

Functions of the Choral Singing at the Beginnings of the Human Society

Petre-Marcel Vârlan
Transilvania University of Brașov

Abstract: *The study presents the beginnings functions of the choral singing, that is fundamental in any human construction - the cohesion function and the mystical function. These functions have contributed to the human progress and to the formation of the human society: the group action in hunting and in mystical activities or to form beliefs, as a premise to develop the ethical and moral functions and other social and individual functions. The presentation is sustained by examples from frescoes in caves which prove the important role of these primary functions.*

Key words: *prehistorical man, prehistorical music, choral singing, social function*

1. Introduction

The birth of the human being was when the new humanoid being not only did it consciously make and remake a tool¹ – the fire is also included here –, but it also completed the act with the free gesture of affection to other members of the group – without being under the maternal/ filial attachment or the reproduction instinct – and with the effort of spiritual creation, similarly to the proto musical products. In this respect, the group also left its mark, the two types of proto musical performances being the individual and the collective one, of proto choral type.

If the individual musical beginnings represents a continuity of the animal alienation, the choral beginnings means taking the animal group to the higher human stage. This explains why the pages to follow are focused on the origins of the choral singing and the reunion, cohesion and making common cause function in the process of Man's and human society's development.

2. Social functions at the start of choral singing

The role of cohesion/ solidarity factor in the various successive levels of intensity and complexity in the development of the human society – the socio-community grouping, the national, then the general and the human global one – of the choral singing was accomplished in the process of the development of practice and choral creation and the choral creation along the various ages in the development of Man. Either spontaneous or planned, with utilitarian or hedonist role, folkloric or cult, of various sizes (choral group, chamber choir, large choir), mixed or unigenre (male or female), grouped according to ages (children and/or adults – male and/ or female), promoting various syntaxes (monody, polyphony, homophony, accompanied monody, various combinations of syntaxes), *a cappella* or accompanied (with traditional or recorded instruments), the choir and the choral singing have been the most eloquent expression of the community feeling, its opportunity of plenary manifestation through musical art.

Stating some issues regarding the prehistorical period of what was to become, music seems a speculative adventure in a past which can only be supposed not certified, but which

¹ "The notion of tool prevents *keeping* the tools and *the reiteration* of works" – K. Horedt, *apud* Ovidiu Drimba, *Istoria culturii și civilizației (History of Culture and Civilisation)*, vol. 1, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1985, note 4, p. 16.

has to be considered when we cross beyond the historic wall of the objective proofs. St. Isidore of Seville wrote at mid millenium of Christianity that the sounds are lost if they are not written on paper, which can be done due to the man's memory, who can write them as soon as he keeps them in mind². The memory transmitted orally, directly cannot be the only one considered – probably – the indirect one, namely the folkloric memory. But this one, besides a limited and short part of the children's folklore, cannot provide clues based on the principle of the analogy between ontogenesis and philogenesis either³. Chris Scarre - from the Department of Archaeology of the Cambridge University – also talks about the unavoidable "risky and ambitious adventure", taking over St. Isidore of Seville's idea regarding "the reconstruction of sounds [...]"⁴, as long as recording is missing (on stone, leather, papyrus or paper).

Therefore, the paleo musicological research, the iconographic proofs or the ones written in the prehistorical ages on which research can exert *observation*, independently of its type (direct or indirect, spontaneous or experiential, qualitative or quantitative, etc) are unfortunately irrelevant for *the lost* of the far past.

If there are still archaeological sources regarding the instrumental music, these cannot but be deduced when it comes about the individual vocal or group singing and prehistory is silent in this respect; the researcher of the vocal music of that age had to use all the possible scientific methods to provide new information: if the inductive method, that of putting the factual proofs together is not possible, then the deduction method Traian Herseni speaks about has to be resorted to, "the application of concepts, essences and the laws established on a certain number of particular cases to all the similar cases, although they hadn't been researched before."⁵

The solution enounced by the musicologist Constantin Brăiloiu, who stated that although the prehistory of music wasn't recorded on any papyrus, "it can still be read in the book of mind, on which each musicologist, no matter how specialised he would have been, could reflect on at length in the future"⁶.

This exercise is done in the present study to identify the origins of *the group singing*, which will turn into *the choral singing* in the relatively close past – a term through which we understand "just" about two thousand of years– and also nowadays.

The cause of the development of the individual or collective vocal singing consists in the process which caused the development of Man as a thinking being. His development has been determined by *cefalisation* or *cerebralisation*, an idea stated by Teilhard de Chardin, who also stated that

² Isidore de Séville, *De Musica*, 15, 2: "Nisi enim ab homine memoria teneantur soni, pereunt, quia scribi non possunt" – *apud* site: http://palmus.free.fr/These/004_Introduction.htm#_ftn1 (31.01.2014).

³ Dimitrie Macrea (coord.), *Dicționarul Enciclopedic Român (The Romanian Encyclopaedic)* - (vol.III, K-P, București, Editura Politică, 1965, p. 86) mentions about this "biogenetic fundamental law" that it is "a law formulated by E. Haeckel (on the basis of his research and those of F. Muller), according to which, during his ontogenetic development, the individual repeats the most important changes of form through which his ancestors also passed along the their phylogenetic, slow and long lasting development, according to the laws of heredity and adaptability".

⁴ Chris Scarre, *Painting by Resonance*, *Nature* 338 (1989): 382, in: http://cogweb.ucla.edu/ep/Art/Scarre_89.html (12.03.2016).

⁵ Traian Herseni, *Sociologia. Teoria generală a vieții sociale (Sociology. The General Theory of Social Life)*, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1982, p. 225.

⁶ C. Brăiloiu, *Despre o melodie rusă (About a Russian Melody)*, in *Opere, (Masterpieces) I*, București, Editura Muzicală, 1968, p. 394.

”*cerebralisation means mentalisation*, namely a continuous increase of the importance of the intellectual factors on the instinctual ones and, at the same time, *spiritualisation*, which means an increasing preponderance of the conscious and rational factors as compared with the uncounscious and irrational ones and also an increasing preponderance of the inventive, creative factors as compared with those related to routine or repetition. Therefore, what happened [...] is more than a quantitative accumulation of organic elements; on these bases (the development was performed firstly against the central nervous system) *new forms of mental life* were born, more and more *intelligent* and *conscious* ones, implicitly *more creative* with unavoidable consequences on *the social life* as well. A last analysis shows that the process known in biology through the term *hominisation* consists in *spiritualisation*, in the superior organisation of matter to less and less material forms, which will give birth in the future to *the ideas and ideologies*, the foundation of a *new way of living life*”⁷.

At the same time, a new way of expression developed, the beginnings of artistic-musical one and the fine arts one. The – individual or group – singing was the first and pre-eminent form of the first musical expression, the voice being the performance instrument available to any being, either human or animal.

Tens of thousands of years ago, the vocalisation with musical attributes in the first human communities used to be an important factor in the magical ceremonies in the caverns of time. One can notice that acoustics used to play a significant role in deciding the placing of the frescoes of animal and human themes, as mentioned by the researchers Igor Reznikoff and Michel Dauvois after investigating a cave in the French department Ariège⁸.

As outlined by Chris Scarre, the study of the two researchers shows the increase in the importance of music and vocal singing in the prehistoric rituals⁹. But proto singing, no matter how basic it could be, it involves the presence of a language, even if on primeval steps of development. The case of Ariège cage, also mentioned by Jacques Chailley, in which ”the man who is playing the musical bow is wearing an animal mask, is dressed up in an animal leather and performs behind a herd of reindeers (figure 1), which he undoubtedly is trying to charm”¹⁰ is not unique. Prehistorical frescoes in caves, representing such ritualic scenes could also be found in many other places in the world, the priest being one of the main social functions within the proto-human communities; to fulfill his magical mission he used the syncretic act of possibly instrumentalised singing (by operating some stones, striking some sticks) and dance:

⁷ Apud T. Herseni, *op.cit.*, p. 253.

⁸ Chris Scarre, *op. cit.*

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Jacques Chailley, *40.000 de ani de muzică (40,000 Years of Music)*, București, Editura Muzicală, 1967, p. 75.



*Fig. 1. Human and animal silhouettes on the wall of the cave Lascaux*¹¹

The moments when the prehistorical man used music in a syncretic, ritualic, magic complex first refer to the acts of the daily life, dominated by a few factors, still essential nowadays in the pyramid of the human needs as designed by Abraham Maslow, and situated at their foundation: life's physiological needs – food, shelter and heating – among the most important ones. These are followed by the needs of security, among which the protection against the nature's forces is one of the most important ones. Regaining health by chasing away the evil spirits by sorcerers/ shamans represented another occasion of practising a complex ritual, in which the members of the tribal group used to be involved. The proto dirges, as lamentations appeared later, when losing close persons began to gain importance in the individual and collective conscience, a fact connected to the appearance of cemeteries, namely only towards the end of paleolithic, especially in mesolithic¹².

Of the needs enumerated above, the human used to practise the scanned and melodised invocation of some spirits like that of water to quench one's thirst or the drained soil, the animals' spirits which he had to hunt to feed, the fire to get warm, the cave to shelter or the trees and the forest among whose trunks he used to set up shelters of knitting rods and branches.

This way, the first ethical-moral rules are outlined, determined by the necessities of the healthy individual and community life.

3. Conclusions

Everett Thayer Gaston, the American psychologist preoccupied with musical therapy, mentions a series of benefits brought by music in general, which we can also consider as regards the choral activity and the specific repertoire: the planning of an adequate, continuous and concrete behavior of reality, as well as the abilities of physiological and psychological abilities; it forms and requires a behavior coordinated affectively and sensorial elaborated,

¹¹ Site: <http://licavoliartroom.weebly.com/1st-grade-14-15/lascaux-cave-paintings> (04.04.2016).

¹² T. Herseni, *cited work*, p. 255.

stimulating thinking and imagination; at the same time, it encourages the individual and the community to self expression, to compensating efforts of the various handicaps; it stimulates both the participants' and the witnesses' (the public's) generosity, generating motivational situations of "reward and sociable acceptable non-reward", it increases trust, appraisal and responsibility towards oneself and others; the verbal and non-verbal communication is developed, it experiences cooperation and competition in acceptable social forms; it facilitates entertainment and (psychical, the physiology of breathing, the speech related) therapy ; it favors "the acquisition of a realistic social skill and of some acceptable personal skills in friendly community and institution groups"¹³.

References

- *** <http://licavoliartroom.weebly.com/1st-grade-14-15/lascaux-cave-paintings> (04.04.2016).
 *** http://palmus.free.fr/These/004_Introduction.htm#_ftn1 (31.01.2014).
 BRĂILOIU, Constantin, *Despre o melodie rusă (About a Russian Melody)*, in *Opere, (Masterpieces)* I, București, Editura Muzicală, 1968.
 BRĂILOIU, Constantin, *Învățământul muzical/ The Musical Education (Conferință la Radio București/ Conference to Radio Bucharest – 1935)*, in C. Brăiloiu, *Opere (Works). VI. Prima parte (The First Part)*, Introducere, clasificare, note de Emilia Comișel (Introduction, classification, notes by Emilia Comișel), București, Editura Muzicală, 1998.
 CEZAR, Corneliu, *Introducere în sonologie (Introduction to Sonology)*, București, Editura Muzicală, 1984.
 CHAILLEY, Jacques, *40.000 de ani de muzică (40,000 Years of Music)*, București, Editura Muzicală, 1967.
 DRIMBA, Ovidiu, *Istoria culturii și civilizației (History of Culture and Civilisation)*, vol. 1, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1985.
 HERSENI, Traian, *Sociologia. Teoria generală a vieții sociale (Sociology. The General Theory of Social Life)*, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1982.
 MACREA, Dimitrie (coord.), *Dicționarul Enciclopedic Român (The Romanian Encyclopaedic). Vol. III, K-P*, București, Editura Politică, 1965.
 SCARRE, Chris, *Painting by Resonance, Nature* 338 (1989): 382. In: http://cogweb.ucla.edu/ep/Art/Scarre_89.html (12.03.2016).

Petre-Marcel Vârlan is musicologist and holds a PhD in Musicology, at the National University of Music from Bucharest (Romania). At present, he is Associate Professor at Transilvania University of Brașov (Romania), Faculty of Music. His areas of research are Music Theory, Musical Stylistics, Music History, Music Didactics, Arts Management etc. Also, as composer, he is member of Composers and Musicologists Union from Romania and coordinator of Brasov Sucursale of this organization. Recently, he published the book with a selection of his choral compositions named *Galaxia muziconauților. Coruri (Musiconauts Galaxy. Choirs, Bucharest, Muzicală Publishing House), București, Editura Muzicală, 2014.*

¹³ *Music in Therapy*, edited by E.Thayer Gaston, 1968, pag.32 – *apud* Corneliu Cezar, *Introducere în sonologie (Introduction to Sonology)*, București, Editura Muzicală, 1984, pp. 32-34.