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The choir performance of Byzantine Music

In the broader ecclesiastic tradition (mainly in Scripture) but also in the relevant literature (especially in the sources of Liturgic, Typical or even Canon Law) there are numerous testimonies about the action of choir performance. Nevertheless, any thorough researcher of the history of choral music might, with reason, claim that the practice of choir performance constitutes nothing less than a “hidden mystery”. Issues such as the practical organization, the specific structure, the proper teaching and the systematic directing of a choir of chanters, or even the technique of choir performance, remain (in their details) musicologically undefined.

To be more exact, musicological sources simply repeat some testimonies (known from ecclesiastic tradition, and therefore theological in character), such as the one that follows, and which can be found in a theoretical text about chanting attributed to St. John of Damascus:

Who introduced with us such [innovation] as to exercise chanting of two separate choirs? Listen, pupil! The blessed Flavian, Archbishop of Antioch, allowed chanting of two choirs for the sake of harmonious and ever charming melody. Placing the chanters not far from each other and arranging the choir in [such] order, he conceived and ordered to chant so pleasantly and harmoniously that at first one part [of the choir] should be at rest then as if take over the other part's breath with the psalmody, and then as a result neither a chanter, nor listener would ever slumber. As it is, [one should sing] not by means of crying, like those who sing music. If you did wish to chant in

accordance with your abilities, then never would you strain [your voice] as those many, when they emit senseless cries and chaotic sounds. For then people do not know God, but rave and become violent. That is why Peter's canon also definitely [forbids singing] with cries, for a canon is a possession of those who chant it together. Therefore he does not allow [crying] and states the following: "We wish that those who are in God's churches should sing with fear of God and piety. We do not approve of the passion of those who take part [in chanting] for senseless uttering and yells". For it is written: "Do not violate your nature beyond measure". The hymns to God ought to be executed with the proper veneration, so that those who will praise God [might do it] with reverence. Just as the Holy Word was proclaimed by the luminary of the universe, renowned for [his] golden mouth, and [just as] the angels daily exhort those who come to church.

However, the following detailed account (by monk Gabriel, a Byzantine theorist of psaltic art) on the ideal way of calophonic (i.e. monophonic) psaltic performance presents us with something of specific musicological (but also purely psaltic) interest; in this account are also incorporated some useful pieces of information about the assistants of the soloist, revealing some specified practical instructions concerning the formation of a musical ensemble, albeit a reduced one, i.e. a rudimentary chanters' choir:

"It is also important to have with you one or two assistants, but definitely no more than that; otherwise, this would not be a calophony, but a choral ensemble. But this can be achieved only if the voices are nice and fitting. Now, if the voice of the chanter is not of that kind, he must hire assistants. All chanters have to be familiar with each other and to study in advance each others' parts; in this way, their voices will be in accord and the chant will sound more melodious. You should never take as an assistant a person with an

unpleasant voice; indeed, it is better for you to chant alone than accompanied by such a person, because in that case you will lose your own melodic charm. Now, the voice of the discordant and the cacophonous is either stony and faster than it should normally be, or feeble and distorted. And if somebody's voice is stony, it rises higher than is normal even against his will, whilst if it is feeble, it unwillingly goes lower. Such a person should be shunned, since their predicament is not confined to themselves alone, but is transmitted to all of us, making our voices drift either higher or lower..."

From the aforementioned testimonies results yet another theoretical deficiency of the chanting science, since, as we have noted from the beginning, the scarcity of primary sources prevents us from perceiving the historical background of the technical details of choir performance. On the other hand, it is this very scarcity that reveals the true nature of psaltic art: the singular way of the functioning of its constitutive elements (such as notation, sounds, rhythm, etc.) creates practical particularities precisely of that kind that must be dealt with very carefully during choir performance. However, these particularities cannot always be recorded theoretically in all detail. Nevertheless, I have the strong conviction that the second reading of the selected theoretical testimonies, which follows, clearly delivers a rough sketch of the details of any attempt for choir performance. More precisely, in the framework of a tentative approach to our subject, the aforementioned testimonies lead to the following remarks:

1. the practice, i.e. the ordinary procedure of choir performance

Choir performance is developed between two choirs of chanters in antiphony (following an alternating pattern which *renders the chanting harmonious and ever charming*). This manner of chanting implies two opposite

approaches, a positive and a negative one. According to the first (desirable) approach, chanting must be pleasant and harmonious (so that *neither the chanter nor the listener ever slumber*), and at the same time it must inspire fear of God and piety (so that it be heard and received as *“the voice of a soft breeze”*). Here the phrasing is characteristic: *“so that at first one part [of the choir] should be at rest, then it almost takes over the other part’s spirit with the psalmody.”* [Of course this image is reminiscent of a well-known Old Testament scene, which we will recall here through the vivid commentary by Alexandros Papadiamantis: *“... Elias the Prophet witnessed the divine epiphany [...] not in the violent wind, nor in the earthquake and the fire, but in the voice of a soft breeze. And the voice of the soft breeze is the voice of mild Jesus, the voice of the Gospel. This is the reason why the melodist says ‘Let us chant for the sake of mild Jesus.’ And that is why in the Church we must chant with mild voices, with the voice of a soft breeze, and not with loud and discordant voices similar to the violent wind and the earthquake through which God did not reveal Himself.”*] According to the second (undesirable) approach, the psalmody must not resemble a cry nor be senseless and chaotic (*“If you did wish to chant in accordance with your abilities, then never would you strain [your voice] as those many, when they emit senseless cries and chaotic sounds. For then people do not know God, but rave and become violent”*.) These two terms (senseless and chaotic) imply, I think, the notions, respectively, of personal study (by means of which what is senseless becomes understandable and acquires sense) and of collective endeavor (which greatly contributes to transforming chaos into order).

2. the technique, i.e. the manner of choir performance.

The desired coordination is attained on two conditions, one of which is innate and the other one acquired. The innate condition is to have talented chanters (with *nice and fitting voices*); the opposite should, without doubt, be

excluded (and, to repeat monk Gabriel's words: *You should never take as an assistant a person with an unpleasant voice; indeed, it is better for you to chant alone than accompanied by such a person, because in that case you will lose your own melodic charm... Such a person should be shunned, since their predicament is not confined to themselves alone, but is transmitted to all of us*). The acquired condition is the familiarity within the group of chanters (: *All chanters have to be familiar with each other*). This familiarity can be achieved only by means of systematic common study (: *The chanters must study in advance each others' parts; in this way, their voices will be in accord and the chant will sound more melodious.*) And of course what else is the monk Gabriel describing here if not the "rehearsal", which is familiar to any chorus' members?

This is how, based on some brief and (prima facie) vague old theoretical testimonies, we can (admirably) infer detailed information about the organization, the structure, the teaching and the direction of a choir of chanters, or even about the practice and the technique of choir performance.

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It is some of those elements, extremely important to the choir performance, that I will try to highlight in the present paper. To this effect, I will rely on the extant historical testimonies, but also on the conclusions of relevant musicological research. At the same time, I will base my remarks on contemporary chanting experience, both personal (in the frame of my general theoretical and practical commitment to chanting) and collective (since we will have the unique opportunity to hear the famous Greek Byzantine Choir

of Lycourgos Angelopoulos illustrate in practice what is here theoretically discussed). For the sake of brevity (but aiming at presenting an original contribution to the discussed topic), in my other paper that follows, I will omit some aspects that either have been (briefly or thoroughly) studied or constitute common issues in the field of choral act in general. I will thus exclude subjects of historical nature (such as the issue of the dress-code of a choir's members or the question of its exact structure, i.e. the number of its members, the distribution of the respective roles or the talents and the specific tasks of the chanters) or similar subjects, mostly technical (such as the so-called *isokratema*). I will also avoid commenting upon contemporary practices which prevail in the functioning of choirs, inside or outside the churches; I will instead focus on other, yet unexplored (as far as I know) areas, making specific remarks (rather aesthetic in character) pertaining to the teaching of choir performance, or even to the directing of a choir of chanters, and, in a broader sense, to the major issue of the so-called "*cheironomia*". All remaining elements will be covered in practice by the Greek Byzantine Choir and the live performances which will be presented during our conference...