

Archaic Ontologies Nowadays: Music of Rituals

Luminița Duțică, Gheorghe Duțică

Abstract—Many of the interrogations or dilemmas of the contemporary world found the answer in what was generically called the *appeal to matrix*. This genuine spiritual exercise of re-connection of the present to origins, to the primary source, revealed the ontological condition of timelessness, ahistorical, immutable (epi)phenomena, of those pure essences concentrated in the **archetypal**-referential layer of the human existence. The musical creation was no exception to this trend, the impasse generated by the deterministic excesses of the whole serialism or, conversely, by some questionable results of the extreme indeterminism proper to the avant-garde movements, stimulating the orientation of many composers to rediscover a universal grammar, as an emanation of a new ‘collective’ order (reverse of the utopian individualism). In this context, the music of oral tradition and therefore the world of the ancient modes represented a true revelation for the composers of the twentieth century, who were suddenly in front of some unsuspected (re)sources, with a major impact on all levels of edification of the musical work: morphology, syntax, timbrality, semantics etc. For the contemporary Romanian creators, the **music of rituals**, existing in the local archaic culture, opened unsuspected perspectives for which it meant to be a synthetic, inclusive and recoverer vision, where the primary (archetypal) genuine elements merge with the latest achievements of language of the European composers. Thus, anchored in a strong and genuine modal source, the compositions analysed in this paper evoke, in a manner as modern as possible, the atmosphere of some ancestral rituals such as: the invocation of rain during the drought (*Paparudele, Scaloianul*), funeral ceremony (*Bocetul*), traditions specific to the winter holidays and new year (*Colinda, Cântecul de stea, Sorcova, Folklore traditional dances*) etc. The reactivity of those rituals in the sound context of the twentieth century meant potentiating or resizing the archaic spirit of the primordial symbolic entities, in terms of some complexity levels generated by the technique of harmonies of chordal layers, of complex aggregates (gravitational or non-gravitational, geometric), of the mixture polyphonies and with global effect (group, mass), by the technique of heterophony, of texture and *cluster*, leading to the implementation of some processes of collective improvisation and instrumental theatre.

Keywords—Archetype, improvisation, instrumental theatre, polyphony, ritual.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN the musical world of the latter part of the 20th century, the excesses of integral serialism and the extreme indeterminism of avant-garde movements led to many a composer’s turning towards the primary, ahistorical source of the many types of music pertaining to the oral tradition. In this respect, the well-known “return to the matrix” produced a revival of the phenomenon that entails connecting the present

to archetypal essences.

In the Romanian area, the music belonging to the oral tradition – including here pre-Christian or Christian rituals – features a great dialectal variety, being, virtually, an everlasting source of inspiration for contemporary composers [1].

Bringing the “music of rituals” to the fore means, on the one hand, identifying the deep structures of archaic musical cultures, and, on the other hand, discovering the compositional means able to integrate these archetypes into the languages of contemporary music.

Apparently, the phenomenon pertains to the philosophy of recovering-bringing back some values of the musical past, but, in its essence, it is about building a **new musical ontology**, which focuses on the (re)activation of the introspective, non-spectacular, initiatic dimension of some perennial spiritual practices. Therefore, benefiting from the immense richness and diversity of the native music pertaining to the oral tradition, from Enescu’s works as paragon, as well as from the achievements of the newest trends and aesthetical directions from the world compositional arena of their times, Romanian composers cultivated, or, better said, continued, the idea of fusing (apparently irreconcilable) language paradigms, deduced from the polygenesis of contemporary music styles.

In this context, their choices were furthered according to two directions: 1. the systems of organising the sonority based on the new **modal vocabulary** [2]; 2. the new view of musical time, which involved a rethinking of **musical syntax**, a phenomenon marked by the absorption of some rhythmic setups archaic in nature, such as: *parlando-rubato, syllabic-giusto* and *aksak*.

II. ARCHETYPAL CONNECTIONS. THE MUSIC OF RITUALS

In what follows, we are going to discuss in a summarized fashion some of the most representative works from the thematic area of our approach, some creations which, through the authenticity of their sources and the artistry of their composers, have managed to re-create, in another spatial-temporal dimension, the mood of ancient rituals: invoking the rain (*Paparuda* and *Scaloianul*), the burial ceremony (*Bocetul* and other specific monodies), the winter holidays and New Year’s Eve traditions (*Colindul, Cântecul de stea, Sorcova, Jocul Caprei* etc.). To this purpose, we selected some of the works signed by Alexandru Pașcanu and Myriam Marbé, two of the most praiseworthy Romanian contemporary composers [3] who, through modern means, managed to revive the uniquely expressive register of the ancient sound world.

Funeral rituals have been safeguarded in the world of the Romanian village since ancient times, being linked with the moment of death, of one’s separation from a loved one. The passage to „another world” was celebrated by the Geto-

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Dacians (the ancestors of present-day Romanians) with dance and joy since they believed that the soul was immortal and that there was a connecting bridge between life and death.

Most of the time, laments are performed vocally by the women in the family, either individually or with accompaniment (wood flute, in Bucovina). When the group is larger, the laments are performed in unison. Unlike in ceremonial songs – *Zorile* (Dawn), *Cântecul bradului* (Fir Tree Song) –, in the **bocet** (lament) the lay nature of the oral creation is much more evident, often emerging spontaneously within the ritual itself, but still remaining a compulsory traditional act.

Specific to laments are free exclamations, interjections, metaphors or personifications, and they all help in the creation of an atmosphere that fosters the direct communication of one's feelings of sadness and hopelessness.

In the piece *Bocete străbune* (Old laments) – choral poem on folk verses for mixed choir, toaca, chimes and timbales – the composer Alexandru Pașcanu re-enacts in a symbolic manner the mood of the ancient funeral rite, quoting four authentic laments collected from different geographic areas of Romania. **Toaca** is an percussion instrument (non-tunable) made out of a wooden board that is knocked on with two specific drumsticks. Academic music took the instrument from the church-related practices of the Eastern Church, where the *toaca* may be mobile or made out of metal.



Fig. 1 *Zori* (Dawn), Oltenia county, collected by Constantin Brăiloiu (Alexandru Pașcanu – *Bocete străbune*/ Old laments, p. 1 [4])



Fig. 2 (a) *Bocet* (Lament), Nereju-Vrancea county (Alexandru Pașcanu – *Bocete străbune*/ Old laments, p. 5 [4])



Fig. 2 (b) *Bocet* (Lament), Nereju-Vrancea county (Alexandru Pașcanu – *Bocete străbune*/ Old laments, p. 5 [4])

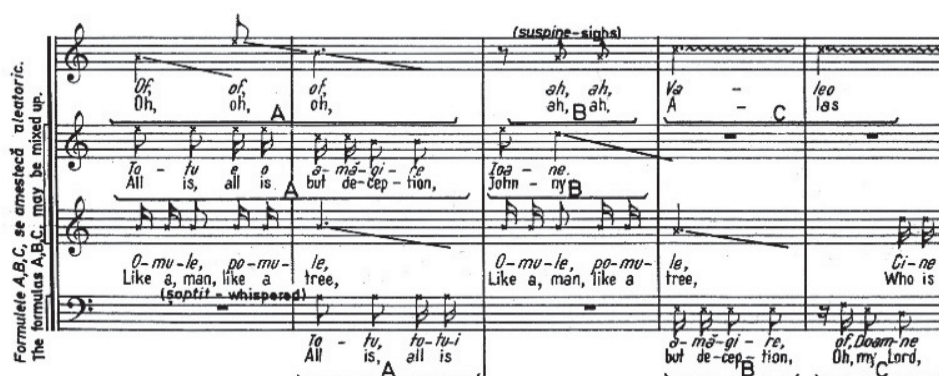


Fig. 3 *Bocet vorbit* (Spoken lament), Nereju-Vrancea county (Alexandru Pașcanu – *Bocete străbune*/ Old laments, p. 6 [4])

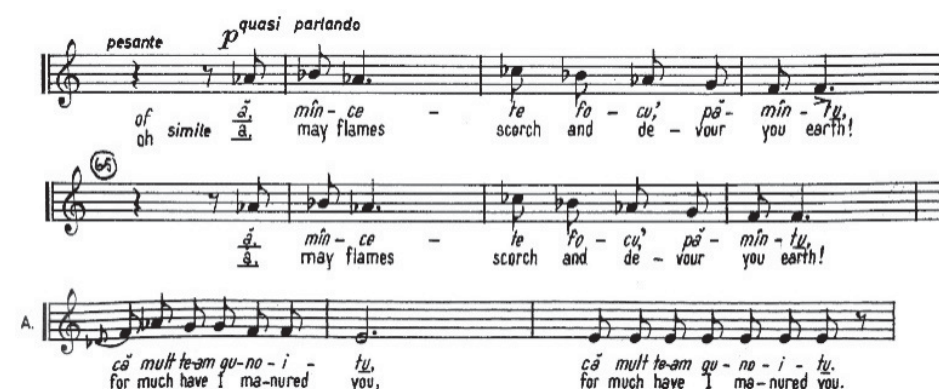


Fig. 4 *Mân-te focu, pământ* (May flames scorch you), Bihor county, collected by Béla Bartók; (Alexandru Pașcanu – *Bocete străbune*/ Old laments, p. 9 [4])

All the harmonic-polyphonic instantiations delivered within are projections derived from the verticalization of the (horizontal-)modal structure of the laments, supplemented, in a one-of-a-kind, original “staging”, by (complementary) elements which amplify the chromatic dimension of the sonority. Yet, besides all these highly expressive procedures (in the direction of the piece’s psychological-philosophical connotations), we should also highlight the tendency to actually dramatize the musical discourse, either through “thematic” counterpoint (rendering two lament melodies at the same time, Fig. 8) or through the generalization of the rhythmic declamation in the text by most of the choir ensemble (as shown in Fig. 3).

Within ancient Romanian rites and customs, a special place is allotted to *Christmas* and New Year's Eve traditions. They materialize differently from a region to the next, involving the entire village community, including the children. *Colindele* (Christmas carols) and *Cântecele de stea* (Star songs - Christmas carols devoted to the star that announced Christ's birth), *Sorcova*, *Semănatul* (practiced on January 1st), *Jocul Caprei* (the Goat's Dance) and other folk dances performed wearing masks and costumes are the main artistic acts devoted to the wonderful period of the winter holidays. Out of all the folk songs preserved throughout the ages, **carols** remain the most cherished by Romanians.



Fig. 8 Alexandru Pașcanu – *Bocete străbune*/ Old laments, p. 5 [4]

The choral poem *Festum hibernum* is meant for an *a cappella* mixed choir, and the vocal sonority is sometimes coloured with the help of percussion instruments, such as *sonagli*, *frusta* and *campane*. As far as the folk sources are concerned, there are the authentic melodies of some ancient Romanian carols (both lay and religious), some star songs and dance tunes specific to the customs marking the passage to the new year.

Apparently, the 16 parts of the work suggest the form of a suite, based on content and motion contrasts. However, actually, this great temporal arch – linking the quasi-aleatoric opening encompassing a mirrored reprise – is proof of a complex architecture, crossed by numerous similes, analogies, and correspondences between parts.

The dominant mood is given by the modal vocabulary which has generative valences ramifying at the level of all syntax typologies: polyphony, homophony, heterophony, instantiations of multi-vocality that are frequently put into interactive relations that can reach the state of a true fusion. From this perspective, the paradigm of archetypality meets that of visionary modernity in an ideal way, Alexandru Pașcanu being an accomplished maestro of “synthesis harmonies”.

As we have previously mentioned, the “leitmotif” of this poem is the **carol** melody, an archetype symbolic for the entire Romanian music culture pertaining to the oral tradition. Although they are simple melodies, concentrated in their duration, the semantic and structural virtues of these true musical “aphorisms” lie at the basis of a sound universe whose complexity is unprecedented.

In *Festum hibernum* **quotation** is used in a consistent manner; carol melodies – which preserve the integrity of their original form – are associated by the composer with the idea of “cantus firmus”: an immutable referential element which is nevertheless subjected to a constant harmonic-polyphonic re-contextualization. In this respect, we may say that the variety of sound instantiations is directly proportional to the dimensions of the compositional arsenal, responsible for the materialization of the most expressive and eloquent sound images.

For instance, right in the opening part, the melody of the carol *O, ce veste minunată!* (Oh, what wonderful news!) – a simple diatonic structure centred on **B** flat –, is wrapped in a mobile *cluster* that has a significant chromatic density (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 Alexandru Pașcanu – *Festum hibernum. Străvechi tradiții ciclice*/ *Festum hibernum. Ancient Cyclic Customs*, R 1⁺², p. 4 [5]

The moment is re-edited (Fig. 10) through amplification at the level of the total chromatic (density 12), a systemic limit reached through the complementariness of the heptachord diatonic level (density 7), and the anhemitonic pentatonic level (density 5).



Fig. 10 Alexandru Pașcanu – *Festum hibernum. Străvechi tradiții ciclice*/ *Festum hibernum. Ancient Cyclic Customs*, R 10⁻⁴, p. 13 [5]

Out of the multitude of sound images – both substantial and elevated – we selected two examples illustrative of the concept of **synthesis** of the archaic and the modern, an aesthetic desideratum lying at the basis of the entire poem.

The first (Fig. 11) refers to the original manner of building a heterophonic sonority produced, in these circumstance, by the simultaneous rendering of two well-known carol melodies: *Doamne Iisuse Hristoase* (Our Lord, Jesus Christ) – Soprano and *Trei crai de la răsărit* (Three Kings from the East) – Tenor. It should also be noted that the heterogeneity of the heterophonic structure itself is amplified by an intermediate minor second pedal (Alto), which is afterwards developed into mixtures of perfect fourths.



Fig. 11 Alexandru Pașcanu – *Festum hibernum. Străvechi tradiții ciclice*/ *Festum hibernum. Ancient Cyclic Customs*, R 9⁺⁴, p. 12 [5]

The second example (Fig. 12) elicits a stage of extreme, utmost simplicity in the monodic writing, all the more so since it references the canonical austerity of an ancient Byzantine monody. The moment is relevant for the general strategy of the composer, who is interested in achieving a macro-form whose balance point is given by the alternation of *quasi-static* (discontinuity) and *dynamic* (continuity) moments. The work that is closest to the topic of our analysis is, as foreshadowed by its title as well, *Ritual pentru setea pământului* (Ritual for the Thirst of the Earth), a choral

poem for mixed choir and percussion instruments signed by the composer Myriam Marbe. It should be mentioned that the score title does not entirely describe its overall formula, which is a special one: seven vocal interpreters (a bass and six sopranos and mezzosopranos) who may be doubled by a “vocal intervention group” placed in the audience, a prepared piano and two percussion groups – one placed on the stage and the other in the back of the concert hall.



Fig. 12 Alexandru Pașcanu – *Festum hibernum*. *Străvechi tradiții ciclice*/ *Festum hibernum*. Ancient Cyclic Customs, R 15, p. 22 [5]

Without any doubt, this work is, at least in its genre repertoire, a **one-of-a-kind piece**. The arguments are manifold and solid, but in what follows we will discuss only the most relevant of them. First of all, as the author herself declares, this work “should not be seen as a purely musical piece, but

rather as a stage whole, an officiating ceremony”. Indeed, there is only a very thin, almost imperceptible, border left between music and theatre, as the entire development of the poem goes clearly beyond any kind of sound-related canon.

The main phenomenon responsible for the atypical nature of this musical syntax is **collective improvisation**. As a result, the principle of **indetermination** – active in any type of “open work” [6] – becomes the generating drive of all the language elements, including some unusual procedures of representing sounds in writing. One of the most spectacular instantiations of the phenomenon of indetermination, cotangent to theatrical rhetoric, is **declamation** or **collective reciting**, synchronized or unsynchronized. If controlled *synchronized collective reciting*, with an isorhythmic/isochronous structure, suggests, clarity, firmness, unification through the coagulation of the “multiple” into “one” – *unsynchronized collective reciting*, with an aleatoric polyrhythmic structure, suggests (by reversibility) confusion, indecision, dismembering through the atomization of the “one” into “multiple”. In the score, this highly dramatic sound reality is rendered in the shape of **global effect** (group, mass) polyphonies (Fig. 13), for whose representation special signs and symbols are sometimes used.

Fig. 13 Myriam Marbe – *Ritual for the Thirst of the Earth*, p. 37 [7]

To the same lineage of a musical-theatrical rhetoric that enhances the intrinsic gestural nature of the ritual, there circumscribe **onomatopoeic effects**, the **diversity of vocal emission modes** as well as the **action of percussion instruments** (Fig. 14).

Supplementing this ensemble of sound structures, often active under an aleatoric sign, and according to a script detailed in the explanatory preamble of the score – there is also the **stage movement** of the “intervention group”, which confers to the compositional approach the connotations of a genuine **instrumental theatre**.

As far as the compositional language and technique are concerned, the choral poem *Ritual pentru setea pământului* (Ritual for the thirst of the earth) is a faithful reflection of the tendencies of her time: from repetitive-minimalism to heterophony, from primary polyphony (pedals, mixtures, *ostinato*) to pointillism and attack polyphony, from

determinism to improvisation [8], from song to declamation, and the list may continue.

III. CONCLUSION

All the works presented in our paper belong to a “compositional class” whose common denominator is **archetype** [9], in general, and **ritual**, in particular. Each of the two composers aimed towards a “restitution” and **not** a “reconstruction”, which means displaying the most intimate spiritual intricacies and the most diverse psychological states. In its essence, their music is an invitation to meditate on the time of the genesis, when man was – without declaring it and maybe without even knowing it – a part of the Great Cosmos.

The musical score for "Ritual pentru setea pământului" by Myriam Marbe is presented in a multi-staff format. The top section, lasting 5' 08'' at *meno f*, includes a vocal part with lyrics in Romanian and English, and a percussion part for T-tom and Bongos. The middle section, lasting aprox. 8'', continues the vocal and percussion parts. The bottom section, lasting aprox. 5'', includes a vocal part with lyrics in Romanian and English, and a percussion part for T-tom and Bongos. The final section, lasting 5' 32'' at *molto sff*, includes a vocal part with lyrics in Romanian and English, and a percussion part for T-tom and Bongos. The score is marked with various dynamics and performance instructions.

Fig. 14 Myriam Marbe – *Ritual for the Thirst of the Earth*, p. 36 [7]

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