From the Hilandar’s Chanter’s Treasury – Vikentije Monk from the Hilandar Monastery (Novi Sad, Art print, 2003, 236 pages of musical examples)

It is not easy to write a brief review about an important new publication by a very talented young scholar writing about a complex topic that should be explained to readers who are not necessarily familiar with the subject matter. To try to present it in as simple terms as possible: the monograph is about a Serbian monk who was both a copyist of musical manuscripts and a composer of music in the second half of the 19th century, residing in the Serbian monastery Hilandar on Mount Athos in Greece. While stating this much, a reader of Slavic origin may recognize the substance of the topic and orientate himself in time and space. However, a Western European or even a Central European reader would require additional information to grasp the complexity of the topic; so let us try to set the stage and proceed with the presentation of the essence of the content of this volume.

The general area under consideration is the domain in which centuries earlier the ecclesiastical organization and practices were part of the Byzantine cultural and religious tradition. From the second half of the 14th century onward the territories of the Balkan Peninsula were under Turkish domination which meant a strong presence of elements of oriental culture. Nevertheless, religious practices of Christian communities continued to serve the needs of the non-Turkish habitants, even being enlarged and enriched by new aspects especially in the area of chants. Quite a few of those chants were composed in monasteries and circulated in musical manuscripts copied by monks.

One aspect of the musical practice that still deserves to be studied with scholarly scrutiny deals with the evolution – if there is any – of the music itself. In other words, assuming that the medieval tuning and temperament used by Byzantine Greeks may be determined to have consisted of specific types of “scales” and/or “modes” (this term being used as a counterpart of the Greek technical term “echos”), the question that has to be raised is whether the “echoi” remained unchanged or whether they evolved in the course of centuries into somewhat different structures. Let me
immediately state that to this writer’s knowledge, no definite answers have been given to these questions yet.

What transpired in the Byzantine cultural domain differs considerably from the events in the Western European musical practice where in due time a “well-tempered” system became dominant and was accepted in just about all the manifestations of the art of music up to the present. In the Greek cultural sphere including the Near East and territories conquered by the Turks, elements of the Near Eastern musical traditions were cultivated and a few concepts mingled with existing traditions in Byzantium.

Furthermore, apparently a number of theoretical treatises dealing with music were compiled but, regrettably, most of them remained unknown to Western European scholars and only a few are slowly gaining access to modern-contemporary study by the analytical approach of Western musicologists.

Greeks are territorially and culturally rather close to European attitudes toward the arts. And in the early 19th century a movement toward a theoretical study of the ecclesiastical music of the Greek Orthodox Church did take place. We refer to this theory and its accompanying notational system as the Chrysanthine theory, honoring thus the Archbishop Chrysanthos of Madytos, the author of the basic theoretical treatise that to this day Greek chanters accept as THE source of musical theory and practice. To get an idea about the type of tuning and/or temperament “codified” by Chrysanthos and used to the present in Greek traditions, let me mention as one example – if I understand the argument – that what in the Western European theory of music is viewed as the interval of a major second that within its ambitus contains two minor seconds, in the Chrysanthine theory the distance of the minor second is described as consisting of six “moreia” and yet it may contain also four or even eight “moreia” depending on the “type” of scale. The major second would contain twelve “moreia”. The first reaction of a Western musician to this theoretical construct is that we are dealing with a NON-TEMPERED system that a Western trained singer would have difficulty to follow and interpret, not to mention that for a “traditional Western musician” brought up on well-tempered scales and nursery rhymes, such chanting of Greek and other Eastern Mediterranean musical
repertories may be viewed as “dissonant” and “out of tune”. And on the other hand, any attempts of Western scholars to study and transcribe Byzantine chant into Western musical notation will be deprecated by Greeks as “lacking understanding” of the subtleties of Greek musical notations and traditions.

Within the last half a century appeared a growing number of studies attempting to examine the relationship of the two neighbouring cultural areas — the Byzantine Greek and the Eastern Slavic (consisting of Russians [encompassing Ukrainians], Bulgarians, Serbs and Romanians). Unfortunately, most of the scholars involved in this endeavour were handicapped by insufficient command of the Greek language that presented a significant linguistic barrier. It is in this respect that the author of the volume under review, Vesna Peno, deserves our warmest congratulations for mastering the Greek language as well as the Chrysanthine theory and practice enabling her to discuss all aspects of ecclesiastical chants “on level” with Greek scholars and to communicate their views to non-Greeks.

Interested in sorting out the musical practices in the Serbian monastery Hilandar on Mt. Athos, Vesna Peno was fortunate to view the manuscripts from an area to which females do not have access, since the “monastic republic of Mt. Athos” does not permit females to visit what is called “The Garden of the Virgin”, celebrated as the “protector” of Mt. Athos. Fortunately the Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies in Thessaloniki is presently a repository of microfilms of most of the manuscripts from the monastic libraries on Mt. Athos. The monastery Hilandar was founded in the last decade of the 12th century by the retiring Serbian ruler Stefan Nemanja and his son Sava who shortly afterwards won the independent status from the Greeks for the Serbian church. Both Nemanja and Sava are venerated by the Serbs as saints and within the last few decades the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts assembled in Belgrade a collection of microfilms from the Hilandar library. These microfilms were the basic sources for Vesna Peno’s investigations that were further supported by “on the spot” double checking of pertinent segments of MSS by her husband who prepared additional photographs of needed materials.

The fact that some Serbs became prominent in the composition and transmission of some individual chants had already
been known and documented in the late Middle Ages. But for the last several centuries of Turkish domination over the Balkan area, little was known about the life in some of the monasteries that were losing monks; in the case of Hilandar, in the 18th and 19th century it was practically “overrun” by Bulgarian monks. The discovery by Vesna Peno of a monk who did not hesitate to indicate his Serbian origin led to additional research establishing the facts that Vikentije, who lived between 1856 and 1927, was a significant copyist of manuscripts and a composer of some chants. He was fully trained and raised in the Chrysanthine tradition and notated his works in the neumatic notation of that tradition. As a special treat this volume includes a compact disc with recordings of nine compositions of Vikentije, performed by a small student choir named Saint Cassiana under Vesna Peno’s conducting. Vesna Peno had trained the choir to sing from the neumatic notation rather than the transcriptions into Western staff-notation. Listening to these recordings will provide new insights into changing taste and tradition on the Balkans.

While it is possible that Vesna Peno may be “accused” for “selling out to the Greek approach to the Chant” rather than adhering to the traditional chanting, usually related to the Russian models for singing of church music, I find her research and attainments as an opening to a new era of studies that just may bridge the distance between the different interpretations of a rich repertory of ecclesiastical music in several Eastern European languages. It is a pioneering effort that deserves full support for the continuation of researches that are enriching our knowledge of the multiplicity of Balkan traditions.

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