

The Eastern Orthodox Chant and Its Epistemological Approach: Possibilities and Limits

Jordan Krassimirov Banev*

j.banev@gmail.com

We often say that chanting in Eastern Orthodox Christianity is on the one hand an oral tradition which can often be quite flexible and, on the other, a well-defined and rigidly-practised art. What “art” presupposes, in other words, is a clear method, or methodology and it is on this presupposition as the main factor in the epistemological approach to ecclesiastical chant that I wish to focus today. It is a well-known fact that the academic training in music, however advanced, is never sufficient to give one access to the knowledge of how to sing an ecclesiastical tone or echos. What is required of the chanter-to-be is to have “listened” well to an authoritative teacher, to have had a personal ear-experience under close supervision. Chanting, just like any other modal music, is characterized by the fact that notes do not have an independent being and the height of each note is related to the previous one or to the given tune, respectively tuning. In modal music the main criterion for approving the genuineness of what we are listening to and what we must have as music is the tradition, the ear-experience. Here the positions of musicus and cantor are completely reversed. The common assertion that we can have an exact and sufficiently objective presentation of a folk song or an ecclesiastical tone does not correspond to the mentioned criterion of “genuineness”. Musical science as a semiotic experiment seeks for written criterion, striving to put down “on the sheet” the oral phenomenon as always the same and always accessible. Notation fixes down the transient nature of the unique oral performance of a song recording it as something unchangeable. The result is that the natural way of existence of the song as a changing phenomenon is forever altered. The basic methodological dilemma which stands before all musical theorists is thus how to balance the relationships between the rational and the traditional, or between the objective musical system and the practice of “this is the way my teacher was singing the song”. In my view, the resolution to this question is methodologically possible if we initially keep three points in mind: 1) what is the phenomenon we hear; 2) how should we be reflecting upon it and 3) how should we understand it pedagogically.

-
- *Born in Sofia, Bulgaria (1974), where I still live with my wife and our two children. Secondary education, National Lyceum for Ancient Languages and Cultures. BA degree, National Academy of Music, Sofia. Baccalaureate thesis on Augustine's views on art, philosophy and theology. Meanwhile I began learning ecclesiastical neumatic singing. Thanks to protopsaltis Michael Meletis and to the benevolence of metropolitan of Demetrias, Ignatius, studying both, the Greek way of singing and the Greek language in Volos. PhD on "The musical thinking of antiquity and the patristic age", 2010. Since then, in the Academy, assistant-professor, lecturer and associated professor. From September 2004 until today, main chanter in the church of "Transfiguration of our Lord" in Sofia. last ten years: 1) in Ottoman Classic music at Yildiz Technical University, Istanbul (2005-2006), and 2) in the general topic Philosophy and Music pedagogy, visiting researcher at Balliol College, Oxford University (2012-2013). My publications are in Bulgarian and focus on musical aesthetics and music philosophy. My latest research is on the question of music as a way of self understanding.*