

# Psalm 130 – textual consensus in Romantic music and the 20<sup>th</sup> century music

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*Abstract:* - This paper starts from the premise that the Romantic composers of classical music and those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century resorted to the text of Psalm 130 to give it various musical forms. Thus, we witness unity in diversity – creators with different styles and of different origins chose to give a musical representation to the same text. Despite social, territorial, linguistic and religious changes recorded throughout history, the texts of David's Psalms are still relevant. The depth of Psalm 130 (129 in the Septuagint) is a vivid source of inspiration for composers, and its spiritual dimension beckons to prayer.

*Key-Words:* - psalm, Romanticism, 20<sup>th</sup> century, religious music, textual consensus, classical music.

## 1 Introduction

This paper starts from the premise that the Romantic composers of classical music and those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century resorted to the text of Psalm 130 to give it various musical forms. Thus, we witness unity in diversity – creators with different styles and of different origins chose to give a musical representation to the same text. Despite social, territorial, linguistic and religious changes recorded throughout history, the texts of David's Psalms are still relevant. The depth of Psalm 130 (129 in the Septuagint) is a vivid source of inspiration for composers, and its spiritual dimension beckons to prayer.

Next to the prophetic and historical writings of the Old Testament, books in poetic form represent an important theological and artistic legacy. Among them, the Book of Psalms (the Psalms) highlights a wide range of human feelings in connection with God, which led to the frequent use throughout time of its texts in multiple contexts. *“These creations have always been at the heart of the preoccupations of those eager for repentance and redemption. The primary interest they enjoyed stems from their wealth as well as from the beauty of their content.”* [1].

The word Psaltery renders the form ψαλτηριον which in the past meant musical string instrument (associated by researchers with the harp). Later on, this name was attributed to the music accompanied

by string instruments, and then it defined the kind music which praised God.

## 2 Discussion



Fig. 1. King David interpreting the psalms – the Saint Galen manuscript – Psalterium aureum

The music-spirituality dualism is a matter that preoccupied mankind throughout history, and even today, in an era that questions the substance of art and the meaning of spirituality, we are witnessing

original musical expressions that reach to the spiritual component for a richer meaning. As we know, all human cultures built and kept a belief in a certain form of spiritual reality, and the matter of the existing of the human soul is one of the reasons why. Art is connected to the human soul as well, so a spiritual-musical experience ensures an otherworldly journey. It is known that man grew as a dialogical being in connection with the divine, and music has always been a way of straight dialog. From this point of view, it is worth mentioning that music is not only a form of expression, but also an important method to influence the mind and soul.

The directive of composers towards religious subjects comes as no surprise to us. The human being is represented within the old wisdom of the fathers as the metaphor of an instrument that is interpreting alongside the creations of the Universe a composition of worship to the Creator. Thus, the desire to serve God through composition is justified by man's spiritual-artistic nature. *"You are my guitar and flute, and temple," says the Lord, Guitar for harmony, flute for the Spirit to breath upon, and temple to hold God.*" [2] In reference to this matter Saint Vasile the Great stated: *"not many can happen upon the mysteries of God, only he who can become a harmonious musical instrument of promise, in such way to replace the psalter as a musical instrument, and be touched by the workings of the Holy Spirit."* [3] There are similar contours being drawn between a human being and that of the musical instruments utilized by the Jews in the Old Testament musical traditions. *"First, we must praise God through guitars to create harmony within out physical movement. The mind that seeks that which is above is named psalter for the way in which this musical instrument in built to have the power of the sounds from above. The doings of the flesh bring the praises of God down to earth. However, the mysteries that are revealed through the mind have their workings from above as they are inspired by the Spirit. In this manner, he who has kept his eyes on the commandments and makes of them concerts and symphony, he is the one who sings to God psalters with ten chords, as ten are the first commandments given as law."* [4]

Saint Ambrosia stated that *"in the psalms, the teachings work alongside grace. We sing psalms for pleasure, but we learn them for our instruction. The teachings given with loathing do not last, but that which is learned with pleasure, once it reaches the spirit, does not waver."* [5] The singing of the psalms brings us closer to God. The confession and cleansing of the mind from evil thoughts through music is a well-known fact since the ancient tribes.

Man has resonated throughout the centuries with the meanings in David's Psalms, and composers considered the psaltic texts a good source of spiritual and artistic expression. The textual consensus in classical music ensured by the creators' propensity for the Psalter is proof that humankind has never stopped reinterpreting the sacred. Also, we can see unity in diversity – composers with different styles and of different origins chose to give a musical representation to the same texts. *"The psalm as a music genre, monadic or choral, harmonic or polyphonic, accompanied or without accompaniment, has coexisted with the one read in secret, read out loud, recited, and has generated exceptional diversification from all points of view: liturgical, hymnographic, stylistic, leaving the churches and the cult services, to generate a very diverse and important musical, vocal, choral, vocal - instrumental literature which has become part of concert repertoires."* [6]

Psalm 130 (129 in the Septuagint, traditionally *De profundis* from its Latin incipit, is one of the Penitential psalms) is the embodiment of a hopeful wait for a saving God. Its lyrics are filled with a special dramatic tension found in the personal prayers in which the believer considers the divine mercy to be the only redeeming light. *"From the depths I cried to You, Lord! Lord, hear my voice. What does it mean from the depths? It is not simply that the words come from one's mouth, tongue, or soul. They come from the depth of one's heart uttered with ardor and eagerness, from the soul's recesses. Because souls in trouble are like this, they stir the whole heart, calling onto God with a lot of contrition."* [7]

## 2.1 Romantic music

The hermeneutic values of Psalm 130 have not passed unnoticed by Romantic composers. One of those who chose to give a musical form to the redemption prayer in the Psalter is Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. He was a member of the Reformed Church, and his work *Kirchenmusik, Op.23* is evidence of this. The three sections which make up the pages of religious music were written for an ensemble including a mixed choir, soloists, organ, and orchestra. The first part of the creation uses a metrical version of Psalm 130 in the German translation of Martin Luther. The vocal-instrumental composition is conservative, suitable for the atmosphere of classical music.

**KIRCHENMUSIK**  
 von  
**FELIX MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY.**  
 Op. 23. Serie 14. No 98.

**I.**  
 „Aus tiefer Noth schrei' ich zu dir“  
 für vierstimmigen Chor.

Composit 1828.

**Nel. CHORAL.**

Soprano. Aus tiefer Noth schrei' ich zu dir Herr Gott, er- höre mein Ge- bet! Dein geistlich Ohr zu keh- ren um mich her.

Alto. Aus tiefer Noth schrei' ich zu dir Herr Gott, er- höre mein Ge- bet! Dein geistlich Ohr zu keh- ren um mich her.

Tenore. Aus tiefer Noth schrei' ich zu dir Herr Gott, er- höre mein Ge- bet! Dein geistlich Ohr zu keh- ren um mich her.

Basso. Aus tiefer Noth schrei' ich zu dir Herr Gott, er- höre mein Ge- bet! Dein geistlich Ohr zu keh- ren um mich her.

Hör sie off - ne! Denn so du willst das se- hen an was Sünd und Unrecht ist ge- than, wer kann, Herr, vor dir blei- ben!

Hör sie off - ne! Denn so du willst das se- hen an was Sünd und Unrecht ist ge- than, wer kann, Herr, vor dir blei- ben!

Fig.2. Fragment from Kirchenmusik by F.M. Bartholdy

Franz Liszt also found inspiration in Psalm 130, which is why in his vast creation there are both a vocal-instrumental work on psaltic lyrics and an unfinished composition for piano and orchestra entitled *De profundis*. Psalm 129 (the Septuagint version) for male choir, baritone solo, and organ is a creation in which lyrical melodic lines artfully combine with chromatic, tense fragments, the representation of the prayer in choral a cappella moments is interrupted by the baritone solos, and later on the organ changes the atmosphere of the musical discourse. The multiple interpretations of the psaltic text highlight the rich meanings of the prayer and the subjectivity specific for the spiritual experience.

Fig.3. Fragment from Psalm 129 by F. Liszt

## 2.2 20th century music

The musical pages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the text of Psalm 130 (in Hebrew) composed by Arthur Honegger appear as a special, restless prayer at a first audition. The bass solo reveals, in

*Mimaamaquim*, a tense melodic line accompanied by piano, the dramatic tension of the prayer being obtained by combining a dark melismatic melody, on the vowel “o” (with narrow, chromatic intervals) with a declamatory melody with text. The musical language used is balanced, tonal, which is explained by the religious topic.

Fig. 4. Fragment from Mimaamaquim by Arthur Honegger

A remarkable personality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century music who resorts to the religious text *De profundis* as a source of inspiration for a maturity musical creation is Arnold Schoenberg. He uses Sprechstimme – which resembles the music in Judaic temples, numerological symbols in the architectural construction of the music, and a cappella choir to convey the psaltic messages in Hebrew. The result is a music piece built on the dodecapronic technique in which “*the apparent dissonance and disharmony, the lack of harmony, and the general atonality emphasize various metaphysical topics*” [8]. The choice of the text of Psalm 130 leads us to conclude that spirituality is not outside the scope of the 20<sup>th</sup> century artist, and that the sacred is reinterpreted.

The first female winner of the Rome composition prize, Lili Boulanger, found her inspiration in the Book of Psalms, and she composed *De profundis* in 1914. This astounding imaginative large piece of music pinpoints the diversity of emotions that one can find and evoke starting from one psalm.

Arvo Pärt’s *De profundis* reveals a microcosmos that proposes a new way of understanding music- the art of sounds is a path to redemption. The diversity that we find in the musical representations of David’s Psalms is supported by Sain Basil’s words: “*The Book of Psalms is a public treasure of good teachings, revealing to everyone, according to their diligence, what is appropriate to them.*”

### 3 Conclusion

Psalm 130 truly represents a consensus in the Romantic music and the music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The psalmist's trust in God becomes a model for the people that are why composers resorted to the text of Psalm 130 to give it various musical forms.

The subjectivity specific for individual prayers is captured by the musical representations of this psalm. The differences in the adopted language and the various voices underline the uniqueness of the creative process and the originality of the artistic feelings. Also, spirituality is biased, so that the overlap between music and religion results in a diverse micro-cosmos with an intrinsic philosophy.

The textual consensus given by the psalmic texts in the Romantic music and the music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is proof that man has not desecrated but just reinterpreted the sacred. Prophetic and missionary, the cultural-spiritual discovery is a personal act; the artist deepens and transfigures the world in a subjective manner, starting from the same religious realities as his contemporary man.

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