

The Study of Byzantine Music – Secular and Divine

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Thesis;

3613711-Christodoulos_Halaris-A_Hunter_Appears.mp3

Music is an ever-evolving art form that borrows liberally from any available source and integrates it. The cultural life of Constantinople and the surrounding Byzantine Empire was filled with music that accompanied festivals, family celebrations and public functions.

Christianity played a huge role in the Empire both positively and negatively in the evolution of music as an art form. The secular music of the early festivals would have lived on; they were given a new religious meaning by the ruling elite but traditions are hard to co-opt and just as some ritual aspects would survive, some music would as well. The court discourse was to promote the state religion and naturally the court records are what survive. The common, working people had no easy way of preserving their art. Nearly all surviving examples of Byzantine music are liturgical and the discussion and research is weighted heavily in that direction. Secular music must have played a larger role in Byzantine cultural life than prevailing opinion holds to be true. A vibrant, well-rounded civilization has popular music as part of its everyday life. This music will seep into all “classes” of society, the construction of hymns and chants will borrow from music heard at festivals, chariot races, and court visits. A rich tradition dating back to Ancient Greece would have influenced courtiers and commoners alike and the day to day sounds of Constantinople would owe much to secular sources despite the lack of physical evidence. Stories and songs survive in society by being handed down, while only those with the means and wealth to no longer fear hunger or



poverty can set themselves to preserving cultural artifacts. The court had a liturgical agenda, as much for political reasons as spiritual ones and thus, the preponderance of hard evidence shows, only religious music was relevant to the Byzantine culture. It can be inferred, however, that the roots of this music owe much to common or “popular” music handed down through families and “pagan” traditions. The over-whelming bulk of historical research dissects liturgical work and debates notation and innovation because this is the easy way; it is what is in front of researchers. The work of uncovering hints and clues that lead to an understanding of secular music in the Empire is not being done to any great extent and those who do research secular items are often dismissed as having an agenda or of building imaginative bridges to fill in the blanks.



Folk music is the backbone of a society. It can chart public opinion, give an insight into moral values, and paint a picture of everyday life in ways that words alone may not serve to do. A greater emphasis on secular music in the study of Byzantine life may yield new theories and shed new light on an underappreciated avenue of academia. An understanding of the past allows us to see where we are in this moment of time in our own society and music certainly plays a role in making us who we are. It is legitimate to then infer that music helped shape the societal norms of Byzantine life and crediting liturgical music is only seeing half the picture.

Sources;

3613705-Christodoulos_Halaris-Death_Approached_A_Handsome_Man_In_The_Corral.mp3

Maria Alexandru “The Palaeography of Byzantine Music” Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Constantine Porphyrogenitus and His World, Arnold Toynbee, Oxford University Press 1973

Under the Presidency of Saint Paul, A.R. Littlewood, University of Western Ontario, 1995

The World on the Last Day, David Stacton, Faber and Faber ,1965

Barbara Schrodt, Sports of the Byzantine Empire, Journal of Sports History vol 8 #3,1981

Constantine Porphyrogenitus and the Book of Ceremonies, J.R. Bury, Oxford University Press, 1964

The Divine Music Project, A Website of Byzantine Chant Documents, Various Contributors

The music of Christodoulos Halaris

www.ec-patr.net a Website of Byzantine Music Documents, Various Contributors

All of the above listed sources would be considered secondary, however, they provide documentation and evidence that would be considered primary. The scholarly works of Bury, Toynbee, and Stacton acknowledge that physical evidence consists almost exclusively of liturgical music but recognize anecdotal evidence of secular pieces. The two websites listed were created to gather and organize Byzantine liturgical music and to provide a forum for discussion about that music. While certainly of a high standard they exemplify the academic bias toward religious study. The music of Christodoulos Halaris purports to re-create Byzantine secular music and would seem to be an ideal jumping off point for further study. His sources, however, are in dispute and the pieces have debatable qualities that call into question just how close they would be to the actual folk music heard in Byzantium.

A search of the internet under Byzantine music studies reveals thousands of sites with available documents. The over-whelming majority of these sites concern themselves solely with religious music, the secular aspect is incredibly under-represented.

The library resources include journal articles and books detailing research. The majority of that research is again concerned with religious studies and would seem to reflect a bias toward the prevailing winds of Byzantine theory.

There are undoubtedly documents out there in the academic world but to the casual researcher, all roads lead to the study of religious music and this certainly gives a slant to Byzantine studies that may not truly reflect the culture as a whole.

Argument; June 2006 saw a conference on Byzantine music in Copenhagen sponsored by the Monumenta Musica Byzantine. There were six keynote speakers who were not dealing with the topic of musical notation and only one of those touched on secular music and that was in passing. Maria Alexandru is concerned with the elements

of early Greek music that may have survived and sees the Byzantine “folk” music as a prime example of the continuation of Greek music. With its more than 7000 preserved musical manuscripts –the oldest codex, namely the famous *Heirmologion* Lavra B 32, dating from about A.D. 950–Byzantine chant presents a thesaurus of a thousand-year-old written tradition which is unique in world music history.

Tremendous research went on both in East and West, in order to discover and catalogue the Byzantine musical manuscripts, to decipher and analyse their contents. Alexandru knows these manuscripts are surviving liturgical pieces but a trained musicologist can find common roots with Greek folk tunes. These manuscripts will be dissected for countless years and a researcher with an eye toward secular clues will likely find uncharted waters to explore.



In order to give an example of current scholarly opinion, let us take a look at the introduction to Byzantine music provided by the Divine Music Project. “Byzantine music is the medieval sacred chant of all Christian churches following the Eastern Orthodox rite. This tradition, principally encompassing the Greek-speaking world, developed in Byzantium from the establishment of its capital, Constantinople, in 330 until its conquest

in 1453. It is undeniably of composite origin, drawing on the artistic and technical productions of the classical age and on Jewish music, and inspired by the plainsong that evolved in the early Christian cities of Alexandria, Antioch, and Ephesus. In common with other dialects in the East and West, Byzantine music is purely vocal and exclusively monodic. Apart from the acclamations (*polychronia*), the texts are solely designed for the several Eastern liturgies and offices. The most ancient evidence suggests that hymns and Psalms were originally syllabic or near-syllabic in style, stemming, as they did, from pre-*oktoēch* congregational recitatives. Later, with the development of monasticism, at first in Palestine and then in Constantinople, and with the augmentation of rites and ceremonies in new and magnificent edifices (such as Hagia Sophia), trained choirs, each with its own leader (the *protopsáltes* for the right choir; the *lampadários* for the left) and soloist (the *domestikos* or *kanonarch*), assumed full musical responsibilities. Consequently after ca. 850 there began a tendency to elaborate and to ornament, and this produced a radically new melismatic and ultimately *kalophonic* style

In the centuries before Constantine, there are no musical manuscripts—all the musical evidence is late; we have no music which is datable with the appearance of the liturgical hymn texts. But if our later musical sources have preserved for us even the essential features of the melodies with which these liturgical texts were first associated, they will enable us to form an idea, however partial, of what the earliest stratum of Christian music must have been like. The insoluble problem of Early Christian music is: how can one make deductions from the evidence in our earliest surviving musical manuscripts?”

Byzantine music is immediately categorized as sacred and while the roots of the music are acknowledged the bias is in discovering Christianity's roots rather than musical roots. Since Byzantine documents are some of the earliest surviving records of music, it is imperative that a scholarly light be trained on these documents with the idea of tracing our common conceptions of music itself without a religious component included. So-called “pagan” beliefs were suppressed and records eradicated but melodies and fragments survive and they can augment our understanding of ancient lives and practices. Those fragments exist in one form or another in the manuscripts of liturgical song and a new path of study must be travelled.

“Byzantine liturgical music did not come about in a cultural vacuum. It has its origins in the desert and in the city: in the primitive psalmody of the early Egyptian and Palestinian desert communities that arose in the 4th to 6th centuries, and in urban centres with their cathedral liturgies full of music and ceremonial. It is this mixed musical tradition that we have inherited today—a mixture of the desert and the city. In both traditions—that of the desert and that of the city—the Old Testament Book of Psalms (the Psalter) first regulated the musical flow of the services. It was the manner in which this book was used that identified whether a service followed the monastic or the secular urban

pattern.” “While it may be possible to date an early musical manuscript, it is virtually impossible to say how old the melodies in it are. The entire question may be seen not so much in terms of a faithful melodic preservation but rather as the degree to which traces of an ancient model may be gleaned from our earliest notated sources.” The Divine Music Project shows where the path of study must lay. Melodies are the shape of music handed down from mother to child, from father to son, from leader to community and the roots of who we are as a people. They will not be documented from their inception but they are the holy grail of music research as it pertains to a social understanding of humanity. With Byzantine music we are farther back along our social evolution than ever before.

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“The music for the hymns, which is virtually all the music that we possess from Byzantium, is entirely choral and follows a similar pattern of growing complexity. Although it is all modal, it in fact owes little to Classical Greek modes. What can be gleaned of its early stages shows fairly simple chants with usually one note to a syllable. Greater rhythmic and melodic complexity became possible in the middle Byzantine period with the emergence of trained choirs in monasteries and important churches. It is now believed that troping (the making of musical or textual additions to a pre-existing piece) was a Byzantine invention dating back to at least the eighth century and one which inspired the similar practice in the

west, contrary to earlier scholarly opinion that the influence was in the reverse direction.” Under the Presidency of Saint Paul, A.R. Littlewood, University of Western Ontario, 1995 pg19-20

Troping was essentially taking an existing piece of music and changing it to suit the needs of the situation. It does not seem like a major innovation but it is the clue that secular music was indeed present in the liturgical ceremonies. Pre-existing melodies and lyrical ideas were exchanged for what was needed in a particular religious festival and then became documented as the definitive version.

When discussing music it is also valuable to look at the actual lyrics or verse used. When replacing secular with religious, the only thing that needs to change is likely the

text and we have a hint of that during the discussion of the Louperkal festival by Arnold Toynbee.

“The earliest surviving specimen of accentual verse looks, in fact, like a popular song, and it is on record that it was sung by the Blues and Greens, with the two demes first singing alternate lines and then repeating the performance in massed choir, as part of the prescribed proceedings in the Hippodrome at Constantinople on the occasion of the Louperkal festival. Bury dates this spring song at least as early as the reign of Michael III” Constantine Porphyrogenitus and His World, Arnold Toynbee, Oxford University Press 1973, pg 551.

Bury reports that the Louperkal festival itself is a prime example of the church co-opting “pagan” events for use by the church. This was done quite often throughout history as a means of “selling” the religion to the common people while allowing them the holidays and celebrations that they were used to commemorating. The banishment of the Louperkal festival took some work and engendered hard feelings among the masses. “That festival is characterized as a matter of jesting and vile songs (*“ludibrii et cantilenarum turpium”*), a religious observance which is celebrated by remarks of obscenity and of crimes (*“quae obscenitatum et flagitiorum vocibus celebratur”*). It’s defenders argued that by carrying out this practice and publishing the misdeeds of everyone (*“haec agendo et facinora uniuscuiusque vulgando”*), men were deterred from such deeds and checked by shame, fearing that they would become the subject of public song (*“ne de his publica voce cantetur”*). The Pope replies that such a performance rather destroys shame and suggests criminal conduct. Jestering serves not to repress evil but as an occasion for merrymaking. One is actually affording a service to such a religion in committing the misdeeds which may be taken as the subjects of song. Thus the festival, like the whole pagan system, is grossly immoral.”

The relevance of secular songcraft is undeniable when viewed in this light. The Louperkal festival would have “named names” and quoted misdeeds and given us a true glimpse of the worries and woes of the everyday, working people in Constantinople.

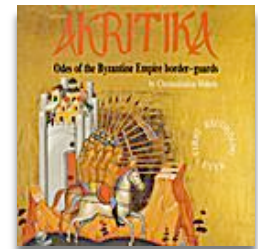


“The Hippodrome of Meat, the Byzantine version of Mardi Gras, marked the last day before Lent on which meat could be eaten. As a replacement of the pagan Lupercalia, it also heralded the beginning of spring, and was the occasion for ceremonial chariot races, choral singing, and dancing.” “Also located in the hippodrome were the silver bellows-type

organs of the Blues and Greens. There is evidence of an organ used in races in the fifth century, and by the tenth century, both organs were used in the imperial liturgy. It is also probable that these instruments accompanied the partisan dancers who performed in the interlude between races, and were used in the acclimation of chariot race victories.”
Pg 5 Barbara Schrodt, Sports of the Byzantine Empire, Journal of Sports History vol 8 #3,1981

There is clear evidence of festivals and celebrations that evolved to become religious in nature but did not start out that way. The research done by people such as Christodoulos Halaris needs to be verified by independent sources before we can accept his vision of secular Byzantine music.

Sometimes billed as “Chris Hallaris,” Greek composer and scholar Christodoulos Halaris is a leading expert on the study and reconstruction of ancient Greek and Byzantine music. He turned to musicology and composing after studying mathematics in Paris. Taking his cues from religious iconography and traditional popular Greek music, Hallaris began reconstructing fragmentary (and sometimes nonexistent) old Greek music documents. His re-imagining of secular Byzantine music, with what Hallaris identifies as roots in Hellenic song, has met with skepticism from some scholars, but it is based on a serious study of a number of sources and centuries of related developments in Greek music. He has published more than fifty compact discs of this music, and helped create the Museum of Thessalonica, devoted to Greek music and now engaged in a significant project revolving around European medieval music .



Halaris has released many albums of reconstructed secular Byzantine music including “Symptomika; Secular Music of Byzantine Banquets vol.I +II

3613699-Christodoulos_Halaris-The_King_Throws_A_Party.mp3

Relation;

The study of a culture’s art, literature, and music reveals much about the core values and discourses present in that society. The undeniable lack of physical proof of secular music in no way devalues the study of the forms and topics of Byzantine music outside of the liturgical setting. Research needs to continue if only because it seems that the building blocks are there to perhaps re-create something like Mr. Halaris has done and to have it truly reflect how this under-valued culture thought and behaved.

Conclusion;

The Divine Music Project states; “Thus, it is not until the fourth century, when Christianity and paganism collide as a result of Constantine's mass conversions, and when imperial ceremony entered liturgical solemnity in new and vast cathedrals, that music rears its formidable voice. And even then it did so under very special circumstances, and not without considerable monastic opposition. The monks of the desert likened tunes to demonic theatre, to false praise and to idle pleasure, satisfying the weak-minded and those of little faith and determination. But this does not mean that the monks did not chant. Their rejection was of worldly music, musical exhibitionism and the singing of non-scriptural refrains and chants. It was, in fact, the monastic population that later produced the first and finest hymnographers and musicians-Romanos the Melodist, John Damascene, Andrew of Crete, and Theodore the Studite. And it was the monastic population that also produced the inventors of a sophisticated musical notation which enabled scribes to preserve, in hand-written codices, the elegant musical practices of the medieval East.”

The monks rejection was of “worldly music”. Why? Because they saw that music as dangerous to the new order or as an affront to their God? These questions are very important when trying to understand the Byzantine way of thinking. The notation that survives and the chants that are preserved are, in a sense, the documents of the winners or the survivors and only tell a part of the story of Byzantium. The past is there to be investigated and better understood and the pieces are available to sift through. A new, updated understanding is possible.

Samples of Byzantine notation can be found at www.ec-patr.net