

# Byzantine church music as a field for ethnological and anthropological research

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**Abstract.** In the focus of this paper lies Byzantine church music as a field for ethnological and anthropological research. In this respect, music is observed as a cultural practice which has an impact on interpersonal communication. [1] The aim of it is to point to all the possible ways in which knowledge and scientific approach from the fields of ethnology and anthropology can be applied to Byzantine church music. When studying this kind of music, it is necessary to perceive a wider social context and a complex network of different factors which affected and are still affecting its creation and development. Research can be conducted on several levels, depending on the what is placed in the centre of the research - the creators of music, music as an audible-meaningful message or its listeners- the receivers of the message. It is necessary to apply a comparative method – in terms of different social and cultural settings – in order to perceive the role of Byzantine church music in the intercultural dialogue.

**Περίληψη.** Στο επίκεντρο αυτής της εισήγησης βρίσκεται η Βυζαντινή Μουσική, ως πεδίο εθνολογικής και ανθρωπολογικής έρευνας. Από αυτή την άποψη, η μουσική ερευνάται ως πολιτισμική πρακτική, η οποία έχει επίδραση στην διαπροσωπική επικοινωνία. Ο στόχος είναι να αναδειχθούν όλοι οι πιθανοί τρόποι με τους οποίους η γνώση και η επιστημονική προσέγγιση των πεδίων της εθνολογίας και ανθρωπολογίας μπορούν να εφαρμοσθούν στην Βυζαντινή εκκλησιαστική μουσική. Μελετώντας το συγκεκριμένο είδος μουσικής, είναι απαραίτητο να αντιληφθούμε ένα ευρύτερο κοινωνικό φάσμα, και ένα πολυσύνθετο δίκτυο διαφορετικών παραγόντων, οι οποίοι επηρέασαν και εξακολουθούν να επηρεάζουν την δημιουργία και την ανάπτυξή της. Η έρευνα μπορεί να διεξαχθεί σε πολλά επίπεδα, ανάλογα με το αντικείμενο που βρίσκεται στο επίκεντρο της έρευνας: οι δημιουργοί της μουσικής, η μουσική ως ακουστικό μήνυμα με ιδιαίτερο νόημα, ή οι ακροατές της ως παραλήπτες αυτού του μηνύματος. Είναι απαραίτητη η εφαρμογή κάποιας συγκριτικής μεθόδου – διαφορετικών κοινωνικών και πολιτισμικών δεδομένων– με σκοπό να γίνει αντιληπτός ο ρόλος της Βυζαντινής Εκκλησιαστικής μουσικής στον διαπολιτισμικό διάλογο.

## 1. DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT STUDIED

Music in general, thus the Byzantine church music, is an organized system, designed by the man who was driven by certain goals, needs, knowledge, feeling. [2] Like other forms of religious art, music represents a field where current problems and social processes are represented in different ways and according to the historical era. Music is socio-cultural category that can be seen as a form of communication. It cannot be treated only as a sound, separated from the social, cultural, economical context where it was created and listened to. [3] Culture and art, and in this respect the Byzantine church music, I view not as a static unchanging object, but as a process undergoing transformation diachronically.

In this paper I treat the Byzantine music as a field for ethnological and anthropological research, pointing to possible methodological approaches and interpretations. So far, this music was mainly the object of study by performers-chanters, musicologists, music historians, etc., from Greece and abroad.

In order to do better study it is necessary to define the object of a study. The question is what do we mean by the term Byzantine music today and whether this term and its contents changed diachronically. At the time when Byzantine music was emerging, term Byzantium and *Byzantine* did not exist. This music was created and developed in the Eastern Roman Empire and its creators and listeners did not know that they were making Byzantine music. Besides, with the spreading of Christianity in the early ages, this

music spread beyond the borders of the Empire. It found fertile ground in the neighboring countries, such as medieval Serbia, which is confirmed by compositions of Kir Stefan the Serb, Isaiah the Serb, Nikola the Serb, etc. Music that emerged in the aftermath of the Constantinople fall within Ottoman Empire was named post-Byzantine. The most important composers who did not know they belonged to post-Byzantine period created music at that time. Byzantine church music can be viewed as a kind of genre within the Orthodox church music. In addition, Byzantine music represents excellent *food for thought*, which we will discuss later.

## 2. METHODOLOGY OF THE ETHNOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology is the most general science about human race in diachronic perspective. It studies the ways people live, experience and interpret their practice and its effects. Large number of different scientific approaches, schools and theories evolved within a framework of ethnology and anthropology in diachronic perspective. In this sense, one possible ethnological and anthropological approach to Byzantine music is the interpretation of its meaning on different levels (social, cultural, symbolical, etc.). Byzantine music can be analyzed on many levels, such as: studying of authors, listeners, notation symbols, place of creation, etc.

Methodology of the scientific approach in ethnology and socio-cultural anthropology includes: planning research, field research itself, archival work, media analysis and repeated or control studies. The first phase of the study implies identification of the topic and formulation of the problem and the subject of investigation. Field research involves material collection. Methodological procedures in ethnology and anthropology include observation with participation, biographical method and structured interview and also free conversation. After completion of the research, analysis and contextualization of collected material follow. [4] Researcher is expected to choose an appropriate approach for the analysis (whether it is functional analysis, theory of structural or cognitive anthropology, semiotics, etc.)

So far, Byzantine church music was rarely seen as a ground for ethnological and anthropological research in Serbia. As a performer, I had an opportunity to observe the situation from the *inside*.

## 3. SOME PATHWAYS IN ETHNOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH OF BYZANTINE MUSIC

Nature of Byzantine music is two-sided: on one hand it is written, on the other it is based on oral tradition, so it is certainly interesting topic for anthropological research. Oral tradition had a crucial share in the development of Byzantine music. Chanting experience gained in oral tradition and strong teacher-student bond were necessary for reading shorthand neume systems. [5]

Anthropological approach in studying of Byzantine music assumes focusing on the question of its meaning in different socio-cultural frameworks in diachronic perspective. In this regard, very useful is theoretical school of cognitive anthropology which examines how people understand the world around them, based on their cultural system. People in different cultures can understand the same phenomenon differently, depending on their cultural system. Cognitive anthropology reveals classification system that is unique to each individual culture. People in different cultures perceive and classify sensory perceptions (colors, sounds) in a different way. [6] Experience of the intervals as pleasant and unpleasant, i.e. tentatively speaking regular and irregular can also be culturally caused.

Musical notation - semiography of Byzantine music can be viewed in semiotic key. In cultural semiotics, the school from Tartu and its representatives – Yuri Lotman, Boris Uspensky, Alexander Piatigorsky, stand out in particular. These authors often worked on topics from history, Orthodox esthetics, especially canons and canonicity, icons etc. [7] Culture in the theoretical model of Tartu school is defined as a sign system, organized in a certain way, i.e. as semiotic mechanism of production, circulation, processing and storing information – a set of secondary modulatory systems. Lotman defined modulatory system as a language. Natural language is the primary modulatory system connected to the reality. It should provide an opportunity for communication. Secondary modulatory system is the second level language, superstructure that uses natural language as its material. It

belongs to the description system and it is associated with the art and culture languages: mythology, religion, behavior patterns, etc. Through modulatory systems we learn about the world and explain it. These are sign systems or sets of rules (codes, guidelines, programs) that are used to produce texts in a broad, semiotic sense. [8] It is necessary to take into account the knowledge of the structural anthropology, which assumes that cultural patterns are based on the human mind. The aim of the structuralism is to reveal the internal principles within human mind for every cultural feature and custom. Structuralism attempts to devise a systematic method to discover hidden structures of the culture. [9]

Byzantine church music can be viewed in function of various identity practices: religious, gender, music, national. Relationship between national and religious identity is especially important for the research. There is an interesting cultural phenomenon: many Greek chanters and even musicologists consider Byzantine church music exclusively Greek, canceling its ecumenical nature of the Orthodox music that should be above the nation. On the other hand, in some other local churches part of the clergy sees it as something *Greek*, which means foreign, and for that reason less desirable. I studied this phenomenon on the territory of Belgrade-Karlovac Metropolitanate and the paper was published under the title *About reception of church Byzantine music in Belgrade in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century (or how Stevan Mokranjac became older and more Serbian composer than Stefan the Serbian)*. [10]

It is necessary to investigate a relationship between the sexual (gender) identity and this kind of music. In fact, there is a large difference in active participation in the church services between male and female chanters in local practices in Greece. This difference is even greater when we compare situation in Greece with that in the other local Orthodox churches, for example in Serbia. I dedicated a study to this topic: *Byzantine chanting and gender identity. Comparative study of contemporary circumstances in Serbia and Greece: Female voice between godlike iconomy and human economy*. [11]

It is important to point out the relationship between the music and the **place** as a kind of a cultural process. Meanings that shape the identities of both music and place develop from here. [12] In this case there are so-called Constantinople school of chanting, Thessaloniki, Mt. Athos, Volos, etc. These are the schools, actually singing styles that are labeled by certain locality. Places represent materialization and kind of a symbol of social relationships. [13] Local authenticity of the music comes from the interaction with local audience as well as the environment. [14]

Regarding the locality it is interesting to investigate the impact of migration on development and spreading of Byzantine music in a diachronic perspective. It is possible to observe not only periodic labor migration of individuals - music professors and chanting performers, but also the influence of migration of large groups and establishing of different musical genres in Diaspora. Byzantine music in Diaspora is a great topic for a separate study especially in overseas countries, such as the USA, Canada, Australia and so on. It is interesting to see how new environment influenced style and expression of chanting.

It is necessary to apply a comparative method – in terms of different social and cultural settings – in order to perceive the role of Byzantine church music in the intercultural dialogue. It is necessary to investigate function and meaning of Byzantine church music in practices of different local Orthodox churches.

One possible avenue of the research is to analyze the **narratives** about the Byzantine music by its participants and listeners, lovers and those who do not favor it. Byzantine music can be a symbol and an inspiration for musical creativity in different genres. I dedicated two papers to this phenomenon: *Byzantium as a Symbol and Inspiration for the Contemporary Musical Creativity in Serbia at the end of the second and the beginning of the third millennium* [15] and *Byzantine music as a driving force of music creativity in Belgrade today*. [16] This research in Serbia showed that during the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century Byzantine music has been an inspiration for a wide range of Serbian musical creators of various genres. For these authors Byzantine music is Pan-Orthodox, supranational, so they perceive themselves as a part of the Byzantine cultural circle. Each of these authors has his or her *personal Byzantium*. Esthetical reasons and thirst for life motivate this search for Byzantium.

**Visual material** (from the church services, concerts, rehearsals, etc.) obtained during field research can also be used in the study. In addition, it is possible to use material independent of the study, but it is necessary to check its validity.

One possible field of research is the study of a **change** in musical creativity, recording compositions, performing, etc. Whether or not it exists and to what extent? If not, why? It is possible that the change exists, but its participants want to believe the opposite – what are the reasons for such a situation?

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to point out some of the pathways in Byzantine music research from ethnological and anthropological perspective. When studying this kind of music, it is necessary to perceive a wider social context and a complex network of different factors which affected and are still affecting its creation and development. Research can be conducted on several levels, depending on the what is placed in the centre of the research - the creators of music, music as an audible-meaningful message or its listeners-the receivers of the message. From the foregoing it can be concluded that it is very important to analyze the Byzantine music from many aspects – musicological, ethnological, anthropological, sociological, geographical, etc., to understand better the culture in which we live and act. It is necessary to apply a comparative method – in terms of different social and cultural settings – in order to perceive the role of Byzantine church music in the intercultural dialogue.

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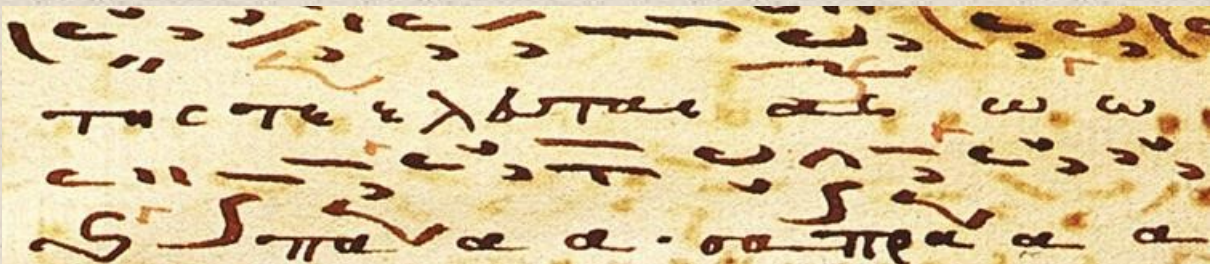
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