

The Modes of the Orthodox Church Chant in South Transylvania

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Abstract: The Orthodox church chant from South Transylvania is a variant of the Byzantine chant. It was transmitted almost exclusively orally until 1890, when priest Dimitrie Cunțan published a volume in Western notation containing the most used pieces. The volume was used as a handbook for the cantors ever since, but oral tradition has continued to play a very important role even today.

In this paper, I present the main issues to be investigated in order to achieve a theory of modes for the South Transylvania chant, pointing to a few particular aspects of this music. Research has to take into account both written sources and audio recordings. For the latter, one can use the database including recordings from about 100 cantors (age 29 to 87) made in 2002–2005 by Rev. Vasile Grăjdian and his assistants.

The theory of modes should not confine only to the description of scales, dominant degrees, cadences, unstable degrees etc. It would be useful for such a theory to also list the formulas of every mode and reveal the rules of concatenating the formulas in a performance, and to describe the significant variations of tempo that are embedded in these formulas and modes as well.

Key words: Byzantine music, Dimitrie Cunțan, formula, free rhythm.

The church music of the Orthodox Romanians in Transylvania was transmitted orally until after the mid-nineteenth century. Except for the southeast of the region, we have no information that it was using the musical notation, even if it had been learned by several Transylvanian students at the schools in Bucharest in the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹

¹ Constantin Catrina, *Ipostaze ale muzicii de tradiție bizantină din România* (Bucharest: Editura Muzicală, 2013), 5, 56–57.

The oldest preserved document with musical notation is a six-page manuscript written in 1867 by Iosif Micu, a student of theology in Sibiu, the headquarters of the Metropolitan Church of Transylvania. The manuscript contains, for each of the eight tones, the *kekragarion* and the first *sticheron* for Vespers, in staff notation. It was discovered and published by Father Sorin Dobre in 2007.²

The next document dates from 1890 and seems to be worked out independently of the first. It is a textbook printed by the priest Dimitrie Cunțan,³ and contains over 100 pieces from all categories of services: hymns for the Divine Liturgy, *kekragaria*, *stichera*, *heirmoi*, *anabathmoi*, *exaposteilaria*, etc.⁴ The textbook is the first collection of Orthodox church music printed in Transylvania, but the author had transcribed these chants, aurally learned from his teachers, since the 1870s, and in his turn taught them to the students of the Theological Institute in Sibiu.⁵ The book was re-edited several times and became the reference for church music in Transylvania, especially in the south of the province. Even cantors who have not attended a formal church music class are said to sing the Cunțan chant.

The descriptions of church modes from southern Transylvania began with the two above-mentioned books. In 1972, Gheorghe Ciobanu analyzed some of Cunțan's songs and described the so-called *sticheraric* and *heirmologic* types (plus, possibly, the type of the *apolytikion*) for the eight tones – all in all, 19 modes.⁶ For each of these, Ciobanu described the scale, often through a medieval name (e.g. Dorian, for Tone 1; or “major hexachord extended downward with an Ionian tetrachord,”⁷ for *varys*). He also mentions the ambitus, the cadence degrees, some *musica ficta*, and provides three to five of the most common formulas. In 1998, Elena Chircev made a similar but more detailed analysis, that also took into account *stichera automela* and short melismatic

² Sorin Dobre, “Cântarea bisericească din Ardeal într-un manuscris inedit din a doua jumătate a sec. al XIX-lea,” in Vasile Grăjdian, Sorin Dobre, Corina Grecu, and Iuliana Streza, *Cântarea liturgică ortodoxă din sudul Transilvaniei: Cântarea tradițională de strană în bisericile Arhiepiscopiei Sibiului* (Sibiu: Editura Universității “Lucian Blaga,” 2007), 77–109.

³ Also spelled Cunțanu.

⁴ Dimitrie Cunțanu, *Cântările bisericești după melodiiile celor opt glasuri* (Sibiu: Editura Autorului, 1890).

⁵ Cunțanu, *Cântările bisericești*, 4; Sorin Dobre, “Dimitrie Cunțan: repere biografice,” in *Dimitrie Cunțan (1837–1910) și cântarea bisericească din Ardeal*, ed. Sorin Dobre (Sibiu: Editura Universității “Lucian Blaga,” 2010), 8–12.

⁶ Gheorghe Ciobanu, *Studii de etnomuzicologie și bizantinologie*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, 1974), 348–353, 365–387.

⁷ Ciobanu, *Studii*, 352.

heirmoi.⁸ A brief presentation of the modes in Micu's manuscript and a comparison with those in Cunțan's book were made by Father Sorin Dobre in 2007. All these studies indicate that the Transylvanian modes are in agreement with the Neo-Byzantine modes in terms of cadence and instability of some degrees.

I will examine further down a few issues that may contribute to a better understanding of the modes in southern Transylvania. The premise I start from is that the notations in Cunțan's textbook and Micu's manuscript were approximate. Their intent was not to faithfully record the chants in use, nor to provide a set of chants to be reproduced exactly. In other words, the notations were neither descriptive nor prescriptive, but rather closer to what Christian Troelsgård called *paradigmatic notation*.⁹ The textbooks were not used in church, but were merely instruments by which students learned to apply the melodies of some model chants to various liturgical texts.¹⁰

Thus, a first observation would be that it is *possible* that the intonation of these chants in nineteenth-century Transylvania was closer to that of Neo-Byzantine modes than it may be understood from the scores in which only Western tones, semitones and augmented seconds are recorded. The noted chants had been learned by Cunțan from Ioan Bobeș, a student of Anton Pann in Bucharest in the 1840s.¹¹ It is reasonable to assume that Bobeș had sung them with the Byzantine intonation, at least on his return to Sibiu.

A pitch that is different from those in the Western scale would have posed problems to anyone who would have wanted to write it down. It is unlikely that someone without a very solid musical training would have used quarter tones, but would rather note one or the other of the adjacent pitches. Therefore, it is possible that some of the steps that appear altered in the score are not mere chromaticisms or unstable degrees, but stable steps, whose pitch was between the two pitches noted in the

⁸ Elena Chircev, *Muzica românească de tradiție bizantină între neume și portativ*, vol. 2: *Repertoriul liturgic românesc notat pe portativ în colecțiile de cântări bisericești din Transilvania și Banat*, revised edition (Cluj-Napoca: Risoprint, 2013).

⁹ Christian Troelsgård, "What Kind of Chant Books Were the Byzantine Sticheraria?" in *Cantus Planus: Papers Read at the 9th Meeting Esztergom & Visegrád*, ed. László Dobszay (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Musicology, 2001), 563–574.

¹⁰ See also Costin Moisil, "'You Have to Sing Them Correctly!': Notation and Performance in Cunțan's Chant," *Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest* 5, no. 3 (July-September 2014): 126–127, and Vasile Grăjdian, "Dimitrie Cunțan (1837–1910) și cântarea bisericească din Ardeal," in *Dimitrie Cunțan* 41–45.

¹¹ Vasile-Sorin Dobre, "Bobeș Ioan," entry in *Dicționar de muzică bisericească românească*, eds. Nicu Moldoveanu, Nicolae Necula, Vasile Stanciu, and Sebastian Barbu-Bucur (Bucharest: Basilica, 2013), 90.

score. For example, in the chants of Tone 2, noted by Cunțan in G major (the Byzantine Di being noted as G), *a* is natural, but less so in a formula of descending cadence on *G*, where *a* is on a downbeat (Ex. 1).¹² In my opinion, it is possible that only in this context, the *a*-*G* interval may have been perceived by Cunțan as narrower than normal, since *a* was noted as *a*-flat. (Note: the same formula is noted by Micu with *a* natural.¹³)

Example 1

Apparent instability of the tone *a* in *Kekragarion*, Tone 2.
Cunțanu, *Cântările bisericesti*, 11.

Andante.

Doam - ne stri - ga - - tam că-tră ti - -
ne a - u - - ți - - mē, a - u - -
ți-mē Doam - - ne; Doam - ne stri - ga - - tam
că-tră ti - - ne a - u - - ți - - mē.
Ja: a - min - te glasul ru-gă - ciu-nei me - - le
când - - strig că-tră ti - - ne: a - u - -
- ți-mē Doam - - ne! Sē se în-drep - te-ze
ru-gă - ciu - nea mea ca tă - mă - ea în-na -
in - - tea ta, ri-di - ca-rea mă -
ni-lor me - - le jert - - fă de sé -
- ra; a - u - - ți-mē Doam - - ne!

¹² Cunțanu, *Cântările bisericesti*, 11–13.

¹³ Dobre, "Cântarea bisericască," 88–90.

Similarly, in the *kathisma automelon Mormântul teŭ Mântuitoriule* (*The Soldiers Watching Your Grave/Ton tafon sou Sotir*, Ex. 2), the equivalent of Byzantine Ke, the final, is *F* sharp. *G* is sharp, with the exception of a *G* natural – *F* sharp cadence formula, suggesting that *G* would actually be three quarters of a tone away from *F* sharp, just like in the Greek *automelon*.

Example 2

Apparent instability of *G* in an *automelon* using the scale of Tone 2.

Cunțanu, *Cântările bisericești*, 34.

Allegretto.

Mor-mên - tul - teŭ Mân - tu - i - to-riu - le,
 os - ta - șü stră - ju - în - du-l; morți
 său fă - cut de stră-lu ci - rea Ân - ge - ru -
 luî ce s'ă a - ră - tat, ca - re - le a
 ves - tit mu - e - ri - lor în - vi - e -
 rea; pre ti - ne - te mă - rim per-ză
 to-riul stri-că - ciu - neî; la ti - ne că - dem,
 ce - la ce ai în - vi - ét - din mor - mânt,
 la u - nul Dumne - ze - ul no - stru.

I have to admit that my hypothesis is speculative. In the absence of other data, we are unlikely to find out whether the Byzantine scales were Europeanized in a year or a hundred since the return of Bobeș to Transylvania, or whether Bobeș learned them correctly from Anton Pann.

A second observation concerns the formulas. Ciobanu and Chircev, like other Byzantine music researchers, insist that a church mode is not defined only by scale and cadence degrees, but also by the melodic formulas variously reiterated over

time.¹⁴ Ciobanu confines himself to providing few formulas for each modal type – usually three, one for each cadence degree and the final cadence. However, he does not discuss the proportion of these formulas throughout a chant or set of chants, nor the different aspects one and the same formula may take, by variation, or the association of the formulas with the literary text, or the way in which they succeed one another. In my opinion, these are matters worth investigating by someone who would like to construct a theory of church modes, from Transylvania or elsewhere.

I have examined two of the *sticheraric* modes from Cunțanu's book, those of the Tones 1 and 3 (see Ex. 3, Figs. 1 and 2, Table 1).¹⁵ I have identified six and seven formulas of between four and eight, rarely ten, bars respectively. For each tone, the initial formula is the same in each of the three chants, and so is the final formula. In Tone 3, the penultimate formula is the same in all three chants, and in Tone 1 a specific formula is penultimate in two chants and antepenultimate in the third. There is no correlation of formulas with the last grammatical accent in the text, as is the case in Greek or Romanian printings with the Byzantine notation.¹⁶ The only rule seems to be that the accented syllables are positioned on the downbeat and last two or more beats and only exceptionally a single beat, while the non-accented syllables last one or two beats, and occasionally four. The analysis shows very similar results with Micu.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ciobanu, *Studii*, 341–342. Chircev, *Muzica românească*, 14.

¹⁵ Cunțanu, *Cântările bisericești*, 8–9, 14–15.

¹⁶ See Costin Moisil, "The Romanian Versions of Petros Lampadarios' *Anastasimatarion*: Observations Regarding the Principles of Music Adaptation," in *Papers Read at the 12th Meeting of the IMS Study Group Cantus Planus, Lillafüred/Hungary, 2004. Aug. 23–28*, ed. László Dobszay (Budapest: Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2006), 159–160, 166; id. "The Adaptation of the *Anastasimatarion* Stichera into Romanian," in *Psaltike: Neue Studien zur Byzantinischen Musik: Festschrift für Gerda Wolfram*, ed. Nina-Maria Wanek (Vienna: Praesens, 2011), 233–242.

¹⁷ Dobre, "Cântarea bisericească," 85–87, 91–93.

Example 3

Kekragarion, Tone 3.
Cunțanu, *Cântările bisericești, 14.*

Andante.

Doam - ne stri - ga - tam că - tră ti - - ne a - u -
- ți - - mă, a - u - - ți - mă Doam - -
ne; Doam - ne stri - ga - tam că - tră ti - - ne a - u -
- ți - - mă; ia a - min - te gla - - sul
ru - gă - ciu - nei me - - le când strig
că - tră ti - - ne: a - u - - ți - mă Doam - ne.

Figure 1

Succession of formulas with Cunțan and Micu, Tone 1.
A formula bears the same number both in Cunțan and Micu.

Cunțan

Doamne strigat-am: 1 – 2 – 3 – 1 – 2 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 5

Să se îndrepteze: 1 – 1 – 3 – 5 – 6 – 5

Rugăciunile noastre: 1 – 1 – 3 – 5 – 6 – 3 – 5

Micu

Doamne strigat-am: 7 – 8 – 5 – 7 – 8 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 5

Să se îndrepteze: 7 – 1 – 3 – 5 – 6 – 5

Rugăciunile noastre: 7 – 1 – 3 – 5 – 6 – 3 – 5

Figure 2

Succession of formulas with Cunțan and Micu, Tone 3. A formula bears the same number both in Cunțan and Micu. Formulas in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 are unrelated.

Cunțan

Doamne strigat-am: 1 – 2 – 3 – 1 – 2 – 1 – 4 – 3 – 5 – 6

Să se îndrepteze: 1 – 2 – 7 – 5 – 6

Rugăciunile noastre: 1 – 3 – 2 – 7 – 1 – 3 – 5 – 6

Micu

Doamne strigat-am: 1 – 2 – 5 – 1 – 2 – 1 – 3 – 5 – 6

Să se îndrepteze: 1 – 3 – 2 – 7 – 5 – 6

Rugăciunile noastre: 1 – 3 – 2 – 7 – 1 – 3 – 6

The analysis of Cunțan's noted chants risks to be irrelevant, because the number of pieces on which it can be based is extremely small: between one and three,

depending on the type of chant. To increase the number of examples for one type, one may look up the database set up by Father Vasile Grăjdian and his collaborators in 2002–2005, when he recorded about 3000 pieces from 100 rural cantors.¹⁸ I did not make a detailed analysis, but I listened to several *kekragaria* in Tone 3 and I became convinced that the rules derived from the late 19th-century score do not apply in the case of very good cantors who learned Cunțan music in the 1930s or 1960s. They sometimes place accented syllables on upbeat, eliminate formulas or add new ones, and do not observe the privileged position of the final or penultimate cadences (see Table 1). Therefore, I think that a discussion about Transylvanian modes and their constituent formulas should also concern the *performed* variants, not just Cunțan’s notations.

Table 1

Division of the *Kekragarion*, Tone 3, into musical phrases (formulas) in Cunțan’s book, Micu’s manuscript, and in the performances of Nicolae Popa and Ioan Albu. Grăjdian, Dobre, Grecu, and Streza, *Cântarea liturgică*, CD 011/06 and CD 016/07.

Text	Cunțan	Micu	Popa	Albu
Doamne strigat-am	1	1	1	–
către tine auzi-mă	2	2	2	
auzi-mă Doamne	3	5	New	
Doamne strigat-am	1	1	1	1
către Tine auzi-mă	2	2		
ia aminte	1	1	6	2
glasul	4	3		
rugăciunii mele	3			
când strig către Tine	5	5	2	1
auzi-mă Doamne	6	6	New	2

Father Vasile Grăjdian’s recordings raise another issue, that of the rhythm. If Cunțan’s notations record a binary giusto rhythm, the audio recordings always show

¹⁸ Grăjdian, Dobre, Grecu, Streza, *Cântarea liturgică*, the attached DVD.

a free rhythm. For example, in the first two phrases of the Easter *exaposteilarion* chanted by Ioan Albu, the duration of a beat varies between 0.2 and 1.7 seconds (see Ex. 4 and Table 2). Far from being a whim of Albu, this way of interpretation is common among the cantors in the region, especially the elderly. On the one hand, the accented syllables are longer than the non-accented ones, and on the other hand the duration of the syllables is longer in the second half of the musical phrase. As the accented syllables usually occupy certain downbeats of the formula, the consequence is that *some* notes in a formula have a longer duration than others. Furthermore, at least for some modes, certain degrees of the scale are associated with a longer duration, and others with a shorter duration. In other words, certain rhythmic factors are inextricably linked to pitch and characterize the mode.

Example 4

Easter *exaposteilarion* (fragment). Top: as notated in Cunțanu, *Cântările bisericesti*, 56. Bottom: as performed by Ioan Albu (Grăjdian, Dobre, Grecu, Streza, *Cântarea liturgică*, CD 016/32). The real duration of the beats is provided in Table 2.

The image displays two musical staves for each of two phrases. The first phrase is 'Cu tru - pul a - dor - mind ca un mu - ri - tor'. The second phrase is 'Îm - pă - ra - te și Doam - ne'. The top staff of each phrase shows the notation as it appears in the printed score (Cunțanu), while the bottom staff shows the notation as performed by Ioan Albu. The notation includes treble clefs, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a 2/4 time signature. The lyrics are in Romanian. The bottom staff of the second phrase is marked with a '10' at the beginning.

Table 2

Easter *exapostelarian* (fragment). Duration of syllables, beats, and bars (in seconds) in the performance of Ioan Albu.

Syllable	Cu	tru	pul	a	dor	mind	ca	un	mu	ri	tor	Îm	pă	ra	te	și	Doam	ne
Duration (sec.)	0.4	0.5	0.1	0.2	0.4	1.8	0.6	0.3	1.3	0.6	4.8	0.6	0.2	1.2	1.7	0.2	1.9	3.2
Duration of a beat	0.4	0.5	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.9	0.6	0.3	1.3	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.2	0.6	1.7	0.2	0.9	1.6
Duration of a bar		0.6		0.6		1.8	0.9		1.9		1-1.8	0.8		1.2	1.9		0.8-1.1	3.2

In this paper, I have tried to raise some issues regarding the theoretical approach of the church modes in Transylvania, starting from the fact that the notation does not reveal certain aspects of the music chanted in reality. I had in view the uncertainties regarding intonation, the description of the mode based on musical formulas, and the fact that rhythmic parameters are embedded into these formulas. I have limited myself to reporting these issues, without undertaking rigorous research, and leaving aside a series of discussions, such as the one about the changes that may have taken place over the nearly two centuries that I have investigated. I believe that, despite these major weaknesses, the issues raised are important not only for modern chant in southern Transylvania, but also for those from other regions and times, wherein the oral tradition plays a major role.

Translated by Adrian Solomon

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