The Psaltic Byzantine Chant in Paul Constantinescu's Creation and its relevance for the Romanian Composers of the 20th Century

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Abstract. One of the most renowned Romanian composers, Paul Constantinescu (1909-1963) has been acknowledged also as the first Romanian composer who extended the psaltic monophony beyond its vocal tradition and transferred it into the instrumental and symphony genres, such as his *Two Byzantine Studies* for piano trio (1929), the *Triple Concerto for violin, piano and cello* (1963). In both his oratorios for soloists, choir and orchestra – the Easter Byzantine Oratorio *The Dolorous Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord* and the Christmas Byzantine Oratorio *The Conception and Birth of our Lord* - by adopting authentic sources from Petre Efesiul, Macarie Ieromonahul, Dimitrie Suceveanu, Stupcanu, Anton Pann, he achieves a synthesis between the autochthonous Byzantine melodic heritage with its modal style on one hand and the vocal-symphonic genre and the tonal harmony of the western musical tradition on the other. This study aims to offer a general view regarding the integration of the Byzantine chant into Paul Constatinescu's creation and the ways in which this heteroclite fusion influenced the next generations of Romanian composers.

Περίληψη. Στα τέλη του 19ου και τις αρχές του 20ου αιώνα, το βυζαντινό λειτουργικό μέλος έγινε μια πηγή πλούσιας έμπνευσης για τους Ρουμάνους συνθέτες, όπως οι Dumitru Kiriac, Gheorghe Cucu και Gavriil Musicescu, που το χρησιμοποίησαν αποκλειστικά στις χορωδιακές τους δημιουργίες. Ένας από τους πιο γνωστούς συνθέτες της Ρουμανίας, Paul Constantinescu (1909 - 1963) έχει αναγνωριστεί επίσης ως ο πρώτος Ρουμάνος συνθέτης ο οποίος επέκτεινε την ψαλτική μονοφωνία πέρα από την φωνητική της παράδοση και την μετέφερε σε ορχηστρικά και συμφωνικά είδη, όπως με τις «Δυο Βυζαντινές Σπουδές» του για πιάνο τρίο (1929) και το «Τριπλό Κοντσέρτο για βιολί, πιάνο και βιολοντσέλο» (1963). Στα δύο ορατόριά του για σολίστ, χορωδία και ορχήστρα -το πασχαλινό Βυζαντινό ορατόριο «Το Πάθος, ο Θάνατος και η Ανάσταση του Κυρίου μας» και το Χριστουγεννιάτικο «Η Σύλληψη και η Γέννηση του Κυρίου μας»- υιοθετώντας αυθεντικές πηγές των Petre Efesiul, Macarie Ieromonahul, Dimitrie Suceveanu, Stupcanu και Anton Pann, επιτυγχάνει μια σύνθεση μεταξύ της αυτόχθονης βυζαντινής μελωδικής κληρονομιάς με το τροπικό ύφος της, αφενός, και στο φωνητικό - συμφωνικό ύφος και την τονική αρμονία της Δυτικής μουσικής παράδοσης, από την άλλη. Η μελέτη αυτή έχει ως στόχο να προσφέρει μια γενική άποψη σχετικά με την ένταξη της βυζαντινής ψαλμωδίας στη δημιουργία του Paul Constantinescu και τους τρόπους με τους οποίους αυτή η ετερόκλητη σύντηξη επηρέασε τις επόμενες γενιές των Ρουμάνων συνθετών.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Romanian music, the phenomenon of taking over the lyrics and melodies from the orthodox liturgy appeared in the second half of the 19th century, after the establishment of the first church choir in 1836, on voivode Alexandru Ghica's initiative. Two decisive causes led to the birth of the choral music: the decline of the aisle ceremonial song (due partly to unprepared singers) on one hand and the model and ideas of the reformation coming from West, that influenced the Romanian society of that time, on the other [1]. Initially, the authorities and especially the leaders of the Romanian Orthodox Church strongly objected to the idea of harmonizing the liturgical archaic melodies, arguing that it could lead to an impure style and that these melodies couldn't and shouldn't be transcribed in the European notation. Nevertheless, a significant number of talented composers began to write liturgies and other sacred works, either by harmonizing authentic melodies, or by creating in a psaltic style.

There were three tendencies in the choral Byzantine music: one trend was under the Russian influence, the second trend followed the German influence and the last trend, the traditionalist and original one, promoted the autochthonous and authentic Byzantine style and it was represented by composers such as Gheorghe Ionescu, Titus Cerne, Teodor Teodorescu, Dumitru G. Kiriac, Popescu Pasărea, Gheorghe Cucu, Ioan D. Petrescu-Visarion.

Between the two world wars, a new school of traditional church music was born, through Dimitrie Cuclin, Sabin V. Drăgoi, Cornel Givulescu, Vasile Petraşcu, Zeno Vancea, Paul Constantinescu and others. Paul Constantinescu's creation is viewed as the peak of this direction: "The culminating point of the religious music in that period was reached by Paul Constantinescu, in his oratorios *The Easter Oratorio* (1946), for soloists, choir and orchestra, based on Byzantines lyrics and melodies originating from the Middle Ages, that were decoded, translated and arranged by Ioan D. Petrescu-Visarion, *The Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord* (1948) and *The Christmas Byzantine Oratorio* (1949) for soloists, choir and orchestra. His music represents a creative processing of D. G. Kiriac's style but also a rebirth of the old Byzantine music and from this point of view, one may consider his oratorios of an overwhelming importance in the universal music, both through their noble expression and the novelty of their musical style. In the same way as D. G Kiriac's *Psaltic Liturgy* and Zeno Vancea's *Requiem*, Paul Constantinescu's oratorios are two of the most inspired religious creations in the entire world of the Orthodox Church" [2].

Paul Constantinescu has been acknowledged also as the first Romanian composer who extended the psaltic monophony beyond its vocal tradition and transferred it into the instrumental and symphony genres, as – for example – in his *Two Byzantine Studies* for piano trio (1929), the *Triple Concerto for violin, piano and cello* (1963) and into the vocal symphonic genre as well, through the oratorios for soloists, choir and orchestra – the Easter Byzantine Oratorio *The Dolorous Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord* and the Christmas Byzantine Oratorio *The Conception and Birth of our Lord*.

During the communist years of oppression (1944-1989), sacred music was under hursh censorship to a point where "it was not possible to declare in the titles of musical works a preference for religious titles" [3]. The communist propaganda valued the autochthonous, folkloric music and they sometimes included and tolerated the byzantine tradition in this area, especially after 1965, without refering to it as "religious music" [3]. Paul Constantinescu was the father of the Romanian Byzantine style and he also used and processed folk music in his creation.

His artistic *credo* was interconnected with his Christian faith; in his own words: "Music is mystery, faith is mystery and music is faith; one must believe in order to feel its blessing; the nonbeliever cannot share its gift" [4]. Due to his ties with the church, he was suspected of a hostile attitude towards the Communist Party and surveilled by the secret police agency. As a result, in the Communist Period, his sacred works were rarely performed, regardless their great artistic value.

2. THE BYZANTINE HERITAGE IN PAUL CONSTANTINESCU'S CREATION

In his Byzantine creation, Paul Constantinescu follows the path of simplification and vocalization, from the chromaticism of the *Two Byzantine Studies* (1929) to the diatonicism of the *Byzantine Variations for the Cello and Orchestra* (1946) and the *Byzantine Sonata for Cello Solo* (1943) and to the vocal style of the *Psaltic Liturgy* (1936) and of the two *Oratorios in Byzantine style* (1948-1949).

His Byzantine oratorios are a synthesis between the structure of J. S. Bach's *passions* and the content of the Romanian orthodox liturgy, between the autochthonous Byzantine melodic heritage with its modal style on one hand and the vocal-symphonic genre and the tonal harmony of the Western musical tradition on the other. The arias, choirs and chorals from the Lutheran oratorios are replaced by genres of the Byzantine music, with lyrics and music specific to the Christmas or Easter Season, such as: *Aliluia, Luminândă, Sedelna, Stihoavnă, Tropar, Antifon, Condac, Stihira, Sedelna-Podobie, Catavasia*.

He adopted authentic sources from Petre Efesiul, Macarie Ieromonahul, Dimitrie Suceveanu, Stupcanu, Anton Pann, without accurately quoting them. Although he kept the original scale degrees (steps), he sometimes changed the modes (echos) and also, modified some words and cut down text

fragments. He tried to simplify the melodic line by removing the excess of melismata, of chromatisms and generally avoiding the augmented second. Although the rhythm is organized in conventional measures, the asymmetric substance of the Byzantine melody is reflected by the metric modulations.

Paul Constantinescu creatively processed the modal and harmonic latencies of the Byzantine melodies. For example, in the baritone aria *Luminândă* from the *Easter Oratorio* he transposed the traditional song (morning service, taken from I. Popescu-Pasărea's *Triod* - see Figure 1) lower, to E flat and unlike the original, the incipit tone E flat is interpreted by the composer as the minor third of Aeolian C (see Figure 2) and not as fundamental tone.

Figure 1: Musical example (fragment). "Cântările Triodului (Triodyon Songs)",
(© Publishing House of the Bible and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest 2001).

Figure 2: Musical example. Paul Constantinescu, Easter Byzantine Oratorio No 3, bars 1-12

"The Dolorous Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord",
(© manuscript, Library of the George Enescu Philharmonie, Bucharest).

E flat becomes the fundamental tone of the next phrases (see Figure 3) and the modal harmonies display colorful effects such as the augmented fourth E flat – A natural or the minor and depressive final third G flat – E Flat. In the last musical phrase, the composer uses a cross tuning effect called *scordatura* by modulating to the upper chromatic semitone, E major, thus reaching a brighter expression.

Figure 3: Musical example. Paul Constantinescu, Easter Byzantine Oratorio No 3, bars 21-39

"The Dolorous Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord",
(© manuscript, Library of the George Enescu Philharmonie).

The musicologist Vasile Tomescu, in the monography he wrote about Paul Constantinescu, suggests that the composer, "did not use a unique modal grammar in a musical piece or sections and in order to avoid the monotony, the ethnographism, the archaism, he reached the crystallization of certain principles. The most important of these is the high synthesis in *choosing the modes according to their expressive ethos* such as the luminosity of Lydian, the dramatic nature of Hypomixolydian, the strange and depressive expression of Locrian" [5].

In my book *The dolorous Passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ in the works of the 20th century composers – the passion genre* [6] within the chapter dedicated to Paul Constantinescu, I demonstrated how the entire modal structure of the Easter Oratorio is based on a system of the main tones and their ethos. There are the conventional ethoses, subclassified in spatial ethoses (determined by the ascending or descending direction between modes/tonalities) and major/minor ethoses on one hand, and the subjective ethoses or leit-tones, specific to a certain musical work, on the other hand. For example, the minor tones are prevailing in the third part of the oratorio, expressing Lord's

crucifixion and His death and the major tones are dominant in the fourth part, as jubilant rendition of the joy of His Resurrection. Below and above the central tone E minor (that starts and ends the oratorio) the author creates a tonal spatiality through the circle of perfect fifths. For example, in the 3rd part (Jesus' death and burial) the modal evolution is below E minor, in the area of the key signatures with flats (A minor, D minor, G minor and so on), gradually descending to the lowest point, A flat minor, simultaneously with Jesus' death. On the contrary, in the last part (Christ's Resurrection), the whole diagram moves above E minor, to the major key signatures with sharps (C major, G major, D major and so on), reaching the highest tonal point of the entire oratorio, F sharp major and C sharp major in the moment when the Angel announces the Resurrection. Regarding the leit-tones, the composer associates a few tones with specific ethoses and meanings. There are three most important leit-tones: (1) the fundamental leit-tone, starting and ending the Easter Oratorio is *E minor* and it is used by the composer as an *Agnus Dei symbol*, in those contexts in which Christ' qualities are eulogized (patience, kindness, supreme altruism, self-sacrifice, obedience to God); (2) *D minor* central tone prevails in the 2nd and 3rd parts of the oratorio, bearing the *ethos of physical and spiritual death* (Lord's death and burial, the brutality of the evil forces, Peter's and the other apostles' denial); (3) *G major* is the main tone of the 4th (and last) part of the oratorio and consequently is invested by the author with the *ethos of Resurrection*, expressing Lord's victory, majesty, divinity, and glory.

The second fundamental principle is *the tetrachordal organization*. Paul Constantinescu himself noted a few tetrachords that can be found in the Byzantine music and in the Romanian folk music as well, preoccupied by the affinities between these two categories: "Starting with the proceedings of the psaltic music that uses mostly and continues (at least theoretically) the ancient Greek system, I have discovered certain elements that, in my opinion, could help to clarify this problem. In fact actually, the Byzantine music and the psaltic music respectively, with all the influences that shaped it, is originally still folk music, sharing an almost mutual identity with the folk music, because both of them were blended together on a common background. The tetrachord, the fundament of the Greek system, applies entirely to the Byzantine-psaltic music and to the folk song as well" [7].

His Christmas oratorio is a brilliant symbiosis between Byzantine and folk music, one of his inspiration sources being *The Book of Carols* by George Breazul. The shepherds' choir, the wise men (Magi) and Herod are those key moments in which the composer imitates the Romanian secular carol (the shepherds), quotes Carols of the Star (the wise men) and uses a traditional folk song called "Bethlehem song" that is intoned by the Romanian peasants in the folk theatre play *Herodes* (Herode). The composer himself gathered this last song, from the villages near Ploieşti, transcribed it and published it (Figure 4):

Figure 4: Musical example. Folk song gathered and transcribed by Paul Constantinescu

Published in Paul Constantinescu, "About the poetry of the music",
(©Premier Publishing House, Ploiesti, 2004).

In the oratorio, this song is used in one of those expressionist and sarcastic moments of Paul Constantinescu's creation, painting a cruel and malicious Herod through the dissonant and chromatic harmonies, the glissando, pizzicato secco and sforzando effects in the orchestra and culminating with the superposition of Herode's theme (choir) with the wise men's theme of an implicit Byzantine origin (the carol of the star *Three Magi from the East* – orchestra) – see Figure 5.

Figure 5: Musical example. Paul Constantinescu, fragment from "The Christmas Oratorio"

(©Bärenreiter Publishing House, -).

One of the harmonic means of expression I have noticed in Paul Constantinescu's creation is the so called *tonal/modal interference* (the syntagm belongs to Eduard Terényi [8]), used to highlight a certain text meaning. For example, one can find in the *Easter Oratorio* the negative tonal interference through the succession of two minor chords positioned at a distance of a major (or minor) inferior third from each other as a leit-expression of a spiritual breakdown. In the following musical example (Figure 6), the tonal leap from G sharp minor to E minor accompanyies the words: "and a cock crowed" (Mathew 26:74), dramatically expressing Peter's betrayal.

Figure 6: Musical example. Paul Constantinescu, Easter Byzantine Oratorio, No 16, bars 42-43
"The Dolorous Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord",
(© manuscript, Library of the George Enescu Philharmonie).

On the contrary, the positive tonal interference through an ascendant leap of major third, from a minor chord to a major one, constitutes an harmonic emblem of divine light and victory, as it can be seen in the fragment where the Angel's speech announcing Christ's Resurrection is harmonically uplifted from D minor to F sharp major (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Musical example. Paul Constantinescu, Easter Byzantine Oratorio, No 35, bars 23-28
"The Dolorous Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord",
(© manuscript, Library of the George Enescu Philharmonie).

The strange and imponderable effect of the augmented fourth/diminished fifth is cultivated in chords, pedals and sometimes in the *pole-counterpole harmonic relations*, signifying an unusual or dark phenomenon. A relevant example of polarity is the pole-counterpole succession between C minor and the perfect fifth G flat - D flat preceding the text: "and Satan entered into Judas who was called Iscariot" (Luke 22:3) – see Figure 8.

Figure 8: Musical example. Paul Constantinescu, Easter Byzantine Oratorio, No 2, bars 9-10
"The Dolorous Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord",
(© manuscript, Library of the George Enescu Philharmonie).

The composer adapts modern *contrapuntal techniques* to the archaic monophony without excluding the specific ison accompaniment and the unison. The ison is pitched usually on the finalis, rarely on the fifth step of the mode, often on both modal pillars (double ison) and the rhythmical triple ison on a

chord is not excluded. The Byzantine ison as a continuum, a sonorous static background, has been compared by André Souris with "the golden background of the icons" [9]. The Romanian composer and musicologist Roxana Pepelea notices that in Paul Constantinescu's oratorios, "The relationship between monophony and unison serves the culminating moments, highlighting the extreme psychological states of drama or jubilation" and "the unison is intended to accompany those monodies that, having an independent meaning (similar to *cantus planus*, *cantus firmus*) and a perfect structure, don't require additional means of expression" [10].

The polyphony changes multiple facets during the oratorios, from the stretto imitations and free imitations, from fugato to a rudimentary heterophony and incipient polyphony in parallel fourths, fifths and even in harmonic parallelism (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Musical example. Paul Constantinescu, Easter Byzantine Oratorio, No 1, bars 91-94, reduction

"The Dolorous Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord",
(© manuscript, Library of the George Enescu Philharmonie).

The technique of parallel chords has an important place in Paul Constantinescu's music, thickening the melody and resulting sometimes in polyvalent harmonizations, in slightly different harmonizations of the same melody.

As early as 1944, Zeno Vancea, renowned composer and musicologist, had already foreseen Paul Constantinescu's polyphonic style as the most appropriate for the orthodox tradition and its renewal: "Paul Constantinescu's polyphonic – linear thinking is profoundly related to that of the Flemish composers from the 14th – 16th centuries and it represents today the musical thinking most adequate to our orthodox tradition and spirit. A future and fruitful evolution will necessarily be based on the same polyphonic – linear style, and it will replace the Byzantine melodies, or our aisles melodies, with new and personal melodies, in order to avoid the danger of a rapid stereotypization and depletion" [11].

The recitatives (in the oratorios), having the Gospels as epic source, are an original creation of Paul Constantinescu, a heteroclite fusion between the psalmody and arioso style, a combination of rectotono with melodic fragments, bearing sometimes resemblance with the Romanian folk "balada" (ballad) and "doina" (melancholy folk song/poem). Although the recitative differs from the Byzantine psalmody through a wider ambitus, richer cadences, more complex rhythms, it still obeys the psaltic tradition according to which "the music never overshadows the text" [12].

The shorter rhythmic values appear usually in the rectotono fragments and the highest pitch in the cadence has a cumulative length (Figure 10). The narrative context and the nature of the characters are reflected in the melodic and rhythmical evolution, in the tempo and through intense tonal modulations. For example, in order to suggest Jesus' serenity and dignity (Easter Oratorio), the composer uses longer rhythmical values for His words, a slower tempo (*Piu lento*, *Maestoso*) and specific expressions such as: *molto tranquillo*, *tranquillo e con calore*, *molto espressivo e doloroso*, *dolce e molto tranquillo*, in contrast with other characters and with the crowd (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Musical example. Paul Constantinescu, Easter Byzantine Oratorio, No 4, bars 8-30
"The Dolorous Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord",
(© manuscript, Library of the George Enescu Philharmonie).

3. ASPECTS OF THE BYZANTINE CHANT IN THE CREATION OF THE ROMANIAN COMPOSERS OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Through his *modus operandi*, Paul Constantinescu inspired and profoundly influenced the next generations of Romanian composers. The traditional vocal line of the Byzantine music is continued in the choir pieces and in *Liturgies* by composers such as Doru Popovici, Dan Voiculescu, Valentin Timaru, Constantin Rîpă. Viorel Munteanu wrote numerous vocal-symphonic creations based on original Byzantine melodies – *Psaltic Triptych*, *The Voices of Putna Monastery*.

On the other hand, there are the Byzantine allusions, the psaltic ethos filtered, transfigured and melt in modern and metastylistic sonorities: the 3rd, 4th and 5th *Symphonies*, *Incantations* for 6 percussionists, *Axion* for women choir and a saxophonist, *Psalmus* for 6 voices by Ştefan Niculescu, *Bizanţ după Bizanţ* (*Byzantium after Byzantium*), concerto for violin and orchestra by Theodor Grigoriu, *Seven Psalms*, *Cantus firmus* and the *Symphonic Cycle Phtora* by Nicolae Brânduş, *Timpul regăsit* (*The time rediscovered*) by Miriam Marbé, *Kontakion* for saxophone quartet by Gheorghe Firca.

The ecumenical view infuses Ştefan Niculescu's *Invocatio – Choral Symphony* for 12 voices, described as "a worship gesture, through three distinct spiritualities – Byzantine, Indo-Islamic and Protestant". [13]

Metabizantinirikon for saxophone and magnetic tape (1984) by Octavian Nemescu, written "for the purpose of recovering the archetypes, the universal and permanent models" [14] is perhaps the most eloquent example of the meta-Byzantine style. Two melodies of Byzantine essence are being born, sound by sound, in the high and low register of the magnetic tape, on the static electronical background of the crickets' and birds' noise and in a quasi-folkloric spirit. The composer was preoccupied by the image of a "cosmic Christianity" (concept discussed by the Romanian historian of religion, Mircea Eliade), of the intersections between the sacred and the profane.

In *Metabizantinirikon*, O. Nemescu created a meta-polyphony by overlapping the circular and orizontal, linear time. The archetype of the spiral time is concretized in three graphic variations of the score: the snail, the seashell and the egg (Figure 11).
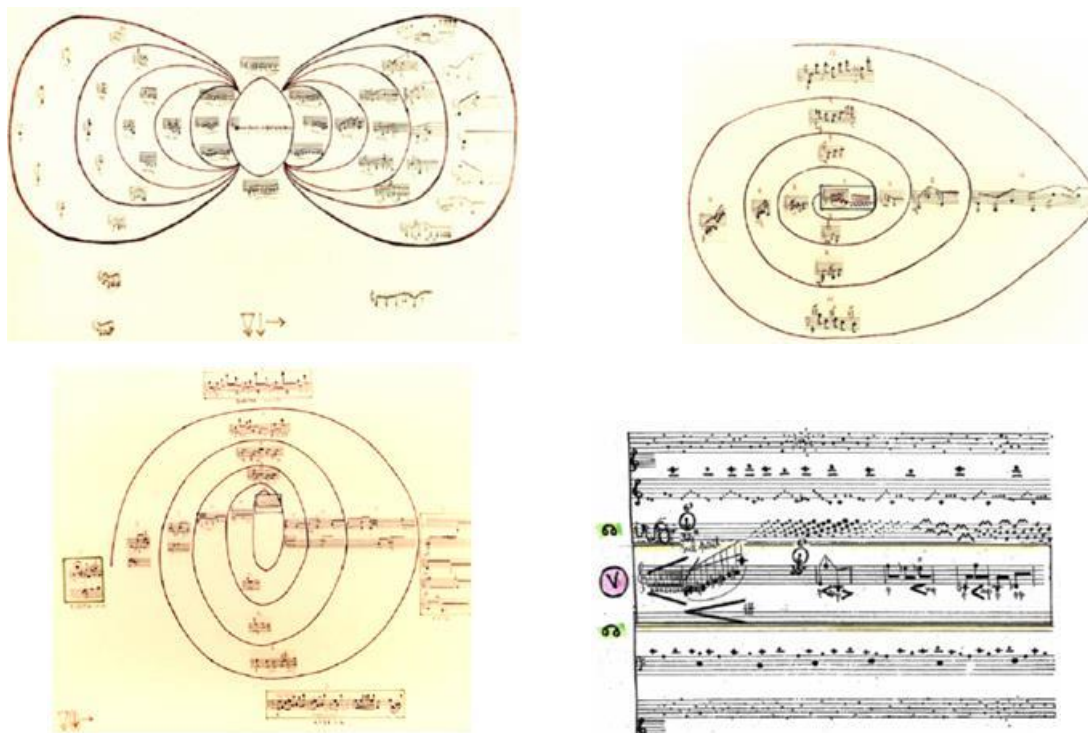
Figure 11: Musical example. Spiral Time: egg, seashell, snail

and Orizontal Time (crickets, birds) in Octavian Nemescu's *Metabizantinirikon*

The pages of the score can be arranged by the performer in the form of a cross, symbolizing the polyphony of different times and "an ascending ladder, a symbol of the whole world, beyond the space-time particularities, unifying all the spiritualities in a transcultural level of the unique and absolute transcendental conscience" [14]. The concept of transculturality also inspired the subtitle *Nature converted in culture*, suggesting the musical journey through five continents (Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, America) unified in one convergent point: the Byzantine music.

In conclusion, the paradigm created by Paul Constantinescu through the original and genial synthesis between Eastern and Western musical cultures has been continued during the 20th century in a generous display of stylistic tendencies, from the more local and tradition oriented neo-Byzantine style to the universal and ecumenical meta-Byzantine and meta-stylistic one, in various alloys with the newest composition techniques.

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