



BYZANTINE CHANT BETWEEN CONSTANTINOPLE AND THE DANUBIAN PRINCIPALITIES

by Nicolae Gheorghita, *Studies in Byzantine Musicology*
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A book on Byzantine chant written in English is always welcome by the international “family” of Byzantine musicologists, for such an enterprise is a rather rare event. If one excludes the great “hierophants” of the past (e.g. Egon Wellesz, Jørgen Raasted), very few scholars worldwide are presently engaged in writing on Byzantine chant for an English-speaking audience (e.g. Dimitri Conomos, Alexander Lingas).

Among the latter, the Romanian musicologist, Nicolae Gheorghita (b. 1971), has recently gained an enviable place as author of articles in international academic periodicals and proceedings. Gheorghita may have completed his graduate and post-graduate studies in his native Romania, but he has broadened his experience by pursuing further studies in Greece, England, and Russia. His engagement with Byzantine chant has been supported by his fluency in Greek and Slavonic languages, for the vast bulk of relevant manuscripts are written in these languages.

Gheorghita's latest publication is a collection of 14 articles (published or to be published) written in English, save for two (which are, nonetheless, translations of English ones). Despite his main emphasis on Byzantine chant, Gheorghita has included chapters on Byzantine and post-Byzantine secular music in Romania, since secular songs were often written by the cantors themselves. Before proceeding any further, a word should be said about the term Byzantine in this context. Although the Byzantine Empire ceased to exist after the Fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks (1453), certain facets of Byzantine civilization (such as music) continued to be cultivated either within the former empire or outside its frontiers, particularly in neighboring lands professing the same religious denomination (that is Christian Orthodox). Among these lands, Romania, and specifically Moldavia and the Wallachia regions, two of the three main provinces of the former Danubian Principalities, occupy a conspicuous place.

Immediately following the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire, Greek cantors (and other intellectuals) found a safe refuge in the principalities and brought along with them a number of musical manuscripts. These manuscripts were deposited in monasteries (e.g. Putna monastery of Moldavia) and meticulously copied by Romanian monks in huge and decorous collections. From the 16th century onwards, Romanian cantors began to compose along these lines by writing either in Greek or Slavonic (the official ecclesiastical language of the Balkans and Russia) and (later) Romanian. The Greek element in Romania was reinforced in the 18th century, following the appointment of Phanariot Greeks (that is Greeks from the Phanar district of Istanbul, seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate) as rulers of Moldavia and Wallachia. Until the end of the Phanariot era in Romania (1821), the official church music was Byzantine chant, and even secular music was mainly written in Byzantine notation¹.

¹ On the musical activity of the Phanariots, see John Plemmenos, “Musical Encounters at the Greek Courts of Jassy and Bucharest in the Eighteenth Century”, *Greece and the Balkans: identities, perceptions and cultural encounters since the Enlightenment*, Dimitris Tziouvas (ed.), Ashgate 2003, pp. 179-191, and idem, *Ottoman Minority Musics: The Case of 18th-century Greek Phanariots*,

Gheorghiuță's book seeks to explore this period (15th to 19th century) by touching on various aspects of Byzantine chant's cultivation and evolution in the Romanian lands. He does not follow a chronological order, but organizes his material in three large thematic unities, history, biography, and theory, without naming them as such. Consequently, the first two chapters ("Byzantine Chant in the Romanian Principalities during the Phanariot Period (1711–1821)" and "Secular Music at the Romanian Courts during the Phanariot Epoch (1711–1821)") belong to the first category. The first chapter discusses three facets of Byzantine chant in Romania: a) the liturgical language employed by Romanian composers, b) the education of cantors in the Romanian lands, and c) the "canonicity" of Romanian ecclesiastical music. The second chapter touches on two musical genres cultivated at the Phanariot courts: the Ottoman military band (*mehter-hane*) and its variation (*tabl-hane*), and popular music played mainly by the Roms (Gypsies). Gheorghiuță's main contribution is the English translation of Romanian writers on the music of the period. In the same category, one may include a chapter on music education of Byzantine chant in Romanian universities in the 20th century.

Two lesser-known Greek composers are discussed in the following five chapters (dealing with biography), Nikephoros Kantouniars (c. 1770–1830) and Dionysios Photeinos (c. 1777–1821). Both composers belong to the social class of "adopted" Phanariots, for they came from the Greek province and rose to prominence by way of their education and connections. Life histories have been considered essential to Ethnomusicology, and may exemplify certain otherwise vague cultural processes². Kantouniars came from Chios island, moved to Istanbul at an early age, was ordained archdeacon in Damascus (Syria), and finally settled in Moldavia (Jassy), where he established a music school, and produced a number of musical manuscripts. Photeinos is the author of an *Anastasimatarion* (Resurrection hymns according to the eight modes) that was popular during his lifetime and became the pattern for its Romanian counterpart by Anton Pan (his pupil and the principal Romanian musical figure of the 19th century). Apart from discussing the surviving copies of Photeinos' *Anastasimatarion*, Gheorghiuță enters into various structural aspects of the contents, such as their melodic formulae and modulations.

The third and last category of Gheorghiuță's book contains chapters concerning theoretical issues, such as various types of Greek musical treatises, aspects of the so-called Callophonic genre (of florid and improvisatory nature), the structure of Communion hymns for Sunday, and the transcription (*exegeisis*) of certain genres of Byzantine chant from the old to the new notation. Among the musical treatises, a special place in Romanian manuscripts has been reserved for the so-called *Nouthesia* or Advise to the pupils by the Greek cantor and composer, Chresaphes the Younger (17th century). The treatise was copied by various scribes, and was finally transferred to the reformed Byzantine notation in 1821 by a Romanian cantor, thus becoming a model for comparison of the old and new notation. In the chapter on the Callophonic genre, Gheorghiuță, focusing on a single Romanian source from the early-19th century, surveys the treatment of the text of a Communion hymn and the techniques of transcription of certain symbols (neumes) to the new notation.

Gheorghiuță's examination of the structure of the Communion hymn has resulted into some interesting discoveries, such as the changes affecting the three parts of the hymn during the post-Byzantine period (which he divides into three stages): the main text ("Praise the Lord from the heaven..."), the so-called *teretisma* (nonsense syllables, such as te, re, re), and the refrain "Alleluia". While, in the first stage (1453–1670), the latter part (Alleluia) used to occupy the lion's share of the hymn, and was closely followed by an extensive *teretisma*, in the second stage (1670-1730), it began to be shorter, and, in the third stage (1730–1821), ended as the shortest part at the expense of the main text. Finally, as to the transcription from the old notation, Gheorghiuță

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² See, for example, Tullia Magrini, "Repertories and identities of a musician from Crete", EOL *EthnomusicologyOnLine* peer-reviewed multimedia e-journal, 1997, 3.

analyses certain symbols as they appear in melodic formulae in a selected repertoire of Byzantine chant.

The book is full of pictures and illustrations, either from travelers' books or musical manuscripts, as well as examples of musical notation (transcribed by the author). It is also rich in footnotes (or endnotes) and bibliography, while an index of names and technical terms appears at the end. Although the chapters have kept their original form of publication (thus lacking in homogeneity), and often overlap with one another, they nonetheless constitute a repository of scholastic and meticulous scholarship on Byzantine chant. The same can be said with regard to the use of Greek terms, which, despite some misspellings and missaccentuation, reveal the author's range of knowledge and education. Thus, Gheorghiuță with his painstaking exploration of this period has managed to fill a gap in Byzantine musicology with reference to Byzantine chant in Romania.

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