

(Public) Feminine Side of Orthodox Sacred Music in Serbia

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Abstract: Contemporary music production in Serbia, mostly the choral practice and performance, has been greatly influenced by the rising interest in the Orthodox religion and spirituality during the last two decades. The church choirs have become more engaged, with many of them entering the concert stage, while the new ensembles with the repertoire mainly or exclusively orientated to the church or sacred music are being founded. Majority of them are led by women. In this study the ways in which church and sacred music is being cherished and popularized in Serbia today is explored through the analysis of female choral conductors' personal views on spirituality and Orthodox church/sacred music, their repertoire politics, (mass) media visibility of their work, as well as the social and cultural tendencies reflecting on various aspects of contemporary sacred music choral practice and performance. Along these lines, special attention is given to the renowned festivals of sacred music such as *Horovi među freskama* (Choirs among frescoes). Using the interdisciplinary approach incorporating the elements of various disciplines such as sociology, cultural and religious studies and musicology, this study will show the aspects in which the work of female choral conductors gives insight both to the role of women and interest in church/sacred music in the contemporary Serbian music and society.

Παράληψη. Η σύγχρονη μουσική παραγωγή στη Σερβία, ιδίως η χορωδιακή πρακτική και ερμηνεία, έχουν επηρεαστεί σε μεγάλο βαθμό από το αυξανόμενο ενδιαφέρον για την Ορθόδοξη θρησκεία και την πνευματικότητα κατά τη διάρκεια των τελευταίων δύο δεκαετιών. Οι εκκλησιαστικές χορωδίες έχουν γίνει πιο ενεργές, με πολλές από αυτές να μπαίνουν στο συναυλιακό χώρο, ενώ έχουν ιδρυθεί νέα σύνολα με ρεπερτόριο κυρίως ή αποκλειστικά εκκλησιαστικής ή θρησκευτικής μουσικής. Οι περισσότερες τέτοιες χορωδίες διευθύνονται από γυναίκες. Σε αυτή τη μελέτη θα διερευνηθούν οι τρόποι με τους οποίους η εκκλησιαστική και η θρησκευτική μουσική προσλαμβάνεται και διαδίδεται στη σημερινή Σερβία, μέσα από την ανάλυση των προσωπικών απόψεων των (γυναικών) διευθυντριών χορωδιών σχετικά με την πνευματικότητα και την ορθόδοξη εκκλησιαστική και θρησκευτική μουσική, τις πολιτικές τους σχετικά με το ρεπερτόριο, την ορατότητα του έργου τους στα μέσα μαζικής ενημέρωσης, καθώς και τις κοινωνικές και πολιτισμικές τάσεις που αντικατοπτρίζονται σε διάφορες πτυχές της σύγχρονης χορωδιακής πρακτικής και ερμηνείας της θρησκευτικής μουσικής. Παράλληλα με αυτά, θα δοθεί ιδιαίτερη προσοχή στα αναγνωρισμένα φεστιβάλ θρησκευτικής μουσικής, όπως το "Horovi među freskama" (Χορωδίες μεταξύ τοιχογραφιών). Χρησιμοποιώντας την διεπιστημονική προσέγγιση που ενσωματώνει στοιχεία από διάφορους επιστημονικούς κλάδους όπως η κοινωνιολογία, οι πολιτιστικές και θρησκευτικές σπουδές και η μουσικολογία, η μελέτη αυτή θα δείξει τις πτυχές στις οποίες η εργασία των διευθυντριών χορωδιών δίνει στοιχεία τόσο για το ρόλο των γυναικών όσο και για το ενδιαφέρον για την εκκλησιαστική και τη θρησκευτική μουσική στη σύγχρονη Σερβική κοινωνία.

1. INTRODUCTION

Interest in religion has evidently been increasing in Serbia in the last two decades. On one hand, this phenomenon is in line with the global trend of the rebirth of religion in the modern world, namely de-secularisation of the world, as it is called by Peter L. Berger, characterised by "strong religious passion" and return to the traditional sources of religious authorities. [1] On the other hand, this phenomenon in Serbia is in a direct correlation with intense change in the political, economic and

social sphere. After decades of the post-war Communist regime, where the Serbian Orthodox Church was dejected to the margins of social life and its teaching treated as anachronistic and unacceptable, tolerated exclusively within family and the church, the 1990s were marked by an intense process of social revitalisation of Orthodoxy in Serbia, which is evident today as well. Reasons for turning to and returning to orthodoxy are numerous and complex. Some do it out of nationalist reasons, making no distinction between a religious and national identity. A correlation between Serbian nationality and Orthodoxy is virtually a "common place", often additionally promoted by the Serbian Orthodox Church. [2] For others, however, in line with the general tendency of de-secularisation in Europe and the world [3], the Orthodox religion becomes a form of defense against uncertainties and insecurities of modern life. Among the general population [4], people in Serbia have increasingly been declaring as Orthodox, thus actively confirming their religious identity (from marking religious holidays to regular visits to church and participation in its activities, such as singing in a church choir). The national policy, particularly since 2000, has additionally been stimulating the revival of the Orthodox religion in Serbia by introducing religious studies to schools, marking religious holidays at the national level, providing media coverage for their public celebration, often followed by presence and open support of the political elite, facilitating the construction of many Orthodox churches, frequently at attractive locations, etc.

2. CHOIRS AMONG FRESCOES FESTIVAL AS INDICATOR OF TENDENCIES IN ORTHODOX MUSIC PERFORMANCE

In the area of music, all these changes have been reflected, among other things, in a growing volume of church and sacred music pieces, more concerts where this music is performed, and establishment and more active engagement of many choirs, dominantly or exclusively performing church and sacred music. The above listed changes are also reflected in the establishment of the *Choirs among Frescoes* international choral festival, founded in 1995, "in the aim of reviving, preserving and enriching Serbian Orthodox sacred music and learning about sacred music of all other confessions within the world cultural heritage". [5] Notwithstanding the established inclination towards a "dialogue" with the music heritage of other confessions, the festival program is dominated by Orthodox music, primary Serbian and Russian, with few examples of Bulgarian and Greek Orthodox music literature. A close correlation with the Serbian Orthodox Church establishment is multiple and explicit. For instance, although the *Choirs among Frescoes* Festival was initially organised in concert halls of Belgrade (National Museum Atrium, Kolarac Foundation concert hall, Fresco Gallery), two years ago it was relocated to the churches across the capital (Church of Saint George the Evangelist, Cathedral of Saint Michael the Archangel, St. Sava's Church). Every year the Festival is ceremonially opened by His Holiness Serbian Patriarch Irinej, a member of the selection jury is always someone from high church officials (e.g. this year's jury president was His Grace Andrej Vicar Bishop of Remesiana), and one of the festival awards is granted for "authentic performance of sacred music".

The number of choirs participating at the festival, particularly church choirs from Serbia and abroad, has been growing from year to year. The festival also facilitates the modern production of sacred music by granting an award for "performing capital pieces of contemporary domestic authors". [6] A review of this year's festival agenda [7], as a representative illustration of the festival program, shows that a half of the participants are church choirs, children's and chamber vocal companies established within churches which, to a larger or smaller extent, change their usual repertoire and step out from their environment (church) to a concert stage. In addition, it is evident that out of 22 conductors performing at this year's festival, 17 are women. This gender disparity, as a reflection of the general situation regarding choral conductors in Serbia, is one of the initial issues which inspired the production of this paper.

3. GENDER IDENTITY IN ORTHODOXY AND SOME OF ITS ELEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY CHORAL PERFORMANCE

Basically, Orthodox Christianity recognises human equality between a man and a woman. However, due to biological differences it refers to, an entire system of differences is constructed, resulting in gender inequality in practice. As "weaker" compared to a man from a physical aspect, a woman is expected to be gentle, weak, more dependent on physiological functions, which is from the spiritual perspective related to the features of humbleness, modesty, sensitivity, obedience.[8] According to some modern interpretations, obedience refers to mutual Christian obedience among people, in a sense of putting higher interests in front of one's own and accepting the will of others.[9]

In addition, in the Orthodox patriarchal value system, the role of women is focused on the private area of activity, mainly regarding care for and support of marriage and family, unlike men, whose influence is dominant in the public sphere. Thus the model of a woman as a mother, carer, feeder, housewife is promoted, often with a negative subtext of other models of a modern woman, such as an intellectual, successful business woman, etc. Furthermore, women are mainly characterised by emotional reactions, compared to a sense-guided conduct of men. On the other hand, it means that they are closer to spiritual, as they "have a unique capacity to *respond to God* with all our hearts and souls... which is the essence of spirituality". [10] Religion, as a specific form of belief, may also be perceived as a special type of tradition, collective memory. [11] Women in our culture are still the main keepers of tradition and communicators of heritage, customs and beliefs. As a result, women close to church are the key pillars of spirituality and Orthodox religious customs today. Thus their role as mothers is underlined at the spiritual level as well, in regard to children's upbringing and teaching about Orthodox faith.[12]

Female conducts defy the above described categorisation of a woman as physically weaker and spiritually meek and obedient to a man, either in a physical sense of conducting a (choir) ensemble, or in a spiritual sense of leadership and charisma, necessary for presenting and sharing an artistic vision with the ensemble she conducts, in order to achieve consistent music performance with an adequate artistic value.

It is often implied in popular contemporary Orthodox theological literature that direct communication with God is a privilege of a man, while it is achievable for a woman exclusively via identification with her husband. This is also confirmed by the type of roles in religious rituals at home, for instance when celebrating the most significant family holiday, Slava, where a man reads prayers and incenses household members, while the role of a woman is servile, as she lights up a cresset. [13] Among other things, we will see below how female conductors perceive their role in the church and Orthodox rituals, and how the relations between a man and a woman in a household are transferred to the area of cooperation between a priest and a female conductor in the church.

4. FEMALE CHURCH CHORAL CONDUCTORS IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

Bearing in mind this specific and expected role of women within the Orthodox faith and church, and their absolute dominance in the area of conducting church and other choirs, my intent has been to survey how church, namely sacred music is performed and promoted today via activism of female conductors of church and other choirs. As performance is one of relevant indicators of music tendencies, as well as cultural and social circumstances, I have also intended to consider aspects in which their activity provides an insight into the dynamism of change of the position and role of women in Serbian contemporary music and society.

The paper is based on field research carried out through series of interviews and free talk with female conductors of various choirs, whose repertoire is focused on (Serbian) church and sacred music. All the respondents are long-term, active participants in the *Choirs among Frescoes* Festival. One of them (Svetlana Krstić) is also a member of the Selection Board. My interviewees are young women, in their early thirties to forties, which means that they have professionally advanced at the time of the above mentioned change of the attitude towards the church and spirituality. My intent has been to gain a more diverse insight into the experience of practicing choral church and sacred music, and therefore I have

talked to the female conductors who are highly active in conducting different types of choirs (church, mixed amateur, women's, children's, school choirs). Some of the surveyed church choirs are limited to the performance at their home church, while others have widely expanded the range of their activism (especially the *Choir of St. George* from Belgrade, with Biserka Vasić as the conductor, and the *Choir of St. Stephen of Decani* from Novi Sad, with Tamara Petijević as the conductor).

The topics discussed in interviews and talks with the conductors can be divided in four groups. The first refers to the motivation for the selection of church and sacred music as a focus of interest, motives behind choosing a specific type of choir, repertoire policy and specific challenges related to those choices. My particular intent has been to find out more about the experience related to performances of church choirs outside their home church (appearances at concerts, festivals, competitions, guest appearances abroad), as well as the media perception of their activity. Media coverage of their activities is a topic of the second set of questions.

The third set of questions has referred to the relations between the conductors and choir members, clergy, public, from the position of women in a leadership position in the dominantly patriarchal and tradition-based environment.

The fourth group has referred to how the interviewees see their role in the society, whether they perceive themselves as mediators of spirituality in their environment and how, whether they think that the music they perform with their choirs communicates something to those who would otherwise not listen to that kind of music as well, and whether they think that their professional activism has raised awareness/knowledge regarding spiritual music in the community/environment/society where they work.

... on Spirituality and Orthodox Church/Sacred Music and Repertoire Policy

Commenting on motives for choosing sacred music, most conductors have listed both personal reasons, primarily personal affinity towards that kind of music and a tendency to express religiousness in that manner, and professional ones. The latter include the perception that sacred music has on immanent qualities enabling simple and effective communication of the spiritual feelings to others and creating cohesion of a group (between singers and a conductor, as well as between a choir and audience). It is interesting to note an opinion that performing sacred music is an excellent technical tool in achieving a balanced sound among different colours of voices in a choir. Furthermore, conducting (church) choirs is the most available form of conducting activity here (unlikely extremely reduced opportunities for orchestra conducting) and although it was not the first choice for some but a result of circumstances and impossibility to conduct an orchestra, all the interviewees continued working in this area after starting conducting a choir, mostly church one.

The choirs of all the interviewees seem to present similar tendencies in regard to their repertoire policy. The core of their repertoire consists mainly of Serbian and Russian church and sacred music of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century (by the authors such as Mokranjac, Manojlović, Binički, Hristić, Topalović, namely Chesnokov, Archangelsky, Tchaikovsky, etc.). The conductors also adapt one-voice records of medieval church melodies and Serbian folk church singing, whose records were published mainly in the course of the 19th century, to choir performance. Striving to expand a repertoire and promote church music, female conducts often search note archives in order to "discover" forgotten pieces of Serbian church music and present them to the public in their own arrangement. A tendency of expanding a repertoire with contemporary (Serbian) church and sacred music is evident among choirs, as they are frequently willing to exceed the limits of church performance.

In that aspect, in the circumstances of a shortage of music publishing activity, efforts of these female music professionals to enrich and promote the repertoire of the modern (Serbian) church and sacred music are impressive. Some of them obtain pieces they think are particularly valuable or worth of performing through personal contact with contemporary composers, while some compose church and sacred music themselves (Maja Obradović is a composer by profession, with awards won for pieces in this music genre).

... on Public Visibility of Their Work

In regard to the establishment and activity of amateur choirs, one of the main reasons for motivation is a wish to perform choral music at concerts, festivals and competitions. For years, church choirs have increasingly been active in this area, and this has proved to be a very intriguing topic in interviews with the conductors. My interviewees mainly think that church choirs seamlessly transform spirituality into performance by their nature, and that amateur choirs specifically have to work in this area. On the other hand, amateur choirs are mainly characterised by higher professional quality, as expected, bearing in mind a frequently evident difference in motives of approach to these and church choirs. Some church choirs do not practice performing outside their home church, as they believe that their crucial role is in participating in church service. Their members most often do not feel comfortable in performing outside the church. On the other hand, choirs which perform at concerts outside their home church find great pleasure in it and huge motivation to advance further. It creates an opportunity to expand a repertoire, which is mainly well accepted, although mostly refraining to the area of sacred music. On those occasions, the choirs perform technically more complex pieces, those that cannot be included in church service, due to their unusual harmonies, treatment of lyrics and other music features or duration. One of the most active choirs in that respect is the *Choir of St. George* from Belgrade, as it has participated at festivals in Austria and Bulgaria, performed in Germany, Austria, Croatia, etc. The *Choir of Holy Stephen of Dečani* from Novi Sad is an even more extraordinary example – in addition to numerous concerts in Serbia, it has also had all-evening concerts across Europe, Russia and Israel, participated at festivals and competitions, appeared in the media, and has also been engaged in publishing music sheets and CDs.

Regardless of their public activity and attendance of sacred music choral concerts, they are rarely covered by the media. Dailies and periodicals most often report on activities of these choirs on special occasions, such as the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the *Saint Georg Choir* from Belgrade. [14] Concerts within the *Choirs among Frescoes* Festival are regularly advertised in dailies, but there are no related critical reviews. *Pravoslavlje*, a publication of the Serbian Patriarchy, reports continuously on the festival from year to year, covering concerts, news on its opening and closing, awards, etc., but there has not been a single article on work of any of the female conductors, for instance. [15] My interviewees say that this situation is typical not only for sacred music concerts and activities of choirs performing it, but that there is generally low interest in cultural events by Serbian media and lack of professional music review practice in them. On the other hand, performances of the choirs abroad, particularly in the countries with huge Serbian expat population, are most frequently well covered in local media. My interviewees explain this practice by nostalgia for the home country and wish to preserve the national and religious identity, on one hand, and higher awareness of audience regarding the social relevance of such events and value of music performed on such occasions, on the other.

As in the case of music sheet publishing, the information on activities of choirs and spiritual music in general largely depends on an initiative and engagement of conductors, who also act as managers of their respective choirs. Thus the promotion of choral spiritual music almost completely relies on performing activity, although there are cases of publishing this kind of music, while the huge relevance of the Internet and new media should also not be neglected.

... on Gender-Related Issues

Regarding gender, experiences and opinions are mainly uniform. Most interviewees say that they have earned the respect of their respective choirs, audience and the environment where they work owing to their authority and professional quality. They mostly do not perceive (female) gender as a specific factor in their work, even though they have mentioned "female conducting" as "softer" and emotionally (spiritually) richer. In only one situation, where there are both a male and a female conductor in a church, the latter is described by the choir members and the clergy as better to cooperate with in a sense of her willingness to make compromises, but also as the one who has to accept someone else's authority more easily.

However, experiences of the church choral conductors in their relations with the clergy and church authorities are more diverse. Many say that in order to conduct a church choir, it is necessary to

“accept obedience” and be clearly aware of the fact that the role of the choir is to participate in church services as they enrich them with their performance. In that respect, the authority of a priest is unquestionable, and the performance has to be in line with a service in its character, tempo dictated by a priest’s service, or with some special circumstances, namely a religious holiday or a type of service where the music is performed. Priests with a benevolent attitude towards choirs, those who perceive them as a tool to get closer to believers and strengthen the spirituality of a church service, also support their choirs in every respect – from technical conditions for rehearsals to support to performances outside the church. Some even actively participate in the choral’s activities. Different circumstances, stronger discordance with priests, non-acceptance of a subordinate role and the necessity to be obedient in cases of a discord in opinion have resulted in conductors leaving church or establishing their own vocal companies that will perform sacred music without the restrictions of someone else’s influence. These mainly refer to discords in regard to the idea of choir conducting and a character of performance within a church service, perceived by conductors as “interfering with their work”, to major conflicts regarding the role of women in church.

... on the Social Role and Significance of Female Conductors

All the interviewees without exception perceive themselves as important mediators and moderators in their environment and wider. According to them, this is primarily a result of the musical and spiritual features of the music they perform, as an excellent tool which directly and effectively communicates spiritual values to listeners. High quality of this kind of music, as well as the beauty of the choral sound, can largely intensify aesthetic features of church service, while outside the church they can make religion appealing and intensify the spirituality of those who are not close to it or do not incline towards it.

It is also important to note that the entire burden of promoting this kind of music is actually on female conductors – from selecting repertoire to be functional in the church context, appealing and challenging for members of a choir, to its expansion via huge personal engagement of conductors, to preparations, performance and media and public promotion of their choirs’ activities.

CONCLUSION

By surveying personal experiences and attitudes towards church/sacred music and spirituality in general, motivation for work and achievements, my objective has been to provide a “female” perspective of various aspects of performing sacred music in Serbia today. The presence of female conductors of church choirs and ensembles with a repertoire consisting mainly of sacred music in the media, their activism in the community and diverse experiences and perceptions of relations with the clergy in regard to church choirs, all reveal intriguing meanings of the role of women in the Orthodox church, choral performance and the contemporary social and cultural life of Serbia.

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