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BYZANTINE CHURCH MUSIC BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

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There is hardly any relevant musicological and theological literature regarding the content and meaning of terms such as canon and Holy Tradition, on the one hand, and creativity and innovation in connection with ecclesiastical psalmody on the other.¹ The focus of our attention here is a specific phenomenon of *kalophony* (“beautified” chant) which Edward Williams rightly described as an Eastern Christian musical *Ars Nova* in an age of political, but not cultural and artistic, twilight in the Byzantine Empire. Theodore Metochites (c. 1260-1332), one of the most famous polymaths and patrons of late Byzantine art, wrote sadly that his age “has nothing more to say”.² However, it is well known that the Palaiologan era was actually an age in which art and science flourished,³ despite the fact that its result, as Viktor Lazarev notes, was the end of something old, and not the beginning of something new.⁴

Was the movement towards kalophony during the artistic renaissance of the Palaiologoi termed “conservative traditionalism”⁵ by historians of art, an innovation that was originally supposed to enrich the “traditional sound” that followed prayer? Or, on the contrary, was kalophony a mark of a more radical modernism that deprived the Church music of its primary liturgical function by making it an independent artistic entity? Did late Byzantine composers, who not incidentally carried the title of master of the art of singing, and who consciously moved away from the anonymity of their many predecessors,⁶ want to transcend or nullify the unwritten, but nevertheless accepted and ancient rule that melody should follow, emphasize,

1 This point was recently emphasized by Fr Ivan Moody in his article entitled “The Seraphim Above: Some Perspectives on Theology in Orthodox Church Music”, in *Religions*, 2015, 6, 350–364; doi:10.3390/rel6020350. Moody’s paper was a significant impulse for new and different approaches to the same theses which Vesna Sara Peno has expounded in a study with a title similar to this article: Vesna Peno, “The Traditional and the Modern in Church Music: A Study in Canon and Creativity”, *Muzikologija* 6 (2006), 233-250.

2 These words are found in the heading of Metochites’s work *Upomnhmatismoi*. Cf. *Theodori Metochitae Miscellanea*, ed. Chr. G. Müller and Th. Kiessling, Lipsiae 1821, 13-18 (cited from Viktor Lazarev, *Istorija vizantijskog slikarstva*, Beograd 2004, 156, note 3.)

3 Emperor Andronikos II (1282-1328) was a well-educated ruler, dedicated to science and literature, and his nearest councilors were highly cultured men, such as Theodore Metochites and Nicephorus Gregoras. Cf. Georgije Ostrogorski, *Istorija Vizantije*, Beograd (second phototype edition, first phototype 1969 according to SKZ’s edition from 1959), 448.

4 Cf. V. Lazarev, op. cit. 156.

5 Cf. V. Lazarev, op. cit. 486, 156.

6 A representative list of fourteenth-century composers and their fifteenth-century successors’ .i.e provided by Miloš Velimirović in his study “Byzantine composers in ms. Athens 2406”, in: Jack Westrup (ed.), *Essays Presented to Egon Wellesz*, Oxford 1966, 7-18.

and interpret the text of prayer or, in other words, to be in its service? Even more important, what was the reason behind this liberated artistic creativity and can it possibly be justified in a theological and liturgical context?

Detailed explanation of these issues cannot be given in the limited space available here. However, the path that leads to the answer will be set in the context of the liturgical exegesis of kalophony as a musical reflection of contemporary theological currents of that time, which were strongly influenced by mystical and ascetic experience and the teachings of hesychasm.⁷

It is an undeniable fact that Byzantine art as a whole emphasized psychological, gnoseological, and anagogical aspects, and its main goal was to reflect the reality of the Kingdom to come.⁸ The success of ecclesiastical artists through the centuries was measured by their resolve, through their works and by the power of Holy Spirit, to bring a more concrete and more apprehensible model of high spiritual ideals to the faithful. They were expected to use the means of their art to present, as expressively as possible, not only the phenomenological, but also the noumenological side of that spiritual ideal. The personal ability of an artist to approach the prototype was, in fact, the ability to invoke the corresponding aesthetic experience in the believer, to instigate the understanding of the deepest secrets and participation in the mystagogical life.

As to how to make a “new song”, as mentioned by Saint John the Theologian in the Eucharist as an icon of the Kingdom of Heaven, patristic writings do not give specific advice. The Fathers of the Church chiefly emphasized the symbolic nature of sacred chants and its effect on man’s spiritual transformation.⁹ Equating earthly and heavenly music and calling it a wise invention of the Teacher and the gift of Holy Spirit,¹⁰ the mutual doxology of men and angels,¹¹ emphasizing its utility in that it reflects the state of the soul and deepens knowledge of Divine wisdom,¹² strengthens virtue¹³ and raises us mystically into unity with God,¹⁴ the Cappadocian Fathers of the Church in the 4th century and their successors and representatives of mystical theology in following centuries were united in stating that Church singing should mimic the singing of angelic choirs. However, instructions for composing chant were left out completely; amongst

7 Alexander Lingas, “Hesychasm and Psalmody”, in: Anthony Bryer & Mary Cunningham (eds.), *Mount Athos and Byzantine Monasticism*, Variorum 1996, 167: “In the absence of a fourteenth-century text explicitly establishing a causal relationship between monastic spirituality and contemporary musical developments, it is possible only to present an admittedly circumstantial case linking Koukouzeles’s revolutionary style of chanting to hesychasm. Yet it is difficult to dismiss these developments as merely coincidental, for it seems highly unlikely that hesychast fathers would have checked in their spirituality at the gate as they entered the monastery each weekend so that they might spend countless hours following the latest Constantinopolitan (or Thessalonian) musical fad. On the other hand, several fifteenth-century mss transmit tropes to Ps. 103 that clearly refer to the Palamite theology of the uncreated light; e.g. the following composition by Manuel Korones from Athens ms. 2401, f. 50r and Philotheou ms. 122/235, ff. 49v-50r: ‘Glory to Thee, O Lord, who didst show the uncreated light to Thy disciples on Mount Tabor, O Holy Trinity, glory to Thee’.” See Gr. Stathes, “Η ασματική διαφοροποίηση όπως καταγράφεται στον κώδικα 2458 του έτους 1336”, *Χριστιανική Θεσσαλονίκη, παλιολόγειος εποχή*, Κέντρο Ιστορίας του Δήμου Θεσσαλονίκη 1989, 198-199; Edward V. Williams, *A Byzantine Ars Nova. John Koukouzeles Reform of Byzantine Chanting for Great Vespers In The Fourteenth Century*, PhD on the microfilm, Yale University 1968, 208 (note 9); idem, “The Treatment Of Text In The Kalophonic Chant of Psalm 2”, SEC II, 1971, 173-193.

8 Cf. Viktor Bičkov, *Vizantijska estetika* (translated from Russian to Serbian by Dimitrije M. Kalezić), Prosveta, Beograd, 1991, 9.

9 Αθανασίου Θεοδ. Βοθρλή, *Δογματικοθητικά όψεις της ορθοδόξου ψαλμοδίας*, Αθήναι 1994; Αντωνίου Αλγυζάκη, “Η λειτουργική μουσική κατά τον Μέγα Βασιλείου”, *Τόμος έόρτιος χιλιοστής έξακοσιοστής έπετειού Μεγάλου Βασιλείου (379-1979)*, Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης – Θεολογική Σχολή Θεσσαλονίκη 1981, 255-281.

10 Μέγα Βασιλείου, Όμιλία εις τόν Α΄ Ψαλμόν, PG 29, 213.

11 Ιωάννου Χρυσοστόμου, Όμιλία Β΄, Εις τό γενέθλιον του Κυρίου ήμων Ιησού Χριστού, PG 56, 387.

12 Γρηγορίου Νύσσης, Εις την έπιγραφήν των ψαλμών, PG 44, 444D; Μέγα Βασιλείου, Όμιλία εις τόν Α΄ Ψαλμόν, PG 29, 212.

13 Ιωάννου Χρυσοστόμου, Ερμηνεία εις τόν προφήτην Ησαΐαν, PG 56, 57. Antique teachings of the ethos of ecclesiastical melodies are often found in patristic writings, although they do not consider musical elements attained by a certain ethos per se.

14 St John Chrysostom was convinced that “nothing so uplifts the mind, giving it wings and freeing it from the earth, releasing it from the prison of the body, affecting it with love of wisdom, and causing it to scorn all things pertaining to this life, as modulated melody and the divine chant composed of number” (Moody, 358). Cf. Ιωάννου Χρυσοστόμου, Έξήγησις εις τους ψαλμούς, PG 55, 156. Μέγα Βασιλείου, Όμιλία εις τόν Α΄ Ψαλμόν, PG 29, 213A; Μέγα Βασιλείου, Περι εύχαριστίας, PG 31, 228A; Μαξίμου Όμολογιτου, Μυσταγωγία ΙΑ΄, PG 91, 689C.

the canons of Ecumenical and Local Councils there are mentions of the ways Church chants should be sung, and thus Canon 75 of the Council of Trullo reads, “We will that those whose office it is to sing in the churches do not use undisciplined vociferations, nor force nature to shouting, nor adopt any of those modes which are incongruous and unsuitable for the church: but that they offer the psalmody to God who is observer of secrets, with great attention and compunction”;¹⁵ Canon 15 of the Council of Laodicea reminds singers of the words of St Paul, who says that we should sing to God not as much by the voice as by the heart.¹⁶

The Fathers of the Church were, nevertheless, quite clear that a melody, as transformed or higher human speech, is in the service of liturgical text, and that its function is to emphasize the meaning of the words of prayer further. “A simple chant is intertwined with Divine words so that the very sound and movement of the voice might expose the hidden meaning of the words” – wrote Saint Gregory of Nyssa.¹⁷ St Basil the Great had expressed similar sentiments: “The delight of melody he mingled with the doctrines so that by the pleasantness and softness of the sound heard we might receive without perceiving it the benefits of the words”.¹⁸ The poetics of musical creativity, formulated in this way in the period of early Christianity, when the process of developing liturgical rites, hymnography, and the very system of the Octoechos was in process, became a given axiom that was never reflected upon theoretically (the theory that melody should emphasize the meaning of words was never written in manuals for singers, i.e. in the so-called protheories or papadiki; the principles of composition that would define the vocal character of sacred melody were not mentioned, and there are no instructions for composers regarding the rules to be upheld while he creates, which chant should be used for a certain kind of hymnography, what laws there are regarding the relation of tone and syllable, tones and whole words and verses, which words have priority, which melodic parameters should be used to emphasize them further, etc).

Event though a *melodos* did not have rules to obey while composing a melody for a given text, he was completely aware that melody should be subjected to the text. The normative character of compositional creativity, understood in this way, was brought into question when the first more complex and melismatic chants appeared.¹⁹ While composers showed greater interest in a more elaborate melodic style, the creative imperative, according to which the melody is but a “useful” addition to the words of prayer, was pushed aside. In endless melodic expansions and variations, which meant interpolation and modification of individual formulas and whole patterns, the repetition of text, one or more verses, one or more words, or entire phrases, became inevitable.²⁰ If one considers the radical arrangements of the *textus receptus*

15 Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, eds., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1886 (reprinted 1997), 398 (356-408).

16 Nikodim episkop Dalmatinski (ed.), *Pravila Pravoslavne crkve s tumačenjima*, knj. I, Novi Sad 1895, 562.

17 V. Bičkov, op. cit.

18 Μέγα Βασιλείου, Ὁμιλία εἰς τὸν Α΄ Ψαλμόν, PG 29, 212.

19 Although there is no consensus regarding the beginning of melismatic treatment of liturgical verses, researchers are generally convinced that after the period that lasted from the 9th to the 12th century, when a long and complex process in development of hymnography, the system of the Octoechos, the melodies of the stichera and irmoi, and the first phase of their notation was finished, a new age in kalophonic or papadike chant began, beginning from the middle of the 13th century. R. Palikarova Verdeil, *La musique Byzantine chez les Bulgares et les Russes (du IXe au XIVe siècle)*, MMB Subsidia III, Copenhagen 1953, 207; O. Strunk, *Melody Construction in Byzantine Chant*, EMBW, 194; Kenneth Levy, *A Hymn for Thursday in Holy Week*, JAMS 16, 1963, 156; Jörgen Raasted, *Intonation Formulas and Modal Signatures in Byzantine Musical Manuscripts*, MMB Subsidia VII, Copenhagen 1966, 118; Ch. Thodberg, *Der Byzantinische Alleluarionzyklus*, MMB Subsidia VIII, Copenhagen 1966, 13; Γρηγορίος Θ. Στάθης, *Οἱ ἀναγραμματισμοὶ καὶ τὰ μαθήματα τῆς βυζαντινῆς μελοποιᾶς*, Ἴδρυμα Βυζαντινῆς Μουσικολογίας, Μελέται 3, Ἀθήνα 1994, 66–79.

20 Edward V. Williams, *John Koukouzeles's Reform of Byzantine Chanting For Great Vespers In The Fourteenth Century*, PhD on the microfilm, Yale University 1968; Исти, *The Treatment Of Text In The Kalophonic Chanting of Psalm 2*, SEC II, 1971, 173-193. “The sheer length and complexity of the newly composed chants for the all-night vigil’s ordinary herald not only a shift of emphasis away from the often verbose canons and stichera of the ‘proper’, but also imply an increased confidence in the expressive potential of purely musical techniques, and new attitudes toward their application within Orthodox worship. This latter conclusion is underlined by the production of multiple and often highly individual settings of a single text, profoundly altering the correspondence between words and melody in Byzantine chant”. Cf. Lingas, op. cit, 167.

in new melo-poetical genres, such as fifteen-syllable hymns (κατανθκτικά),²¹ anapodismoι (αναποδισμοί), anagramatismoι (αναγραμματισμοί),²² and other compositions collectively known as *mathemes* (τα μαθήματα), than it becomes clear that the inherited and established poetical wealth was no longer sufficient for late Byzantine masters of the art of singing. The freedom in organizing and reorganizing of syntax structure, as well as changing the meanings of the text of the prayers, indicate that in the 14th century an unstoppable need for emphasizing the sovereignty of expression through singing had appeared. Composers needed new words for their melodies, whose meaning would remain unutterable, and which did not seem to be exhausted by their long durations.

The masters of the art of singing knew that the basis of Orthodox gnoseology regarding God is made up of two approaches, kataphatic and apophatic,²³ and that true servitude to God encompasses both uttered and unuttered word (προφορικός και ένδιάθετος λόγος). The prayer of mind and heart was part of their monastic everyday lives, as witnessed by the life of St John Koukouzelis, a coryphaeus among composers of sacred music and a renowned hesychast, a member of the fraternity of Great Lavra together with St Gregory Palamas. The unique mystical experience as a result of prayer without ceasing (which was described by St Paul, who said that he, in the ecstasy of prayer, was taken by God to the third heaven and saw things that cannot be expressed by words, [2 Cor. 12:4]), and reaching hesychia as a sign of spiritual perfection, were goals of the first creators of kalophonia. The syllables without meaning in kratimas could possibly have been those *unutterable words* (ἀρρητα ρήματα), which were equated by St Simeon the New Theologian, another representative of silent prayer, with the communion of the “Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ”.²⁴ These words are a proof of the experience of the Age to come, which transcends everything that the earthly way of existence represents, even human speech. According to St Isaac the Syrian, “silence is the mystery of the Age to come”,²⁵ and “all words will find their fulfillment in silence, for even the servants become silent when their Lord approaches”.²⁶ However, this is not silence as a lack of sound and words (K. Ware, *Η έντός ημών βασιλεία*, 33); in this silence, one discovers the inner symphony of God’s epiphany and the inner harmony of creation, in which the logoi call one another into the bosom of incarnate meaning. It is a new song for which ears, as organs that enable us to hear, are not enough, but a hearing that is transformed through new birth. It is, therefore, a song by which both angels and humans celebrate God who has gathered His guests “from east and west, from north and south” for the Feast of Love.

In given theological context, it is quite clear that kalophonic melodies are justifiable if they are a part of Eucharist as an icon of the Age to come, and if they bring the faithful closer to the reality of the Eschaton and contribute to iconic ontology as a method of living in the Church. The mystery of piety, according to St Gregory Palamas, is fulfilled “not in words, but in realities” (Οὐ γάρ έν ρήμασιν ήμῶν, άλλ’ έν πράγμασιν ή εύσέβεια).²⁷ The leading representative of the hesychast way of life did not want to use this statement in order to differentiate between Eastern Christian realism and the nominalism of his Western adversaries. He wanted to consolidate

21 Cf. Γρηγορίου Θ. Στάθης, *Η δεκαπεντασύλλαβος ύμνογραφία έν τη Βυζαντινή μελοποιία*, Ίδρυμα Βυζαντινής Μουσικολογίας, Μελέται 1, Αθήνα 1977.

22 The gerund αναγραμματισμοί (from αναγραμματίζω) indicated the shift in the meaning of the word that is accomplished by reorganizing its letters, like in the following example: ήρα & άήρ. Cf. Henry G. Liddell –Robert Scott, *Μέγα Λεξικόν της Ελληνικής Γλώσσης*, τόμ. Α', έκδ. Ι. Σιδέρης, Αθήνα, 163.

23 Both approaches to the mystery of knowing God are based on the words of St John: No one has ever seen God; but the One and Only Son, who is near to the Father’s heart, He has revealed God to us.

24 *Συμειών ό Νέος Θεολόγος, Βίβλος ήθηκῶν λόγων*, 3, 17, ΕΠΕ 1988, 19 Β', 334–336.

25 Ίσάκ ό Σύρος, *Λόγος* 66 (65), transl. Wensinck 315, transl. Miller 321. “The movements of mind and heart during prayer represent keys. What follows is entering the most hidden chamber of the heart. There every movement of lips and tongue ceases. The heart, which is the hidden treasury of thoughts, and mind, the master of feelings, and reason, and the brave bird, with its richness and forces and convincing gusts, let them all be silent – lo, the Lord has come!” (Logos 22/23).

26 Ίσάκ ό Σύρος, *Λόγος* 22 (23), transl. Wensinck 112, transl. Miller 116 (Νικηφόρου Θεοτόκη, *Λογος* ΛΑ').

27 Γρηγορίου Παλαμά, *Πρός Φιλόθεον* 6, *Συγγράματα Β'*, Θεσσαλονίκη 1966, 521.

Orthodox believers in the belief that the reality of the Eucharist is a precondition for mystical and real unification with God, and a precondition for immersing oneself into the mystery of eternal life. In this way, Palamas confirmed that human words addressed to God, and even those that lead to the prayer of heart and mind, are not goals in themselves, but means that lead to ultimate reality, and that this is the final realization of every believer's life.

Just as the goal of silent prayer is not "prayer for its own sake", nor celebrating God without participating in His life, and especially not attaining the passive silence of Western quietists,²⁸ but participating in liturgical communion with Christ, the same goes for Church psalmody, because the goal of kalophony is not "singing for its own sake", not even under the guise of celebrating a distant and unreachable God by unutterable words (the fact is, nevertheless, that in the kalophonic repertoire there are certain kratimas whose designations "organikon" or "persikon" point to sources of musical inspiration; their interpretation demands extraordinary singing virtuosity, so we can rightly conclude that these melodies were meant to make singers famous, i.e. to expose their vocal potential; this is, however, a separate subject that should be analysed further).

In the communion of Christ's Body and Blood, the faithful find answers to their deepest questions regarding the meaning of life. In the event of unification with God, every hesychastic quest for uncreated light is fulfilled, as well as the need for the unstoppable celebration of God when words are not necessary; and this is affirmed by the hymns at the end of the Eucharist: "We have seen the true light" and "Let our mouths be filled with thy praise, O Lord".

28 Quietism is a movement that originated in the West in the 17th century, based on the ideas of Miguel de Molinos and Madame Gujon, who emphasized silence or quietness as their main principle, and this entailed rejection of all human activities. In order to achieve perfection, man must attain perfect passivity and nullification of will, surrendering himself to God in such a way that he does not even care about heaven or hell, and not even for his own salvation... The soul consciously rejects not only every disturbing thought, but every specific act, such as the desire for virtue, the love of Christ, and worshipping the Holy Trinity, simply having faith in the presence of God... Since this passive prayer demands the highest perfection, all external activities, such as repentance, such as patience, charity, confession of faith, etc., are completely redundant F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1997, 1357).