



THE FAILURES OF A TWENTY-SECOND-CENTURY HISTORICAL MUSICOLOGIST¹

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DEAR COLLEAGUES,

My article presents the results of a research project that took a few years to complete. I studied the archives of an obscure church in Bucharest, where I discovered some volumes of Orthodox church chants. Some of them are in staff notation and others in an old neumatic notation that no one fully understands any longer. I have thought hard about it while reading textbooks and theoretical treatises in Romanian and I think I am able to give you a relatively clear picture of the music in these volumes.

As you well know, after the Second Pan-Orthodox Council of 2065, Orthodox liturgical music acquired various forms of expression; basically, today we cannot find a common feature of all these musics, or a defining element to indicate that a particular music is Orthodox or not. At the same time, the old musical traditions – Byzantine, Russian and others – have fallen into decline or even disappeared, and the communities that still practice them are hard to investigate.

George Martin stopped reading, wiped the sweat off his forehead and threw a glance at the room. It was going well. The teachers watched him tensely, the students were whispering to each other or playing Solitaire silently. Although old-fashioned and dealing with niche topics, Martin was a respected academic, probably also because not many people grasped the subject-matter of his research. He breathed deeply and resumed:

The volumes investigated testify to a consistent musical tradition. The repertoire is quite wide. There are several types of chant collections, mainly taking into account the service they are intended for – Liturgy, Vespers, etc. – but also collections devoted to a certain liturgical moment (communion, *polyeleos*, etc.). Many pieces are of relatively small size, half a page, or one page, and their duration was probably about two minutes. However, there are also pieces that take tens of pages and whose duration comes close to one hour. Undoubtedly, the interpretation of such pieces of large size and increased difficulty required high-level training and great endurance.

The high professional level is also visible in the details of the notation of rhythm and ornaments. The notation used is a precise one, which allows rhythmic formulae difficult to perform, such as quintuplets. I should mention that the notation accurately describes the division of one beat into two quavers; or a dotted quaver and a

1 Translated by Ioana Stamatescu.

semiquaver; or a crotchet and a quaver into a tuplet. The very frequent occurrence of these various formulae shows that rhythmic details were important to the musicians and that they were able to execute them with precision. The ornaments are indicated by a series of signs often symbolized by broken lines and whose meaning eludes us. The melody may have followed the ascending or descending direction of the signs. Again, their abundance and the context in which they are found indicate that their precise interpretation was necessary.

The musicians' mastery is also visible from the microtones they used. The repertoire features a multitude of scale structures with tones of varying size and mobile degrees. There are often signs which show that a particular note had to be sung two, four or six commas higher or lower than its usual position on the scale. Sometimes these signs were marked in pencil or pen by the cantor; hence, the latter's desire was to correct the printed edition.

The chanters did not mark only accidentals on the books, but also small formulae meant to replace some of the motifs in the printed version.

The authors of the chants come from different times. Together with the composers of the time, there is a significant number of composers from the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, one can also find creations from earlier times: the seventeenth, the fourteenth or even the eighth centuries. Probably the high quality of these pieces allowed them to be copied without interruption throughout the centuries and thus to survive. However, we can assume that the style of the old cantors must not have been entirely to the liking of the new ones considering the variants found noted in pencil in the margins of some pieces, which replace some formulae with others, such as in the *Koinonikon* by St John Koukouzelis (fourteenth century).

The volumes in staff notation – sometimes in both neumatic and staff notations – also contain tonal pieces or pieces influenced by Western music or even pieces directly composed by Western composers, such as Wagner's wedding march from *Lohengrin*. The curious case of a *Kyrie eleison* in neumatic notation can also be found, with notes handwritten on a sheet of woven paper added at the end of a print, and whose melody seems to be that of a South American hit from the end of the twentieth century.

Finally, the fact that the volumes contained pieces which were either only monadic, with a drone, or only 3- or 4-part leads me to think there were two irreconcilable camps: the first – traditionalist, the second – modernist.

In conclusion, I think the data we have at our disposal indicate a vigorous musical tradition in the Bucharest churches from the beginning of the twenty-first century. Aside from that, I would say that the keyword of this tradition is *stability*: a repertoire with a certain age, vast and widespread, precise rules of notation and execution, and a high standard of professionalism amongst the cantors.

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It so happened that in the same building, in an adjoining room, Jill Adams was presenting a paper about Romanian as a second language at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The paper was based on a rare document from the twenty-first century, a handwritten letter from a master's student in Leeds to a friend from the Republic of Moldova. The former described to her friend her fieldwork at the churches in Bucharest. Unfortunately, linguistic matters are beyond me, so I will content myself with giving you an approximate translation of the young researcher's letter.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

Let me tell you that I am well and healthy, which is what I wish for you as well. One month has already lapsed since I came to Bucharest, and I feel I have made headway with my research. I have been to all kinds of churches and I have observed the way the services are carried out. A first impression would be: *chaos!* Although there are clear worship rules, as you well know, in practice each is left to his own devices. Each cantor chooses what to sing, so some chants never get sung. Some are guided by the clock, thinking they should start the Liturgy at the appointed hour. They chant as much as they can from matins and, at the priest's signal, they suddenly start the doxology.

As for the music, the same chaos. Although there are a lot of books, they are not used as they should be. Many cantors know certain chants by heart, and it is those that they sing every time. In vain do they have ten Cherubic Hymns in a book! They are content to chant the simplest one, closest to tonality, and which is to the priest's liking.

When they sing from the score, what is heard is more or less similar to what is notated. Those who use staff notation follow the position of the notes on the staff and render in an approximate manner the melodic line of the piece. As for Byzantine notation, the imprecision is even greater: very good chanters have no qualms about replacing an ornament with another or even some motifs with other close ones. The average chanters have other problems: they mix up the large leaps (fifths with sixths etc.) and do not get the modulations right. Both the good and the weaker ones seem not to value the precision of the rhythmic subdivisions – for example, a quaver followed by two semiquavers is executed either as a triplet or as two semiquavers and a quaver. Even more fun is the fact that, although the musical scales contain tones of varying sizes and there are various types of sharps and flats, the cantors often sing in the Western scale.

One even wonders why there is a need for so many books, when the tradition seems to be rather an oral one. My opinion is that, on the one hand, enthusiasm makes many buy books which they don't put to much use. On the other hand, some cantors claim there is a pressure on students and curates to buy the "official" books, edited by music teachers from the seminary or college and printed by the Patriarchate's publishing house. If this is true or not, I do not know.

Many pieces are performed with variations from one day to another. There are, however, also some pieces that are performed relatively stably, because the cantors draw upon a standard recording. I have seen, for example, a score with St John Koukouzelis's communion hymn, on which the chanter had written in pencil the way he thought some of the passages were meant to be sung and which he sang in that very fashion every time. To my question, he replied that he sang as Angelopoulos's choir did on the CD. (As an aside, the singer had never seen the CD, just the recording posted on YouTube.)

What seems to me worthy of investigation is the way they improvise. You remember that most of the pieces borrow the melody from another piece taken as a model. The fact that the model and the copy have verses of different lengths forces the performer to expand or to contract the musical phrases of the model on the spot to adapt them to the text of the copy. But the performers do more than that: they pay attention to the position of the tonic accents, change the order of the phrases, introduce new phrases or eliminate some of the existing ones. Sometimes, the cantor

may also slightly modify the text so as to find a better musical solution. (By the way, I was a witness to the composition of a hymn on the spot: the chanter had forgotten to prepare the text of the *apolytikion* which he had to sing. Pressed for time, he invented a small text in which he reminded us of fragments from the saint's life, following the classic model of the hymns in this category.) To come back to what I was saying before, it seems to me really curious that all the studies I have read focus only on the written pieces, which – in fact – represent a tiny part of this music.

One more thing before saying goodbye: it is said this music is a monody accompanied by the drone, which is interpreted antiphonally. I believe this is a superficial description of the reality of the sound. Antiphony is present in varied forms, not just as an alternation between chanters or choirs in the two apses (the clergy choir in the altar could be added to those). There are places in which the singers all sit in the same apse and sing alternately in groups set up on the spot and in continuous movement: for example, one stanza is sung with A, B and C; and D and E sing the drone; the next stanza A and E sing the drone and B, C and D sing together. Just in time for the third stanza, F has reached the church and the whole structure is rearranged.

I also found an atypical church. It has two choirs, each with its apse. One of the choirs is weaker and is not able to sing all the types of pieces. Before the service, the weaker choir lets the other choir know which chants they will sing: the antiphony is partial, but it is rigorously prepared.

As for the monody, there are churches in which two cantors basically sing the same chant, but one of the cantors may "break loose" sometimes, doubling the melody in thirds. If there are three cantors, occasionally they can sing major chords, nostalgic for choir classes at the theological seminary. Sometimes, a weaker cantor may not get even close to the right melody and may create, involuntarily, a counterpoint noticeable by everyone, except for him. In churches where the community sings as well, heterophony is, of course, the rule. All of the above may overlap in all possible combinations, with some potential temporal differences, with or without the drone. No irony intended: I can assure you that there were moments when these non-synchronizations gave rise to quite accomplished music.

So I think this will be a good thesis. I am thrilled that this music is alive, spontaneous, and full of inventiveness. I will write to you soon.

The author of the letter took her master's degree in Leeds, and then moved with her boyfriend to Italy, where she became a well-known folk singer. A century later, the letter raised only the interest of those intent on certain grammatical peculiarities of the Romanian language; musicologists have completely ignored it. George Martin and Jill Adams have never met.