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Church Polyphony in the Light of Ecumenical Dialogue

Cerkvena polifonija v luči ekumenskega dialoga

Abstract: The existence of polyphonic forms within the liturgical music of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches appears to be closely related to the domain of ecumenical dialogue. The appearance of polyphonic music in the liturgy, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, aimed to preserve the unique identity of both the nations and the Church within the given cultural context. The authors use a comparative analysis of the material gathered from both theological and musicological field. Using the example of church polyphony, the authors argue that ecumenical dialogue is also correlated with the issue of music in the liturgy and, consequently, with everyday life.

Keywords: church polyphony, Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, ecumenical dialogue

Izveček: *Obstoj polifonih oblik v liturgični glasbi Rimskokatoliške in Pravoslavne cerkve je tesno povezan s področjem ekumenskega dialoga. Pojav polifonične glasbe v liturgiji v devetnajstem in dvajsetem stoletju je bil namenjen ohranjanju edinstvene identitete narodov in Cerkve v danem kulturnem kontekstu. Avtorja uporabljata primerjalno analizo gradiva, zbranega tako s teološkega kot muzikološkega področja. Na primeru cerkvene polifonije avtorja trdita, da je ekumenski dialog povezan tudi z vprašanjem glasbe v liturgiji in posledično z vsakdanjim življenjem.*

Ključne besede: *cerkvena polifonija, Rimskokatoliška cerkev, Pravoslavna cerkev, ekumenski dialog*

Introduction

The connection between church polyphony and ecumenical dialogue originates from the very root of the appearance of polyphony within the Roman Catholic liturgy. From its beginnings, polyphony represented a sign of solemnity of the Roman Catholic Mass, a distinctive element of Catholic semantics through which the Church conducted the dialogue with the surrounding world (Pius X 1903, art. 4; Pius XII 1955, art. 14–15; Congregazione

dei riti 1958, art. 17). Classical polyphony, i.e. *polifonia sacra*, »signifies Roman Catholicism much more specifically« than Gregorian chant does, considering that the complete Western harmony owes its origins and development to the counterpoint embellishment of Gregorian chant melodies (Swain 2012, 119). The Western harmony, on the other hand, played a significant part during the centuries-long process of spreading Western-Christian culture. As Zizioulas observed (Zizijulas 2014, 54), anybody can recognise themselves in the phrase »the Western man« since our literature, music, and poetry completely originate from Western culture. In the context of Orthodox liturgical practice, it can be observed that the polyphonic form, influenced by Western church music,¹ also occupies a significant place in the liturgies of the majority of Orthodox Churches.²

This paper aims to shed light on a broader spectrum of dialogue through the subject of music. Using the example of church polyphony, the authors will argue that, through music, ecumenical dialogue is also closely linked with everyday life. The analysis will focus on the vocal polyphony, as this form is the most conducive for a comparative analysis between Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church practices. With the aim of investigating its dialogical potential, the church polyphony will be analysed both within the theological and musicological background.

It can be said that polyphony represents the universal phenomenon of humanity, existing from the ancient times (Jordania 2006). Bearing this in mind, the authors selected the type of polyphonic music which can be classified as church polyphony, or more precisely, *polifonia classica*, and the polyphonic church compositions emerged from the Western European technique of harmonisation. While classical polyphony can

1 Unlike Eastern theologians and musicologists, Ratzinger (2000, 145) does not completely assign the emergence of choral polyphony among the Slavs to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church.

2 About the development of the polyphonic sound in other Orthodox Churches see for example: Ionuț-Gabriel 2018; Kujumdzhiiev 2015.

The fact that polyphonic music exists within the Orthodox liturgy is most eloquently evidenced by the materials which can be found on the official websites of certain local Churches; see for example: Mixed Choir at the Patriarchal Cathedral 'St. Alexander Nevsky' [n.d.]; Horovi u hramu [n.d.]; Choir [n.d.]; Strana Catedralei [n.d.]; Temple Ministries [n.d.].

Even though research on church polyphony has been conducted from different standpoints and as such has led to different conclusions, the very fact that it has been analyzed confirms its presence in Orthodox liturgical practice; see for example: Kavarnos 1978, Peno 2014, Takala-Roszczenko 2023.



be heard in the space of the Roman Catholic Church, the other mentioned type of polyphony is part of the Orthodox liturgy.

The first part of the paper is dedicated to the emergence/presence of polyphonic music in both Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The authors will take examples from historical events considered the most significant for the purpose and in accordance with the limitations of this paper. Therefore, it should be noted that the events to be presented only represent parts of a more complex puzzle, which in its wholeness testifies to the unity between the matters of liturgical music and ecumenical dialogue. In the second part of the paper, the authors will discuss the theology of church polyphony using four documents issued by the Roman Catholic Church. The final part will provide some concluding remarks on this topic.

I

Due to their specific mentality, Western (Roman) people have always connected the entire religious experience with usability (Zizijulas 2014, 51). During the course of history, Roman Catholic liturgical music developed within the juridical type of ecclesiology which viewed the Church as an institution of a temporary character (Matić 2018, 189–190). Music of the Church had to differ from the prevailing musical patterns of the surrounding world in order to ensure its function in navigating the road to salvation. According to Swain (2012, 194), the Roman Catholic Church has never attached a particular musical setting to the Scripture, nor has ever equalised the truth of the words with the way of singing. In fact, many compositions that were conceived in utter secularity obtained their place within the Roman Catholic liturgy as soon as the cultural context forgot the specifics of their sound. Therefore, it does not seem strange that in Catholic documents, the term *polifonia classica* (*polifonia sacra*) involves polyphonic works composed by the composers such as Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Josquin des Prez, Orlandus Lassus, Tomas Luis de Victoria, and William Byrd, created from the late fifteenth to the early seventeenth century (120).



The official definition of sacred polyphony can be found in the documents of the Roman Catholic Church (Congregazione dei riti 1958, art. 6). However, what seems more significant to emphasize is the fact that since the appearance of polyphony in the Roman Catholic Church, the only type of harmony was modal harmony. Harmonisation of Gregorian chant by means of the counterpoint technique enabled the preservation of the free rhythm of chorale melodies which led polyphony towards serving the liturgical act.³ The chord syntax was formed by consonance and dissonance within the chords, but the chords themselves were created in an almost accidental harmony of melodies which resounded simultaneously and which harmonised each other. In contrast, the change of the harmonic syntax in the sixteenth-century secular music, namely in opera, led to a centuries-long period of adapting the European ear to the functional type of harmony. At that point, chord structures were bearers of the syntax both on their own and in their mutual interaction. Since their development, specific musical examples created new auditory patterns – psychological reminders of the profane.⁴

The imposed circumstances provoked the emergence of a movement within the liturgical movement in the nineteenth century Roman Catholic Church. The »Caecilian movement« took efforts to restore Gregorian chant and classical polyphony, primarily aiming to safeguard the Church from the deviant secularization which it had already stepped deeply in.⁵ Establishing the distinction between the sacred/liturgical and profane/secular was profoundly significant from the ontological perspective. The association with the dogmatic authority of Gregorian chant, as well as the different social context, enabled a certain polyphonic repertoire to become a credible representative of the existence of the unique identity

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- 3 At the time of the first »embodiment« of the polyphonic sound in the Roman Catholic Church, the court had nothing similar to it. The early polyphony represented the sound of plainchant followed by a shadowy melody, and appeared in the contexts of festival liturgies, which also contributed to the notion of the liturgical character (Swain 2012, 188).
 - 4 After the appearance of opera, a growing split between the styles of music written for the church and for the court was definitely clarified (Swain 2012, 135). According to Swain (195–196), it seems that there is nothing intrinsically sacred about any music or any kind of music, but that it »can acquire sacred semantics of significant power, bound by the community agreement and both general and specific contexts«.
 - 5 See more in: Monti 2011, 597–610; Donella 2012, 57–58. The encyclical *Tra le sollecitudini*, initiated by Pope Pius X in 1903, positioned the sanctity of sacred music not through its relationship with the biblical and phenomenological, but as the antithesis of the secular (Joncas 1997, 52).



of the Roman Catholic Church as the instrument of salvation. The imperative to preserve the Church's identity became a sufficient argument for compositions of *polifonia classica* to be perceived in the context of serving the liturgy since their inception.

The connection between socio-cultural identity and polyphonic sound also appeared in the story of the Orthodox diaspora in the nineteenth century. Namely, members of the Greek and Serbian Orthodox churches in diaspora began the official implementation of polyphonic forms, similar to the ones that could be heard in Western church, into the liturgy. For them, the question of polyphony was inseparable from the idea of preserving identity and ensuring the existence of a nation throughout history. As scholars claim and sources testify, the main reason for the acceptance of the »new music« in the liturgy was of a psychological nature, caused by the dominant influence of Western culture and Enlightenment society in the Austrian capital. At the time, Vienna held the same significance for the Greeks as Alexandria once had (Peno 2016, 197). Regarding the Orthodox Serbs in Vienna, there was a feeling of social shame provoked by the ridicule of Roman Catholic clerics and new cohabitants (35). As writings testify, what was praiseworthy and delightful one day was shown as false and unacceptable the next, while the youth were »undressing the old man and getting dressed into the new one« with the aim of communicating with their surroundings (197).⁶

Since it aimed to save the identity of national minorities, the process of implementing polyphonic choirs (into the liturgy of Greek and Serbian Orthodox Churches in Austria) was marked by the creation of compositions primarily intended to preserve the originality of national melodies within the harmonic landscape of contemporary musical trends. As Perkovic Radak claims (Perković Radak 2008, 26), during the nineteenth century the church choral music, better known as »Serbian folk church chanting«, was favoured precisely because it was believed to contain melodies enriched with national motives. At the same time, everything

6 Conscious discernment between »old« and »new« and the tendency of striving for the »new« which is perceived as good and positive (as opposed to old, bad, and unworthy) represent the characteristics of the syntactic cultural model which Lotman connects with the era of centralization. According to Perkovic Radak, the representatives of this period are characterized by the practical spirit, and by the tendency towards achieving practical interest (Perković Radak 2008, 33-34).



»western« and based on the rules of harmony and counterpoint technique was rejected. However, it was neglected that »techniques of the composition, no matter the cited melodies, were not the product of national tradition, but were taken from the Western European tradition«.

The other relevant detail is the fact that the majority of Orthodox inhabitants of Vienna considered the pro-European musical reform as »a public work« which in its ultimate result overcame the boundaries of Orthodoxy, becoming thereby the universal Christian good. Moreover, the introduction of the polyphonic sound into the Orthodox liturgy was expected to intervene in suppressing confessional divisions, as well as to bring blessings to the Orthodox inhabitants and lead »sarcastic« and »malicious« Western cohabitants to repentance (Peno 2016, 66). The trace of this idea was to emerge in the years following the Second Vatican Council through the writings of Johannes Overath (1983, 75), who would underline that banishing the great art forms of the Sanctus from the solemn liturgy, i.e., the polyphonic Sanctus, would deepen the rift between the East and West. His words seem to have been echoed earlier than their written version since they were cited by Gottfried Göller (1969, 126) during the Fifth International Congress of Sacred Music held in Chicago-Milwaukee on August 21–28, 1966.

The Second Vatican Council provoked the emergence of a new type of ecclesiology and, with it, a different understanding of salvation marked by a linear and almost exponential growth towards *koinonia*-based and personality-based dimensions, as well as integral and eschatological dimensions. Individualistic elements were rejected; legalism surrendered to the ecclesiastical trend, which affirmed the Eucharistic elevation to salvation. Soteriological glory began to be seen as intended for the whole creation (Matić 2022, 168). Despite these optimistic movements towards communal love, the council and the post-council period revealed relevant conflicts centralised around the questions of liturgical music that emerged among Western theologians. »Conservatives« opposed »puritans«, who advocated for eliminating the polyphonic form from the Mass in favour



of congregational singing (Bugnini 1997, 853–855).⁷ A similar scenario, in which the existence of polyphonic sound in liturgy generated conflict, had been realised a century earlier, when stormy reactions from ecclesiastical authorities at the Phanar reached the Greek clerics in Vienna. The patriarchal letter from the 1850 revealed the existence of a special Commission which was supposed to condemn all inappropriate church music that had developed under the influence of Western European harmony, i.e., polyphonic sound and tonal harmony. These reactions were provoked by the implementation of the music style which was seen as new and foreign to the chanting tradition of the Great Church in Constantinople (Peno 2016, 66).⁸

II

The efforts of the *Caecilian* movement were accompanied by a tendency towards connecting it with the dogmatic support of the papal magisterium. Finally, the motu proprio *Tra le sollecitudini* made the sacred preeminence of Gregorian chant official, which positioned *polifonia classica* immediately next to it.⁹ The theological aspect of classical polyphony is not directly presented in this document; the reader can instead draw conclusions from the exposed premises. By closing the first part, the document reveals the ecclesiological model within which it develops. The phrase «*quae vel codex iuris sacrorum musicorum*» highlights the juridical type of ecclesiology as the main medium through which the reading of the following chapters should be done.¹⁰

7 By encouraging active participation of all members of the laos in liturgical singing, a group of Catholic theologians clearly expressed the stance on the irreconcilability of the esoteric nature of church music artistry with the nature of the Liturgy (Rahner and Vorgrimler 2008, 48). In addition, the «scandalous» statement by Jungmann regarding the Council's departure from the ideal of the traditional Latin Mass surrounded by great musical splendor while elevating the level of church music, provoked a strong reaction from a group of Catholic theologians (Overath, 1983).

8 The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were also marked by conflicts between Western European and Greek scholars of Byzantine and post-Byzantine psalmody. The intensity of these conflicts was authentically described by musicologists who stated that the shadow of schism permeated the overall Byzantine musicological discourse during the first half of the twentieth century. See more in: Peno 2011; 2015.

9 This will be also confirmed in the encyclical *Divini cultus* from 1928, issued by Pius XI (1928, art. 5).

10 «Our present Instruction to which, as to a juridical code of sacred music, We will with the fullness of Our Apostolic Authority that the force of law be given, and We do by Our present handwriting impose its scrupulous observance on all.» (Pius X 1903)



After the opening chapter, the document exposes the general principles of sacred music and positions classical polyphony as the genre which contains the necessary qualities of sacred music to the greatest extent, because of its connection with the Gregorian melodies. Polyphony thus preserves »universality« which derives from *sanctitate* and *bonitate formarum*, and actively testifies about its inseparability from Gregorian chant. Dedication to tradition enables classical polyphony to participate in fulfilling the purpose of sacred music which is »the glory of God and sanctification of the faithful« (Pius X 1903, art.1). This purpose is repeated once again in the document *Musicae sacrae* issued by Pius XII in 1955. The necessity for holiness and goodness of a musical form is confirmed (Pius XI 1955, art. 41–42) and classical polyphony is recognized as restored and cleaned from profane melodies. Therefore, it should be cherished with great prudence and care (art. 54).¹¹

This document differs from the previous in the given explanation about the meaning of »universality«. The purpose of »universality« consists of ensuring the appropriate feeling among the faithful. Wherever they may be, the faithful »will hear music that is familiar to them and a part of their own home«. This would, eventually, enable the spiritual consolation found in »the wonderful unity of the Church« (art. 45). The document also contains a direct reference to Augustine's understanding of music as one of the »great gifts of nature with which God, in Whom is the harmony of the most perfect concord and the most perfect order, has enriched men, whom He has created in His image and likeness« (art. 4).¹² The teachings of Tertullian, Augustine, and Anselm of Canterbury correlated salvation with the notions of punishment, redemption and law as well as with the necessity of directing all rhythms of human activity and movements towards the encounter with the perfect God's justice (Matić 2020, 160–164).¹³ Even

11 The glory of God and sanctification of the faithful, as the true purpose of sacred music, will be confirmed again in the Instruction named *Musica Sacram* (Congregazione dei riti 1967, art. 4).

12 Since the main contribution of music is spiritual joy and the delight of soul, music is »the science or the sense of proper modulation« which is »likewise given by God's generosity to mortals having rational souls in order to lead them to higher things« (Pius XII 1955, art. 5).

13 The need for directing one's consciousness towards the end was confirmed once more by Pius XII: »The ordination and direction of man to his ultimate end – which is God – by absolute and necessary law based on the nature and the infinite perfection of God Himself is so solid that not even God could exempt anyone from it. This eternal and unchangeable law commands that man himself and all his actions should manifest and imitate, so far as possible, God's infinite perfection for the praise



though clear evidence is still lacking, it would be negligent not to mention the fact that Augustine allocated the octave proportion to Christ's figure of the God-man (1991, 155–157), bearing in mind that the consonant polyphonic sound would be attached to Christ's righteousness and His act of redemption in the following centuries.¹⁴

Musicae sacrae also reminds the reader that all the historical events of salvation, deliberation, and healing from the Old Testament onwards were accompanied by music (art. 11). It also cites the verses from the Epistles of the Apostle Paul (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16) which in the juridical environment only represent arguments of the liturgico-historical character.

On the other hand, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* also mentions apostolic words that can now be interpreted in different ways due to the emergence of the above mentioned ecclesiological model of *koinonia*. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* does not contain the theological explanation of polifonia classica; as Joncas suggests (1997, 20), it rather represents worship music as the very means by which certain liturgical actions occur. By using the term »il canto sacro«, which is understood primarily in scriptural, i.e. apostolic terms, the document transfers its focus from the notion of *music* to the idea of *singing*.¹⁵ This discrete detail elegantly changes the focus forming a kind of the refined order, and subordinating the concept of »music« to »singing«.

and glory of the Creator. Since man is born to attain this supreme end, he ought to conform himself and through his actions direct all powers of his body and his soul, rightly ordered among themselves and duly subjected to the end they are meant to attain, to the divine Model. Therefore even art and works of art must be judged in the light of their conformity and concord with man's last end.« (Pius XII 1955, art. 24)

14 From the ninth to the sixteenth century, the semantics of church polyphony developed in stages starting from an auditory image of a principle, through Christ's act of redemption, soon to be closely connected with the very Essence of God and Kingdom of God. Thus, counterpoint technique was particularly related to the area of eternity and consequently to a specific aim: making an audible existence of the principle that unites numerous independent individuals while managing their relationships. See in: *Musica Enchiriadis et Scolica Enchiriadis* 1955, 30–31; *Leodiensis* 1955, Cap. V; *Tinctoris* 1975–1978; *Antiphonarium* 1301–1400, fol. 1v; *Strunk* 1950, 195–198; *Bell* 2009, 367–368.

15 »La tradizione musicale della Chiesa costituisce un patrimonio d'inestimabile valore, che eccelle tra le altre espressioni dell'arte, specialmente per il fatto che il canto sacro, unito alle parole, è parte necessaria ed integrante della liturgia solenne. Il canto sacro è stato lodato sia dalla sacra Scrittura, sia dai Padri, sia dai romani Pontefici; costoro recentemente, a cominciare da S. Pio X, hanno sottolineato con insistenza il compito ministeriale della musica sacra nel culto divino. Perciò la musica sacra sarà tanto più santa quanto più strettamente sarà unita all'azione liturgica, sia dando alla preghiera un'espressione più soave e favorendo l'unanimità, sia arricchendo di maggior solennità i riti sacri. [...] Perciò il sacro Concilio, conservando le norme e le prescrizioni della disciplina e della tradizione ecclesiastica e considerando il fine della musica sacra, che è la gloria di Dio e la santificazione dei fedeli, stabilisce quanto segue.« (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, art. 112)



Focusing on »the singing man« who needs the others to be recognized as such marks a precious step which pushes polyphony towards a new perspective which cannot be understood out of the sphere of personhood.

If the proper understanding of *koinonia* means staying on the Apostle Paul's trace, then it would imply, as Matjaž suggests (2019, 192), the existence of the dynamic communion, carrying one another's burdens, and sharing the goods with each other. It implies dying of the old man who lived in an individualistic way, and giving birth of the new man who lives by the faith in God's Son, or, in other words, as a being of a communion. This context leaves nothing else but to diminish rationality and accept the challenge of experiencing the musical sound as a consequence of the real acceptance of the otherness. The boundaries of this communion need to be constantly reexamined and grounded in the liturgical (eucharistic), and thus eschatological experience, since there is a thin line between a singing community based on personhood and a collective consisting of individuals gathered around the same »musical taste« dominant in the local Church. The best evidence of how sensitive the question of music in the liturgy might be is found in the case of Sanctus, which the Instruction *Musicam Sacram* positions as a part of the liturgy that cannot be sung without the congregation (Congregazione dei riti 1967, chap. 3). On the other hand, for the »opposing team«, it is precisely its polyphonic form that enables a dialogical medium between the West and East.¹⁶

The Second Vatican Council gave scope for the co-existence of two ecclesiologies, and due to this, the diffusion and acceptance of the ecclesiology of *koinonia* are yet to take place in the life of the Roman Catholic Church (Matić 2022, 168). In the current circumstances, the issue of church polyphony can significantly contribute to reaching a final solution (Oblonšek 2021, 126).

16 To gain a closer view of the attitudes of Johannes Overath and his fellow thinkers, we provide the previously mentioned citation in its entirety: »If the great art forms of the Sanctus were to be banished from the solemn liturgy and nothing allowed other than acclamatory forms, meaning forms of congregational singing, then we would not only have to record a further dismantling of the cultic element in contemporary liturgical practice. No, the moat separating East and West in the liturgy and its theological foundations would also have been deepened, now that the Greek 'Kyrie' appears to be suppressed more and more in daily liturgical practice.« (Overath 1983, 75)



Conclusion

The emergence of polyphonic forms within the liturgical music of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches clearly indicated the dialogical potential of church polyphony. Although the aim of this research was not explicitly to list elements of ecumenical convergence that polyphony certainly offers, we believe readers are provided with a broad enough platform to assess that reality based on the description of the worship practices of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches over the past two centuries.

The integration of polyphonic music into the liturgies of Orthodox Churches in the nineteenth century aimed to preserve the identity of nations within their respective cultural contexts. During the mentioned century and the following one, the sound of classical polyphony served as a distinguishing feature of the Roman Catholic Church from the surrounding secular world, signifying its soteriological importance. As such, church polyphony brought the questions of ecumenical dialogue closely to everyday life.

The theological analysis of church music, in this case church polyphony, has the potential to contribute to the process of resolving questions that can be raised in the comparative analysis of Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology. Therefore, further research on this and similar topics would be beneficial. It would be useful to gain a deeper insight into the dogmatic aspects of church polyphony, especially in the context of Roman Catholic juridical ecclesiology, as well as to examine the idea of polyphonic singing that arises from it in light of the perspective of the Greek Fathers who emphasized hypostasis over essence. Additionally, research should address how the intention of establishing polyphonic sound as a norm within liturgy can be reconciled with the theology that constantly anticipates the Eschaton, striving towards the Kingdom that »already is, but not yet«. Lastly, there is a need for deeper exploration into how exposure to church polyphony, as a sound medium which has the purpose of glorifying God and sanctifying the faithful, affects human free will.

By remaining faithful to our theological heritage, we must acknowledge that the phenomenon of church-musical exchange throughout history, particularly during the period marked by the Great Schism, cannot



be disregarded. Moreover, the examples from the history of Church and its music consistently remind us of the significance of dialogue and the necessity of its holistic development.



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