

Springs of the Church Music: A “Russian *Axion Estin* (It Is Truly Meet)” from the Psaltic Manuscripts of Neamț Monastery

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Abstract: The 19th century brought in the Romanian ecclesiastical environment a new type of music: the harmonies of choral music. Although psaltic music, with roots before the Middle Ages, but subjected to the evolutions and regressions of the Middle Ages, had a solid tradition in the Moldavian monasteries, and especially in Neamț Monastery, the presence of a consistent group of Russian monks determined here several creations with obvious Russian influence. Such is the case of the *Axion estin* from the Romanian manuscript no. 14 from the library of Neamț Monastery. We will briefly analyze this creation and underline its characteristics and the differences it presents from psaltic music. Such creations constitute the germs of choral creation in our country.

Keywords: Middle Ages, choral, melisma, psaltic music, Neamț Monastery, manuscript.

Being real tools for the researchers in the field of Romanian church music of Byzantine tradition, as well as in the field of Byzantine musical paleography, psaltic manuscripts are also a source of information, sometimes undiscovered, that we cannot find in other branches. They can be the key to certain questions, problems, controversies in the field of history, literature, church life and why not, in the field of life in general with all its aspects: social, anthropological, economic and political.

Neamț Monastery, the heart of Romanian spirituality and culture, has books and manuscripts of inestimable value in its library. Among these, there are a number of 42 psaltic manuscripts¹ that are a testimony of the Romanian Orthodox church music from Moldavia in the 19th century.

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¹In this study, we use the term “psaltic” since it is the most common in the Romanian ecclesiastic environment. The correct expression would be “manuscript of ecclesiastic music”. When I analyzed these manuscripts for my PhD thesis (that happened in the middle of 1990s), the number of manuscripts was the one mentioned above. We have no knowledge whether now, for various reasons, the number remained the same. See Rev. Alexandrel **BARNEA**, *Muzica bisericească în Moldova secolului al XIX-lea*, Editura Sf. Mina, p. 138-163.

I have chosen for the present study a “Russian *Axion estin* (It Is Truly Meet)” that can be found in the Romanian Manuscript no. 14, f. 7^v – 8^r. What motivated my choice?

In the 19th century, the Romanian Orthodox Church received the polyphonic-harmonic garment of the monody of Byzantine tradition. We call it choral singing. Up to this moment, the Romanian Church has used the monadic chant. The first manifestations of harmonic chant, timid of course at the beginning, occurred earlier than the 19th century, maybe even in the 18th century. In time, this “new chanting” that penetrated into Romania through Russia, has drawn ahead and gathered more and more supporters. We say this because, as every new thing, the reaction to choral chanting was divided in two sides, especially after the decree issued by the ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza regarding the celebration of the divine cult exclusively in Romanian: on the one hand, the progressive world was enthusiastic with the new sonority and received it gladly, up to theatrical exaggerations in composition, on the other hand, conservatism, especially the monastic one, invoking the old norms and canons, presented a strong opposition, which led to physical conflicts in Neamț Monastery that required the intervention of law enforcements².

There, in Neamț Monastery, in the 19th century, the choir (the group of singers more precisely) was formed of Moldavian monks, that is of Romanians, and the choir on the left was formed of Russian monks, sometimes called “Ruthenian”, their number at the time being of 200. The Ruthenian monks used the linear notation. The neumatic notation used by the Romanian monks was the one from the period after the Chrysantic reform that is, as we all know, that simplified notation, cleared of useless signs that hindered the melody too much. This overload of the melody with ornamental signs occurred during the Middle Ages, especially after the fall of Constantinople under the Turks, when the rhythmical-melodic formulas came to unfortunately influence the clear Byzantine music.

Since these were a source of disagreement, there were attempts to reconcile the two types of notation – psaltic and linear. Such an attempt is the novel *Creed*, from the Romanian manuscript no 5, f. 84^r-87^v, written for three equal men voices, in neumatic notation (psaltic), “composition of late Hieromonk Visarion the Protopsalt”³. Regarding this *Creed*, the musicologist Vasile Vasile said that “it is the argument to an original solution to join two styles that seemed irreconcilable: the choral harmonic chanting on three voices and the Byzantine notation”⁴.

²See Prof. Mihail Gr. POSLUȘNICU, *Istoria muzicii la români*, Editura Cartea Românească, București, 1928, p. 94-95.

³See Rev. Lect. PhD Alexandrel BARNEA, “The Creed from the Psaltic Manuscripts no. 5 from the Library of the Neamț Monastery”, in *Analele științifice ale Universității “Al. I. Cuza” – Teologie Ortodoxă*, tomul XV/2010, no. 2, Editura Universității “Al. I. Cuza” Iași, p. 99-109.

⁴Vasile VASILE, *Istoria muzicii bizantine și evoluția ei în spiritualitatea românească*, Editura Interprint, București, 1997, p. 174.

We do not know whether the "Russian" *Axion estin* that we refer to⁵ was written prior or after this *Creed*, but it can be inscribed in the musical production of the Russian monks from Neamț Monastery, being a very important document which establishes the manner of manifestation and interpretation of the two systems of ecclesiastic notation and singing. The copyist of the manuscript, Hieromonk Dorothei⁶ ("these were written by Hieromonk Dorothei in 1862 December 3"), presents this chant as follows: "Russian *Axion estin* with Romanian interpretation. And for the Romanians not to forget that there was a time when the chant was like this, we added it here" (f. 7^v-8^r).

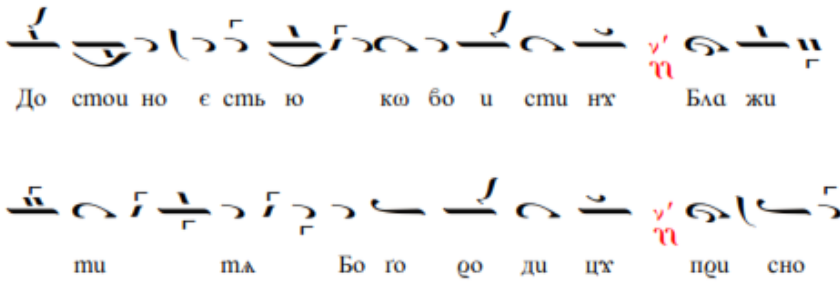
A short description of the Manuscript no. 14 before we move to the presentation of the chant is required. The manuscript with the dimensions 25x20 cm has no title. Its covers are made of cardboard, covered in coloured paper on a brown background. On the leather spine, there is the inscription "Tome 3". The paper is of two types: ordinary, thin, yellow, and ordinary thick. The Liturgical language is Romanian with Cyrillic letters, and the number of rows with musical notes varies between 15-16/page. The manuscript is a colligate with two incomplete printings, a Gramolnic for 1869 and a Polyeleos "By the waters of Babylon". The sole authors mentioned by this manuscript are the famous protopsalt Dimitrie Suceveanu (f. 9^r) and Visarion the Confessor (f. 33^r)⁷.

As we have already mentioned, the chant we are interested in can be found at the beginning of the manuscript, page 7^v-8^r. The voice or echos used for this *Axion estin* is the 8th and the language is Slavonic with Cyrillic letters. From the very beginning, we observe a preference for the acute register, and almost all the cadences (7 out of 10) are placed on Ni'.

⁵This *Axion estin* was also mentioned by Prof. Pavel Lungu ten years after my research and transcribed in both notations. See ***, *Axioanele tradiționale de la Mănăstirea Neamț*, Colecția Fundației Culturale "Pavel Lungu", Piatra Neamț, 2003, p. 73-75.

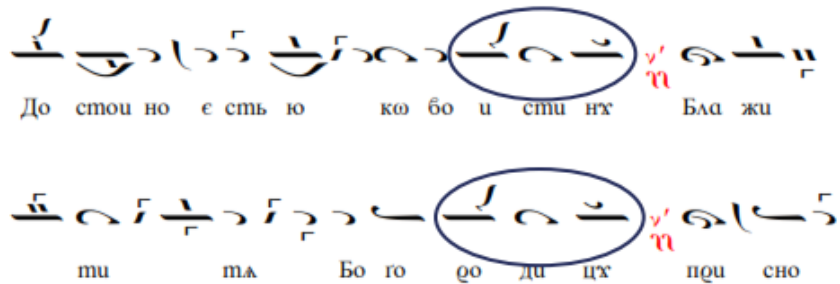
⁶Dorothei/Dorothei Hieromonk (19th century) – psalt, conductor of the psaltic group formed of Romanian monks from Neamț Monastery. See Gheorghe C. IONESCU, *Lexicon al celor care, de-a lungul veacurilor, s-au ocupat cu muzica de tradiție bizantină în România*, Editura Diogene, București, 1994, p. 115.

⁷Dimitrie Suceveanu (1816-1898) – protopsalt, teacher of psaltic music, composer. He activated at the Metropolitan Cathedral from Iassy. See IONESCU, *Lexicon*, p. 330-333. Visarion the Confessor (19th century) – hieromonk, psalt, teacher of psaltic music, calligrapher, composer. He activated at Neamț Monastery. See IONESCU, *Lexicon*, p. 365-367.



The construction of the melody is rather challenging for the interpreter because it has a lot of big intervals (jumps of three, seven and even eight notes). We may also observe the fact that the perfect 4th is used quite often after the cadence on Ni'. In fact, the combination of linear progression and intervals creates a rather unusual sound for a church melody in neumatic notation. Also, the range (ambitus) of this chant is impressive, and it requires an interpreter to have solid musical knowledge and good vocal abilities, since it extends from Di (Dhi) in the lower octave to Ga'.

The first two musical phrases⁸ (until the first note marker) do not even look like a hymn in a sticheraric tact. They have no ample melismas, and the frequent use of the gorgon determines a quite rapid execution. Our attention is also drawn by the end of each of these two musical phrases since they anticipate or illustrate the influence of the choral music with its tonal-functional principles. The landing on the cadence is made through the means of the leading tone, which is not at all characteristic to the Byzantine music.



Another aspect of this chant is that each time we meet with a progressive evolution of the melody, either to the acute or grave register, the passage is done rapidly, using the gorgon or digorgon. The only moment when the interpreter is allowed to linger a little longer is the cadence, marked by a klasma.

⁸In this study, we consider a musical phrase from one note marker to the other.

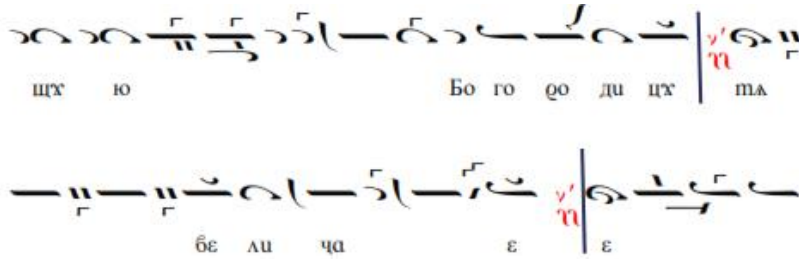
ми ма Бо го ди ца | при сно
 Бла же нх ю х и пре не по ро чнх
 ю и Ма терь Бо га
 на ше го | Чест нѣ ѿе шх ю

For instance, in the example given above, between the two marking lines, the gradual ascension towards Ni' and then the descent to Ni accompanied by a few turns of the phrase and some intervals represent a challenging passage for the interpreter given by the abundance of gorgons and digorgons. The turning of phrases, through the introduction of an interval, is used in order to interrupt the linear and monotonous ascension from Ni to Ni'.

The flow of the melody with such accelerations is also visualized with the help of the combination between apostrophos and elaphron, also known with the name of syneches elaphron, which occurs plenty of times along the melody.

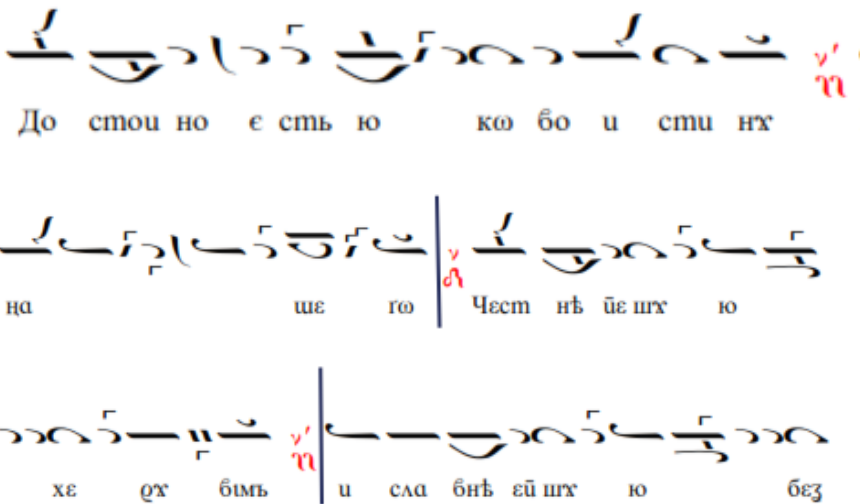
ни а Бо га сло ба ро ожд шх ю сх
 ща ю Бо го ро ди ца ма

Towards the end of this chant our attention is drawn again by what we call an anticipation of the dominant seventh chord.

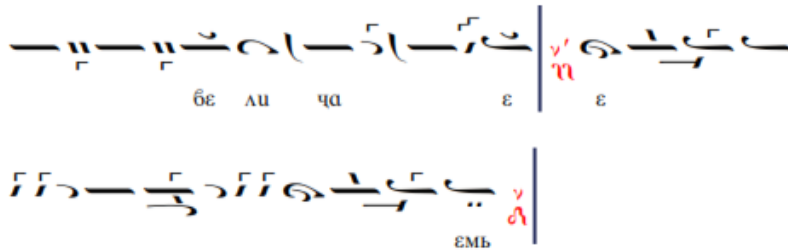


The dominant seventh chord can be identified between the two marker lines and is presented in a latent form, but it is certainly there, as a clear influence of the tonal-functional harmonies that started to penetrate into the Romanian musical environment.

Along the chant, we can identify some formulas that the author uses in several musical phrases. For example, the first phrase of the chant uses the same musical material and almost the same disposition as the fifth musical phrase. This is a common practice of the composers of Byzantine music to reuse some of the formulas along the melody. There is also this theory that a piece of Byzantine music is in fact composed by using a series of formulas put together in an inspired manner by the composer.



The end of the melody, the final cadence also brings the most extended melisma of the entire piece. I would consider it a double cadence since it is firstly situated on Ni' and then repeated on Ni.



As one may observe, the same formula is used on the acute register and then it is repeated on Ni, in both cases the basis is preceded by the interval of 4th or a jump of three notes. The descent from Ni' to Ni is gradual, but rapid, with the help of a series of gorgons.

From the point of view of the ornamentation, this chant is quite atypical because it should use more ornamental signs than it does. But this *Axion estin*, on the contrary uses very few ornamental signs. The most present are varia and psiphiston. The omalon occurs only twice during the melody and the antichenoma four times. We would expect to see such ornaments especially at the end of the musical phrases, to prepare the cadences, but this is not the case. The rest of the melismas which aren't as many as we would expect are created with the help of the temporal signs (gorgon and digorgon) and with the combination between apostrophos and elaphron (syneches elaphron).

Another "curiosity" of this *Axion estin* is the fact the melody does not modulate at all. This is very uncommon for a sticheraric chant that usually presents one or more modulations at least in the key moments of the melody. Maybe the predominance of the acute register did not allow a proper modulation.

This chant as we have it today, rather reminds us of the recitative style of singing characteristic to the Russian religious music, than of the psaltic music that was sung in the Romanian Orthodox Church in the 19th century.

Regarding the prosody in this chant, we may observe that the reason why the melody is placed so much on the acute register is the meaning of the text it illustrates. "It is truly right to bless thee, o Theotokos" is represented using the acute register to emphasize the worthiness of the Virgin Mary to receive such praises. When the composer presents the characteristics of the Theotokos, he passes from acute to the central octave, or the basis of the echos (Ni) because he mentions the human nature which is far from the purity of the Virgin Mary: "ever blessed, and most pure, and the Mother of our God". The effect is even more impressive since the following musical phrase starts with a reference to the Mother of God illustrated through a jump of seven tones: "**Thou** the more honorable than the cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim". This entire phrase develops on

the acute register, because it speaks of the heavenly creatures, and the cadences are here on Ni'. The following descent to the basis of the echos is to express the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, His descent among us, His incarnation. This phrase is also brought into contrast with a jump of eight tones to illustrate again our addressing to the mother of God "thou the true Theotokos, we magnify thee".

Instead of Conclusions

The impact of the choral music on the Romanian ecclesiastical environment was extremely profound. It took decades for the priests and monks to accept choirs into churches and choral music during the religious services. But, through the presence of the Russian monks in Moldavian monasteries, and with the help of their creations and musical tradition, we think that the process of acceptance was at least partly eased. One cannot deny the value of such compositions firstly because these are the melodies that took the prayers of our ancestors to God, and secondly because one cannot deny history, but accept it. The manuscripts from Neamț Monastery hide between their covers many such treasures that will hopefully be used one day, and which constitute the thesaurus of religious music of Byzantine tradition of our country.

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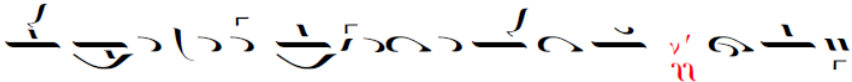
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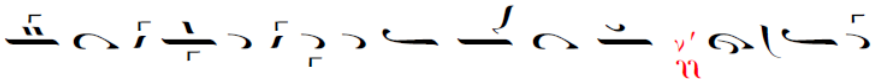
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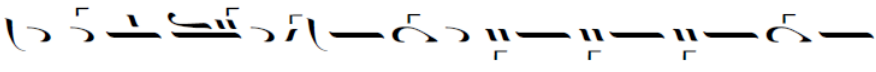
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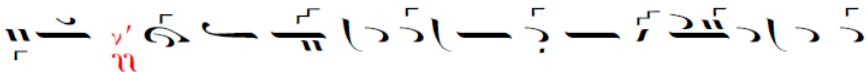
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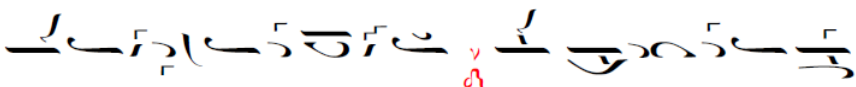
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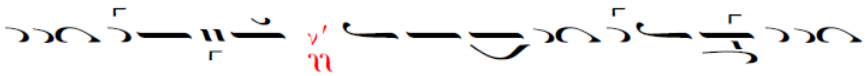

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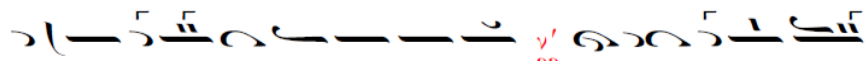

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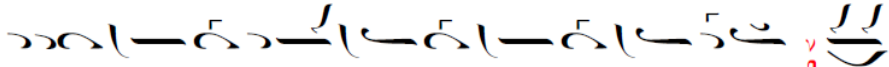

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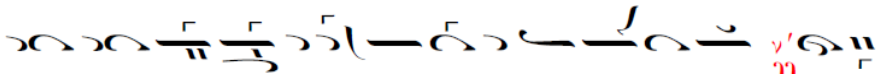

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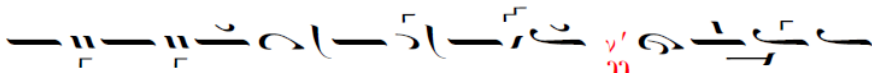
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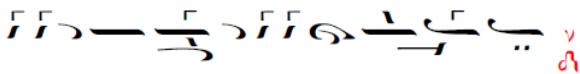
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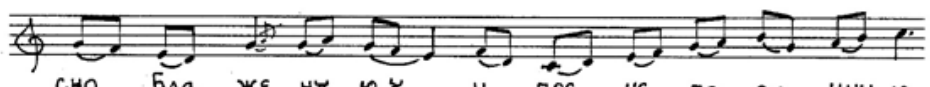
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Springs of the Church Music: A "Russian Axion Estin (It Is Truly Meet)" from the Psaltic Manuscripts of Neamt Monastery

шѣ ю безъ сраблѣ нї а се ра фимѣ бе зу
слѣ ну а бо га сло ва рожда шѣ ю сѣ щѣ
ю бо го ро ду цѣ ꙗ
бе лу ча э э
ѣмб

The image shows a musical score for a Russian Axion Estin. It consists of five staves of music in a single system. The notation is in a single melodic line with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are written in Cyrillic script below the notes. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a sharp sign. The second staff has a sharp sign and a '3' below it. The third staff has a sharp sign. The fourth staff has a sharp sign and a '3' below it. The fifth staff has a sharp sign and a '3' below it. The lyrics are: шѣ ю безъ сраблѣ нї а се ра фимѣ бе зу, слѣ ну а бо га сло ва рожда шѣ ю сѣ щѣ, ю бо го ро ду цѣ ꙗ, бе лу ча э э, ѣмб.