

Christian Troelsgård

**BYZANTINE NEUMES,  
A NEW INTRODUCTION TO THE MIDDLE  
BYZANTINE MUSICAL NOTATION**

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Attempts to reconstruct old musical practices are a special challenge for musicologists. The absence of primary sources – notated manuscripts – could make it seem an arduous, if not pointless, effort. However, experts in musical palaeography themselves would agree that even when old notations exist, they often remain silent testaments hiding utterly unfathomable secrets for ages. On account of this, researchers' endeavours seem truly greater and more responsible, motivated by the desire to revive and set free “visible” and “edified”.

At the time of the foundation of Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae in 1931, Carsten Høeg, Henry Julius Wetenhall Tillyard and Egon Wellesz, as well as their associates and later disciples, came across numerous unsolved issues concerning the development of the Byzantine musical tradition. Bearing in mind how broad the range of work to be done, they began, as is well-known, a new publication, the *Seria Principale*, in which facsimiles of the most relevant Byzantine, Greek and Slavic manuscripts were printed. There was also the *Seria Subsidia*, which comprised scientific papers on Byzantine and Old Slavonic chant and poetry as well as treatises on the mutual influences of the

two. In the *Seria Transcripta*, nine volumes including the *Stichera*, *Oktoechos*, *Heirmologia* and *Akathistos* hymns according to the then-established rules of the transcription of the Middle Byzantine “Round” notation, the oldest notation which could be transcribed with a degree of precision, were published by 1960.<sup>1</sup>

In Wellesz’s words, the main topic around which the founders of *Monumenta* gathered in 1931 was the transcription of neumes. Four years later, researchers of Byzantine liturgical music and its admirers received the first compendium for the study of the Byzantine neumes. It was Tillyard’s *Handbook of the Middle Byzantine Musical Notation*, the first in the *Subsidia* series, reprinted in 1970. This “extraordinarily practical introduction to Byzantine music”, as Oliver Strunk, the then director of MMB, wrote in his Postscript to the reissue, without which one could not commence a study in the field of Byzantine music, had to be reconsidered at some point in the light of later findings.

The editorial Board of MMB decided to change Tillyard method for a new one, the author of which was meant to be Jørgen Raasted. Raasted’s untimely death in 1995 thwarted his plan to prepare a publication which should have included not only the description of transcription rules but also a comprehensive and thoroughly grounded introduction to the wider field of Byzantine chanting tradition.

This project has been brought to fruition in the latest *Monumenta* edition thanks to Christian Troelsgård, Raasted’s successor and one of the most eminent scientists in the field of Byzantine musicology today. The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters and Museum Tusulanum Press has published his book *Byzantine neumes, A new introduction to the middle byzantine musical notation* as the ninth volume in *Subsidia* series.

As the author writes in the *Preface* to his book, his primary intention was to prepare a volume similar to Tillyard’s companion, which would serve as an introduction and help in understanding the MMB facsimile volumes of manuscripts with Middle Byzantine notation. Moreover, Troelsgård does not hide that the choice of topics covered in his book is similar to Tillyard’s. But

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<sup>1</sup> A series of volumes containing biblical readings was issued under the general term *Lectionaria*.

what makes his methodological perception unique is, in his own words, his striving to shift the way of understanding Byzantine chant pieces as “works of art in a closed score” towards seeing these pieces as “witnesses to an organic musical culture”. This approach defines the structure and order of chapters in *A new introduction to the Middle Byzantine musical notation*.

Bearing in mind the reader who is not totally unfamiliar with the history of Byzantine chanting art, in the introductory notes the author reminds us why the Middle Byzantine notation is in the focus of his interests. He does not hesitate to acknowledge, at the very beginning, that there are still many points of this notation concerning which modern science does not have definitive answers. Being aware of the fact that liturgical music was a part of living tradition, and that each community could develop some musical characteristics to a certain extent, especially regarding the rhythmic aspect of the melodies and their intervallic structure, Troelsgård limits his theoretical conclusions in advance. His circumspection can be justified by the fact that there are no precise instructions regarding the rhythm and intervallic structure of the melodies in the existing Byzantine theoretical treatises. A concise and comprehensive review is offered of the usage of chant books and therefore of the medieval idea of musical literacy, of various types of collections (Anthologia, Sticherarion, Heirmologia) and their chanting pieces, of existing didactic material found in the chant volumes and finally of relevant performing practices in which the so-called “non-written” or “gestic” notation (cheiromonomy and kanonarchema practice facilitating choral chanting without notation) had its special role.

In the ensuing chapters, Troelsgård’s perception is focused on specific topics. He begins, as expected, with basic remarks about chanted texts: the relation of words and music, recalling the main phases in the evolution of the Greek language, the ways of melodic accentuation (in *Accents and music*), the relation of syntax and melodic formulas (*Syntax and music*) and basic musical principles in the production of new texts to suit the existing melodies (Automelon – Prosomoion), the technique of writing chanted texts in syllables rather than in full words. From the very first chapter, the author provides all phenomena with an adequate choice of notated primers both in the original (stating the source from the MMB facsimile) and in modern staff transcription.

In *Preliminary remarks on the Byzantine notations* Troelsgård manages, in a few pages, to draw particular attention of potential researchers to historical problems in the development of Byzantine musical art. Here he deals with the oral transmission of chanting practice (before neumatic notation), the formation of the eight-mode system (the Oktoechos), similarities and differences between Byzantine and the Western notations and, of particular importance, reconstruction of the early notations from which first adiastrumatic and, later, diastematic notation systems arose. The division of scales into three different *genera*, diatonic, chromatic and so-called enharmonic, is, in the author's opinion, one of the results of the reform that took place at the beginning of the 19th century, but he also emphasises that it is still a matter of dispute among the scholars "how far back in time this Neo-Byzantine system of modes, scales and intervals can claim its validity". Troelsgård unpretentiously suggests that the scale system of the Byzantine and Neo-Byzantine church chant must have interacted with Arabo-Persian and the Ottoman music cultures over centuries, and in a wider sense, with Mediterranean and Western chant. It would therefore be unreasonable to expect that the chant tradition remained unchanged over a period of 650 years, during which the Round notation was in use. It is certain, the author claims, that the Three Teachers from Constantinople attempted, in addition, to reaffirm the traditional chanting practice with this reform, and not to introduce a new one. Offering an impartial assessment of the work of Chrysanthos, Gregorios and Chourmouziotis in the given historical circumstances, Troelsgård justifiably leaves the question as to what extent the church melodies of the 18th and 19th century preserved the characteristics of the medieval liturgical music open for future research.

The third chapter – *The varieties of Byzantine musical notations*, offers elementary information about different neumatic notations which either existed at the same time or succeeded one another: the oldest ekphonic, Theta, Coislin and Chartres notations, then, Middle-Byzantine or Round notation,

and finally, the New Method or Chrysanthine notation.<sup>2</sup> A short account of transcription methods, starting from the MMB transcription system, and covering those of Petrescu, van Biezen, Raasted, States and Troelsgård, is given in the fourth chapter under the title *Transcription of the Middle Byzantine notation*. It is worth mentioning that the author espouses the view, supported by most contemporary Byzantine musicologists today, that the rhythm and the structure of the scales as they are given in the round semiography can only be deciphered approximately. The reason rests on the fact that “‘relative’ or ‘digital’ character of the Middle Byzantine notation” was well suited for training and performance, “indicating to the reader/singer both the upwards and downwards movements of the melody and special dynamic and rhythmic qualities. Seen from this point of view, the Byzantine notation invites a primarily linear or ‘dynamic’ perception of the melody” (cf. 40).

The middle chapters deal with a detailed description of the signs of the Middle Byzantine notation and also offer comprehensive insight into the modes, melody and intervals. In more than thirty subchapters accompanied with numerous examples and tables, the author categorises neume signs, the so-called bodies and spirits, their dynamic quality and phrasing, explaining additional interval signs and rules for their combination that were exemplified through specific tables which could be found in almost every Papadike. There is also a description of confirmatory and subsidiary signs and their stock and frequency; also discussed, naturally, are the rhythmic signs and their conspectus as well as the conspectus of phrasing signs and group signs which are described by their own name and shape, typical application and suitable comments of the author based on his insight into the manuscript material. Most of these signs are explained through their specific place and meaning in different melodic chant types, that is, chant books.

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<sup>2</sup> It is significant that Troelsgård sticks to the adopted term of Chrysanthine notation, though it is well-known that other two great *daskaloi* of Constantinople, Gregorios and Chourmouzos, also took part in the creation of Chrysanthine’s Great Theoreticon of Music, and that they actually ensured legitimacy of the reform at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century through their numerous transcription of old chanted pieces. Furthermore, Troelsgård gives no comment on the term “analytic notation”, frequently mentioned in Greek reference books, which implied the stenographic character of neumes until the first steps towards the reform were taken by some Constantinople musicians during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The explanation of specific palaeographic features of neumes which might resemble each other in shape is exceptionally valuable, as are the instructions for codicological analysis of undated manuscripts for which there are no data about the place of origin and whose scribes are anonymous. With the aim of comparing these with dated manuscripts whose creator-scribes are identified, as well as their provenance, in the Appendix the author gives 22 specimens, dating from the period between 1453 and 1820.

The validity of transcription certainly does not imply the exact deciphering of the meaning of neumatic signs, but rather an adequate understanding of the essence of the eight mode system. Taking into account the structure of modes in the Neo-Byzantine chanting tradition, which Troelsgård regards as absolutely valid, he approaches the subject of its mode structure and description of modality in an impartial and precise style with the help of elements used in medieval manuscripts for its presentation: intonation formulas (echemata) and expanded intonations, as well as apechemata (“sounding-off”, “tails”), modal, main and medial signatures, their positions which suggest transposition and modulation, multiple medial signature (MeSi), modulation signs – enarxis and phtorai – and last but not least, the burning issue of chromaticism in Byzantine melodies. Troelsgård treats this important subject, which contributes significantly to the quality of the transcription of old manuscripts, in the only possible manner. His solutions are not sensational and he has certainly opted for none of the conflicting options, one of which exclusively implies diatonic interpretation of medieval Byzantine chant, the other allowing for the existence of chromaticism in Byzantine melodies. The author of *A new introduction to the Middle Byzantine musical notation* looks critically back at the standpoints of representatives of the old MMB school. One would say that he denies, though discreetly, the long established and unconfirmed conviction concerning the decisive influence of Ottoman music on Orthodox liturgical music in the Post-Byzantine era. However, the facts that in earlier musical theory there are neither explicit indications of diatonicism nor of chromaticism, that the concept of “scale” is kept in the background and that ecclesiastical chant treatises speak of melody – melos – constituting the idea of echos (mode), have directed Troelsgård towards the conclusion that there

are three possible and legitimate explications of chromaticism represented by the phthora of the nenano which should not be understood as “profound differences in the interpretation of Byzantine chant corresponding to the opinionated convictions of a strict diatonicism or chromaticism”. Troelsgård’s compromise solution is the acceptance of chromatic passages against the background of a basic diatonic system.

The changes which introduced melodic/tonal adjustments and chromatic passages must be seen in correlation with other additions to the sign repertory of the Middle Byzantine notation around the year 1300. As a result, it is necessary to suppose that such phenomena were not innovations but rather reflections of some older chant traditions, because of which it is almost impossible to tell with certainty “to what extent practices of tonal alteration and/or chromaticism were at home in the chant tradition right from the beginnings of Byzantine musical notation”.

The uniqueness of Troelsgård’s scientific approach is reflected in the fact that he places each parameter of notation in relation to existing chant pieces, that is, hymnographical and musical genres, which are the subject of the last chapter *The Byzantine chant styles*. Here he again provides an abundance of examples illustrating the chanting of simple psalmody, automelon/prosomion singing, characteristics of chanted pieces found in Heirmologion, Sticherarion, Psaltikon and Asmatikon, and in a separate section he deals with kalophonic styles.

Along with the above-mentioned Appendix containing specimens of dated manuscripts and their provenances (Plates 1–22), the author also provides a comprehensive bibliography, enlarged with a list of publications issued between 2000 and 2007. Indeed, he essentially completed the writing of this book in 2000, as he writes in the Preface, so this supplement of updated references is meant to bridge whatever gaps exist in the bibliography he refers to in the otherwise thorough footnotes. This ninth volume of the Subsidia series offers also a detailed index of proper names, of manuscripts and of neumes and principal subjects, as well as Descriptive Catalogue of Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae editions. Succinct and very solid, clear and concise, Troelsgård’s scientific style has also a touch of pragmatism which is definitely a result of

his long and successful work with students, especially evident in the choice of notation primers, their precise marking, but also in a well-conceived quick reference card which on four pages gives all the necessary elements for the interpretation of Middle Byzantine semiography.

Thanks to the MMB Editorial Board, primarily to the chairman John Bergsagel, who wrote the Foreword, to the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters and Museum Tusculanum Press, and with essential support of various foundations (Aksel Tovborg Jensens Legat, The Carlsberg Foundation, Lilian of Dan Finks Fond and Union Académique Internationale), but above all, thanks to Christian Troelsgård, musicology has been given a long-awaited book which will certainly long remain the leading light in the intricate labyrinths of Byzantine melodies.

*Vesna Peno*