

# Contemporary Choral Music in Cyprus and its Cultural Characteristics

*Michalis Pagoni, choir conductor and music teacher*

The field of 20<sup>th</sup> century music encompasses a vast and varied range of styles. This can be at least partly explained by two factors, which may well be connected to one another: the century witnessed both the arrival of new notions of what constitutes music, and a huge number of active composers. Far more people committed themselves to the task of formal musical composition than in all previous centuries combined. Moreover, the increase was not merely numerical, but also geographical. The period that spans the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is one of the most important and interesting periods in the history of musical culture. This era, characterised by such important socio-historic and ideological changes, marks a new stage in the formation and evolution of choral music. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century music has become more fragmented than in any previous historical period, with each composer striving to find an original, individual voice. Those who draw inspiration from other music do so from past composers, rather than general, contemporary trends.

Just as in other art forms, the political upheavals of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a profound effect on music. During the economic depression following the various wars that blighted Cyprus, musicians and particularly composers were forced to make do with limited musical resources. This led to the development of small ensembles, and especially choirs. The

end of British dominion over Cyprus following the island's struggle for independence (1955-9) fostered a new atmosphere of creativity which saw a rapid development of the country's musical culture. The political events of 1974 also represented an important stage not only in the history of Cyprus, but also of its musical culture: the Turkish conquest of part of the island and the displacement of many people both had a huge impact.

Cypriot choral music is relatively young by European standards, having appeared in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was the same period in which revolutionary new trends arose in the choral music of many European countries, and the new choral culture became established. Due to its unique characteristics, choral music in Cyprus has gained worldwide recognition. Although socio-political factors have influenced its style and direction, its origins can be traced back many centuries in traditional folk music. Along with the development of the performance of choral art, the appearance of the island's first composers is particularly important for Cypriot music. Among the most important historical figures to have contributed to the development of the island's musical culture are Leandros Sitaros, Solon Michaelidis, Sozos Tombolis, Yagos Michaelidis and Kostas Ioannides. The number of choral works they produced and the influence that they exerted over contemporary literature and poetry have assured all of these names an important place among 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Cypriot composers. Even today, much of the music they composed remains as powerful and memorable as the day it was first performed. Other musicians, while playing a lesser role, also had a significant impact on the development of musical culture as a whole, both in terms of artists' performances and the way in which audiences experienced them. Both groups played such an important part in cultivating the choral culture of the island that the group as a whole can be referred to as the 'first Cypriot composers'.



## **Cypriot folk music as the foundation of choral art**

In some senses the musical life of Cyprus only began at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before this, the only music that existed on the island was the traditional folk song, sometimes accompanied by traditional instruments but more often not.

The term 'folk-song' implies a poetically phrased statement in combination with music, used to express the innermost feelings of a human being.[1] Poetry, generally speaking, is the intimate expression of the spiritual and aesthetic experiences and impressions of the individual poet. However, it can also articulate the emotions of an entire people without emphasizing the personal tastes of the individual. We may therefore say that 'folk-music' is the collective property of a people in which their spiritual and musical life is reflected.

We cannot say exactly when folk music appeared in Cyprus, but we can be sure that the islanders used it during their work and in various public rituals such as mourning. It might be said that every Cypriot carries a musical instrument within themselves, as music is present at nearly every moment of

island life.

The active development of music on the island essentially began in 1878, when the island fell under British domination. This period influenced every sphere of Cypriot cultural life, which in many ways came to reflect the culture of the colonising power. However, political autonomy is a vital prerequisite for cultural development and historians have noted that the achievement of independence was a key moment in the country's development, and especially in the fields of culture and music.

The development of several private music schools was another factor that affected the development of music in Cyprus. The appearance of many new choirs and orchestras greatly increased Cypriots' interest in music and collective singing. There were also many musicians from the island who chose to pursue their studies abroad, passing on their knowledge to others when they returned to Cyprus. World musical culture also had an effect on Cypriot composers. For example, their early work is characterised by nationalistic elements that reflect contemporary European trends.

Such impressive developments did not appear overnight, and would not have been possible without the hard work of many different musicians. There were almost certainly other factors that also contributed to this musical flowering, though the literature of the period makes no mention of it.

### **The Byzantine influence on the development of Cypriot folk songs**

Cypriot music was hugely influenced by the Byzantines, whose music was written in Greek and intended for festivities and ceremonial or ecclesiastical purposes.[2] Historians from both Greece and elsewhere agree that the ecclesiastical tones and the whole system in general of Byzantine music are closely

related to that of Ancient Greece. This tradition encompassed the whole Greek-speaking world, and was developed in Byzantium from the founding of its capital, Constantinople, in 330 until its fall in 1453. Its origins are undeniably varied, drawing on the artistic and technical productions of the classical age, on Jewish music, and inspired by the monophonic vocal music that evolved in the early Christian cities of Alexandria, Antioch and Ephesus.

A key figure in Byzantine music in Cyprus was Ieronimos o Tragoudistis (Hieronymous the cantor), a Cypriot student of Gioseffo Zarlino.[3] He flourished around 1550 – 1560 and, among others, proposed a system which enabled medieval Byzantine chant to correspond to the contemporary contrapuntal practices via the *cantus firmus* paraphrase and which would later have an important impact on traditional music in Cyprus. Other important figures of the island's Byzantine musical period include Chrysanthos of Madytos, Gregory the Protopsaltes and Chourmouzos the Archivist. The evolution of folk music in Cyprus therefore represents the characteristic features of Greek and Byzantine musical forms, and the island's music can be seen as a branch of both Greek and Roman folk music. The only feature that differentiates it from folk music in Greece is that the former has more erotic than heroic elements, giving Cypriot folk music a certain ancient charm.

Christianity has played a huge role in Cypriot society, and it is therefore unsurprising that it has also played a part in the development of its folk music. There are numerous examples of where a strong influence can be traced from Byzantine music to folk music on the island. Both kinds of music seek to recreate human experience with their outstanding melodic lines and metaphorical texts. Just as Byzantine music aims to create a relationship between Christians and God, folk-music aims to link one generation to the next. This explains why many researchers in the field of Byzantine music and folk-music who live and work in Cyprus have found structural similarities

between them.



*Concert by the Choirs "Ermis Aradippou" and "Kimon Xylotympou"*

### **Thematic characteristics of Cypriot folk music**

Both the content and theme of folk songs are always concrete in nature, and powerful imagery plays an important role. Nature, both animate and inanimate, is vividly described, and the lyrics work together with the other musical components, including melody, rhythm, horizontal harmony and tempo, to create a magical impression on the listener and provoke feelings of love, joy or grief.

In Cyprus, people are used to expressing their feelings through song, and their folk songs are characterised by their spontaneity, simplicity, freedom of natural expression and disregard for formality. However, the fact that folk-music on the island is generally monophonic is very important, as it was to have an impact on the subsequent development of choral music in Cyprus and the way in which composers worked.

With regard to their content, Cypriot folk songs can be divided into several groups, the most important of which are the Akritic epics and songs, regional songs, love songs, marriage songs, children's songs, humorous songs, songs of lament and Christian-religious songs.

The term 'Akritic' derives from the *Akritai*, army units which

guarded the eastern frontiers of the Byzantine Empire and fought many battles both in the borderlands and in Cyprus. The Akritic epics immortalise the feats of heroes such as Digenis, Porphyris, Andronikos and Konstantas – names that have been linked to historical figures who lived between 900 and 1000 AD. Lyrics based on battles against numerically superior enemies, as well as against snakes and lions, are no doubt connected to eastern legends. The contacts between Byzantium and the Arab world were so strong that not only did the spirit of Greece and Greek culture influence the Arabs, but the Arab world also left a lasting mark on Hellenic culture.

The regional songs are known as 'phones' on the island. Such songs are characteristic of certain regions and set the artistic standard for inhabitants of these areas as regards both lyrics and melody. Many regional songs have remained complete in terms of both lyrics and melody, among them such works as 'Paphitiki', 'Karpasitiki', 'Avgoritiki', 'Akanthiotissa' and 'Tilirkotissa'.

Love is the dominant theme in Cypriot folk-songs. In this group of songs the lyrical element prevails and is marked by a highly imaginative illustration of the subject matter with symbols and metaphors from nature, at times concentrating on the more sober experiences of the lovers. One image follows another, with the foreigner represented by a migrating bird, the girl by a rosebud, the beauty of a human being by the radiant sun, and tears by the rain. Love songs also often compare the two lovers to heaven and its stars, with the Earth and its trees, with tender basil, a red or white rose, or jasmine. At times the lover is compared to a tree, a falcon, a fresh water spring or the sun.

Marriage songs encompass an impressive number of works and are closely bound up with habits and customs on the island. They were first sung some fifty years ago, especially in the smaller villages, with the purpose of blessing the bride, the groom and the guests. The group can be further divided into

bridal preparation songs, drinking songs, songs related to the adornment of both bride and groom, songs for the married couple, for the best men and for the parents of the couple.

Working songs make up a special grouping in Cypriot folk music, and are sung either at work or for recreation. The original purpose of these songs was to reach a steady working rhythm in order to improve productivity, and they often cover themes such as the traditional methods of reaping, mowing, threshing, weaving or gathering the grape harvest. Most of these songs are light-hearted in nature and aim to ease the burden of hard labour.

Another group of songs in the traditional music of Cyprus is made up of music for children, which includes both songs sung for children and those recited by the children themselves. In the first category lullabies can be found together with songs having the opposite purpose, designed to keep children awake or encourage them to play. The second group includes those songs that children sing for their own sake while at play or simply to express joy, but also those that are intended to deepen their general knowledge and religious awareness, which might be deemed character-forming songs.

Just as they always have, Cypriot mothers still sing to their children to send them to sleep. In these songs the mothers express their wishes, expectations, and hopes for the child. They invoke happiness and hope that the goddess of destiny will grant their child a good life.

Humorous songs have always been important in Cyprus. They centre around human beings as an object of mockery and satire, particularly criticising or making fun out of those whose greedy, covetous or lazy behaviour differs from established norms, or who find themselves in strange or absurd situations. In reality, these songs also serve as a means of moral education for those who sing and listen to them.

The Cypriot choral art performed by artists and listened to by audiences is in fact the end result of long hours of work by choral conductors and composers on the island.

### **Professional choral art in contemporary Cyprus**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many composers of classical music were experimenting with an increasingly dissonant musical language, which sometimes yielded atonal pieces. Following World War I, and as a backlash against what they saw as the increasingly exaggerated gestures and formlessness of late Romanticism, certain composers adopted a neoclassic style which sought to recapture the balanced forms and clearly perceptible thematic processes of earlier styles. After World War II, modernist composers sought to achieve greater levels of control in their composition process, for example through the use of the twelve tone technique and, later on, using total serialism. At the same time however, composers also experimented to varying degrees with relinquishing control and exploring indeterminacy or aleatoric processes. Technological advances led to the birth of electronic music, and experimentation with tape loops and repetitive textures contributed to the advent of minimalism.

The later years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw great developments and an intense degree of creativity in choral music. The presence of numerous professional choral conductors – many of whom had studied in European countries including England, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Greece – and the appearance of new choirs, played an important part in the development of choral culture in Cyprus. Many of the greatest Cypriot musicians have now returned to work on the island, which speaks volumes regarding the state of choral music. The new generation of professional conductors includes names such as Angelina Nikolaidou-Spanou, Evi Afxentiou, Maria Kapetaniou, Michalis Pagoni, Stelios Karaolis, Francis Gais and many more.

Choral art found a fertile breeding ground in the country after 1955, when conductors made their first attempts to develop the genre. The choirs Aris in Limassol, founded by composer Solon Michaelides, and Leandros Sitaros in Nicosia, founded by the eponymous composer, may be regarded as the first professional ensembles in Cyprus.

The final years of the 20th century witnessed the creation of many new vocal groups, including mixed, local, national and children's groups, as well as choirs with a particular focus, for example those that base their repertoire around patriotic songs. The founders of these choirs have variously aimed to shape people's artistic hopes and expectations, to develop popular folk songs or to put on artistic representations of traditional folk music. It would be impossible to mention all of the choirs that are currently active on the island, but special recognition must go to: the Epilygy Cultural Society, which includes three ensembles and is conducted by Angelina Spanou-Nicolaidoul; the Modern Times Choir, conducted by Nicos Vihas; the Choir of the Musical Society of Paphos, conducted by Sotiris Karagiorgis; the Choir of the Cultural Society Ermis Aradippou, conducted by Michalis Pagoni; the Proodevtiki Larnakas Choir, conducted by Marios Lysandrou; the Choir of the Cultural Society of Limassol, which includes two ensembles and is conducted by Violetta Kakomanoli and Maria Kapetaniou; and the Choir of the Evagoras Music Ensemble, conducted by Loucas Zymaras.



*Concert by the Choir of*

## *“Ermis Aradippou”*

Local and municipal choirs have also made an important contribution to the choral music of Cyprus. Among them are the municipal choirs from the towns of Nicosia, conducted by Koullis Theodorou; Larnaca, conducted by Andreas Gerolemou; Derynia, conducted by Tasos Protopapas; Polemidia, conducted by Maria Georgiou–Mandaliou; Aglantzia, conducted by Neofytos Rousos; Famagusta, conducted by Nicos Vihas; Lakatamia, conducted by Maria Tumazian; of Paphos, conducted by Kleopatra Kotsoni, and many others besides.

This list could be far longer, but for practical reasons it is impossible to name everybody who is currently working in the field of Cypriot choral music. It is important to note that all of them, composers and choristers alike, are making an important contribution towards raising standards and promoting the choral art in Cyprus. Their many artistic achievements and the international recognition they have gained has lent Cyprus an important role in global choral culture during the last decade. There are many other choral groups and leaders who are contributing to the development of Cypriot choral art through their professional performances of choral works.

Both the establishment of a number of new choirs in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and the emergence of a new generation of young, professional conductors, have led to an increasing number of performances taking place not only on the island itself, but also overseas. In the last twenty years Cyprus has seen the creation of various festivals, concerts and symposia, based around choral art as well as other artistic disciplines, and which have given both conductors and singers the chance to meet new people, experience the festival atmosphere, gain ideas for their repertoire and establish ties with other choral groups.

The rapid development of vocal groups across the country also has an effect on choral repertoire. It significantly expands, enhances and enriches the work of the choirs with choral works from different genres and eras. Cypriots' rising concert attendance encourages all choir conductors to provide the audience with something new or less well-known.

Choral arrangements of traditional music occupy a central place in the repertoire of Cypriot choirs. Composers have written many transcriptions of traditional music, and even more have been produced by the conductors themselves by arranging and adapting folk songs to match the abilities of their ensembles.

Conductors have also shown a strong tendency for arranging many songs written by Greek composers such as Mikis Theodorakis and Manos Hadzidakis. In addition to this, there are a remarkable number of different arrangements of the same songs written principally by the choral conductors themselves. The choral repertoire also includes works written by renowned composers of all eras, from Bach to Mozart and Beethoven, and from Verdi to Orff and many others.

Predictably, a large part of the choral repertoire on the island consists of songs with a patriotic theme. Composers' strong links to nationalist sentiments mean that these songs are performed on several occasions throughout the year.

It is fair to say that choral works written by Cypriot composers occupy an important place in the repertoire of the island's choirs. An example of these works is the *Hymn of Grieving for Cyprus* by Solon Michaelides, the cantata *9<sup>th</sup> July* by Michalis Christoudoulides, the choral song *Violin of Twenty Years Ago* by Andreas Charalambous, and many others.

## **Professional choral composing in Cyprus**

The appearance of many new choirs around Cyprus has led to a growing interest by composers from the island to create new choral works. All 20<sup>th</sup>-century Cypriot composers had close ties to local choirs around the country, which led to the creation of an important number of new choral works.

Among the many composers and musicians who played an important part in the development of the choral art in Cyprus are Andreas Charalambous, Christodoulos Georgiadis, Sotiris Karageorgis, Leandros Sitaros, Solon Michaelides, Sozos Charalambides, Sozos Tombolis, Andreas Gerolemou and Michalis Christodoulides.

These composers' choral works reflect wider changes in Cypriot society. The pieces are characterized by a high degree of fluidity and expressiveness, but do not impose any new aesthetic requirements on the original traditional music of the island. More modern Cypriot composers have also tended to reproduce an impression of today's society within their music. An analysis of Cypriot composers' choral works from this period shows that the spirit of patriotism is evident throughout. However, composers have also used choral songs to express their feelings, describe painful experiences, seek the healing power of confession and encourage others to express their emotions through the powerful medium of the choral art.

Choral songs, with or without accompaniment, have proved to be the most popular genre for Cypriot composers. Popular oratorios, cantatas and requiems, again with a patriotic content, typically form a large part of their output. The use of musical symbolism and imagery is also a key part of many works, and typically varies according to the ideological and artistic outlook of the composer. They are characterized by the repetition of a short melody, which takes on the role of the refrain, but with different lyrics every time.

When Cypriot composers use the term 'oratorio', they do not generally intend the classical genre of that name. Instead,

they use it to refer to cycles of songs that are closely related to one another in terms of subject matter, musical accompaniment or lyrics. Based on these principles, the works take their name from their composers and are known as 'popular oratorios'.

Artistic poetry has played an important role during this period of the development of choral music. Its structure is characterized mainly by free verse, but traditional rhyming forms are also employed. To name but a few, some of the most important representatives of contemporary Cypriot poetry are Kleri Angelidou, Costas Mondis, Kypros Chrysanthis, Rina Katseli and Tevkros Anthias. Their poems are marked by an unusually strong emotional tension, while their content is based on personal experiences and memories. These poems have provided many interesting ideas not only to Cypriot composers, but also to those in other countries, especially Greece. Such ideas have been integrated into choral works, giving them both national and cultural significance.

The folk-figures and images of the island's traditional music also have a special place in the choral works composed by Cypriot composers. Many composers use folk forms in their works, and while it is often difficult to trace their origins, it is certainly true that folk music has contributed to Cypriot composers' work. The evidence of this influence is to be found both in quoted expressions, whether fragmentary or complete, and in traditional rhythms.

All of these features play an important role in the choral music of Cyprus composed from 1975 up to the present day. Even now, these are the features that form the foundation on which the younger Cypriot composers have developed the presence of choral culture on the island.

**The status of choral art in Cyprus and its cultural**

## **prerequisites in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Many artists have contributed to the development of the choral art in Cyprus during the last few years. In addition to these, many choral conductors have also made a vital contribution, some of which have already been mentioned above, as have the many composers living and working on the island. Moreover, many of the choral groups that are organized and working in Cyprus are playing an important role. Aside from academic choral music, which is being studied in the two major private universities of the island, an important role in the overall choral culture of Cyprus is occupied by the vocal ensembles and vocal groups based in cultural centers.

The choral festivals that are organized around the country, which act as important meetings for both singers and conductors, also play a major role in raising the levels of professionalism in contemporary choral art in Cyprus. At these festivals, singers have the opportunity to hear other choirs from abroad and experience the beauty of choral art in Cyprus, as well as the chance to meet with colleagues and expand their choral events. The festivals also allow choirs to organize more choral exchanges or to invite other choirs from abroad to visit Cyprus for choral meetings and concerts.

Various congresses, mainly organized in Greek cities and aimed at choral conductors, also play a significant role. At these events conductors have the opportunity to exchange their experiences of working with choirs, make new friends and contacts, and enhance their reputation. Unsurprisingly, the congresses help to forge cooperation and contribute to many artistic achievements in the field of choral culture.

Over the last ten years, choral art in Cyprus has played a special role in the lives of ordinary people. Choral culture on the island is still undergoing a period of development and growth that will lead to further successes. It is clear that choral music has largely been led by amateur and community-

based choirs, with a relative absence of chamber, male, female, boys' and girls' choirs. Patriotic themes, we note, occupy a particular place in the music of the country as a whole.

Undoubtedly, a great effort will be required if the active development of the choral art is to be continued. But Cyprus possesses talented and well-trained composers and conductors in abundance, who are ready to pass on their knowledge to the next generation and strive for a more active development of the island's choral culture.

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[1] Gottfried J. Herder, Herders Werke, Suphan, p. 25.

[2] The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th ed., 2007 – Byzantine music.

[3] Gioseffo Zarlino (31 January or 22 March 1517 – 4 February 1590) was an Italian music theorist and composer of the Renaissance. He was possibly the most famous music theorist between Aristoxenous and Rameau, and made a large contribution to the theory of counterpoint as well as to musical tuning.

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