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[Constructing a Romanian Identity in Church Music] by Costin Moisil

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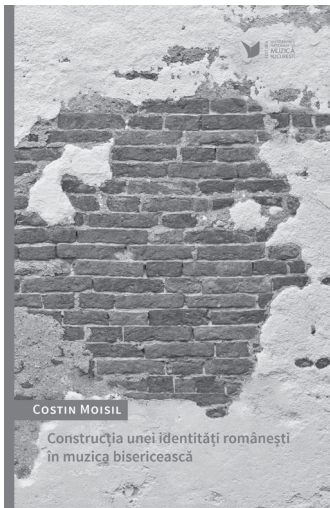
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*Construcția unei identități românești  
în muzica bisericească*

[Constructing a Romanian Identity  
in Church Music] by Costin Moisil\*

Editura Universității Naționale de Muzică, Bucharest, 2018



I t's not hard to see that the situation today is rather the opposite of the 19th-century efforts to declare the existence of a Romanian nation. If back then we talked about, aspired to, and affirmed, by a number of cultural and political means, the unification of all Romanians, today we speak of European integration. This a propitious context for re-evaluating what is in fact Romanian, what Romania itself is and, implicitly, what we deduce from these efforts to reconsider our position and to align to a new political and social map, and it is especially so as regards ascertaining the way this new constellation impacts our culture. The

book I wish to present here is an exercise in reconsidering the Romanianness of church music and, more precisely, in evaluating the attempts, from the 19th century through the end of the 1900s, to configure a national musical identity of church music.

I will begin by admitting that the studies in this volume touch a nerve in the targeted field, and at the same time reveal sensitive subjects to the

\* This review has been previously published in Romanian in a slightly different form as Ioniță 2019.

history of church music in Romania, their relevance undoubtedly surpassing by far the area of musicological studies. A second characteristic of the volume worth mentioning at this point of my presentation is that these studies, although addressed essentially to the specialized reader, constitute, translated into Romanian as they are, a great gain for the general public interested both in church music and in the broader discussion on the relation between Church and nation, between Church and the state.

I would like to state the reason for which the talk about nationalism and church music might be difficult nowadays. First, most priests and cantors today are the result of an intellectual and musical training heavily marked by the national ideology insistently promoted during the communist rule and even afterwards. The readers, if they are graduates of a faculty of theology, seminary, or cantor school, will surely recognize their teachers' discourse as described in Moisil's book:

I was confused, as were my cantor friends, by the similarities between Greek and Romanian music from the first half of the 19th century. Such a correspondence seemed to contradict the general discourse in Romanian musicology, according to which adapting Greek chants to Romanian meant shortened versions, the elimination of Oriental influences (chromatic passages, melismas), bringing the music closer to Romanian folk music, and adjusting it to the Romanian taste and soul. I compared the contents of Greek and Romanian volumes, I counted the beats, the characteristic intervals, the modulations, and I learned that that discourse was unfounded. (p. 10)

That the author refers here to a painstaking research stretching over several years, and not just to the present volume, can be followed or verified by going through the related volumes published before (see Moisil 2012 and 2016). His conclusion, that "that discourse was unfounded", might seem downright confusing in a field where such a heavy silence reigned until recently. Church music not only seemed to be an unsuitable subject for serious historiographical research, but it also fulfilled its role as accompaniment of religious services with the appearance of a harmless effect. The author finds out, and shares with us, that

unlike the standard history described by Romanian musicology, stating that Romanian cantors fought for hundreds of years until

the national language and spirit won in the chants of Hieromonk Macarie and of Anton Pann, the history I draw in this chapter believes that major musical changes took place not by 1850s, but only afterwards, fuelled by nationalist ideology. (p. 12)

There is nothing hasty about how nationalism in church music is tackled in this book. The entire first chapter (p. 15-29) is a synthesis (which the Romanian reader will welcome) of modern theories on nation and nationalism. In addition to the “classical” approach of the concept of nation, the author summarizes and makes a brief presentation of the *modernist*, the *perennialist*, the *primordialist* and the *ethno-symbolist* paradigm, taking care to stress that he doesn’t wish to comment on the validity of such theories (p. 28); rather, he uses them in order to peer as deeply as possible into the phenomenon of musical nationalism and, implicitly, of the relation between politics and the Church. Well aware of the fact that “until the triumph of television, there was no medium of secular propaganda to compare with the classroom” (Eric Hobsbawm, quoted at p. 47), Moisil dedicates special attention to the sources on primary and secondary education during the period he investigates. The 1897 Ministry of Education circular on patriotic education is edifying:

Strive to convince [the children] that their country is the best country, that their people is the bravest, the noblest, the most energetic of all peoples. Do not be afraid of getting carried away thereupon; no matter how far you will go, it will only be so much the better. (Spiru Haret, quoted at p. 47)

Here too Moisil shows restraint and indifference to premature conclusions. He doesn’t judge and doesn’t categorize, offering instead a quite palpable ease of access to the process of shaping the Romanian nation starting with the mid-19th century. He follows for example how some rulers become heroes of the entire nation and how in Romanian society at the beginning of the 20th century “those educated came to respect Orthodox Christianity not because it offered salvation, but because it was historically tied to the Romanian nation” (p. 47), while historical sources until the beginning of the previous century prove that “religious identity was more important than that ethnic” (p. 68).

But what do all these political analyses have to do with our church music? The reality – and we might not like to see it for what it is, I admit – is that “the last stage . . . consisted of a series of actions meant to introduce in churches a national imagined music, which this time resulted in an actual change in

church music” (p. 57). In charge with this process of adapting church music to the taste of a “modern European nation” of “noble Latin ancestry” was the modern state and its efficient collaboration with the Church. The measure taken by the government of the new Romanian state in 1863, which forbade church singing in another language than Romanian, mainly translated into a reduction of the repertoire to what existed in Romanian at that time, and induced the idea that Romanian church music is essentially different from that Greek or of Slavic tradition (p. 78).

The Romanianization of church chants was thus rushed by political and ecclesiastical actions of adapting to the new political context, as well as sprinkled with the stringent need to declare the existence of a new state. This state “supported” the Church in its action to popularize plurivocal music, town and village choirs. In 1864, polyphonic music was introduced in the seminaries’ curricula, and the state promised monks and cantors studying choral music a raise. The Ministry of Education supported the printing and distribution to the choirs of three- and four-part scores. The desire to have the same music throughout the country had of course grown, especially after 1918, and this led to the uniformization of church music. But these efforts, only partially successful in spite their authoritarian communist mechanism, created rather a “narrow and simple” repertoire (p. 81), in fact accessible to amateur cantors (p. 85). The conclusion of this chapter on “Romanian identity and church music” is – no more and no less – that “Romanian national church music was constructed together with the Romanian nation, starting with the second half of the 19th century” (p. 85).

The chapter on the “Problems of identity in the Orthodox church music of Transylvania” (p. 87-111) is the result of field work conducted in 2012 and 2013 in several localities in Transylvania. Again, the author will not rush to evaluate or appreciate one tradition at the expense of another, be it music noted by Dimitrie Cunțan, Trifon Lugojan or from Blaj; with his interviews and studies Moisil proves that music “can provide components for a group identity, just as dress, hairdo, diet, the economic system and many others such aspects do” (p. 96). To see this analytical apparatus applied to the situation of church music in Transylvania is simply charming, but extremely necessary as well, taking into account, in particular, the oral character of church music in this region.

So what about church music and its Romanian identity? The author stays at the academic and descriptive level, leaving it to those able to judge and act to do so in accordance with their responsibilities. I will only be so bold as to emphasize the importance and the necessity of such an endeavour as

Costin Moisil's, both concerning the field of musical church historiography, and the performers of this music, whatever its form of expression. This is a scientific work, but written in a very accessible language; it seduces with its style, but shatters us with the realities it reveals; it is short (111 pages without the bibliography), but X-rays a quite comprehensive and still influent chapter in the history of local church music. I would recommend it as a prerequisite in the intellectual training of every cantor, theologian, priest, or layperson interested in this field, seeing that it is a synthesis of the history of Romanian church music and, as such, of the past two centuries, of which it is a brief but critical, a documented but charming and redemptive presentation.

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English version by Maria Monica Bojin

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