

A Brief History of Greek Choral Music

Stathis Oulkeroglou, composer, choir conductor, Director of Agios Stefanos Music School, General Secretary of the Pan-Hellenic Association of Choral & Instrumental Ensembles' Conductors

It is said that the Greeks are no strangers to choral music. If we think about it, this comes as no surprise, since choral music originated from the ancient Greek tragedies more than 2500 years ago. In the tragedies, the chorus would sing and dance throughout the performance, in much the same way as they did in classical opera.

After the establishment of the Byzantine Empire, the rationalist way of thinking cultivated in Ancient Greece began to steadily disappear. Nowadays, art based on Greek Rationalism has become increasingly popular in Western culture, whilst Byzantium has been influenced more by mythical, oriental culture. That said, music goes its own way, and often contains elements which can characterize it, generally, as being either oriental or westernized. This, however, is not the case with choral music, which can be categorized as both Eastern (Byzantine) and Western (Roman). This is because it was based primarily on Mass in the Christian Church, which in the Great Schism of 1054, had been divided into the Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) branches. As a result of this split, complete separation began to be called for, in order to make completely clear which category specific characteristics belonged to.

After the fall of the Byzantine Empire, during the time of the Ottoman Empire, Greek choral music was considered sacred.

Despite not being polyphonic, it relied on a second voice to act as a pedal, known as *isokratias* in the original Greek. According to the old manuscripts that have been discovered, in some cases, Byzantine music was influenced by the polyphony of Europe.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, some aspects of Hellenism were very similar to Western culture, and Polyphony and Homophony developed both through choirs (the Ionian Islands), and through opera, orchestras and bands (the Ionian Islands, Smyrna, Constantinople).

After 1828, upon being declared the first governor of the New Greek State, Count Kapodistrias made great efforts to introduce the Greek people to European Music. He had been inspired by not only his childhood in Corfu and Western Europe, but also by Russia where his political career had evolved and developed. Unfortunately, his efforts were in vain and European music did not take off.

In 1833, the Bavarian Othon A' (Otto Friedrich Ludwig) was crowned as the first King of the new Greek nation. Athens had been named as the new capital and parades were accompanied by bands playing European marches. The flamboyant uniforms worn by the musicians in the bands included hats bearing crests, which appealed greatly to the Athenians who, as a direct result of these events, gradually became more and more accustomed to the sounds used in European music. Little by little, all aspects of Athenian lifestyle became more westernized, including their fashion and way of dress. This can be seen simply from looking at portraits from the period, which depict bourgeois gentlemen wearing the traditional *fustanella* (kilt) with European-influenced shirts, ties and coats, topped with an Ottoman fez hat.

As the 19th century drew to a close, Vienna's Greek community welcomed a group of musicians who, inspired by European

polyphony and homophony, hoped to arrange Byzantine single melodies into three- or four-part choral pieces. This kind of arrangement had never previously been accepted by the Greek Orthodox Church, or by the (Orthodox) Ecumenical Patriarchate.

At the same time, large numbers of music teachers arrived in Athens from foreign nations including Austria, France, and Italy, and contributed to the promotion of European-style music by offering lessons to children from wealthy families. This idea spread like wildfire across Greece's urban areas and cities, all the way to its ever extending Northern and Eastern borders.

Contemporary researchers later established unofficial music schools and Western-style choirs in several areas around Greece, from the beginning of the 20th century onwards. The founder of each of these schools, as can be easily seen from their records, tended always to be a European musician who had come to live permanently in Greece.

During the National Resistance against Germany, artistic groups were created within the Partisan Army, focusing on theatre and choral music, amongst other themes. These groups visited villages to provide entertainment for the local inhabitants and to spur them to help the Resistance. Akis Smyrneos, Alekos Xenos and Dinos Pandas are three renowned conductors from such choirs, who also composed partisan songs which became nationally famous.

After the Second World War, this type of choir began to re-emerge, either as a newly-formed group or as a veteran one that had managed to survive the German Occupation.

Some years later, in the 1980s, Greek choral music grew in popularity and importance. The first reason for this was that Antonis Kontogeorgiou had returned to Greece, after having both successfully established himself in Germany and founded the State Radio Choir. The second reason was that the

creation of choirs had become fashionable, causing festivals to be set up across the country, often led by conductors whose knowledge of the music left, at best, a lot to be desired. The third, and final, reason was that the Greek Ministry of Culture had become greatly interested in choral music, and had decided to split Greece into four choral circuits, which would be conducted by Antonis Kontogeorgiou, Yiannis Mantakas, Michalis Adamis and Stefanos Vassiliadis.

Currently, as a result of a downturn in the economy and changes to ideology, many of the better choirs are likely to cease performing, and the festivals where they would normally perform close down, leaving behind only the weaker choirs.

There are numerous associations to which both conductors and choirs belong, the most important being the Pan-Hellenic Association of Choral & Instrumental Ensembles' Conductors and the Hellenic Choirs Association. The oldest association of choirs is the Union of Choirs in Greece.

E-mail: mousic@otenet.gr



Stathis Oulkeroglou, composer, choir conductor, Director of Agios Stefanos Music School, General Secretary of the Pan-Hellenic Association of Conductors of Choral & Instrumental Ensembles

Edited by Will Masters UK