

## Achilleas G. Chaldaeakes

Associate Professor at the Music Department of the University of Athens

### Byzantine Music: Dimensions and Perspectives

#### *What is Byzantine Music?*

The present conference gives us a very nice opportunity to speak for a while about Byzantine Music in general; and I would be so happy to share with you some of my thoughts about this specific kind of music.

I'm not sure that the majority of you know lots of things about the so-called Byzantine Music; thus, personally I have always a main question in mind, which is – in my opinion– the usual question of everybody who listens to this specific kind of music for the very first time: *what is Byzantine Music finally?*

Of course, Byzantine Music is the traditional ecclesiastical music of Greek Orthodox Church; nowadays, you can listen to this kind of music in every church all over Greece. But, it isn't only a Greek music; you can also listen to the same music in all orthodox churches all over the world. That's why Byzantine Music, not only during the last years but lots of years (even centuries) ago, is adapted into lots of other languages. So, you can listen to the sound, the specific sound, of Byzantine Music not only in Balkans (i.e. in Albania, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, even in Russia), but also in Europe (in German, French, Finland and -of course- English language); you can listen to Byzantine Music even in the Arabic world (and it's so interesting to see and listen how Byzantine Music sounds through Arabic language)...

#### *The sound of Byzantine Music*

But, beyond all the above, I believe that the question is more philosophical rather than a musicological one: *what Byzantine Music is?* We can speak for hours about the tradition, the history, the theory, the technique, the specific musicological rules and the details about the signs and the intervals and the melody of Byzantine Music; because, Byzantine music is the modal and monophonic Greek music. It extends over two millennia, from the first century of Christianity's expansion up to the present day. Since the mid-tenth century, Byzantine music is exclusively transmitted by means of a complete and self-contained notation system stemming from Greek alphabet. We know and study it through approximately seven thousand musical manuscripts, containing the creations of more than a thousand Byzantine and post-Byzantine composers.

Here, however, I'll care just about the sound of Byzantine Music; and what that sound is? I usually say that the sound of Byzantine Music is a similar one to "*the voice of a soft breeze*", as it is characteristically written to a well-known Old Testament scene, which allows me to recall here through a commentary by the well known Greek author Alexandros Papadiamantis:

*"... Elias the Prophet witnessed the divine epiphany not in the violent wind, nor in the earthquake and the fire, but in the voice of a soft breeze. And the*

*voice of the soft breeze is the voice of mild Jesus, the voice of the Gospel. This is the reason why the melodist says 'Let us chant for the sake of mild Jesus.' And that is why in the Church we must chant with mild voices, with the voice of a soft breeze, and not with loud and discordant voices similar to the violent wind and the earthquake through which God did not reveal Himself".*

So, in my opinion, Byzantine Music is the sound of the soul of somebody who believes in God; somebody who loves God; somebody, in general, who loves people and life. It's the sound of a full of love heart, it's the sound of love, the sound of heart, the sound of a sensitive soul; a clear, soft and smooth sound, which can deliver us in another emotional world, full of nice and real feelings...

Please, think about it; what do contemporary relationships need? Real feelings... If you give a smile you will receive a smile; if you give truth you will receive truth; if you give love you will receive love; and you will give your heart to somebody who is special for you, as well as you have to give your soul to somebody you care about... So, for real performers of Byzantine Music anyone of their listeners is special; we care about every one of you; that's why we try to give you all these feelings, to give you our souls, to pass you the real sound of Byzantine Music.

Finally, this is the reason why –as time goes by– Byzantine Music becomes more and more popular all over the world; because it's something unique, something full of the truth of life, something emotional, a music which can touch the soul of everybody and drive them into another beautiful world.... I could speak about Byzantine Music for hours, but, I shall leave off any words; I shall let you enjoy the sense of music, the sense of all those feelings hidden in the Byzantine Music itself; let yourself travel to the sensitive world of Byzantine Music and please feel free to realize this odd dialogue, which is held between performers and listeners, a dialogue through feelings, a dialogue where the speakers are the hearts and the souls of both...

### *Byzantine Music as "Tabula Rasa"*

*or*

#### *Which should be the "language" of Byzantine music?*

Recently, I have been trying to combine *Byzantine Music* with the well-known term "*tabula rasa*", directing the mind towards *empiricism*, not as a dogmatic, philosophical stance, but as a personal view and understanding of the so-called Byzantine Music itself through the perspective of its constant evolution.

It's certainly known that "*tabula rasa*" as a Latin term means "white board" and it refers to the epistemological thesis that people are born without innate knowledge, ideas, or psyche and that knowledge is obtained by experience. The above philosophical current of *empiricism* was developed because of this belief, starting from the English philosopher John Locke. The same term is used in philosophy, psychology, neurobiology, politics, even in the science of computers. Perhaps it wouldn't be aimless if its use could be tested in Byzantine Music, specifically in the

possibility of its comprehension, intake and acceptance by any possible receiver (under the above conditions).

I'll submit a question straightaway: "*Which should be the language of Byzantine Music*"? I do this exactly because this kind of music was preserved –and is so far recognized– in its large majority, received and understood through its written (recorded on paper) version. As the major proportion of written (as well as the relevant oral) tradition of Byzantine Music is delivered (uninterrupted from the 10<sup>th</sup> century until now) listed (or expressed) in Greek, it seems perhaps obvious that Greek language has to be recognized as "mother tongue" of psaltic expression. And although, even from a very early age, similar formulations of Byzantine Music in other (mostly Balkan) languages have not only been attempted, but they have also been successfully listed, this attempt seems to be absolutely adherent to every initial Greek musical model (as every foreign musical formulation is usually shaped and formed towards it); that is why, the terminology which was introduced and is used for similar attempts is rotated around the typical term "adjustment".

However, if the above initial "birth" of Byzantine Music (originally Greek) is approximated to the theory of *empiricism*, if any piece of *paper* on which Byzantine Music is recorded, could be considered as "*paper*", in other words as "*tabula rasa*", then I believe that music could both be recognized without premises, without prerequisites and without having a shaped aesthetic perception in advance, with the outset rejection of any pre-existing (*a priori*) thought and therefore by showing its latent (*a posteriori*) hindsight. Instead of considering it as a drawback or moreover, instead of leading the above sterile attachment to a previously established standard, the complete lack of relevant prior knowledge and experience could lead to a renewed approach of Byzantine Music through the senses of any ignorant receiver who could understand the concept of Byzantine music in their own special way; then, they would create personal knowledge of music itself by processing the data of this internal sense and by verifying it through empirical evidence.

I recently had a relevant experience while trying to adjust Byzantine Music to Korean language; this corresponding attempt gave me the opportunity to develop additional fertile thoughts on the typical procession and also form (even in an early level) a different relevant methodology, which I hope that it will expand the usual and established procession of corresponding "adjustments". My speculations launch from the disclosure of the inherent *elasticity* of Byzantine Music (a crucial component which allows music to actually "speak" in every other language), while they are also related to the obvious dynamic dimension of all individual parameters (notation, modality, melodic development, etc.). Whatever I have observed screen the unlimited prospects of the nature and function of music itself, so as to be extricated from every sterile, dogmatic review: it doesn't have to do with some kind of "holy music" that it would be unacceptable to be violated, but for an open and flexible "musical arrangement" that is imposed to change and evolvement, whenever it is necessary and indispensable.

Of course, the above attempt did not take place in a "blind environment". It would be extremely interesting to study both the possibility and the receiving way of Byzantine Music to people who have no previous knowledge of it. But taking for granted the spread and the popularity of this kind of music to almost all over the world, this doesn't seem very easy and anyway, as far as I know it has been impossible to be done so far. Nevertheless, I believe that the relatively small

community of Orthodox in South Korea is a very interesting field of application of a similar attempt of reapproachment of Byzantine Music. It's been one hundred and ten years since a very small percentage of native Korean has been initiated in Orthodoxy; the music they use during the church services is formed by an alloy of Russian and (Western and Byzantine style) Greek melodic standards, obviously affected by national origins and corresponding musical knowledge of missionaries that become active there at times.

This is the usual method of similar adjustments; the endeavour is used to keep music as identical as possible and turn the language into the local dialect; which means that the previously Greek musical sound will "speak" Korean. Which is the vital result of a similar attempt, the result of similar adjustments? While on the one hand, the experts of music recognise it immediately –even ignoring the new language– the experts of the new language, reversly, find it difficult to understand their mother tongue [; this is the fact that native people of South Korea confessed to me]; this happens because of the way the language is reformed in order to adapt to the pre-existing music. Finally, *music*, i.e. the element that was the basic motivation of this attempt of adjustment from the beginning might reach the ears of the new audience as interesting information, however while it develops at such an expense of their native language, it becomes unable to overcome the level of an “exotic” (and therefore difficult to understand and assimilate) experience.

In the nature of Byzantine Music is inherent a sense of "democracy": there is no reason to "be imposed" to anyone, considering it as a dogmatically inviolable, superior and ideal standard, as it is possible, without any formed memories in advance or prerequisites, to be shaped in a (musical) form that everyone would wish, to "fit" in everyone's mind, to speak in every language....

Working in South Korea on the above-mentioned attempt of adapting Byzantine music in Korean, knowing the music but ignoring the language, I “discovered” that instead of trying (as usual) to transfer the music I know, unchanged, into another language, I could much easier (in a more productive, more impressive and more effective way) create new music; new music based on the one I know and want to transfer; new music inspired by the overall tradition of the so-called Byzantine Music; a new music though, which launches, respects, based and relied on the desired, new language, a language which has to highlight and make it clear to the new audience:

*So, let me note here just one characteristic example: once, I asked my pupils and colleagues there to write down for me the text of a very well known hymn of the divine Liturgy, the hymn Tou Deipnou sou tou mustikou, singing during the holy communion; but I suggested writing it down by showing me at the parallel its individuals words and moreover the number of the syllables of any word; looking and having in mind just this series of words and syllables, i.e. knowing and counting just a series of numbers, I created a new music, inspired of course from Byzantine Music, a music appropriate for that specific series of syllables and words; I just chose some*

*very well known repeated motifs of the first plagal mode, spreaded at all three pentachords of the said mode, specifically the basic one (D-a), the relevant high (a-e), as well as the low tetrachord (D-A); I wrote the melody into the staff notation and my colleagues there added the words below the notes; we rehearsed that new composition (with me singing just the melody, through the note a, and them performing the text of the composition) and after that they started to use it (along with a lot of other similar melodies we fixed together the same way) during their church services...*

This is a new version of Byzantine Music, composed on purpose in Korean. The next and in my opinion desirable and ideal step would be a native Korean to continue the same process, a person who can combine excellent knowledge of both: the Korean language and the Byzantine Music. This expected, idealised but for now imaginary, person could give special local colour to this music, by (why not?) incorporating elements of the other (urban or erudite) local musical tradition; and then we would speak of a special and unique Korean Byzantine music. What happened in this case? *on an initial "tabula rasa" Korean symbols were written and so Byzantine Music had to speak in the Korean language...*

Dear colleagues,

I think that now is the time for Byzantine Music to start speaking in Turkish language as well; there is a strong pre-history between Greek and Ottoman people and of course there are in addition lots of common elements between Greek and Ottoman music. I would like to take this opportunity and suggest that in a next project of us, perhaps a project between *Istanbul Technical University* and my Department (the *Music Department of the University of Athens*), we have to investigate questions of musical identity in the multi-national artistic environment of Istanbul; through the appropriate questions, questions of all three dimensions of musical theory and practice [: the historical, the systematic and the cultural], we would receive the desirable answers regarding any relationships or common elements between the Byzantine and the Ottoman musical traditions, by considering the degree to which the said two musical traditions overlap...

Such an endeavor, that should naturally illuminate the negotiation of identity in the multi-ethnic artistic world of the Ottoman capital, is, in my opinion, worthwhile to undertake.