Cantata Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her by Hans Peter Türk

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ABSTRACT – This paper, prepared as part of a doctoral research work, proposes an analysis of the Christmas cantata Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her, by the Cluj composer Hans Peter Türk. The work is characterised by unity in diversity. The unity is represented by the chorale melody, which remains unchanged from the beginning to the end of the work. The diversity lies in the multitude of variants in which the Lutheran chorale is arranged and harmonised (timbral, rhythmic, dynamic and harmonic diversity). Hans Peter Türk thus continues the tradition of Bach’s Lutheran cantata, writing a valuable work with a powerful liturgical message.

Keywords: cantata, Hans Peter Türk, musical genre, Lutheran chorale.

The cantata is a musical genre that has attracted the attention of many Romanian composers. Belonging to the vocal-symphonic genre, the cantata has gradually departed from its original form, preserving only the vocal-instrumental sound source. This is the main criterion based on which we can differentiate between the vocal-symphonic genres. Thus, the cantata can draw inspiration from a diverse range of subjects from both the religious and secular spheres.

Born in Sibiu in 1940, Hans Peter Türk began his musical studies in Brașov, and continued them at the Cluj-Napoca Conservatory, in maestro Sigismund Toduţă’s composition class. His oeuvre includes choral, chamber, symphonic and vocal-symphonic works, along with film music.¹

Hans Peter Türk has written two religious works belonging to the cantata genre: Cantata No. 1 Weise mir, Herr, deinen Weg (Show me, Lord, your way) – 1970 and the Christmas Cantata Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her (From Heaven Above to Earth I Come) – 1992. In addition to these religious works, he has also composed the Cantata Siebengestirn (The Pleiades) – 1981, a folk-inspired work that revives the “Saxon folk traditions related to the New Year and wedding customs.”² Hans Peter Türk’s religious works are accessible to both professional musicians and amateurs, as well as to all those who want to get closer to the art of sound.

The Christmas cantata Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her was written in 1992, as a Lutheran religious cantata with a liturgical purpose. The cantata is based on the chorale of the same name, which is part of the Nativity service.

Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her is one of the numerous hymns written by the German Protestant reformer Martin Luther, in 1534. The text revolves around the Birth of Jesus Christ and is based on the Bible verses from the Gospel of Luke 2, 1-18. The full version of the hymn has fifteen stanzas, of which only three or six stanzas are sung today. The first five stanzas refer to the announcement of the Birth of Jesus to the shepherds. The following stanzas are an invitation to follow the shepherds to the manger and celebrate the newborn baby. The last stanza is a glorification of the magnificence of God, and mentions the new year as a new, peaceful time.

The work of the Cluj composer Hans Peter Türk is a chorale cantata³ for solo soprano, mixed choir, instrumental ensemble and community, based on the hymn Vom Himmel hoch by Martin Luther. The instrumental ensemble consists of: oboe, trumpet, strings (1st violin, 2nd violin, viola, cello) and organ. In this cantata, the composer uses all fifteen stanzas of the chorale, although only three or at most six stanzas are commonly sung in religious services.

The idea of composing the chorale cantata Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her came from Pastor Wolfgang Rehner from Sibiu⁴. Thus, composer Hans Peter Türk has created a concertante version of the chorale. Along with the solo voice and choir, the congregation is also involved, having specially dedicated moments throughout the

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¹ Cosma, Muzicieni din România – Lexicon [Romanian Musician – Lexicon], 116.
³ The chorale cantata is a typology that was commonly used in the Lutheran church in northern and central Germany, in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is written for voices and instruments and consists of several sections, two or more of which are based on the text and melody of a German Protestant chorale.
⁴ At the beginning of the score published at the Schiller Verlag Publishing House, Sibiu, 2013, in “Cuvânt înainte” (“Foreword”), p. 6, composer Hans Peter Türk makes a brief description of the cantata, while also mentioning the name of Pastor Wolfgang Rehner, from Sibiu.

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work, accompanied by the organ. Thus, the community actively participates in the musical realization of this work.

The work is built by alternating the soloist with the choir and community. Each of the three voices, or vocal groups, is assigned five stanzas. The cantata is therefore structured into five sections, each comprising three stanzas. The work is based on the following sequence: solo soprano (with or without accompaniment), choir (with instrumental accompaniment or a cappella) and congregation accompanied by the organ. The final stanza brings together all the participants in the religious service, crowning the entire vocal-instrumental work. The last stanza is flooded with the joy of the Nativity, manifested by all the heavenly forces, by the angels who sing along with the other voices.

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Table 1. The structure of the cantata Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her

The cantata is built symmetrically and balanced, with each section having three ramifications. We note the gradual evolution of the sound events. It starts with a monody (unaccompanied) – the statement of the chorale melody by the soloist, in the simplest possible manner. Then, one by one, the string instruments, the choir, the organ, the community of believers, the oboe and the trumpet join in. The work has a gradual construction also in terms of dynamics: it starts in a piano (dolce) nuance and gradually builds up into a fortissimo. At the macro-structural level, there is an accumulation and finally an explosion of joy, the joy of the birth of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Hans Peter Türk’s cantata is composed in chain form. The stanzas succeed one after another, in the following order: solo soprano, choir and community, in various instrumental and timbral combinations. The chorale melody is arranged differently every time, receiving a different aspect, a new appearance.

The essence of each stanza is the chorale melody, which with each occurrence brings something new in terms of timbre, dynamics, rhythm and harmony. The work is characterized by unity in diversity. The unity is represented by the chorale melody that remains unchanged from the beginning to the end of the work. The diversity lies in the multitude of variants in which the Lutheran chorale is arranged and harmonised (timbral, rhythmic, dynamic and harmonic diversity). The diversity is also manifested at the level of the literary text, with a new stanza being used every time, with a different poetic content. The composer also keeps both the original German text and the chorale melody unaltered. The work is written in the bright key of C major and can be easily performed even by amateurs.
The cantata begins with the chorale melody sung by the soprano soloist.

Ex. 1. Hans Peter Türk, Cantata *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her*, mm. 1-9 (solo soprano)

The four lines of the opening stanza follow one after another, uninterruptedly. The first and third lines are based on the same major tetrachord (*G*-*A*-*B*-*C*), the second line is built on a tetratone (*C*-*E*-*F*-*G*), and the fourth line uses the entire sound material of the key of C major (a major heptachord in descending motion).

The chorale melody has an anacrustic beginning, consisting of 8 measures. It is a symmetrical, square, tonally closed period. This period consists of four musical motifs, based on a rhythmic structure consisting of a short note value followed by seven long note values. This rhythmic motif appears throughout the entire work, contributing to the unity of the cantata.

After the introduction of the chorale melody by the solo voice, the string instruments join in, in *piano*. The last motif of the chorale is intoned by the 1st and 2nd violins, over a C pedal in the viola, in an imitative polyphonic texture.

Ex. 2. Hans Peter Türk, Cantata *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her*, mm. 9-10 (string instruments)

The two measures precede the entrance of the choir, first represented by the two female-voice sections (soprano and alto). The chorale melody is assigned to the upper voice, while the lower voice provides a countermelody. The third stanza has a homophonic texture.

The third stanza of the chorale is sung by the entire community, with the harmonic support of the organ, in isorhythmic style.

Then four transitional measures follow, played by the organ and leading to the entrance of the soloist. The organ part has a different texture than the previous one, with block chords. This texture is built around two planes: the upper plane – a cantilena derived from the chorale melody, characterized by a movement in eighth notes, and a lower, harmonic plane, based on chords. In the upper plane, one can notice the frequent use of a melodic cell consisting of a third and a second. This comes from the chorale melody, representing the 5th, 6th and 7th notes of the first musical motif.

Ex. 3. Hans Peter Türk, Cantata *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her*, mm. 28-31 (organ)

The soloist’s voice intones the chorale melody in a fragmented version, with a 4-beat rest between the four musical motifs, in which the organ pursues, uninterruptedly, its melodic-harmonic course.

The fifth stanza introduces for the first time the full choir, with all four voices, in *a cappella* style. The soprano part sings the chorale melody while the other voices complete the harmony. The choir’s intervention takes place

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in *forte*, in a homophonic chorale texture for four voices. We note the eighth-note progression of the bass along with the presence of many passing and changing notes.

The sixth stanza is assigned to the entire community, being harmonically supported by the organ. The number of voices in the organ part is increased (an extra voice is added). The writing is homophonic, in four voices, with the chorale melody being assigned to the upper voice. The sixth stanza largely retains the harmonization used in the third stanza, to which it is related. A few small changes occur in the third, fourth and sixth measure, as well as in the final cadence. The changes are insignificant, with some main scale degrees being replaced by secondary ones. However, the same function is preserved. The only time the function is changed is the first beat of the fourth measure, where the tonic chord is replaced by the dominant chord.

The seventh stanza is preceded by the entrance of the string instruments, joined in also by the oboe (appearing for the first time in the cantata). The oboe performs one motif of the chorale melody at a time, while the solo voice echoes the same motif along with the text of that line. Thus, the oboe and the solo voice engage in an imitative dialogue of the first three lines, while the fourth line is played in unison, in isorhythmic form.

During this dialogue, the string instruments provide the harmonic accompaniment. Rhythmically, the strings part makes use of the same rhythmic formula: a quarter note followed by an eighth note (a long note value and a short note value). The writing is isorhythmic, the repetition of this rhythmic formula creating the impression of a succession of sighs.

The choir appears on the last line of the seventh stanza, in homophonic, isorhythmic writing, on the text: "*Es ist das Liebe Jesulein*" [The blessed Christ-child lieth there].

The eighth stanza is sung by the choir, along with the oboe and string instruments. The strings section evolves in the same manner as in the previous stanza, within the same harmonic framework. Immediately after the entrance of the choir with the chorale melody, the oboe plays the following countermelody:
The ninth stanza is sung by the congregation along with the organ and is musically identical to the third stanza. The poetic text expresses amazement before the magnificence of the Holy Christ Child, born in a humble manger, among cattle and donkeys: “Ach, Herr, du Schöpfer aller Ding, wie bist du worden so gering, dass du da liegst auf dürrem Gras, davon ein Rind und Esel aß!” [Ah Lord, who hast created all, How hast Thou made Thee weak and small, That Thou must choose Thy infant bed, Where ass and ox but lately fed!].

On the last chord of the organ, the 1st violin and the cello maintain a pedal on C, while the 2nd violin and the viola move in parallel sixths, in half-note values. Against this harmonic background, the solo soprano makes her entrance with the chorale melody, counterpointed by the oboe and the trumpet.

Both the oboe and the trumpet follow a descending melodic contour. The evolution of the oboe is gradual, descending, in long note values, on every note of the C major scale. The trumpet plays a descending line, on a Phrygian tetrachord.

The entire instrumental accompaniment unfolds in a soft nuance: \( p – pp \). The tenth stanza brings a change in agogics and dynamics. We thus witness both a decrease in tempo (\( \text{Langsam} \)) and in sound intensity (\( p – pp \)). Only the soloist sings in mezzo-forte. This diminution at the agogic and dynamic level is also due to the poetic text, which depicts the emptiness and vanity of all the riches of the world before the brilliance and magnificence of the Son of God.

It is in the same piano nuance (with a dolce indication) that the eleventh stanza of the cantata begins. However, with the beginning of the second line there is a change both in agogics (\( \text{a tempo} \)) and dynamics (\( \text{forte} \)). The entire vocal-instrumental apparatus plays in a forte dynamic, while resuming the initial tempo. This is when the trumpet enters the musical landscape (\( \text{senza sord.} \)) with its bright timbre, giving the stanza a solemn, festive, triumphant character. Here, the trumpet plays a melodic role, being entrusted with the chorale melody, slightly modified from a rhythmic point of view.

Through its sound, the trumpet amplifies the joy of the Saviour’s birth and the greatness of this Christian feast. The chorale melody will be heard both in the soprano part and in the 1st violin and trumpet. Thus, it will appear in three timbral variants: voice, strings and brass.

The twelfth stanza brings again to the fore the chorale melody sung by the congregation, accompanied by the organ. This stanza is identical to the sixth stanza in terms of construction and harmonics. The differences are only at the level of the poetic text. Then follow the four transitional measures taken from the end of the third stanza, which bring to the fore the melodic cell based on a trichord.

The thirteenth stanza has the same structure as the fourth stanza, with the chorale melody being performed by the soloist voice, with organ accompaniment. The sound gradually grows in intensity with the fourteenth stanza, in which the choir evolves along with the strings, oboe and trumpet. For the first time, the chorale melody is assigned to the alto part, doubled by the trumpet. The melody sung by the soprano part accompanies the chorale theme, being also exposed by the oboe. This secondary melody is played by the oboe in ornamented form, by adding some changing notes. The string instruments harmonically punctuate the chorale, with discreet interventions only on the strong, accented beats.
The final stanza represents the climax of the cantata and brings together the entire vocal-instrumental apparatus taking part in the Nativity service. The chorale melody is played fortissimo by the soloist, alto part, community and oboe. The countermelody, played by the oboe in the previous stanza, is taken over by the trumpet in the final stanza. An exchange thus takes place between the oboe and the trumpet: the chorale melody goes to the oboe, whereas the countermelody goes to the trumpet. In the final stanza, we notice the use of the organ pedalboard, which amplifies the grandiose sound of the work. The finale is an explosion of joy, the cantata ending in a festive, grandiose atmosphere.

Hans Peter Türk has created a concertante version of the well-known Protestant chorale Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her, while also involving the community of believers. The work is well-balanced, with a rigorous, symmetrical construction. Hans Peter Türk thus continues the tradition of Bach’s Lutheran cantata, writing a valuable work with a strong liturgical message.

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Traducere din engleză de Dora Barta