

“Between East and West”, Choral syncretism on the two sides of the Aegean

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This article explores the parallel paths of two historically significant vocal traditions which developed in Istanbul: Greek Orthodox chant and Ottoman court music. As we will see, these two art music genres, apart from being developed in the same place, share a “similar fate” largely influenced by prevailing political trends of the 19th and 20th centuries. Moreover, both genres have been a source of inspiration for contemporary composers of choral music, both in Türkiye and Greece. These composers have contributed to the establishment of a “syncretic” choral genre which blends features of local music traditions and Western art music.

Greek Orthodox chant

The term “Byzantine music” refers to the ecclesiastical music of the Greek Orthodox Church. It should be noted that this term is problematic as it implies that the genre developed exclusively during the Byzantine period without evolving in the centuries that followed. Moreover, the term “Byzantine” itself is a neologism, which was coined by the German historian and humanist Hieronymus Wolf who lived in the 16th century, after the fall of Byzantium in 1453. For this reason, in academic contexts, other terms have been proposed such as “Greek Orthodox Chant”. In his Grove article, Kenneth Levy mentioned 12,000 to 15,000 surviving manuscripts dating from

before 1453, the earliest ones of which—written in ekphonic notation—date from the 9th century. He also emphasized that this genre continued to develop after the fall of the empire, flourishing mainly in monasteries and at the patriarchal see of Constantinople (Istanbul).

Basically monophonic, Greek Orthodox chant is performed a capella, accompanied by a vocal drone called *isokratima*. It follows a theoretical system consisting of eight modes that include intervals smaller and larger than the semitone, and which should not be confused with the modes found in Western church music during the Renaissance. The notation system used today is the result of a reform carried out at the beginning of the 19th century by the so-called “three teachers” Chrysanthos, Chourmouzos the archivist and Gregorios the Protopsaltes. Nevertheless, as the musicologist Nikos Andrikos points out, despite its “scholarly” character, Greek Orthodox chant shares both literal and oral elements. This means it cannot be transcribed into a music score with absolute accuracy, since there are specific features which are passed down orally from the older to the younger cantors.

Regarding the cantors who chanted in the Greek Orthodox churches of Istanbul, these seemed to be connoisseurs of court music as well. This becomes apparent by the large number of cantors who worked also as court musicians, some of which published editions of Ottoman music or even wrote theoretical treatises on this genre. It should be mentioned that the Greek Orthodox community was not the only non-Muslim religious community which contributed to the musical life of Istanbul. Equally important was the contribution of Jewish and Armenian musicians such as the composer Hampartsoum Limondjian (1768-1839), known in the imperial court as ‘Baba Hamparsum’ (Father Hampartsoum). Limondjian devised a notation system, called *hamparsum* notation, with which he transcribed hundreds of compositions of Ottoman court music as well as sacred and secular Armenian songs.



Concert in Lesvos, a Greek Island in the Northeastern Aegean Sea

Vocal music in the Ottoman court

Ottoman court music was essentially monophonic, performed traditionally in a heterophonic manner. It was organized by a system of modes and rhythms, known as *makams* and *usuls* respectively. In the Ottoman court, vocal music seems to have played an important role as indicated by a significant number of genres such as *kâr*, *beste*, *agir semai*, *yuruk semai*, which were part of the longer *fasil* form, in addition to the *şarkı*, the improvisatory form *gazel*, etc. Nevertheless, it should be made clear that these vocal genres were performed mainly by solo singers and not choral ensembles.

Until the early 20th century, when the use of Western notation was generalized, Ottoman art music was learned through a system of oral transmission called *meşk*. In the context of Ottoman visual arts, such as calligraphy, the term *meşk* referred to the copying exercises that teachers assigned to their apprentices. In music, the term *meşk* referred to the teaching process in which the student memorized orally the taught repertoire, by repeating its basic components, such as the poetic text, the rhythmic cycle (*usul*) and the melodic structures based on in the modal system of makams.

“Between East and West”

The “East–West” dichotomy can be traced back to Ottoman society as early as 19th century. Regarding music, this dichotomy was expressed by two opposing concept styles: the *alla turca* and the *alla franga* style, of which the first was identified with modernity and innovation, while the latter with the conservative commitment to tradition. With reference to this era, indicative is Sultan Mahmud II’s (reigned 1808–1839) decision to invite European teachers to Istanbul in order to train the musicians who played in the Ottoman Army and replaced the Janissary Corps, which had already been abolished in 1826. In addition, in 1828, Western notation was adopted as the “official system” of the Ottoman Empire. Similar was the fate of Ottoman court music during the years of the Turkish Republic, mainly due to the multicultural character of Ottoman arts in general, an element that could not contribute to the development of a Turkish national identity. Moreover, basically monophonic, Ottoman court music could not constitute the music of a nation claiming its place among the “developed” nations of the world. For these reasons, interest in this music was initially limited, while from the 1970s, the strong influence of State Radio and Television standardized a new performance practice of this music which was now performed

by large instrumental and vocal ensembles. Due to their size, and despite their monophonic character, these ensembles were reminiscent of Western-style orchestras and choirs. However, despite the relatively limited interest in it, Ottoman court music—as well as folk music from rural areas of Türkiye—has been a source of inspiration for modern Turkish composers. In his article “Singing with Style: The Turkish Choral Landscape” [ICB 2021-4], conductor Burak Onur Erdem identified two key features in Turkish composers’ choral music that indicate the influence of these genres: their irregular rhythmical structure and the modal development of melody and harmony under the influence of makams.

Interestingly, Greek Orthodox chant on the “opposite side of the Aegean” underwent a similar development during the decades that followed the establishment of the Greek State in 1830. Indicative was the case of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Athens, in whose Easter service in 1869 the choir performed some polyphonically harmonized hymns. This practice, despite the controversy it caused among ecclesiastical circles, was further developed during the reign (1867-1913) of Queen Olga, who was of Russian origin. Here too, vocal music was seen as a means of achieving an important goal: the development of a new national identity, of a nation placed among the other “developed” nations of the West. Therefore, early 20th century composers combined features of European art music with elements from Greek Orthodox chant and folk music in their choral works. In 1908, influential composer Manolis Kalomiris (1883-1962), presented his manifesto for the so-called “Greek National School”, the purpose of which should be “the building of a palace in which to enthrone the national soul” by combining folksong and folk rhythms with techniques invented by “musically advanced peoples”.

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