

“Style” or “yphos” in Psaltic Art?

ADRIAN SÎRBU, Lecturer, PhD

“George Enescu” National University of Arts Iași
ROMANIA *

Abstract: The term style is used in the philosophy of culture, in aesthetics, art theory and art criticism, in literary languages, in the plastic and monumental arts, in the way of life and behavior of people to characterize cultures, eras, creative individuals or works, so as we learn from philosophy dictionaries. If in Greek there is this duality of the terms style and yphos, the Romanian language uses only the former, while yphos appears to be used with completely different meanings, over time. Unlike the meanings in Greek, in the current dictionaries of the Romanian language the word yphos has a more pejorative meaning, suffering over time semantic changes. However, it seems that the old meaning of the term yphos reveals much deeper and richer valences than the term style and helps us to understand in a better way the conditions of an authentic musical-spiritual interpretation, in the "right spirit".

Keywords: *yphos*, style, Psaltic Art, byzantine music.

1. Introduction

The Psaltic Art or Byzantine-based ecclesiastical chant is the music of worship of the Eastern Orthodox Church, transmitted as a legacy by the Holy Hymnographer and Melodist Fathers from the early Christian times. In their writings, some of these Fathers left us advice and exhortations as to how ecclesiastical chant should be approached (see also Gérold, 1931 and Paris, 2018). Other historical, liturgical and musical documents produced later on give us, for example, valuable information about the organisation of the choir or the church in a certain place or period, about the lessons taught in music schools¹, repertoires, customs etc. There are also some relatively newer musical writings (especially from the nineteenth century on²) that develop even further various themes related to the types of chanting specific to a particular region, school, period, etc. All this written tradition therefore confirms and enhances, from a spiritual, historical, and liturgical perspective, the living tradition that has been perpetuated from *master* to *disciple* in the Church of Christ until today.

This accumulation of information from the *written* and *oral* tradition offers us the defining coordinates that outline a certain *style* of interpretation of

* adrian_sirbu2005@yahoo.com, <http://www.byzantion.ro>

¹ See, as an example, the teaching methods used by Pann, 1846, pp. 211-222.

² See, as an example, the romanian musical writings for the 1st half of the 19th century in Sirbu, 2020.

ecclesiastical hymns, which, in turn, is subject to very clear spiritual, liturgical and musical rules, as we can see in various writings. We can identify two types of information: one that defines the *spiritual* coordinates of a *style*, common to the concept in its entirety, and one that sketches a *technical, musical* side and that is different from person to person.

The *spiritual* side refers to all the spiritual advice meant to describe the state of mind that one must attain while chanting, the life that a chanter should have³, and, in general, the spiritual approach to the interpretive act. This side is a permanent one, all the ideas being complementary and unitary in meaning.

The *technical* side of style is also unitary, but through its diversity. It refers to interpretive and more personalized information. It describes chanting styles, local or even choir practices, teaching methods etc.⁴

It is important to mention here that the spiritual side has always had precedence over the technical, musical one, but it has never made it relative, but on the contrary, it has enhanced it. In other words, byzantine music is at the same time *prayer* and *art*; it is the *prayer* that gives meaning, depth, direction to the *art*, which retains its theocentric role unaltered, but we must not relativize the technical role and the high level attained by the melodists in this music that manages, to this day, to combine the simplicity and austerity of monody with the inexhaustible richness of hymnography, melopieia (composition), Octoechos (the system of the eight modes) etc.

This fine relationship between the spiritual and the technical element in the interpretation of byzantine music requires a nuancing of the concept of *style*, an adaptation to the broader meaning that includes this influencing factor of spirituality. Even if there is no theoretical treatise in the Psaltic Art that exhaustively analyzes the concept of *style*, the written tradition and, especially, the oral one gives us enough information to be able to talk about *style* in the chanting of liturgical hymns in the Eastern Church.

2. Meanings of the terms

First of all, we propose a definition of the terms *yphos* and *style*. Before analyzing the different definitions provided by linguistic, philosophical, and aesthetic dictionaries, etc. or by musical terms, it should be noted from the outset that the universal Western language of areas such as aesthetics, philosophy, architecture, music, etc. use the term *style*, not *yphos*.

Style is a basic element for defining the originality of cultural creations. The trends, the spiritual traits common to all areas of a particular culture, ethnicity, nation that bear the stylistic mark of a historical moment define the *style of an age*. The external factors that determine a style may be material or

³ Regarding the live of the psaltes as members of the inferior clergy, see also Ramsey, 2020.

⁴ See, for instance, the work by Αγγελινάρας, 2008.

spiritual conditions, or they may relate to economic, historical, national, class, geographical, ethnographic factors, etc.

Various artistic styles may pertain to several fields (for example: classical, baroque, romantic, realistic, etc.) or to a single field (for example: Doric, Ionic and Corinthian in architecture).

We may talk of lifestyles as unique sets of concepts and behaviors, particular ways of living pertaining to a person or a human community. A lifestyle expresses the inner unity and the degree of evolution of one's personality⁵. An artist's lifestyle leaves a direct mark on their artistic *style* but, all the more so in the field of the sacred arts, this interference lays the foundation of the creative act's spiritual authenticity.

In linguistics there is a tendency to consider *style* an individual deviation from the norm, from a "degree zero" which, in turn, is difficult to define. On the other hand, in traditional cultures – including the Christian one – *style* appears to be more related to a collective set of traits, unanimously accepted and unaffected by the trends of a particular age. Thus, in this context, individuality appears as a fine "negotiation" with this set – broadly called *tradition* – so as to strike a balance between "preserving tradition" and "preserving one's personality."

At least from a musical perspective, style is seen as the sum of the choices (Sandu-Dediu, 2010) that a person consistently makes when exploiting the various means of using a language. This definition may also be successfully applied to the psaltic *style*. The interpretive act is the sum of all the choices that a psaltis makes every second while performing a chant, appealing to "echoes" from his memory (Khalil).

Definitions of *yphos*. The explanatory dictionary of the neo-Greek language (Μπαμπινιώτης, 2002) provides the following three definitions:

“**ύφος** (το) = 1. (a) a person's expression and/or manner of speaking which bears the mark of that person's moods⁶: = 2. ling. (b) the particular, individualized way in which a person uses the language that he or she speaks.⁷

Sometimes a synonym is used, ρυθμός (hence, *rhythm*), which can also be used in contexts like architectural rhythm, modern rhythm, renaissance rhythm etc. (Μπαμπινιώτης, 2002, p. 1861).

Thus, *style* (στυλ) or, depending on the meaning, *rhythm* (ρυθμός) or *expression* (έκφραση) are used as synonyms, but, despite this, it seems that

⁵ We can talk about lifestyles, as unique sets of concepts and behaviors, particular ways of living of a person or a human community.

⁶ „Η έκφραση του προσώπου ή/και ο τρόπος ομιλίας, στα οποία αποτυπώνονται οι ψυχικές διαθέσεις του ατόμου”.

⁷ „Ο ιδιαίτερος, εξατομικευμένος τρόπος με τον οποίο χρησιμοποιεί καθένας τη γλώσσα”.

yphos has a more profound meaning, linked directly to the ancient greek concept, while *style* is used in Greek language as a fashion, a contemporary type of expression (Μπαμπινιώτης, 2002, p. 1861).

In Romanian modern dictionaries, one can notice a dramatic change of the basic meaning:

“1. An attitude of unjustified superiority towards others; arrogance; haughtiness; pride; hubris; condescension; immodesty; greatness. ◇ A-și da ifose [literally, to give oneself yphoses] = to believe oneself superior to others without any reason. /<ngr. *Yphos*” (*Noul Dicționar*, 2002).

“2. Unfounded pride; haughtiness, arrogance. Adv. phrase With *yphos* = emphatic, arrogant, swollen. ◇ Expr. A-și da *yphose* [literally, to give oneself yphoses] To give oneself yphoses = to believe oneself a valuable person; to brag” (*Dicționarul explicativ*, 1998).

Despite these definitions, romanian dictionaries that were edited in the first decades of the previous century contain also other meanings of the term *yphos*, which reveal the same meaning with the greek one.

“*yphos* – 1. dignity, social situation: *nu cred să-i poți ținea ifosul și ighemoniconul cu un venit de cincisute galbeni* [I don't think you can keep his *yphos* and *hegemonicon* with an income of five hundred goldens]; 2. air (more often pretentious): the *yphos* of a diplomat”. (Șăineanu, 1929).

Today, unfortunately, the meaning of the word *yphos* in Romanian is reduced to a pejorative one, contrary to the nuances and semantic depths with which it was invested in the literature of Greek antiquity. However, in recent years, some articles of Byzantine musicology translated from Greek have chosen to preserve the word *yphos*, as they probably intended to reactivate this term frequently used in old Romanian writings.

3. The concept of *yphos*

Universal musicology reveals an overwhelming preoccupation for the stylistic analysis of various musical creations from different times; thus, there have emerged very diverse and complex personal views of musical style. As for byzantine music, the bibliography does not abound in writings that theorize, define or systematize the term *style* or *yphos*. One of the few substantial papers that approach our subject is Alexander Khalil's doctoral dissertation (Khalil, 2009), which treats with obvious interest the issue of *yphos* in the oral tradition.

Both the writings consulted and the interviews conducted with various personalities⁸ mainly from Greece have shown how generous in meanings and possibilities of definition the term *yphos* can be. Each interviewee revealed new and very interesting ideas.

The fact that the performer's state of mind is directly reflected in his own interpretive vision may be confirmed by any musician. „Le style est l'homme même”, Buffon said in his famous 1753 speech at the French Academy. As for the Psaltic Art, this interdependence between the chanter's *inner state* and his *style of chanting* seems to mark the boundary between *the authentic* and *the non-authentic*.

In Psaltic Art, the interpretive act is directly related to the spiritual state of the psaltis both at the time of chanting and as a general way of life. Father Antipas Mikragiannanites from the Holy Mount Athos analyzes the issue from a strictly spiritual perspective, denying the existence of any *yphos*, of any kind, when there is no inner spiritual harmony: “What *yphos* could the immoral, the corrupt, the greedy, the secularized, or the selfish have? What *yphos* can someone who is not imbued with the fear of God and does not take part in the holy and eternal mysteries of the Service have?” (Αντίπας, 2011, p. 17)

Father Antipas' words seem to have been taken out of the “Psaltis' Gospel”, as the notion of *yphos* is directly connected not only to the cantor's momentary spiritual state, but also to his whole life. For Saint Basil the Great, the sacred chant can be sung only in a state of humility and purity of the soul: “Clean your hearts, so that you reach spiritual goods and become devout. Only thus you can chant to the Lord” (Grigorie, 2010, p. 179). This connection is so strongly emphasized that vocal virtuosity becomes less important in the case of an inadequate spiritual life. In fact, for Father Antipas *style* or *yphos* is not about voice, but about *ethos* (understood as morality): “Yphos is directly related to ethos [...] There is no doubt that yphos is shaped by the musical experiences that each of us has lived. But ethos or, in other words, the psaltis' spiritual state, transpires in his chanting.” (Αντίπας, 2011, p. 17)

Protopsaltis Ilias Stathis is also of the opinion that *yphos* represents a power that is transmitted through chants, provided that our state of mind reflects our relationship with God: “If we live spiritually, humbly, mysteriously, if we confess, receive the Communion and fear God, everything is transmitted along, and this is the ethos we are talking about.” (Στάθης, 2015)

The ideas represent the same repeated “spiritual warnings” of the Holy Fathers of the Church, in one form or another. They help us to be aware of the deep spiritual implications of the concept of psaltic *yphos* and, at the same time, to re-evaluate the meanings of this term. If *yphos*, this imprint of the spirit through chanting, is so conditioned by the cantor's spiritual state, if it

⁸ See the interviews for the doctoral dissertation (Sirbu, 2020).

exists only when this state has been reached, then the so-called styles of the various truly authentic psaltes will have a common denominator, they will be so close to each other that someone with the same spiritual concern will be able to recognize some common stylistic traits guided by the spiritual factor, rather than the vocal or the interpretive one.

A good example in this respect is Father Dionysios the Blind, the abbot of the Kellion Colciu, at the Holy Mount Athos. He used to be held in high regard by the monks, being considered a great chanter, a true representative and carrier of the Athonite psaltic *yphos*. Before listening to Father Dionysios' records, I was prepared to hear a virtuous voice, in the style of the great soloists. However, I was extremely surprised to hear the fragile, brittle voice of an elderly man. But it nevertheless hid an unusually calm state of mind, composed and at the same time pleading and insistent. This "composure" came from that inner peace and tranquility that the monks covet incessantly and manage to acquire only after many years of prayer. Like all the people living in a monastery, the monks chanting in choirs are constantly striving to acquire and maintain inner peace and humility (modesty).

Psaltic *yphos* is conditioned by some defining elements such as silence, patience, obedience, or modesty, all of them based on a long apprenticeship with the spiritual master and afterwards with the musical master traditionally called *daskalos*. Without having acquired these virtues, the famous Greek psaltes Panagiotis Neochoritis⁹ warns us, the young chanter will not be able to turn a hymn into a prayer: "Teach your apprentices ever since their youth to manage their moods (*ethoses*) because otherwise the music they will chant will hurt them more than it will benefit them".¹⁰

In this context, psaltic *yphos* seems to be more than a mere association of words, and the word *style* does not seem to be able to compensate enough for the weight with which the word *yphos* has been semantically loaded. The latter represents an initiatory path for the disciple who, wishing to become not only an interpreter but a *man of prayer*, must be formed first as a *spiritual man*. The temptation to form his own stylistic mark from the years of his apprenticeship makes him stray from this initiatory path. Determining to remain submissive, in silence and patience, does not annul his personality, but on the contrary: it gradually polishes his spiritual senses, so that he can later learn how to put his own moods in the service of hymns and their messages.

True *yphos* does not emerge even when the disciple has matured long enough from a musical viewpoint, because in the Psaltic Art, the chanter does not see himself as an interpreter who is supposed to bring his own original

⁹ Archbishop Protopsaltis of the Great Church of Christ (Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople).

¹⁰ Conference held at the Byzantine Singing Masterclass in Iași, 13th edition (July 2020).

vision into a composition. First of all, the psaltis prays for himself, and this attitude makes any interpretation the internalized expression of a personal prayer. The psaltis sees himself as an insignificant, underserving intermediary who uses the vocal talent he is endowed with to render, through liturgical and musical texts, the moods that the hymnographer and the composer transmitted through their works.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, using an association between two words that are only seemingly synonymous, we could say that *style* becomes *ypchos*, a phenomenon of revelation, of spiritual enlightenment that touches the soul and implicitly the human voice only during the phase of “kenosis”, i.e. the emptying of the self which makes the psaltis an empty vessel that lets Divinity fill it in and manifest itself. Inspiration can only be divine and it appears only when the psaltis chants his own shortcomings and inabilities, seeks to see his sown sins, deplors his own failures with the joy of the Resurrection, considers himself unworthy of this profound call to chant to God and asks Him for help, because all the power and understanding are not in his human hands.

References

- Αγγελινάρας, Γ. (2008). *Έκφρασις της Ψαλτικής Τέχνης* [Expression in Psaltic Art]. Samos: Athos.
- Αντίπας, Αγιορείτης, Hieromonk (2011), Prologue. In *Αθονική Μουσική Πανδεκτέ* [Athonite Musical Pandekte]. Άγιον Όρος: Τò Ίερòν Ίβηριτικòν Κελλίον τῆς Άγίας Άννης.
- Μπαμπινιώτης, Γ. Δ. (2002). *Λεξικό της νέας ελληνικής γλώσσας* [Dictionary of the Neogreek language], 2nd edition. Αθήνα: Κέντρο Λεξικολογίας.
- Gérolde, Th. (1931). *Les Pères de l'Église et la musique* [The Church Father and the Music]. Strasbourg: Librairie Félix Alcan.
- Grigorie The Hiermonk (2010). *Explicarea Dumnezeiestii Liturghii* [The explanation of the Divine]. Bacău: Bunavestire.
- Khalil, Al. (2009): *Echoes of Constantinople: oral and written tradition of the psaltes of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople*. Doctoral dissertation. San Diego: University of California.
- Noul Dicționar Explicativ al Limbii Române* [The New Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language] (2002). București: Litera Internațional.
- Pann, A. (1846), *Bazul teoretic și practic al muzicii bisericesti* [Theoretical and practical manual of the Ecclesiastical Music]. București.

Paris, N. Archim. (2018), *Tò ἐκκλησιαστικὸ ᾄσμα* [The ecclesiastical chant], doctoral dissertation. Thessaloniki: Stamoulis Antonios.

Ramsey, J. (2020). *Clerul inferior în Biserica Ortodoxă* [The inferior clergy in the Orthodox Church]. Cluj: Renașterea.

Sandu-Dediu, V. (2010). *Alegeri, atitudini, afecte. Despre stil și retorica în muzică* [Choises, Attitudes, Affects. On Style and Retorics in Music]. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.

Sîrbu, A. (2020), *Ύφος και υφή στην ψαλτική παράδοση της Μολδαβίας, με έμφαση στο 18^ο αιώνα έως σήμερα* [Yphos and musical texture of psaltic art tradition in Moldavia, from the 18th century until nowadays] (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Thessaloniki: Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Retrieved from <http://ikee.lib.auth.gr/record/314976>

Șăineanu, L. (1929), *Dicționar universal al limbii române* [Universal Dictionary of the Romanian Language], 6th ed. București: Scrisul Românesc.

Στάθης, Η (2015). *Ύφος και ήθος στην διακονία του Ιεροψάλτη* [Style and Ethos in the Chanter's Minister]. Retrieved from <http://www.pemptousia.gr/video/ifos-ke-ithos-stin-diakonia-tou-ieropsalti/>

*** (1998). *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române* [Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language], 2nd ed. București: Univers Enciclopedic, Romanian Academy.