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The technique of cheironomia [gesticulation]

Etymologically, the expression “cheironomia” (from *cheir* = hand plus *nomos* = law) means the movement of the arms and hands. Musicologically, the cheironomia is an essential aspect of Byzantine choral music or of the art of directing a choir by means of movements of the hand. In fact, “cheironomia” is a broader technique which –in addition to the obvious sense of the movement of the hands aiming at coordinating a group of chanters– must be understood as a gesture indicating the choral way of chanting – as a visual codification of the right way of interpreting either (in a narrow sense) of the notation signs (neumes), or (in a broader sense) of the musical lines, i.e. of the whole aesthetic concept of choir performance. “*What is cheironomia?*” asks an anonymous Byzantine theorist of sacred chant, only to provide the answer himself: “*Cheironomia is a law, handed down to us by the Holy Fathers, St. Kosmas and St. John of Damascus among them. When the voice of the one who is going to chant comes out, immediately the cheironomia [starts] in order to display the melody.*” According, to monk Gabriel, also a theorist of chanting art, the cheironomia “*not only is useful for the <theseis> (which in psaltic art have the same value as the words have in grammar), since it distinguishes them and evaluates their correctness,[...] but we also use it as an assistant and collaborator of sorts in our chants. Indeed, as those engaged in a conversation seem to be more comfortable when they accompany their words with movements of their hand, and sometimes of their whole body, in the same way the chanters sing better when they move their hand. If there were no cheironomia, there would be noise but not harmony. For even when we all chant not the different intervals but [perform] the same, then, if there were not something guiding everybody to chant in harmony, then it would happen so that one would go ahead and another would be late, one would sing higher and another would*

sing lower. This is what the cheironomia exists for. Indeed, all of us, looking at the hand of the domesticos, sing in harmony."

In other words, the cheironomia describes the method of approaching the choir performance: it contributes (as an assistant and collaborator) to the quest for fundamental prerequisites of choir performance (such as order, rhythm, tranquillity, etc.) Chanting with cheironomia guarantees harmony (*symphonia*), whilst chanting without cheironomia produces noise (*pamphonia*). Both terms (*symphonia* and *pamphonia*) are of paramount importance for the quality of choral psalmody: the latter must be understood as a description of isolation (everyone chants as they see fit, in isolation, and therefore "*we all chant the different intervals*"), whilst the former must be understood as a description of unity and concord ("*we all chant the same*"). In other words, what one must seek is the coordination of different voices and performances through the cheironomia (*This is what cheironomia exists for; indeed, all of us, looking at the hand of the domesticos, sing in harmony*). However, this does not mean flattening (since every choir member keeps not only their vocal particularity, which is pretty obvious, but also –mutatis mutandis– their personal approach to choir performance). Consequently, what is being avoided is simply the phenomenon of "*the one going ahead and the other being late, one singing higher and another one lower*", and this is achieved by means of an adequate "artifice", i.e. the technique of cheironomia, which ensures overall harmony.

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In Byzantine musicology, the cheironomia is a notion with multiple dimensions and meanings; literature on the subject is already abundant and very interesting. Chrysanthos, in his Great Theory, describes the three fundamental dimensions which characterize the cheironomia up to the present day:

According to the ecclesiastical musicians, cheironomia is motion of the hand aiming at the depiction of melody and the measurement of time flowing in it in accordance with the rules of rhythmic. As the ecclesiastical musicians say,

The cheironomia is a law handed over to us by the Holy Fathers. The chanter begins the cheironomia the instant his voice is emitted, in order to indicate with this cheironomia the chant that has started. In fact the chanters, using the cheironomia as an assistant who knows the various proportions, sing properly instead of carelessly.

It is said that the cheironomia was indispensable to the chanter, because by it he was able to distinguish the compositions of quantitative and qualitative neumes by which every melody was written. Whoever knew the cheironomia well, therefore, chanted in harmony, rhythm and order. At present, however, it is of no use to us, other than to inform us on the etymologies of certain neumes, which got their name from the cheironomia.

According to this interpretation, the term cheironomia seems to mark, in that order:

- the etymology of the neumes of the psaltic art
- the depiction of melody (recorded by means of the neumes)
- the measuring of time (in which each melody is chanted).

It is obvious that all three meanings approach (each one of them from a different angle) exactly the same issue, which has been stated in the beginning of the present text: the broader aesthetics of the melody, which is ensured (among other things) by the knowledge of each neume in particular and of the whole rhythm of the psalmody in general. By using, therefore, the cheironomia, the director of a choir does not simply aim at marking the rhythm required to coordinate the musical ensemble; through the movement of his hands, he tries (since he knows in advance, more deeply and profoundly, the structure of the chant performed) to “elicit” from the chanters the feeling necessary for each performance. Several testimonies in the extant theoretical sources (beside the practical dimension per se of the topic, preserved up to the present day) confirm this view; here I will cite just two of them:

- First, the following remark by Vassilios Stephanidis: “... *the cheironomia [...] is considered not only to be a measure of time, as the hand goes up and down, but also to impart to the sounds a kind of sharpness and intensity, and this is the reason why, according to its various forms, the signs that denote, in the lines or positions, its different ways and shapes receive various names.*”
- Second, the following (concise) statement by Cyril Marmarinos, former bishop of Tenos: “*cheironomia is the moment of the hands which designs the melody.*”

In that sense, the cheironomia acquires the dimension of a sublime mystic art known only to the “initiated”, i.e. those who were (and still are) familiar with all the aspects and the parameters of psaltic art. “*The name of the cheironomia alone*”, writes Panagiotis Chalatzoglou in his *Theoretikon*, “*was handed down in the books of the successors [of the great masters], whilst the art itself is no longer taught nor will ever be imparted to our musicians.*” Its teaching has never been systematic; its knowledge is “offered” only to those who, after many years of (individual and collective) exercise, intense study and careful observation, succeed in combining its constitutive elements, the most fundamental of which have already been mentioned above, and which I resume here: the way the neumes function, the multifaceted expression of the forming parts of any melody, the whole rhythm of the psalmody.

Relevant to that issue is the following (very well known) remark by Vassilios Stefanidis: “*The meaning of these neumes and the cheironomia cannot be taught in any written form, but only through the voice and the visible movements of the master, in exactly the same way as it happens with the rhetorical schemes and manners which can generate emotion. Indeed, no orator can be considered perfect if they ignore these verbal mannerisms and subtleties; in a similar way, no one should be called an ecclesiastic musician if they have not learned, mostly by tradition, the forms and the melodies of these neumes.*”

Therefore, the answer to the plausible question “*how can I understand the meaning of cheironomia and how will I learn to direct, by means of it, a choir of chanters*” is

to a great extent implicit in the knowledge of these elements. The appropriate way of using the cheironomia must be sought in the neumes and in their etymology. The following dialog between a student and his master, recorded in the Theoretikon of Cyril Marmarinos, former bishop of Tenos, is indicative in that aspect:

How did the ancients use them [the signs]?

Just as we do, except the cheironomia, which remained hidden from us.

But how can we chant without the cheironomia?

Those [people] had the practice and the theory of that cheironomia, while we can use only the practice preserved up to the present days by the teachers of musical art.

If you can, tell us about the function of each sign separately.

I cannot speak of them in words. If it were possible, the ancients would have spoken of them in words, but we [can communicate them] only by means of showing them. But I give you some etymology [of the names of signs] ...

Here is, therefore, the first step to approaching, understanding and learning the cheironomia; the mechanism of correlating the name, the form and function of every sign, since, according to monk Gabriel, “*the ancients have not named them randomly, but each sign has been named after its function.*” This function, i.e. the way in which every sign (and, in a broader sense, every union of the signs, every thesis, i.e. every musical phrase of a melody) is expressed through the voice of the chanter, can also be visualized through the cheironomia, i.e. a series of specific movements of the hands. This is the reason why, in the relevant teachings of the various theoretical texts, whenever the signs are mentioned, the notion of cheironomia is also evoked, and vice versa: every attempt to explain the term cheironomia is accompanied by the teaching of the signs. I will cite here a relevant passage from Chrysanthos’ Great Theory. The text is entitled “*about the cheironomia*”, but, as you will realize, the discussion revolves almost exclusively around the signs:

The **ison** was thus called because it keeps the sound unbending. Its *cheironomia* was done the way we do the sign of the cross, three fingers forming the symbol of the Holy Trinity.

The **oligon** was thus called because with it we ascend a little, that is, the interval of a tone, while with the *kentema* we ascend two tones discontinuously and with the *hypsele* four tones. We compare the *oligon* to the *kentema* and the *hypsele*, because the first inventors of the neumes used only these neumes in ascent. The *cheironomia* of the *oligon* was done with the gesture that symbolizes our Lord's holy hand when he said: "Shoot the net to starboard and you will make a catch".

The **petaste** got its name from the *cheironomia*, because when it was done, the hand went up and flied like a feather. This gesture was done with the five fingers held together and the hand seemed like flying, the way the Lord's hand is symbolized when he said to the paralytic: "Take up your bed and walk".

Etymologically, the **kentema** derives from its *cheironomia*, because the person who did it, formed his forefinger as if pricking. The **two kentemata** had the same *cheironomia* too. Both *cheironomiae* were done the way deity and humanity are symbolized.

The **hypsele** was thus called because no other neume rises the sound so high. The **chamele** was thus called because no other neume lowers the sound so much and what lies low is called chameleon. The *hypsele* and the *chamele* had no *cheironomia* to themselves alone like the *kentema*, because four among the neumes, the *kentemata*, the *hypsele*, the *elafron* and the *chamele*, were called spirits and their *cheironomiae* were done in common with the bodies, which is what all the remaining neumes were, except the *hyporrhoe*, which was neither called body nor spirit.

The **apostrophos** was thus called, because it turns the sound away from the high pitch towards the low and is the opposite of the *oligon*. The **elaphron** was thus called because the two notes were descending with lightness, not the way they descent with the two *apostrophoi*. The **hyporrhoe** got this name because the sound, it is said, flows in the larynx like water flowing under small stones.

There are many older sources on which relies here Chrysanthos (since the discourse on the etymology-cheironomia of the signs is absolutely necessary in the theory of the Art); however, he is mostly influenced by (and frequently quotes from) a very interesting theoretical text of the 13th century, the interpretation of the signs by Michael Blemmydes [*see his entire text at the end of the present paper*].

The aforementioned text is purely symbolical; that is why those who have studied it up to the present day are rather puzzled about its true meaning. *The explanations are so metaphorical in this treatise –observes Neil Moran– that it is almost impossible to disentangle concrete indications from the biblical exegeseis [...]*

The sign for the petaste for instance is modeled upon the hand of Christ saying to the paralytic “Take up your bed and walk” (Mk 2.9). The pelaston shows the hand of the angel saying to the shepherds: “Go unto Bethlehem and you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes; this is Christ our Lord”. The cheironomy for the kouphisma is modeled upon a cloud overshadowing Christ in the Transfiguration and it shows with the fingers the three: Christ, Moses and Elijah. The oligon is cheironomized upon the model of the hand of Christ saying to his disciples: “Cast in the net on the right side of the boat and you shall find”. One might suppose that iconographic representations of the above- mentioned scenes would offer clues for the interpretation but in nearly every case the hand gestures are quite innocuous – some figure is simply giving either the sign for the blessing or pointing upward.

The only certain thing is that this text (just like most of the theoretical manuals of Psaltic Art transmitted to us) must be read in the light of the philosophy exposed in the following passage from the answer (given the year 1640 by the philosopher Gerasimos, a Vallachian and Cretan) of the protopsaltes Demetrios Tamias from Crete, in a question of certain Jacob, a Venetian who asked what is the reason for the custom of the cheironomia and the chanting of the terere in the Eastern Church:

“From the very beginning, the Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ has done nothing in vain; all its actions have a meaning and a purpose, following the tradition of the old Fathers and Teachers. Each form, each word, denotes an

accomplishment, a meaning, a history, a miracle and a mystery of almighty God. Today, however, many people with an aversion for the study [...] dare say that chanting the terere and accompanying the divine music with gesticulation is a wrong thing to do, ignoring the reason why this is done. Thus they resemble the animals, which cry without gesticulation because they do not have hands."

From that perspective, the present text offers something more: it evokes specific scenes from the life of Christ, which are known to Byzantine iconography, images that can be considered as examples of possible movements of the hands and can thus function (together with the knowledge of the purely musical material) as a guide to the indirect teaching of cheironomia. *Cheironomia's specific features* –notes Evgeny Gertsman– *always depended not only on the musical material, but on the unique artistic manner of each choir-master and, of course, on the professional quality of the choir itself, as well as on its professional culture. Thus, it would not be reasonable to think that cheironomic gestures were everywhere and always the same. Quite the contrary. Following some general principles each master added his own individual features to them, and at times they may have differed greatly. Hence, the information recorded in the work of Michael Blemmydes should be considered as a variant of the systems of cheironomic gestures, popular at that time ...* What is, therefore, recorded here is the endeavour to combine the usual theoretical instruction (based on the description of the signs of Psaltic Art) with a designed image, following concrete visual examples of possible forms of cheironomia...

Neil Moran (one of those who have studied the subject of cheironomia) rightly observed: *The Byzantine cheironomy is thus to be differentiated from the modern conception of a director's function in that the cheironomy is neither a circumscription of the course of a melody with movements of the hand nor an artistic waving of the hands and arms. It was rather an exact science for the indication of specific musical intervals, of melodic figures and of marks of expression. As such it was an indispensable facet of Byzantine choral practice. Unfortunately the post-Byzantine centuries took their toll in the area of church music. The*

isolated references in literary works and the silent representations in frescoes, icons and miniatures are seemingly our sole witnesses for this now lost art. I would add, in conclusion, that this art, considered as lost by some, is only hidden before our own eyes; all we have to do is, using as guides and assistants all the pieces of information scattered in our sources (of which only a part we have presented here), open our eyes and see it, decode it, understand it and then use it. It is not easy, but it is not impossible either.

***With God, the beginning of signs [of the art of chanting],
explained separately, created by the wisest Michael Blemydes.***

Question: What sign is the ison cheironomized by?

Answer: By the sign of the Holy Trinity. Just as the Holy Trinity is trinal – [for] in holiness the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit exceed [each other]; so is the ison chanted, when the fingers are put together.

Question: What sign is the oligon cheironomized by?

Answer: It is cheironomized by the sign of the hand of Our Lord who said to [his] disciples: “Cast the net on the right side of the ship and ye shall find”.

Question: What sign is the oxeia cheironomized by?

Answer: By the sign of sharp lances, as if imitating sharp nails.

Question: What sign is the petasthe cheironomized by?

Answer: By the sign of the hand of Our Lord, who said to the paralysed: “Rise, take up the bed and walk”.

Question: What sign is the kouphisma cheironomized by?

Answer: By the sign of the cloud overhanging Our Lord in the Trasfiguration. It is shown by three fingers, [embodying] Christ, Moses and Elias.

Question: What sign is shown by the diple?

Answer: It shows the hand of Our Lord, exhorting the Jews and saying to them: “The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself but of the Father which sent me”. It shows [its] holiness by three stretched fingers, and its humanity is shown by the clenched ones.

Question: What sign does the kratemokatabasma show?

Answer: It shows the sign of God descending, who came down from Heaven, embodied in flesh by Holy Virgin, and became a man, and having sunk [into the sepulchre], resurrected the dead but was not void of the Father’s bosom.

Question: What sign does the parakletike show?

Answer: It shows the fire of coals in the sea of Tiberias and Christ’s call: “Come and dine”.

Question: *What does the parakalesma show?*

Answer: *It shows the rod of Moses which turned into a serpent.*

Question: *What does the petasthon show?*

Answer: *It shows the hand of the Angel saying to the shepherds: "Go to Bethlehem and ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. This is Christ the Lord".*

Question: *What sign does the kratema show?*

Answer: *It shows the hand of [John] the Baptist, holding [it] and saying: "Behold the Lamb of God".*

Question: *What sign does the apoderma show?*

Answer: *It shows the sign of the tabernacle of testimony.*

Question: *What sign is the bareia cheironomized by?*

Answer: *By the sign of those heaving up [their] burden and climbing up all [their] way; as they say among the grammarians that a bending man imitates the oxeia and the one riding [a horse] imitates the circumflexed accent.*

Question: *What sign is the kylisma cheironomized by?*

Answer: *It shows the Sun, making its way from East to West.*

Question: *What sign is the xeron klasma cheironomized by?*

Answer: *By the sign of the hand of the Lord who is blessing five loaves and filling five thousands [people].*

Question: *What sign is the antikenoma cheironomized by?*

Answer: *It shows the boat when Peter casts a hook and a net into the sea and finds a stater.*

Question: *What does the apostrophos show?*

Answer: *Joachim's gifts for Anna, when they return from the temple [after having prayed] about their childlessness.*

Question: *What does the elaphron show?*

Answer: *It shows the sign of the hand of Our Lord, breaking bread and giving [it] to his disciples.*

Question: *What does the psephiston show?*

Answer: Jacob's stairway which he put up [in his dream], or [it shows] Our Lady.

Question: What does the gorgon show?

Answer: It shows the sign of the hand of John the Baptist, rejoicing in his soul and using his hand when baptizing Christ. In the same way the tromikon [is shown] .

While the tzakisma ... dot. Let it be for you ... the bodies [?] and the spirits.

Question: How many semi-tones [there exist]?

Answer: Seven.

Question: Why are they called semi-tones?

Answer: [Because] they lead to the tone.

Question: How many spirits [there exist]?

Answer: Four

Question: What are they?

Answer: ... the hypsele and the chamele.

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