

Greek chanting

Thoughts – Recommendations

Byzantine music is the music that the Greek Church uses in all of its sacraments. Every word of these sacraments is accompanied by this special music. Typically, there is no word during the most important sacraments that is spoken instead of be sung. Byzantine music took its name from the Byzantine Empire, where it was first created. This music has its own way of singing which is called “Chanting”. Byzantine music has its own music system, and it is clearly a type of music that uses the human voice as its unique and special instrument. The people that sing inside the churches are called Chanters, and they can only be men. This is a custom that Byzantine music and the Greek Church have followed until now. There are two chanters in the Church, the “Right Chanter” and the “Left Chanter”, who traditionally are named “Right Chorus” and “Left Chorus”. During the age of the Byzantine Empire, in addition to these men, there were two literal chorus group sang the hymns during the Church’s sacraments. Today, there are few places where similar choruses still exist; these can only be found in big churches in big Greek cities. Instead of these, there are only two men, one at the left of the chancel screen (who is the right chanter), and one at the right (who is the left chanter). They are sometimes accompanied by a few other men who help them with singing, or they are alone and without help have to accomplish quite a difficult task. The way that these two chanters sing is called Antiphonal. Firstly, the one chanter sings a hymn, and then the other one responds with another one.

Byzantine music, both its style of singing and its use within the Church and the sacraments, is something that needs modernizing. It must be faced firstly as an art. As it is today, Byzantine music comes short in very important areas, such as theoretical, artistic and general music principles. In my opinion, one of the most serious problems is a lack of elocution among Greek chanters. This style of singing has been traditionally created, and has nothing to do with the basic rules and principles of singing. The problem of elocution is great. The Greek Church uses the Ancient Greek language in its sacraments. Today, most Greeks do not know how to speak or even understand this ancient language. This factor together with the lack of elocution makes the hymns’ lyrics totally unintelligible. On the other hand, there are those who advocate that this musical tradition should not be changed because it was created by famous chanters during the period of the Christian Byzantine Empire. However, it is well known that the Byzantine Empire’s chanters had no education in the basic principles of singing and elocution. In my opinion, though, when something is wrong it must be changed, regardless of tradition.

Putting aside the point of understanding the lyrics, there is still another very important reason why elocution must be studied by Greek chanters. This is the health of their voice. Most of the chanters, who don't have an elocution education, use their voices without concern about whether they can keep their voices healthy for their entire lives. As a result, their voices become coarse and completely incomprehensible. This gives no opportunity for someone to understand the hymns' lyrics and so the music becomes boring. Often the voices are out of tune because of the chanter's lack of basic music education.

I believe that if this musical style will ever have an opportunity to evolve, it will only happen if people study and use it without the religious influence. Instead of specialized professionals, each church chooses and engages their chanters. It is up to the priests that are in charge of the churches to decide who will get the job and how much his payment will be. In contrast to priests, who are public servants and are paid by the government, chanters are simple workers and usually they do not even have insurance or a respectable salary. However, if the whole matter is to be confronted clearly, even from the religious point of view, the same problem still exists. There are only a few believers that can listen to the hymns and understand the lyrics and their meanings. It is very difficult to get the meaning of a religious mystery without understanding what you hear.

Another serious problem with the sound of the chanter's voices is that there is an unwritten rule in Greek chanting which says the pupil should mimic his teacher. It is true that studying Byzantine music at a school of music alone is not enough in order to learn to sing this type of music satisfactorily. The real studying of this music takes place inside the church during the sacraments. This unwritten rule requires the pupil to watch and hear his teacher's behavior at the place where they sit called "Analogio", which means psaltery or music stand. The pupil is supposed to do this for a long period of time, even for many years, without having an opportunity to sing what he has learned at the music school. However, there are several negative consequences of this. The pupil studies music at the music school, but when he is at the only place where he can practice this music, he is bound to sit and hear his master. After this period of time, the pupil might find another church where he can work as a chanter alone. He then imitates his teacher, and so he has no chance to create a personal singing style. Usually, of course, one voice cannot imitate another one. So, the result is simply voice distortion which creates a very bad sound.

Another area that needs improvement is how a Byzantine choir works, in comparison to a classical choir. Despite the fact that both have to do with human voices, in comparing the two choir types, many tremendous differences can be found. Beyond the fact that the first is a polyphonic choir and the

other a monophonic, there are two big major areas that prove where artistic quality can be found. Firstly, any classical choir has a professional director whose every movement is specific, based on a scientific musical approach. He had studied the discipline of choir direction before he assumed any responsibility. On the other hand, a professional director can hardly be found with a Byzantine Choir. Byzantine music studies at private music schools or at the two academic departments of Greek universities do not include studies in choir direction. There cannot exist a clear voice-music without including education in the direction of a choir. The result is an unclear mix of voices, where the monophonic melody cannot be recognized. This situation is caused by both of the factors mentioned above: everyone has his own personal way of singing, and the director does not know how to create a well organized group of voices.

In conclusion, I believe that radical changes are needed in order to create a standard musical system of Byzantine music. Everyone who has a role in this situation must face these problems outside the spiritual and religious viewpoint. They should consider confronting this musical style firstly as an art, because it has many things to offer music education internationally. It would be wiser if everyone sees a chanter firstly as a singer, because a singer he is. I strongly believe that there are ways for Byzantine music to evolve, if it is left to scientists and professionals and not those uneducated in music to decide about these and other problems, and create a base on which a whole correct musical system could be built.

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