some vocal elements specific to the Byzantine chanting, like the monodic beginning of the work with soprano; he uses ison on *e* and *b* sounds, namely the tonic and dominant mode, followed by the progressive completion of the entire choral apparatus with the help of successive voices entries. The harmony used is tono-modal, through the preponderance of authentic connections.

*The melody of the Sunday Axion in church echos VIII*, appears in various variants, in the choral liturgies signed by George Ionescu, Dumitru G. Kiriac, Gheorghe Cucu and Ioan D. Chirescu. They prove a common source, undeclared by those who have quoted them. In the stall chants liturgy books published by the first chanter I. P. Pasărea, there are two axions in tone VIII which bear the names of their authors: one by Ștefanache Popescu, of large dimensions, with rich melismatic phrases richly ornamented and the other by Ioan Popescu-Pasărea, Ștefanache's disciple. The songs quoted by G. Ionescu and D. G. Kiriac are strikingly similar. It is possible that they reflect the linear transcription of shortened variants by the live, stall practice of the Axion signed by Ștefanache Popescu, a safe source for Ioan Popescu-Pasărea's Axion.

Kiriac's version has a predominantly syllabic, sinuous song with small melismas in the cadences of the inner musical phrases. The melody is metric in 2/4 measures, and *Andantino* tempo and betrays the tendency of *sticheraric* interpretation of abbreviated axions, in contrast to the old practice of singing these chants in a papadic tactus, corresponding to a slow tempo. The composer treats the psaltic melody for a unique formula of mixed choir, at four voices: soprano I and II, Alto, Tenor; the bass party is missing. Apart from the songs quoted, there are also axions with melodies created in the spirit of the VIIIth tone, used by Gheorghe Cucu and Ioan D. Chirescu. Such original creations are inspired by the traditional stall chanting, whose profile transpires fragmentarily. Gh. Cucu composes a song in B-flat major for chorus to three equal voices, in the medium tempo of *Andantino* and ternary meter. The first 27 measures are in unison, and from measure 28 (*Thou the most honourable...*), the harmony is approached in 3 voices.

Ioan D Chirescu, in the *Divine Liturgy after the 8th Echos*, treats chorally a melody composed by his teacher, D. G. Kiriac, taken from the *Children and People Mass*. This song is characterized by coherence because of the preponderant gradual movement, mobility given by the giusto-syllabic bichron rhythm (quarter notes and quavers), fitted into alternative 4, 2 and 3 metre measures, the ambitus of which covers the space of an octave, from *f1* to *f2*. The song is eminently homophonic,

according to the principle of the accompanied monody, tonally harmonised, with the melody often seconded by altos in parallel thirds.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The equivalent of the *Ave Maria hymn* from the Roman Catholic mass, the Axion hymn has found a choral treatment commensurate with its significance in the Romanian liturgical repertoire. Of the variety of such hymns, in current choral practice, the axions that capitalize on psaltic singing have been preserved in particular. The suppleness and naturalness of the melodies as well as the mastery of their choral treatment constitute artistic values that make them stand alongside choral works of the same genre from the Western repertoire.

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