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AURAL ARCHITECTURE IN BYZANTIUM

Ed. Bissera V. Pentcheva
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This collection of essays is unique in its range, arising, as the Editor says, “from the challenge to reconstruct sonic and spatial experiences of the deep past [...] realized through cross-disciplinary collaboration and new research and collaboration (p.1). It began with Pentcheva’s research project “Icons of Sound”, in conjunction with Jonathan Abel, into the acoustical and aesthetic phenomenon of the mediaeval ecclesiastical space, most notably the Byzantine Hagia Sophia, and has not only resulted in this innovative book, but more immediately in recordings by Cappella Romana within the recreated space of Hagia Sophia, easily found on Youtube.

The first essay is by Peter Jeffrey; here he deploys his vast and deep knowledge of liturgy in many traditions in a wide-ranging discussion of the cathedral rite and its ascent, in Jerusalem, Rome, Constantinople and Alexandria, beginning naturally, with the fourth-century account of the Jerusalem liturgy written by Egeria. The discussion is much enriched by the addition of photographs of architectural elements of the buildings he discusses, most of them taken by the author himself, reinforcing his thesis that ecclesiastical architecture in these centres became more various following its initial basilica-centred beginnings, in parallel the liturgical-musical developments. Jeffrey’s contribution is complemented by that of Christina Maranci, who, by studying both architectural and liturgical evidence, aims to unveil the mediaeval Armenian ecclesiastical space. She concentrates on three seventh-century churches in great detail endeavouring to visualize their connection with the consecration ceremonies preserved in mediaeval Armenian liturgical texts. She is also careful to place enquiry within the context of both Jerusalem and Byzantium, thus helpfully locating her observations for those more familiar with the Byzantine rite and Byzantine architecture. Again, her observations are illuminated by the inclusion of very clear photographs.

The third chapter, by Christian Troelsgård, is entitled “Byzantine chant notation. Written documents in an aural tradition”, the use of the word “aural” where one might expect “oral” being essential to the author’s characteristically clear explication of a vast and complicated subject. As he says in his conclusion, “This is a plea for relinquishing the idea of categorizing chant traditions in a one-dimensional continuum from ‘oral’ to ‘written’. Instead, I point to the importance of studying the mechanics of oral-aural chant transmission and the variety of roles played by the written sources in the totality of ‘chant transmission’ in its sociological, ritual and physical contexts.” (p. 74) This plea is made not only through the author’s vast knowledge of the tradition, but through the practical application of “auralization” and the way that chant (in this case particularly from the *asmatika* and *psaltika* of the Great Church) is perceived in the cathedral soundscape.

Walter D. Ray contributes a discussion of the Byzantine liturgical commentaries, of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Pseudo-Dionysios, Maximus the Confessor, Patriarch Germanus, Nicholas and Theodore of Andida, Nicholas Cabasilas and Symeon of Thessaloniki, and discussed the opposition of the mystagogical to the anagogical. This latter, articulated especially by Maximus, is manifest architecturally in Hagia Sophia, in which the dome is a plastic rendition of a visual ascent, accompanied by the cosmic aspirations of the highly melismatic cathedral chant echoing in the acoustical space. Ray is nevertheless correctly anxious not to interpret the commentaries in terms of liturgical experience too literally, all of them reflecting the state of theological reflection of their time. The following two chapters deal with matters specifically architectural: Ravinder S. Binning discusses the “all-seeing eyes” of the depiction of the Pantocrator (a term whose usefulness or lack thereof the author discusses) in the dome of the Church of the Panagia in Trikomo, Cyprus. He relates this encounter between the faithful and the Judge of the Universe to liturgical developments at the Monastery of the Stoudion in Constantinople, and especially to the new liturgical poetry of Theodore’s Triodion. Lara Webb’s chapter deals with “Mosaic and liturgy at Nea Moni”, on Chios, specifically the relation between the depiction of the Transfiguration in the katholikon of the monastery and the way the feast is presented liturgically in the Typikon – she examines those from the Great Church (tenth century), Messina (twelfth century), and particularly Evergetis (eleventh century). These connections are very clearly and deftly brought out, though perhaps her conclusion is a little too speculatively poetic.

The chapter by Laura Steenberge, analysing word-music relationships in transcriptions of Cheroubika (from Conomos’s *Byzantine Trisagia and Cheroubika*) is somewhat unexpected in this context, being as it is a series of reflections from the point of view of a practitioner rather than an historian, but it serves very well to emphasize not only the continuity of tradition in these phenomena and their anagogical nature, but their continuing relevance to contemporary culture. This theme is continued in Ruth Webb’s chapter, “Spatiality, embodiment and agency in ekphraseis of church buildings”, in which she expatiates on the way these texts – the *ekphraseis* – were intended to suggest the reader’s actual presence in the building and the visual, ritual and acoustical phenomena experiences by being thus present. The authors of such texts bring about, the author explains, “a virtual multisensory experience of being inside the sacred space of the church” (p. 172), a description that sounds startlingly modern and neatly makes the connection between the “archaeological” aspects of this project and the sensorial aspects, accessible to us by means of the latest technology.

And that is explained in the final two chapters. Chapter 9, by Wieslaw Woszczyk, dealing with the acoustics of Hagia Sophia. He details his on-site acoustical measuring of the space, leading to the creation of a “virtual Hagia Sophia” in which the voices of Cappella Romana were able to resound in a remarkable concert given in the Bing Concert Hall at Stanford University in January 2013. The extent of this remarkable achievement may be understood when one reads that the acoustics were recreated “using forty statistically independent synthetic impulse responses generated from a model derived from a recording of one balloon pop in this church” (p. 194). The actual auralization of the concert, the recordings of which I urge the reader to seek out, is explained in great detail in the final chapter, by Jonathan S. Abel and Kurt James Werner. This, in spite of the formidable array of scientific minutiae, is no dry scientific report, but a text in which the excitement of what they have been able to achieve is palpable.

This book constitutes, then, a ground-breaking collection of essays opening up a new field of research with possibilities for future research and our understanding of “aural architecture” as yet unglimped and unheard.

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