

# The Tradition of Choral Singing in Albania

*Suzana Turku*

*choral conductor & Vice Minister for Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Albania*

Albanian musical culture is as ancient as the Albanian people who lived in the Balkan Peninsula and were known under the name of *Pellazgë*. An important part of their culture is the art of choral singing. Choral singing in our country, apart from being a part of our folklore and therefore an intangible folk heritage value, is also considered of great value within the artistic culture which was fostered by the Albanians throughout their national history.

Albanian *a cappella* folk singing, known as iso-polyphony and handed down to us over the centuries, is nowadays internationally well known and recognized for its particularly great values: the UNESCO honored it by including it in the category of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Besides being part of our intangible heritage, *a cappella* singing still vitalizes the musical life of our country. Iso-polyphony is still widely practiced by the inhabitants of the southern territories and is based on two dialects: *Lab* and *Tosk*, each with its different style and particularities. Iso-polyphonic choral singing has influenced and oriented choral art, with many connections between them. Besides traditional folk group singing, choral singing has also seen considerable improvement in our country.

Right from the first century of our era, at the time when music was influenced by the Christian religion, various composers were active, such as Nikete Dardani (340-414), who

was born in Dardania and who wrote several sacred works. His masterpiece is a *Te Deum*, still genuinely testifying to the long tradition of choral singing in Albania. Nikete Dardani is always remembered on 7<sup>th</sup> January according to the Catholic calendar.

During the Byzantine period, from the fourth to the eighth centuries, the well-known Jan Kukuzeli was a real musical talent and one of the great reformers of Byzantine music, on account of which he was appointed head of the Imperial Chapel of Constantinople. During his pilgrimage to Mount Athos in Greece, he created various religious vocal works including *The Biblical Psalm (N°.117)*, *The cherub song*, *The great Papadik Iso* [Great Pope Gerguri] among others. He also created the very important Kukuzeli theoretical system, which was highly innovative, and he influenced the creation of the Byzantine musical alphabet. Jan Kukuzeli composed many religious that influenced the artistic quality of music and improved the art of singing. Because of the longevity and the values of two of his works, *Commitment to prophets*, and *The last supper*, the Italian musicologist Giuseppe Ferrari, in his work *Albania and Byzantine Liturgical Music* (published in Palermo in 1979), wrote: "... these two works can be heard not only in the Greek monasteries but also in the great cathedrals. In Constantinople cathedral I was interested to hear the Kukuzeli works and I thought about Durrës and Kukuzeli, proud to be Albanian ..."

The period after Kukuzeli provides no data reflecting significant developments in musical culture, but between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries we find choral pieces written by many Albanians living in the Italian territories during the Ottoman invasion, notably the sacred choral music of Gjergj Danush Lapacja with his 1532 work *Antifonarit*, which is preserved in the Diocese of Monopoli in Italy.

Even in the period of musical classicism and romanticism, many Albanians composed choral music while living abroad. Particularly noteworthy are *Mesha* and *Oratori* by Luigi Albanesi (1821-1897) or *Ave Maria Coelorum* by Mihovil Mijo Qurković (1852-1936), an Albanian composer who lived in Croatia.

Choral singing in Albania has a long history of progress and tradition but it is hard in some cases to find historical documentation testifying to this on account of 500 years of Ottoman occupation with its subsequent political issues. Despite all the difficulties and intermissions in this tradition during various periods of Albania's political history, the art of choral singing is as ancient as the Albanians themselves, who mostly perform it in the churches. During all these periods, choral creativity was concentrated on, and music was performed exclusively in connection with religious life.

It was the Albanian Revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that, despite mobilization against occupation, also gave new inspiration and orientation to Albanian folk music following the examples of other European countries. For this reason, a new way of approaching secular choral music, emphasizing the war of liberation and patriotic values, became very popular not only in churches but also in other public domains.

The art of choral singing was characterized by heroic and patriotic themes, used to promote Albanian enlightenment ideas during this liberation period. From now on, Albanian music passed through many periods, the first of which is represented by the Albanian Revival period as far as the Declaration of Independence (1912), when choral music followed the example of other Balkan patriotic music. Meanwhile the first choirs were organized in close conjunction with cultural and patriotic organizations at the beginning of the twentieth century. Among the greatest composers of that time are Palokë Kurti, Frano

Ndoja, and Thanas Floqi who, besides composing orchestral music, created many choral pieces, frequently in the style of folk songs. The choral pieces, inspired by democratic and patriotic motives, spread all over the country, becoming more popular and beloved every day over and above other types of music. Choral inventiveness during this phase is distinguished by great creativity of songs with patriotic motives, the main national theme before the Declaration of Independence in 1912.

The texts of choral songs of this period were mostly inspired by the heroic fight against occupation, in which the Albanians were engaged. Among them figure *You Brave Soldiers, For the Motherland, All We Lads, My Honor Calls Me, Missing the Motherland*, and *Sons of Skanderbeg*<sup>[1]</sup>, which are still part of the contemporary repertoire of Albanian choral music. Many authors of the texts of these songs, such as Mihal Grameno, Asdreni (Aleksander Stavre Drenova), Pashko Vasa, and Hil Mosi were at the same time leaders of the national independence movement.

The second period is represented by the musical progress taking place in Albania after the Proclamation of Independence, and extends from 1912 to 1944. This was a period during which the professional and dynamic aspects of Albanian music were most widely developed. Patriotic and cultural organizations which were formed during the Albanian Revival continued working on the extension and development of choral music all over the country. In a short time, cultural centers were opened in many cities, including Korçë, Shkodra, Gjirokastër, Elbasan, Vlorë, Durrës, and Berat. Their activities vitalized the artistic life of the main Albanian cities and lent a new approach to choral singing. During this period, choral creativity was inspired by patriotic themes in all aspects of its harmony and arrangement. The best-known composers of the time were Lec Kurti, Thoma Nasi, Martin Gjoka, Fan Noli, and Kristo Kono, who composed many religious and secular songs in folk style. Choirs became more

and more professional and attractive. The main reason underlying progress was the participation and help given by many composers who had studied in the West.

The most important vocal group of that period was the Lira Chorus founded in the city of Korçë in 1920 under the direction of the composer Nasi, who had studied composition in the USA. Later it was directed by the singer Mihal Ciko and the composer Kono, who had both studied in Italy. Some of their best works are *Vlora-Vlora* and *Hymni i Vatres* (*The Hymn of Hearth*), composed by Nasi, *Çu ngrit lulja në mëngjes* (*The flower rose in the morning*) and *Zoge ku më je rritur* (*Where did you grow*) by Kono. Later, Kono gave major examples of the choral singing perspective in works like *Albanian Choral Rhapsody N.1* and *Albanian Choral Rhapsody N.2*, composed in 1938 and 1939 respectively.

The Lira Chorus was disbanded in 1939, when Albania was occupied by Italian troops, and revived only after the end of the war. In 1932 a girls' choir was also created at the 'Queen Mother' school in Tirana under the direction of the singer Jorgjia Filce (Truja), who had studied in Italy. In the choir's repertoire there were many works by European composers of the time besides Albanians. It was also involved in many stage plays between 1930-1940.

The work of church choirs such as the Scuola Cantorum in Shkodra, or the choirs of churches such as Shën Thanasi, Shën Gjergji and Shën Ilia in Korçë was notable at the time. The Scuola Cantorum was founded at Shkodra Cathedral on the initiative of the cardinal and composer, Father Mikel Koliqi in 1932. In his monograph on Cardinal Mikel Koliqi, *Symphony of a Life*, Professor Gjon Simoni writes: "... in a place of honor in the choral repertoire were also the works composed by Cardinal Mikel Koliqi with religious themes such as *Viri Galilei*, *Confirmat Hoc Deuc*, *Cor Jesu*, *Sacerdotes Domini*, and *Ecce Sacerdos ...*"

The choral singing tradition in Shkodra has been acclaimed since the nineteenth century, but the Scuola Cantorum is considered an especially emblematic part of it. A very important role in this must be attributed to the Catholic Church in Albania. Under the direction of Cardinal Koliqi the choir became a place where an entire generation of musicians grew up and became famous: Prenkë Jakova, Çesk Zadeja, Tonin Harapi, Tish Daija, Simon Gjoni, to name but a few.

Even during the Second World War there were other choirs such as the Orthodox Church Chorus founded in Tirana under the initiative of the Archbishop of the independent Orthodox Church of Albania Visarion Xhuvani in 1942. From its foundation until 1945, the choir was headed by the well-known soprano Jorgjia Filce who has already been mentioned for her various initiatives with the pupils of the Queen Mother school and the Tirana Technical School. The choir maintained its tradition of church music even in other cities like Durrës and Elbasan. After 1945 the choir was conducted by Kostandin Trako, who had trained as a choir-master in Bucharest, Romania. Under his influence the interpretative qualities and repertoire of the choir improved.

Furthermore, during the Second World War, a male-voice choir was also created at the Tirana Radio Center, headed by the singer Ciko until 1947, when it was attached to the Albanian Philharmonic Chorus. The chorus worked very hard at the interpretation and harmonization of choral folk music for male voices. Other choirs were created during the Second World War, such as the Anti-fascist Youth Chorus formed in 1944 near Tirana, headed by Trako, and many others including that headed by Gaqo Avrazi which, after the end of the war, became the People's Army Artistic Ensemble Choir.

The songs created during the war are known as Partisan Songs. They were inspired by other world revolutionary songs, mostly from the Balkans. They were also influenced by patriotic songs from the time of the National Revival, city songs and

others, demonstrating a close connection to folk songs following the Albanian folk musical metrics of 7/8, 5/8, 4 + 5/8 etc. These inspirational partisan songs were well known for their spirit of mobilization and bravery. *Marsh Partizan* (Partisan March), *Malet me blerim mbuluar* (Green covered mountains), *Partizani n'luft po shkonte* (In the war the partisan was going), *Shqiponjat Partizane* (The partisan eagles), are the best known songs even nowadays. Among the most famous composers of partisan songs were Dhora Leka, Sofokli Paparisto and Mustafa Krantja, as well as Kono and Trako, who have already been mentioned.

The third period covers all musical progress between the end of the Second World War and 1960. At the beginning of this period, Albanian music developed greatly. Many professional musical institutions were opened, among them choral ones, and the first Albanian music school began its activity. In later years it would make an enormous contribution to the preparation of composers. After the end of the Second World War, under pressure from communist ideology, choral music was encouraged all over the country to support communist-inspired national propaganda. During this phase many choirs were created, such as the People's Army Artistic Ensemble Choir (1945), the State Philharmonic Chorus (1947) which became part of the Opera and Ballet Theater (1953), the State Artistic Folk and Dance Ensemble Chorus (1957) and the first music school, Jordan Misja (1946). Following that example, other choirs were organized all around the country close to other cultural centers and became a very important element in the cultural life of Albania.

Apart from folk choral singing, other varieties of music appeared such as the cantata, vocal suite, vocal rhapsody, vocal poem, and oratorio, and many stage works such as the opera where the chorus plays an important role. The most famous choral works of the time are the vocal-symphonic poems like *Borova* and *Labëria* by Kono and *Dasma Shqiptare* (Albanian

wedding) by Kostandin Trako, as performed by the State Philharmonic Chorus. Apart from the national music repertoire there was enormous interest in international composers, and Albanian choirs also began performing in other countries including USSR, China, North Korea and Vietnam.

The interpretative quality of the professional choir grew constantly through artistic courses and schools. The quality of choral music creativity began to reach a very high level thanks to composers who had studied abroad like Kono, Trako, Jakova and Dhora Leka, Zadeja, Daija and Gjoni, who studied in eastern music schools. All these figures made their contribution towards improving and modernizing choral music in Albania.

The fourth period extends from 1960 to 1990. During this period, Albanian music reached the level of a fully developed culture with its own quality and national identity. Qualified choirs intensified their activity and creativity all around the country. All this was possible thanks to the opening of new musical education centers, the opening of the first Music Conservatoire (1962), the possibility of having more professional music information from abroad and better organization of events. Many composers, conductors and vocalists who studied in the Albanian music school lent real prosperity to a large opus of the national choral tradition. During this period a new affluence of musical creativity and a new dimension of event organization can be perceived. Directors concentrated more on music for the stage and on vocal concert creativity.

The first Albanian opera *Mrika*, composed by Prenkë Jakova, was followed by many others by various artists including Kono, Grimci, Nova, Gaci, Tonin Harapi, Mula, Kapidani and N. Zoraqi. The main theme still remains Albanian resistance against occupation over the ages. Very often these operas evoke the character of 'Skanderbeg', or the anti-fascist resistance of the Albanian people during the Second

World War. A general view of Albanian opera of that period would show the dominance of grandiose scenes where the role of the chorus was particularly important. The most successful are *Skënderbeu* by Jakova, *Lulja e Kujtimit* by Kono, *Zgjimi* by Harapi, and *Komisari* by Zoraqi.

Large choral works were developed at this time: for example, *Kënga e maleve* (The mountain song), the vocal suite *Vullnetarët* (The Volunteers), *Poema e Dritës* (The poem of the light) by Harapi, the cantata *Komisari* (The commissioner) by F. Ibrahim, the oratorio *Partizani* (The Partisan) by T. Hoshafi, and choral poems like *Përse mendohen këto male* (Why these mountains are thinking) and *Shqiponjat fluturojnë lartë* (Eagles fly high) by T. Daia.

Together with stage and concert choral songs, the harmonization of choral folk songs became popular, where many composers like Zadeja, Harapi, and Milto Vako made their contribution with many works including *Shkon djali termal* (The boy goes beyond the mountain), *Kur me zbret nga Voskopoja* (When descending from Voskopoja) and *Kurvelesh zemra ime* (My heart Kurvelesh) by Cesk Zadeja and *Pranvera filloi me ardhe* (The spring is coming), by Tonin Harapi.

The period from 1960 to 1990 was very rich, with cultural activities all over the country. From 1967 onwards, the 'May Concert' was organized in Tirana where children's choirs from many music schools all over the country took part together with professional choirs. This fourth period brought technical perfection in singing technique and in vocal qualities. Until 1967 the Orthodox and Catholic church choirs continued their choral singing activities. Later the communist dictatorship forbade the performance of religious rites and with the closure and destruction of all religious buildings, choirs were also suppressed. Despite the progress that choral music had made over the years, it could hardly remain undamaged by communist propaganda and ideology.

The fifth period runs from 1990 to the present, a period covering the fall of the dictatorship and the restoration of democracy. After 23 years of silence, choral music returned to the Orthodox and Catholic churches under the leadership of such personalities as Gjon Simoni, Gjon Kapedani, Milto Vako, and Zef Coba, with many high quality pieces including *Deus in adiutorium intende*, *Requiem* by Harapi, *De Profundis*, *Ave Maria* and *Stabat Mater* by Simoni and other non-religious works such as *Rini më e bukur se Pranvera* (A youth more beautiful than the spring) (Cantata for mixed choirs) *10 Kenge për kor mikst*, (Ten songs for mixed chorus) *Dremit liqeni*, (The lake is asleep) *Requiem për humbjen e ëngjëjve* (Requiem for the angels lost) by Ibrahim, *Gaudeamus*, *Lutjet e Nënë Terezë* (The mother Theresa prayers) and *Lotet e Planetit* (The planet tears) by A.Peci.

Other choirs were also created in this period: Kori i vajzave (The girls chorus, 1992) headed by Vako, Pax Dei (1993) and Engjejt e vegjel (Little angels) (2001) headed by S.Turku, Rozafa Expression headed by Coba and the continuation of the Lira Chorus in Korça, headed by J. Nano. Albanian choirs began their international activities too during this period. The Pax Dei chamber choir, which I myself directed, took part in more than 50 national and international activities in countries including Italy, Switzerland, France, Germany, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece, during the period 1994-2000. The Rozafa Expression choir and the Lira Chorus also took part in such activities in Shkodra, Korçë, Durrës, Tirana and in Greece, Montenegro, Italy and Macedonia.

The art of choral singing – other than the ancient Albanian folk tradition – despite its comparatively short life-span of hardly more than a century, has played a very important part in the history of musical culture in Albania. Choral music is well-known and liked all over the country, maintaining a predominant role over other musical genres. Song and singing have accompanied the Albanians during the

centuries of their fight for freedom, independence and prosperity.

Apart from being a national heritage and wealth, choral singing is also the best way to express solidarity and mutual affection, and it possesses not only cultural values but also an educational role for the new generations.

May express to all of you my sincere gratitude for your attention and the interest shown in traditional choral singing in my country.

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[1] Skanderbeg (Gjergj Kastrioti) is one of Albania's iconic figures, a national hero who fought against the Ottoman Turks in the fifteenth century. The name 'Skanderbeg' derives from Iskander Bey, the name given to him by the Turks.

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