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Variety and consistency in composing works for mixed choir: *Our Father, Psalm I and Psalm 65* by Father Gheorghe Șoima

Buta Mircea

Mircea Buta

„Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad
E-mail: mirceabuta25@gmail.com

Abstract

In the 20th century, in the city of Sibiu, the religious-musical education was dominated by professor, composer and conductor Gheorghe Șoima. There is hardly any writing regarding the approaches and methods used by him in composing. This study underlines those processes and composition approaches in the pieces mentioned in the title. The contrast of ambitus, the dialogues between ensemble and soloist, the usage of unison passages, the insistent repetition of key words, exploring a univers of many altered sounds, the detailed care towards no repeating chords with the same distribution, the projective thinking of the piece's segments on more tonal poles, multiple associations between the ensemble's voices, the rhythmic variety serving the accents of the words' syllables, the combination between the fugal writing with elements in the Romanian church music and others, represent only a part from the variety and consistency ion compositions by Fr. Gheorghe Șoima. Those can become a good reference and base for the the students who will deal in perspective with the harmonization of future repertoire and also, for deeper understanding of works by this important representative of church music from the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Keywords

ambitus, rhythmical formulaes, tonal sections, harmonic details, altered sounds, fugal technique, diminished chords

In the year 2010 (more precisely on the 26th of November) there was a quarter of a century since the passing into eternity of father, professor, composer and conductor Gheorghe Soima. Moreover, only three months from this date, on 11th February 2011, there were 100 years since his birth. An extraordinary personality in the musical life and spiritual life of Sibiu Faculty of Orthodox Theology from this known Transylvanian city, he wrote a book which pointed this very important moment in its history. It's about: **Writings of Theology and Musicology**, edition cared by Fr. Prof Univ. Dr. Vasile Grăjdian and Prof. Cornelia Grăjdian.¹ In comprises all the writings and articles of father Gheorghe Soima and also more articles and studies of other fathers professors, composers and musicologists. From these we mentioned here some with representative theme: Nicolae Scutea, *Pr. Prof. Gheorghe Soima, a peak of Transylvanian Alps* (pp. 356-362), Prof. Constantin Catrina, *Unpublished Testimonials for an anniversary: Gheorghe Soima – a soul and faith for the music of ancestral lands* (pp. 352-356), Fr. Acad. Prof. Dr Mircea Păcurariu, *The Priest, Professor, Conductor and Composer Gheorghe Soima* (pp. 365-370), Prof. Constantin Catrina, *Gheorghe Soima, An Animator of Choral Music* (pp. 330-333), Fr. Prof. Dr. Vasile Grajdian, *The Oratory „Octoechos from Sibiu” of Fr. Gheorghe Soima, a Musical Monument of Transylvanian Orthodoxy* (pp. 370-375), Ilie Moise, *Gheorghe Soima and the Popular Melodus* (pp. 375-377), etc.

By reading with great interest this book, I thought of adding to these wonderful appreciations addressed to the father some findings regarding his way of working, his manner of processing and developing of the melodic speech for four voices, harmonic and rhythmical in the religious pieces written for mixed choir. For this I chose three pieces in the title of this study and strived to comment using accessible musical terminology, to be understood also by the graduates of the Theology Faculties who deal with choral singing effectively. These also in turn will strive to harmonize for four voices other original existent pieces and discovered by them in the regions and parishes where they will place their activity.

¹ It appears with the blessing of I.P.S Dr. Laurențiu Streza, Metropolit of Ardeal, University Edition “Lucian Blaga” 2010, References: Fr. Prof. Univ. Aurel Pavel, Fr. Lect. Univ. Sorin Dobre.

Thus, in the Lord's prayer, *Our Father* the author uses a „weave” of harmonic sonorities for four voices together with a melodic line brought to a solo bass voice. This approach brings out more the level of expressivity and the impact of the piece on the audience and it delivers a complex sonority, very adequate for the prayer towards God The Father. Through this option, what results is an extra sonority effect, which suggests that collective singing of the choir is also singing with the entire community of believers and the soloist, who represents the „personal-individual”.

The opening of the piece starts with sounds of a chord in the lower register of all the choral voices, leaving the soloist to have a more imposing part in a optional medium of the voice, with multiple possibilities of timbre at the start of this prayer. Here is this opening²:

The musical score is written for five parts: Solo, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The Solo part begins with a whole rest followed by a melodic line. The choral parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) enter with a sustained chord. The lyrics are: Solo: Ta - tăl nos - tru; Soprano: Ta - tăl nos - tru; Alto: Ta - tăl nos - tru; Tenor: Ta - tăl nos - tru; Bass: Ta - tăl nos - tru.

Already, after the first words, the tenor voice commits to a short entry like an echo with the soloist, then what follows is the ending of the phrase to be sung also with an echo of the words „*your name*”, by all choral voices as:

² Fr. Gheorghe Șoima, *Religious Choral Songs* University Edition „LUCIAN BLAGA”, Sibiu 2010, *Our Father*, p. 11.

10

nu - me - le Tău,

- scă - se nu - me - le Tău,

- scă - se nu - me - le Tău,

- scă - se nu - me - le Tău,

The principle of those words replays is kept nearly during the entire duration of the writing, through alternating the choral voices with the soloist. We can see clearly that the order in which those word replays is not kept strictly but sometimes the choir is the first to present the text and other times the soloist, for example³:

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Pâi - nea noas - tră cea spre fi - in - ță

Pâi - nea noas - tră, pâi - nea

Pâi - nea noas - tră, pâi - nea

Pâi - nea noas - tră, pâi - nea

și ne iar - ță no - uă

ne iar - ță

ne iar - ță

ne iar - ță

By exploring contrasting sonorities and variety, the author doesn't omit the passages that have all choir's voices singing in unison, like in the following passage example⁴:

-şa şi pe pă - mânt

-şa şi pe pă - mânt

-şa şi pe pă - mânt

From the harmonic perspective, the work opens in Bb Major, followed by the speech to alternate the imposition of this tonic with the relative minor: *g minor*. In this game between the two tonalities centres, father Gheorghe Şoima despite bringing the relative minor's dominant (*D Major*, six times), every time when this prepares the inflexion towards *g minor*, the respective chord is never exposed with the same vocal distribution. This fact demonstrates a very refined pretence of the author, „to take advantage” of the multitude of existent opportunities and also, to show his skill that he had in melodic-harmonic leadership of the female and make voices. Below there are the six cases, with the relative's dominant cord incorporated:

⁴ *Ibid.*, *Our Father*, p. 12.

1
sfîn-teas - că - se nu
sfîn-teas - că
sfîn-teas - că
sfîn-teas - că

2
cea spre fi - în - ță
păi - nea
păi - nea
păi - nea

3
dă - ne-o no - uă
dă - ne-o
dă - ne-o
dă - ne-o

4
ge - li - le noas - tre
no - uă
no - uă
no - uă

5
-și - ți - lor noș - tri
-și - ți - lor noș - tri
-și - ți - lor noș - tri
-și - ți - lor noș - tri

6
veș - te de
veș - te, ne iz - bă
ne iz - bă
ne iz - bă

We may also observe an embellishment of the harmonic sonorities addressed, the use of three steps with such natural sounds and also altered notes, like: *C-C#*, *F-F#*, and *Eb-E natural* and also, accepting some diominished chords towards the end, which underline and attract the attention upon the word *temptation* and *evil*. Those cause a powerful contrast with the main chords from the final *amen*. Here are the two examples framed with borders⁵:

8
is - pi - tă
is - pi - tă
is - pi - tă
is - pi - tă

cel vi - clean
veș
veș - te ne
veș - te ne

⁵ *Ibid.*, *Our Father*, p. 13.

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A more unusual detail that is easily missed, but which hides many of the intentions of composer Gheorghe Soima in this piece is the absence of the word „evil” within the choral voices. It is pronounced only in the bass soloist voice, the accent falling in the final choral exposure on the word „and deliver us”, which appears firstly with the female voices, then twice more in the male voices and once again with female voices, totally being repeated four times.

Here is the ending of the work preferred by the author:

ci ne iz - bă - veș - te de
ci ne iz - bă - veș - te ne iz - bă -
ne iz - bă -
ne iz - bă -

26

cel vi - clean a - min a - min
veș - te a - min a - min
veș - te ne iz - bă - veș - te a - min a - min
veș - te ne iz - bă - veș - te a - min a - min

Psalm I. This work is projected in *d minor* but in the melodic line exposed in the opening, there appears systematically a *b natural* which sends a clear hint towards the modal world. The author renounced this time to have a soloist but he uses the bass voice within the choir to sing in the

opening and present the first verse from the psalm. Afterwards, in bar 5, the same head topic appears but in the alto and interestingly, it is written at a tone higher. Two bars later, in bar 7, the tenor voice with same sonority material but this time expose at a fifth higher. Certainly, those fugal entries predict the requirements that need to be achieved by the man who will be happy if: „*does not walk*”... „*or stand*”, ”*or sit*”,...etc. Here we see this opening of Psalm I⁶:

BASS [Fe - ri - cit bār - ba - tul ca - re - le n-a um-blāt în ca - lea ne - cre - din - cio - și -

A. 5 Fe - ri - cit bār - ba - tul, fe - ri - cit

T. 8 Fe - ri - cit bār - ba - tul

B. lor, Fe - ri - cit, fe - ri - cit

For a better textual fluency and to respect the syllabic accents, father Gheorghe Soima uses more often the alternative bars, achieving this way an even greater rhythmic activity. This during the course of the piece it intensifies when the triplets appear, but also the quavers and dotted rhythms, semi quavers, like they are framed in the following borders⁷:

ca - lea pă - că to - și - lor

ca - lea pă - că to - și - lor

ca - lea pă - că to - și - lor

ca - lea pă - că to - și - lor

scau - nul pier - ză to - ri - lor

scau - nul pier - ză to - ri - lor

scau - nul pier - ză to - ri - lor

scau - nul pier - ză to - ri - lor

⁶ Ibid., Psalm I, p. 13.

⁷ Ibid., Psalm I, pp. 15, 16, 19.

3

jesc, iar ne - cre - din - cio - şii nu sunt a - şa !

jesc, iar ne - cre - din - cio - şii nu sunt a - şa !

jesc, iar ne - cre - din - cio - şii nu sunt a - şa !

jesc, iar ne - cre - din - cio - şii nu sunt a - şa !

Those observations demonstrate in one way the „exactness” and interest in detail, achieved by the author, and in another way, the rhythmic richness and high expectations for the executors. The use of 7/4 time signature has a certain difficulty for the conductor as well as singers. Nevertheless, the purpose of its usage is so that it offers a better phrasing „unity” of the text sung in this case. Here it is the respective bar⁸:

50

ff

ci sunt ca plea-va ce-o spul-be-ră vîn-tul de pe fa-ţa pă-mân-tu-lui!

ci sunt ca plea-va ce-o spul-be-ră vîn-tul de pe fa-ţa pă-mân-tu-lui!

ci-s plea - va pă-mân-tu-lui!

ci sunt ca plea-va ce-o spul-be-ră vîn-tul de pe fa-ţa pă-mân-tu-lui!

⁸ *Ibid.*, Psalm I, p. 20.

The expressive power of the unison of four voices is not left unused nor it is left out, especially when the message of the respective text is emphasized even more. For example⁹:

21

și în le - gea Lui

și în le - gea Lui

și în le - gea Lui

și în le - gea Lui

57

Nici pă - că - to - șii

Nici pă - că - to - șii

Nici pă - că - to - șii

Nici pă - că - to - șii

⁹ *Ibid.*, Psalm I, pp. 16 and 21.

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As an extra palette for timbre color, father Șoima brings towards the end specific chord progressions, only in the male voices with the word *happy*. This word is resung many times towards the end of work, wishing to impress even more with the text from the opening. Here are the chord progressions¹⁰:

75

lor.

lor.

lor. Fe - ri - cit,

lor. Fe - ri - cit,

On a harmonic level, the author divides the work Psalm I in three sections, of equal content. The first section consists of 24 bars in *d minor*, followed by the middle section in the homonym tonality of *D Major* then in the recapitulation back to *d minor* in the third section. The ending contains a short final section, this starting with the same topic head as in the opening bass line, followed by the tenor voice at a fifth higher, the final chord being a tierce de Picardie.

Compared to Psalm I, **Psalm 65** is divided in five sections and the author himself limits them with double bars. The tonics are developed in such a way that the contrasting principle is very well used.

In section I, father Gheorghe Soima keeps the same debut in *d minor* (like in Psalm I) with the theme exposed in bass. To note is that this work has a fugal character more pronounced through the themes exposed at the opening of the sections but also through the motivic character. For example, the work starts as¹¹:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Psalm I, p. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Psalm 65, p. 24.

Sopran

Alto

Tenor

Bas

î - năl - țați lui Dum - ne - zeu, î

The above rhythmic formulae, under the legato sign, has powerful similarities with the psaltica music from the southern country. Its promotion is made through repetition in the soprano voice (many times) and it strengthens the wish of the author to explore a rhythmic basis of the existing byzantine origin and to develop and process it in a complex manner as selective as possible for the four voices. Below the formulae used by the author like an echo, after 4 beats each time¹²:

51

î - năl - țați, năl - țați lui Dum - ne - zeu stri - gă - te de bu - cu -

55

ri - e, î - năl - țați lui Dum - ne - zeu toți

The work is abundant in altered notes from the very beginning, respectively in bar 5 there are harmonic modal inflexions very interesting. Notes such as *F#*, *B natural*, *Eb*, *G#*, *C#* alternates with *F natural*, *Bb*, *E natural* and *C natural*. These harmonic „searches” head towards the second section towards the subdominant homonym’s tonic, *G Major*.

At the opening of the second section, the alto voice presents the theme and in the major character it brings a surplus of energy and greatness, emphasizing the message of the text in this way¹³:

¹² *Ibid.*, Psalm 65, p. 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Psalm 65, pp. 25-26.

A-du-ce-ți-I sla-vă și lau - dă.

In the second section, the author develops the speech through a dialogue between the female and male voices. This process is not just a term, but it returns four time as such¹⁴:

1. A - du - - ceți sla - vă, a - du-ceți sla - vă

2. a - du-ceți sla - vă a - du-ceți

3. A - du - - ceți sla - vă, a - du-ceți sla - vă

4. a - du-ceți sla - vă, a - du-ceți

¹⁴ Ibid., Psalm 65, p. 26.

After this „competition” between the two vocal groups (female and male) to „bring glory”, the composer exposes in the the soprano the most beautiful and long embellishment with the same text from the whole work, under a vaulted melodic line that attains the climax two thirds in her length and then it descends step-wise, preparing the ending of this section. At the same time, the tenor voice and bass present as a fugue the importance of the word „bring”, accumulating afterwards in the last three bars the emphasis of the words „glory” and „praise”. Here we capture this moment¹⁵:

18

a - du - ceți sla - - - - - vă, a

als - - - - - vă, a

sla - vă, a - du - ceți sla - - - - - vă

sla - vă, a - du - ceți sla - vă, a - du - ceți sla - - - - - vă,

The third section opens exactly with the same theme as found at the opening of the work, presented in the bass voice, but this time with the tonic on E, bringing a novelty to the same material and also keeping the multitude of altered notes like: D#, F natural in the sensitive role (inferior and superior) through the E, at the same time with d natural and F# or C# with C natural or G# with G natural.

In this section the author doesn't lose the power of the unison and presents this time the same melodic line the first time in the lower voices (alto and bass), afterwards adding the other two voices (soprano and tenor). Here is the respective moment¹⁶:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Psalm 65, p. 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Psalm 65, p. 28.

21

noas - tre, Dum - ne - ze - u - le!
noas - tre, Cer - ca - tu - ne-ai, Dum - ne - ze - u - le!
noas - tre, Dum - ne - ze - u - le!
noas - tre, Cer - ca - tu - ne-ai, Dum - ne - ze - u - le!

Because the text and the message of the verses from the psalm becomes very dramatic and the author leads the chord progressions in more and more dramatic manner, like the diminished chord with diminished seventh framed below¹⁷:

24

u - me - rii noș - tri
u - me - rii noș - tri
u - me - rii noș - tri
u - me - rii noș - tri

The preparation that is achieved by father Soima is very interesting, to return at base key using the note D, in the next section. Through this,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Psalm 65, p. 29.

after the use of accidetails in the notes mentioned above, to obtain varied sonorities, the composer doesn't hesitate to exacerbate the sound universe by using *A#* and *Bb* as well as *D#* and *Eb* in just some bars. The reasoning behind the leading of the voices he controls very well, by using the opportunity to end this section on an *A* note at unison with all voices, which actually prepares the return to tonic on *D*. The note *A* from the old base key of *E minor* transforms from being subdominant of this tonality to being the dominant of the next in *D*.

The fourth section of the work Psalm 65 opens with a theme in the bass voice, who through a fifth used at the beginning it reminds us of the initial theme, but the evolution of it differs afterwards. The contrapuntal answer appears in the soprano voice and the text „*through fire and through water*” is being explored by the author in the usage of diminished chords, however this time with a diminished seventh. To remember that those never appear distributed in the same way. Here they are exposed and framed in border¹⁸:

26

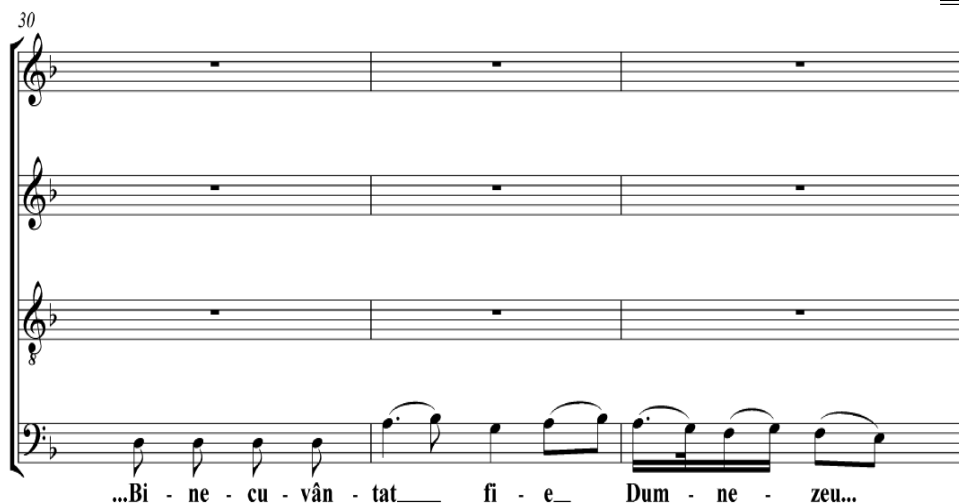
foc, prin foc și prin a - pă prin foc, prin foc și prin a - pă prin foc și prin a - pă

Half way through this section, after father Gheorghe Șoima looked for a way to return to the beginning, this retrieval is made at the same time with the return of a positive text. Yet again the bass voice sings the melody like at the beginning, but the theme presents the text: „Blessed is God...”. Here is the achievement written half way through the fourth section¹⁹:

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Psalm 65, p. 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Psalm 65, p. 31.

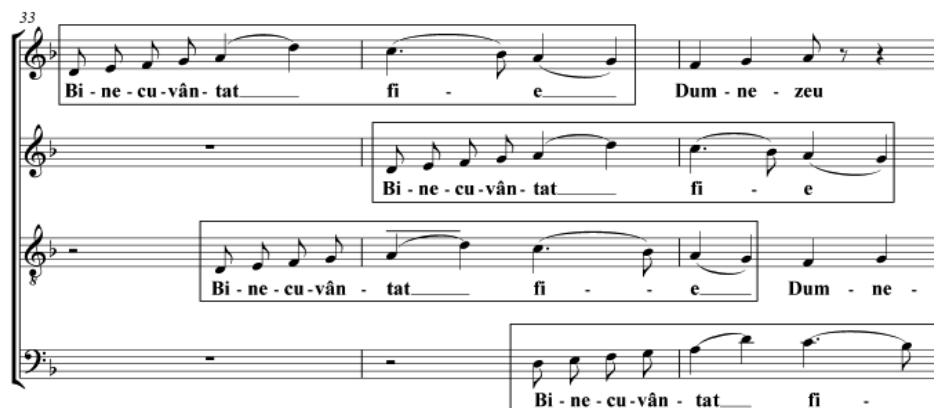
30



...Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat___ fi - e___ Dum - ne - zeu...

In this section he reveals his craftsmanship in the leading of the voices, by the strict keeping of every two beats having a fugal head topic entry in the soprano, then tenor, then bass. To emphasize this moment, it is resung after one bar precisely by all voices, but in a different order. The achievement and realization of such a moment commends highly the composer Gheorghe Soima as a master of fugal writing and as a refined connoisseur of vocal writing. Here we capture the special moment, with the strict entries of the framed voices²⁰:

33



Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat___ fi - e___ Dum - ne - zeu

Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat___ fi - e___

Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat___ fi - e___ Dum - ne -

Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat___ fi -

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Psalm 65, pp. 32-33.

36

Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat fi - e

Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat fi - e Dum - ne - zeu.

Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat fi - e.

Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat fi - e.

The ending of the final part brings again, in the foreground, the emphasis of the homonym tonality, D Major. Also at the end, what is underlined – like in Psalm I – is a repetitive word, in order to use its expressive power. On this occasion, the word is *blessed*, which is repeated seven times²¹:

44

① Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat,

① Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat,

① Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat, ③ Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat, ⑤ Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat,

② Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat, ④ Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat,

48 ⑥ Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat, ⑦ Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat.

⑧ Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat.

⑥ Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat.

⑥ Bi - ne - cu - vân - tat.

²¹ Ibid., Psalm 65, p. 34.

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From the observations made above, we can see the many approaches and composition methods applied to the works mentioned in the title by Gheorghe Șoima. Evidently, those demonstrate the varied possibilities and consistency that the author mastered not on an average level, but on a supreme artistic level. We sum up the most important ones:

1. Ambitus contrast (opening of work *Our Father*)
2. The dialogue between ensemble and soloist, where the text messages favours this combination (*Our Father*).
3. The resumption of important key words many times as an *echo*.
4. The use of some passages in *unison*, for the increase of the sound palette.
5. Detailed harmonic interest not to repeat same vocal distributions on a repeated step note.
6. The exploration of a vast number of natural notes together with their altered appearance through accidentals.
7. Accepting diminished chords which emanate a certain restlessness and anxiety by only the specific words of the piece and even diminished chords with diminished seventh.
8. Detailed and developed harmonic thinking, in parts of a longer piece, like: minor tonic, major homonym and then returning to first tonic (*Psalms I*), or minor tonic (*D*) – subdominant's homonym (*G*) – supertonic (*E*) – returning to first tonic (*D*) – the ending in a homonym key (*D*).
9. We notice a special care taken towards the fluency of the text and respecting the accents on syllables that the composer puts in practice by using special rhythmical formulae like: *variants of tripets or alternative bars or even 7 beats*.
10. For the rhythmical variety we see the emphasis of the established rhythmical formulae during the psaltica tones from the Carpathians and their value in a developed manner.

11. In order to achieve many vocal colours, the author presents the voices in as many combinations as possible: only female, only males, only high ones (soprano and tenor), only lower ones (alto and bass) or different others.
12. The composition fugal writing technique, which the composer masters perfectly, combined with elements from Romanian church music.