

The Melchite Liturgical Chant

Musical forms and structures: Oral and written tradition

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Abstract. The Melchite liturgical Chant is the byzantine liturgical chant of the Church of Antioch, used in most byzantine churches in both orthodox and catholic section. In This Study, we will see a review, beginning from the unity of the musical tradition in Antioch before 17 -18th century, passing by the schism in the Antiochian church in 1724, and later in the 20 century. Studying the characteristics and the differences between Antiochian Melchites orthodox and catholics, by analyzing the oral and the written tradition, we will take partitions of the manuscripts and vocal records to try to recognize the aspects of this tradition.

Περίληψη. Το λειτουργικό μέλος των Μελχιτών είναι το βυζαντινό μέλος της Εκκλησίας της Αντιόχειας, το οποίο χρησιμοποιείται και στα Ορθόδοξα και στα Καθολικά τμήματα. Σ' αυτήν τη μελέτη θα δούμε μία παρουσίαση του, ξεκινώντας από την ενότητα της μουσικής παράδοσης στην Αντιόχεια πριν το 17 - 18ο αι., προσπερνώντας το σχίσμα στην Εκκλησία της Αντιόχειας το 1724, και αργότερα στον 20ο αι. Μελετώντας τα χαρακτηριστικά και τις διαφορές ανάμεσα στους Ορθόδοξους και Καθολικούς Μελχίτες της Αντιόχειας, αναλύοντας την προφορική και τη γραπτή παράδοση, θα πάρουμε αποσπάσματα των χειρογράφων και των φωνητικών ηχογραφήσεων για να προσπαθήσουμε να κατανοήσουμε τις όψεις αυτής της παράδοσης.

1.UNITY OF THE ANTIOCHAN MUSICAL TRADITION

In general, chants of the Greek Melchite Catholic church were never separated from the chants of the Greek Orthodox Church, as per the forms and structures, as well as the written and oral tradition, including within the period following the Schism of the Church of Antioch. The Byzantine musical tradition has always been the standard before the Schism that occurred in the Patriarchate of Antioch in 1724, and has always represented such standard during the major part of the following period.

Pioneers of the Arabic Liturgy, the Greek Melchite Catholic composers have transmitted the musical byzantine heritage from Greek to Arabic, even though many of them were influenced by the « Constantinopolitan » style in the written and oral tradition. *Few characteristics may be stated of such style: sophisticated melodies, quite advanced rendering of the partition, and subsequently, dominance of solo chanters on the choir.*

Hence, Greek Melchite Catholic Musicians, must be classified into different categories according to their source of inspiration: the influence of oriental singing¹, the Greek style of Constantinople as well as other influences, such as the Greek Orthodox Antiochian chanters (especially those in Damascus) and, much later, polyphony. Thus, Greek Melchite Catholic chanting may not be separated, in its structure and basic musical forms, from the Orthodox chant, at least in the early stages of the life of the melkite church, until the early 20th century. The difference, whenever existing, does not lie within the liturgical text, which remains the same, but rather in a different musical expression.

¹ Such term shall refer to the music with fine scales and mostly pathetic style, highly valued at the Ottoman empire. It has remote syriac origin and had influenced the sufi brotherhoods, the popular music, and the secular musical production of this geographic area.

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2. INNOVATIONS OF THE GREEK MELCHITE CATHOLICS

Polyphony appeared in a very recent period (1920-1963), with Father Abel Couturier in 1930 and the works of Sakellaridis. Such type, rejected by the Greek Orthodox of Antioch, was disseminated by the Greek Melchite Catholic liturgy under the influence of the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) (MAWF) and the works of Sakellaridis, which has developed a very primitive two-voice chanting system. Sakellaridis adapted the traditional melodies to the Western musical system². The works of Father Abel Couturier (MAWF) appeared later, and, according to Archimandrite Anthony Hebby, Couturier was the first to introduce such system in our church.

Recent Melchite authors are usually based in their musical compositions in Arabic on "Byzantine" works of Sakellaridis, which were simplified and easier to perform in the choir. Such trend caused a decline in traditional compositions; hence of the performance of musical signs and the energy they transmitted by the oral and written tradition. Therefore, it is undeniable that the Melchites have introduced a specific style and a character to the written tradition, especially with the introduction of the western notation.

However, the constant and prevailing issue in the Byzantine chant remains the style of interpretation. In other words, the oral tradition remains the essential criterion of such liturgical music. *One must state that, in contrary to Western notation, which gives an absolute value to the notes placed on a staff, Psaltica, with its system of "neumes" or signs, presents the notes as links. Neumes indicate that the voice rises or drops in one or more tones compared to the previous one. Other neumes, called "voiceless" are not intended to indicate the pitch for the notes, but rather the inflections of voice that must bind them. A Byzantine partition must always be interpreted beyond the strict written notation which represents a mere framework to be embellished with various glides and vibrations that are specific to the oriental music.*

3. ANALYSIS OF THE WRITTEN TRADITION: BETWEEN HISTORY AND MANUSCRIPTS

Witnessing manuscripts: musical notations and languages

Melchites used Syriac for centuries preceding the fall of Constantinople until the early 17th century, especially in the villages and monasteries located far from major cities where the Greek dominated, being the main language in the territories of the Byzantine Empire and especially the liturgical language of the fathers and scholars of the Chalcedonian Church in the East.

A Melchite manuscript clearly illustrates the liturgical language and "neumes", or signs, of the Byzantine music which are used and identified in the period dubbed as the "mesobyzantine", which represents a milestone in the development of notation. Indeed, scores of origins, called "ekphonetics", consisted of simple accents placed on the text, acting as a reminder for the chanter. The notation has been enriched over the centuries (9th - 12th "primitive simiography"; 12th - 14th "mésobyzantine simiography") and achieved its fullest development and clearest expression through the most accurate "maïstor" Koukouzelis which will be mentioned hereunder. This manuscript was restored on Japanese paper in Italy, at the Basilian monastery of Grottaferrata. It is composed of liturgical chants in Syriac, for the feast of the Presentation of Jesus to the Temple, (February 2nd), written in "Estrangelo" character. Such type of writing has been used for calligraphy by the Chaldeans as well as the Melchites until the 15th century.

The manuscript of the St. John Monastery in Khenchara, provides an insight of the usage of the notation system called "koukouzelite". This system was created and developed by the monk Ioannis

² According to the specialist and musicologist Lycourguos Angelopoulos, the influence of the German dynasty descending from Bavaria that ruled in Greece starting 1833 has promoted a polyphonic type of music in the main churches, especially in the 19th century. The work of Ioannis Sakellaridis came to increase such trend, which impaired the traditional melodies by distorting their rhythm and adopting the occidental musical notation.

Koukouzélis, considered to be one of the greatest chanters and composers of Byzantine music in History, who spent a part of his life in the great monastery of "The Great Lavra" in Mount Athos. He established a range of 54 signs capable of conveying the most subtle vocal inflections. Such impressive and highly accurate system represents a peak of the Byzantine music, yet is considered as extremely difficult, complicated and time consuming for learning. (Manuscript of the Vespers Lucernary "Lord, I cry to you..." dating back to 1727).

The introduction of Arabic

As aforementioned, offices and the Divine Liturgy were first performed in Greek and Syriac until the early 17th century. The Greek language was dominant in cities and understood by many speakers of Aramaic. Following the 17th century, the tradition was still spoken in Greek and Arabic to the period considered as "The Renaissance" at the time of the musical compositions in Arabic (1920-1963).

The 17th and 18th centuries witnessed the introduction of the Arabic language in the liturgy. Manuscripts and old books state that the translation from Greek into Arabic lacked poetry in that period. Orthodox attempts to chant in Arabic remained scarce, and the majority of chanted prayers remained in Greek, while readings were in Arabic.

The 19th century was a milestone for the composition in Arabic, and the most shining in the Church of Antioch, with the appearance of the first fully translated offices and the works of the famous Greek Orthodox protopsalt (precentor) Mitri El- Murr. In the Greek Melchite Catholics camp, the reform of 1814 had provided an edition of the liturgical books (accomplished in 1839³) which preserves the entire Byzantine heritage, transcribed by the inspirers of the said reform, particularly in the main monasteries: Saint Saviour (Basilian Salvatorian) in Joun and Saint John (Basilian Shweirite) in Khenchara.

In the early 20th century, Father Abel Couturier, member of the "White Fathers" community which served the Melchite Church, was the first to introduce a new system: polyphony. Subsequently, Archimandrite Antoine Hebbly published the full resurrection service in 1939, followed by the Paulist fathers in 1944, and the Salvatorian Fathers in 1947. It is to be mentioned that, during that period, the Melchite chanting was heavily influenced by the works of the aforementioned Greek chanter Ioannis Sakellaridis, considered by Archimandrite Anthony Hebbly as the most famous composer of the 20th century in his domain. On the other hand, the archprotopsalt (the grand precentor) of the Church of Constantinople, the researcher and musicologist Lycourgous Angelopoulos, reckoned the works of Sakellaridis as representing a musical deviation, which had a harmful influence on many Greek and Melchite chanters.

The adaptation of the Byzantine hymnology into Arabic raised a specific issue; it is a language that is written from right to left while the Greek text and musical notations attached to it, are to be read from the left to the right. Hence efforts were deployed, relying on trial and error by adopting miscellaneous types of musical writings during this period:

1 – Musical writing with reversed note: signs of Byzantine music were calligraphed with a "mirror effect", supposed to compensate the opposite direction of the text and notation (Manuscript of the Office of Vespers of the Corpus Christi⁴).

2 - The musical writing from left to right with reversion of the Arabic language, in which the priority is to the former: it is indeed kept as it is. The Arabic text is divided and laid from the left to the right to match each corresponding musical sign (Manuscripts of the Basilian Shweirite Father Gebrael Abi Chdid - † 1955).

3 - The currently used musical notation: reading notes from the right to the left without reversing them, with a normal reading of the Arabic language, namely from the right to the left. Here, priority is given to the language which imposes its direction to the musical signs.

³ The said edition is available at the Saint John Monastery in Khenchara.

⁴ This feast originating from the Latine rite is exclusively celebrated by the Greek Melkite Catholics, hence the origin of the manuscript may not be doubted

These various types provide an insight of the attempts performed by the Greek Melchite Catholics in order to preserve the Byzantine notation while respecting the Arabic structure.

At the instigation of His Beatitude Gregory III Laham, an extensive musical and liturgical reform was undertaken in the years 2000-2010, deploying in two directions: on one hand the restoration of Byzantine music and teaching its characteristics (notation, importance of interpretation etc); on the other hand, efforts to unify the translations and compositions of various monasteries and chanters within one collection containing all the offices and celebrations of various feasts of the liturgical year. The cornerstone was the publication of the Anastasimatarion (literally: the "resurrectional", a collection of the offices of Vespers and Sunday Matins revolving around the theme of resurrection), and the Divine Liturgy.

These publications have been completed thanks to the efforts of the Patriarchal Liturgical Committee, especially Father Makarios Haidamous (Basilian Salvatorian Order) and Father Elias Shatawi, patriarchal assistant, who had, prior to their work in musical composition, meticulously collected works of ancient composers, many of which came from Greek Melchite Catholics religious orders.

Hence, melodies currently used in the Melkite Church are based on the works of Greek origin, but also on the compositions of Basilian Salvatorian monks such as fathers: Cyril Haddad, Youssef Nakhleh, Basile Khoury, Basile Kassis and Ignace Saad, as well as the Archimandrite Boutros Jreijiri (Basilian Order Chouérite), in addition to members of the Order of the Saint Paul Missionaries and the Greek Orthodox composer of Antioch, the famous protopsalt Mitri El Murr.

4.ANALYSIS OF THE ORAL TRADITION: TRENDS AND INFLUENCES

From Antioch to Constantinople and back

The influence of the protopsalts of Constantinople after the reform of 1814 and the spreading of new music system in the Greek Orthodox as well as the Greek Melchite Catholic church of Antioch, was quite important, and considerably noticeable between 1821(From Youssef Doumani Protopsaltis) and 1960. The beginning of this period, witnessed the musical reform initiated in 1860 by chanters such as Petros and Constantinopolitan Ionnis Vizandios who considerably influenced their colleagues in Antioch. Mitri El -Murr and other protopsalts tried to chant according to the Constantinople style, their references are chanters like Daniélidis, Pringos, Stanitsas, Nafpliotis. Some of them (such as the renowned Elias Simonides) even moved to Damascus, where their presence and example echoed for a long time.

This influence could take a different path as Antiochian chanters would return to the very sources of Byzantine music. Father Elias Gedeon, whose mentor was the Salvatorian priest Basile Khoury, left his country of origin to undergo a long period of training in Greece. Some of his contemporaries stated that he impressed the Greeks by his unprecedented voice. It has also been stated that he had relationships with chanters of Jerusalem and Damascus. His rare records that are left in our hands assert that he had performed the Greek style of Constantinople, also known as the "Istanbul style". Gedeon became a school in its own right, as he inspired many chanters who knew him.

One may be surprised sometimes by the role of other factors which highlight the positive aspects that can be played by modern communication. Let's take the example of Mr. Assaad Samaha from the village of Jouar Al-Khenchara in Metn – Lebanon. A chanter with a voice of rare quality, Mr. Samaha reveals that not only he was influenced by the Orthodox chanters of Antioch, but also mentions the chanters of Cyprus, to which he listened through a local radio!

Nevertheless, such influence of the Greek chanters of Constantinople on their Antiochan peers, no matter how significant it is, was never governed by dominance and inferiority. Indeed, it is to be reiterated that, despite the fact that Mitri El -Murr had attempted to chant according to the Constantinople style, he had always preserved his own musical personality with its own characteristics, as was the case of the majority of the chanters of Antioch. The contributors to the Greek newspaper "Mousiki", specialized in Byzantine music, though considering that Mitri El -

Murrwas was revealed, since the age of 33, as a true musical genius who showcased an exceptional talent with an unprecedented voice, highlighted the distinctive features of his interpretation and significant differences with Greek sources of inspiration in this area. According to them, such special musical tone featured by Mitri el -Murr could not be found outside the Syriac Levant.

It is an established fact that, when it comes to the liturgical music, sectarian barriers of liturgical music between Greek Orthodox and Greek Melchite Catholic chanters would easily fall down. Father Nicolas Abou Hanna relates the story of a Greek Melchite Catholic deacon who, in the 1860's, regularly attended Byzantine music lessons and chant in the Cathedral of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Damascus. Michel Al Chammas, precentor of the village of Douma in northern Lebanon, states that he owes a lot of his musical knowledge to the Orthodox protopsalt Elias El -Murr, son of the famous Mitri. A close friendship binds the two men, and Elias El -Murr had taught Mr. Chammas principles of Byzantine chant, while Archimandrite Anthony Hebbly taught him the rules of Western music.

Some celebrities

Among the Greek Melchite Catholic chanters, Father Basil Khoury was known for his beautiful resonant voice. He preferred a style known as "Turkish" (or more specifically "Constantinople" or "Istanbuli" style)⁵.

Archimandrite Boutros Jreijiri, of the Basilian Shweirite Order, was famous for his strong and impressive voice, as well as the scope of his musical scholarship. He published a complete musical collection of the various liturgical offices in 1985. F. Jreijiri was extremely meticulous in his work, especially when it comes to the respect of the Arabic structure and the preservation of the composition style of the original Greek composition. He reckoned that the composition system commonly used by the Greeks should be followed in our area, citing an example of the Troparion of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross: "Save, Lord, thy people, and bless thine inheritance..."⁶.

Last but not least, one must mention the Orthodox Metropolitan of America, Samuel Daoud for his original and powerful contributions, including a well renowned "great doxology" in the second plagal mod. Melchites oftenly chant it in grand occasions, such as the papal liturgies, or in rare cases, where they celebrate Matins for major feasts. *Met. Daoud was indeed a colorful character*. Although he was a student of protopsalt Mitri El- Murr, the two men were in litigation, due to a disagreement between. Documents in the archives of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, and dating from 1952 and 1953, give evidence that the protopsalt Mitri El-Murr complained to Patriarch Alexandros and had formally accused the Metropolitan of stealing a some of his compositions, especially those of the great doxology and the Marian hymn "Axion Estin" ("It is indeed worthy to proclaim you blessed, O Mother of God...") in mode one, shamelessly claiming they were of his own composition. The Metropolitan had even recorded tracks and sold them in the United States. I have personally managed to verify the high similarity of the compositions of Mitri El-Murr and those of Metropolitan Samuel Daoud. The paradox lies in the fact that the good faith of the latter was not necessarily questioned. Maybe he simply considered that the interpretation and execution of the compositions, which are so important in Byzantine music, are his own, being singled out by his voice and their quite original character?

5.CONCLUSION

This story shows us the pivotal role of the issue of interpretation in Byzantine music. Moreover, it is the main focus of contemporary researches, especially in Greece. Their issue focuses on the dialectics between the written tradition and oral tradition, namely, the relationship between what is written and what is chanted; the miscellaneous styles and performances; interpretation signs and what might be dubbed as their "philosophy". Several major studies and treatises have recently been published in this

⁵ The precentor Ziad Dib stated that F. Bassilios had a "Turkish" style of chanting, according to his own words. Such expression simply meant that his musical style followed the Constantinople style.

⁶ A personal interview of the writer with Father Jreijiri.

domain in Greece, especially by the musicologists Simonos Karas and Lycourgous Angelopoulos, the latter being internationally known for the performances of "Byzantine Choir of Greece", which he founded and currently manages. Such researches, even the most theoretical of them, can only be based on a careful inventory of the oral tradition, especially of the ancient chanters of Constantinople and Mount Athos. There lies the explanation of the basic elements of the Byzantine music, the interpretation of its musical phrases and their characteristics, as well as the study of the used ranges. Such advanced studies have revealed to us how the interpretation of the chanters may differ, whether for the explanation of the neumes or the musical phrases and their own energy.

The Antiochian tradition in general, and the Greek Melchite Catholic tradition in particular, is no exception to the rule. Such outstanding tone reflects a Syriac influence, which had been identified in the work of Mitri El- Murr, common to most Orthodox and Melchite chanters. The performance of these chanters bears the influence of the oriental environment, namely, the oriental songs and its very particular ranges.

Bachir Osta started taking interest in the Byzantine music at his early adolescence where he joined the Beirut Orthodox School of Church Music, led by Father Romanos Gebran. He moved to Greece to pursue advanced courses in Byzantine Music. He obtained a "Diploma" from the Yorgos Foudoulis Conservatory under the supervision of Konstandinos Karagounis, in addition pursuing a post-graduate program in the conservatory of Athens under the supervision of Yorgos Constandinou. Bachir currently teaches the Byzantine Music at the National Conservatory and the St Anne Seminary in Rabweh, and is the Protopsaltis (Leading Chanter and Trainer) of the St. Joachim and Anne Parish. In 2007, Bachir took in charge the Saint Stefanos The Melode School which was initially inaugurated by his brother Alain (Protopsalt of the Eparchy of Beirut and Jbail). The School Choir was later founded and it presented many recitals in Lebanon (including Beirut chants festival 2011 and 2012 amongst others...) and abroad (2012 Summer tour in France). Mr. Osta also obtained the first prize in the InterArtia International Festival of Music in 2009 and 2011 for the Byzantine Music. In 2013, he featured as main speaker at the seminar: "Musical Structures and Forms of the Liturgical Melkite Chanting", within the "Voice and Sound Prayer" Annual Seminars, organized by the Intercultural Institute of Comparative Music Studies established by the Giorigio Cini Foundation (Italy). In 2013, he presented a workshop on the Byzantine Music within the "Voices in Harmony International Workshop" held at the Holy Spirit University – Kaslik (USEK – Lebanon).