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BYZANTINE MUSIC AS 'TABULA RASA' OR *WHICH SHOULD BE THE 'LANGUAGE' OF BYZANTINE MUSIC?*

ABSTRACT: This paper deals with my recent experience in adjustment of Byzantine music to Korean language. This gave me the opportunity to develop additional thoughts on the typical process and also to form a relevant methodology, which will expand the usual and established process of corresponding "adjustments".

KEY WORDS: Byzantine music; Korean language; renewed approach to Byzantine music; *Agni Parthene*

I am trying to combine *Byzantine music* with the well-known term *tabula rasa*, directing the mind towards *empiricism*, not as a dogmatic, philosophical stance, but as a personal view and understanding of the so-called Byzantine music itself through the perspective of its constant evolution.

It is certainly known that *tabula rasa* as a Latin term means "white board". It refers to the epistemological thesis that people are born without innate knowledge, ideas, or psyche and that knowledge is obtained by experience. The above philosophical current of *empiricism* was developed because of this belief, starting from the English philosopher John Locke. The same term is used in philosophy, psychology, neurobiology, politics, even in the science of computers. Perhaps it would not be aimless if its use could be tested in Byzantine music, specifically in the possibility of its comprehension, intake and acceptance (under the above conditions) by any possible receiver.

I submit the question straightaway in the subtitle of my paper: *Which should be the language of Byzantine music?* I do this exactly because this kind of music was preserved – and is so far recognized – in its large majority, received and understood through its written (recorded on paper) version. As the major proportion of written (as well as the relevant oral) tradition of Byzantine music is delivered (uninterruptedly from the 10th century until now) listed (or expressed) in Greek, it seems perhaps obvious that Greek language has to be recognized as "mother tongue" of psaltic expression. And although, even from a very early age, similar formulations of Byzantine music in other (mostly Balkan) languages have not only been attempted, but they have also been successfully listed, this attempt seems to be absolutely adherent to every initial Greek musical model (as

362

every foreign musical formulation is usually shaped and formed towards it); that is why, the terminology which was introduced and is used for similar attempts stems from the typical term "adjustment"[1].

However, if the above initial "birth" of Byzantine music (originally Greek) is approximated to the theory of *empiricism*, if any piece of *paper* on which Byzantine music is recorded could be considered as *'paper'*, in other words as *'tabula rasa'*, then I believe that music could both be recognized without presumptions, without prerequisites and without having a pre-formulated aesthetic perception, with the initial rejection of any pre-existing (*a priori*) thought and therefore by showing its latent (*a posteriori*) hindsight. Instead of considering it as a drawback or, moreover, instead of introducing the above sterile attachment to a previously established standard, the complete lack of relevant prior knowledge and experience could lead to a renewed approach to Byzantine music through the senses of any ignorant receiver, who could understand the concept of Byzantine music in their own special way; then, they would create personal knowledge of music itself by processing the data of this internal sense and by verifying it through empirical evidence.

When the previously mentioned English philosopher John Locke, developed his theories about the origins of knowledge in the mid-17th century, he tried to give an answer to the basic philosophical question: whether we are born with complete lack of knowledge and learn as we obtain more and more experience (*tabula rasa*) or whether we have some – basic at least – knowledge from the very first moment we are born. During his philosophical searches he came up with a main question for his philosophy: *if a person born blind manages to regain their vision, will they be able to recognize objects they so far knew through touching, by just looking at them?*

Seeking an answer to this question, a neuroscientific research team from MIT achieved to access children with serious eyesight problems who had just managed to gain their eyesight, through an Indian visual rehabilitation program for children (*Project Prakash*). These children suffered from various pre-

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[1] Among the existing bibliography see the following articles (where an additional relevant bibliography is also mentioned): [Hieromonk Ephraim], "Concerning Adaptation", available on the web site http://stanthonysmonastery.org/music/Adaptation.htm. John Michael Boyer, "The Transcriprion, Adaptation and Composition of Traditional Byzantine Chant in the English Language. An American's Bried Look at the United States" in: *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference of the American Society of Byzantine Music and Hymnology*, pp. 570-587 (available on the web site http://www.asbmh.pitt.edu/page12/Boyer.pdf). Jaakko Olkinuora, "The Adaptation of Byzantine Chant into Finnish" in: *Composing and Chanting in the Orthodox Church; Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Orthodox Church Music; University of Joensuu, Finland 4-10 June 2007*, by I. Moody and M. Takala-Roszczenko, University of Joensuu & The International Society for Orthodox Church Music, Joensuu 2009, pp. 142-152; Idem, "Experiences in Adapting post-Byzantine Chant into Foreign Languages: Research and Praxis", *Musicology*, 11 (2011), 133-144.

ventable diseases that had resulted in their congenital blindness. Researchers constructed 3D shapes and set them before children in three different ways, using the sense of touch in combination with the corresponding (and newly developed) vision. The brain plasticity and cognitive flexibility that characterizes the human species emerged – among others – from the results of these experiments, as the brain was trying to discover the world through the essential new sense of vision; and while the children came into contact with more and more visual and tactile stimulation, as time went by, the brain started to adapt and became "rewired"[2].

I recently had a relevant experience while trying to adjust Byzantine music to Korean language; this corresponding attempt gave me the opportunity to develop additional prolific thoughts on the typical process and also to form (even at an early level) a different relevant methodology, which I hope will expand the usual and established process of corresponding "adjustments". My speculations stem from the discovery of the inherent *elasticity* of Byzantine music (a crucial component which allows music to actually 'speak' in every other language), and they are also related to the obvious dynamic dimension of all individual parameters (notation, modality, melodic development, etc.). Whatever I have observed screens the unlimited prospects of the nature and function of music itself, so as to be extricated from every sterile, dogmatic review: it does not have to do with some kind of 'sacred music', the violation of which would be unacceptable, but for an open and flexible 'musical arrangement' that is imposed to change and evolvement, whenever it is necessary and indispensable.

Of course, the above attempt did not take place in a 'blind environment'. It would be extremely interesting to study the reception of Byzantine music among people who have no previous knowledge of it. But taking for granted that this music is spread and popular almost in the entire world, this does not seem very easy, and anyway, as far as I know, it has been impracticable so far. Nevertheless, I believe that the relatively small Christian Orthodox community in South Korea is a very interesting field of application of a similar attempt of re-introduction of Byzantine music. It has been one hundred and ten years since a very small percentage of native Koreans have been initiated in Orthodoxy; the music they use during the church services is a blend of Russian and (Western and Byzantine style) Greek melodic standards, obviously affected by national origins and corresponding musical knowledge of missionaries that were active there at times.

I think that a musical example would be useful here; an example not only completely indicative but also highly typical: it includes very widespread and popular, now universally known, 'Byzantine' song *Agni Parthene Despina*, because it has already been adapted and it is frequently sung in Korean during the ecclesiastic services [Fig. 1]. As it is obvious, the melody which was built upon the Greek language remains here unchanged and the text is adapted to the

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[2] See http://psychologein.sciblogs.net/2011/10/31/blind_tabula_rasa/

Korean language. This is the usual method of similar adjustments; the effort is made to keep music as identical as possible and turn the language into the local dialect; which means that the previous Greek musical sound will 'speak' Korean. What is the vital result of a similar attempt, the result of similar adjustments? On the one hand, the musical experts recognise it immediately – even ignoring the new language – while the experts in the new language, on the other, find it difficult to understand their mother tongue (this is a fact that native people of South Korea confessed to me); this happens because of the way the language is reshaped in order to adapt to the pre-existing music. Finally, *music*, i.e. the element that was the basic motivation for this attempt of adjustment from the beginning, might reach the ears of the new audience as interesting information. However, while it develops at the expense of their native language, it becomes unable to overcome the level of an 'exotic' (and therefore difficult to understand and assimilate) experience.

The above process differs very little from an ethnic or religious 'propaganda'. After all, the theory of *'tabula rasa'* is targeted as an offspring of political propaganda, as some researchers of the human soul derogatorily call it *Standard Social Science Model*, and dismiss it. However, the actual dimensions of this theory, which appear here as ideological framework and philosophical model and understanding of the corresponding dimensions of Byzantine music too, can be condensed in the following comments easily: *There are neither dispositions, nor any innate ideas or memories that make one person different from the other; everyone is born the same, with the same form, with equal rights and there is no reason to consider some as superior and others as inferior.*[3]

This notion of 'democracy' is inherent to the nature of Byzantine music: there is no reason to 'impose it' to anyone, to consider it as a dogmatically inviolable, superior and ideal standard, since it is possible, without any memories formed in advance or prerequisites, to be shaped to a (musical) mould that everyone would wish, to 'fit' in everyone's mind, to speak in every language.

Dealing in South Korea with the above-mentioned attempt at adapting Byzantine music to the Korean, knowing the music but ignoring the language, I 'discovered' that instead of trying (as usual) to transfer the music I know, unchanged, into another language, I could much more easily (in a more productive, more impressive and more effective way) create new music; new music based on the one I know and want to transfer; new music inspired by the overall tradition of the so-called Byzantine music; new music though, which promotes, respects and relies on the desired new language, a language which has to highlight it and make it clear to the new audience.

So, let me mention here just one characteristic example: once, I asked my pupils and colleagues there to write down for me the text of a very well-known

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[3] See http://thesecretrealtruth.blogspot.com/2011/10/tabula-rasa.html

hymn of the divine Liturgy, the hymn *Tou Deipnou sou tou mustikou*, which is sung during the holy communion; but while doing it, I wanted them also to show me the individual words and, moreover, the number of the syllables in any word [Fig. 2]; looking and having in mind just this series of words and syllables, i.e. knowing and counting just a series of numbers, I created a new music [Fig. 3], inspired of course by Byzantine music, a music appropriate for that particular series of syllables and words [Fig. 4]; I wrote the melody into a staff and my colleagues added the words below the notes [Fig. 5]; we rehearsed that new composition (me singing just the melody, through the note *a*, and they performing the text of the composition) [Fig. 6] and after that they started to use it (along with a lot of other similar melodies we fixed together the same way) in their divine service [Fig. 7].

This is a new version of Byzantine music, composed on purpose in Korean. The next step – in my opinion desirable and ideal – would be if a native Korean continued the same process, a person who can combine excellent knowledge of both: the Korean language and the Byzantine music. This expected and idealised, but for now imaginary, person could give special local colour to this music, by (why not?) incorporating elements of the other (urban or erudite) local musical tradition; and then we would speak of a special and unique Korean Byzantine music. What happened in this case? *On an initial 'tabula rasa' Korean symbols were written and so Byzantine music had to speak in the Korean language...*

Figure 1

The Korean score of *Agni Parthene Despoina*, very widespread and popular 'Byzantine' song, now universally known.

Figure 2

The rough sketch in which Gabriella Kim, my pupil and colleague in S. Korea, wrote the text of the hymn *Tou Deipnou sou tou mustikou*. She showed me the individual words (divided by slashes) and the number of the syllables in any word (by numbers).

하느님의 / 아들이시여 / 오늘 / 신비로운 /
1 2 3 4   1 2 3 4   1 2   1 2 3 4

성찬에 / 나도 / 참여케 하소서 /
1 2 3   1 2   1 2 3 4 5 6

주의 / 원수들에게 / 이 신비스런 / 성찬에
1 2   1 2 3 4 5   1 2 3 4   1 2 3
대하여 / 말하지 않으리이다 /
4 5 6   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

유다처럼 / 주님을 / 입 맞추지 않고 / 강도처럼
1 2 3 4   1 2 3   1 2 3 4 5 6   1 2 3 4
주님께 / 고백하나이다 / 오 / 주여 /
1 2 3   1 2 3 4 5 6   1   1   2 morning glory

주의 / 나라에서 / 나를 / 기억해 주길 /
1 2   1 2 3 4   1 2   1 2 3 4

간구하나이다 /
1 2 3 4 5 6

Figure 3

This melody, inspired by Byzantine music, is written in Byzantine notation. I created it after looking and counting just the words and syllables contained in the text in question. I just chose some very well-known repeated motives of the first plagal mode, spread at all three pentachords of the said mode, specifically the basic one (D-a), the relevant high (a-e), as well as the low tetrachord (D-A).
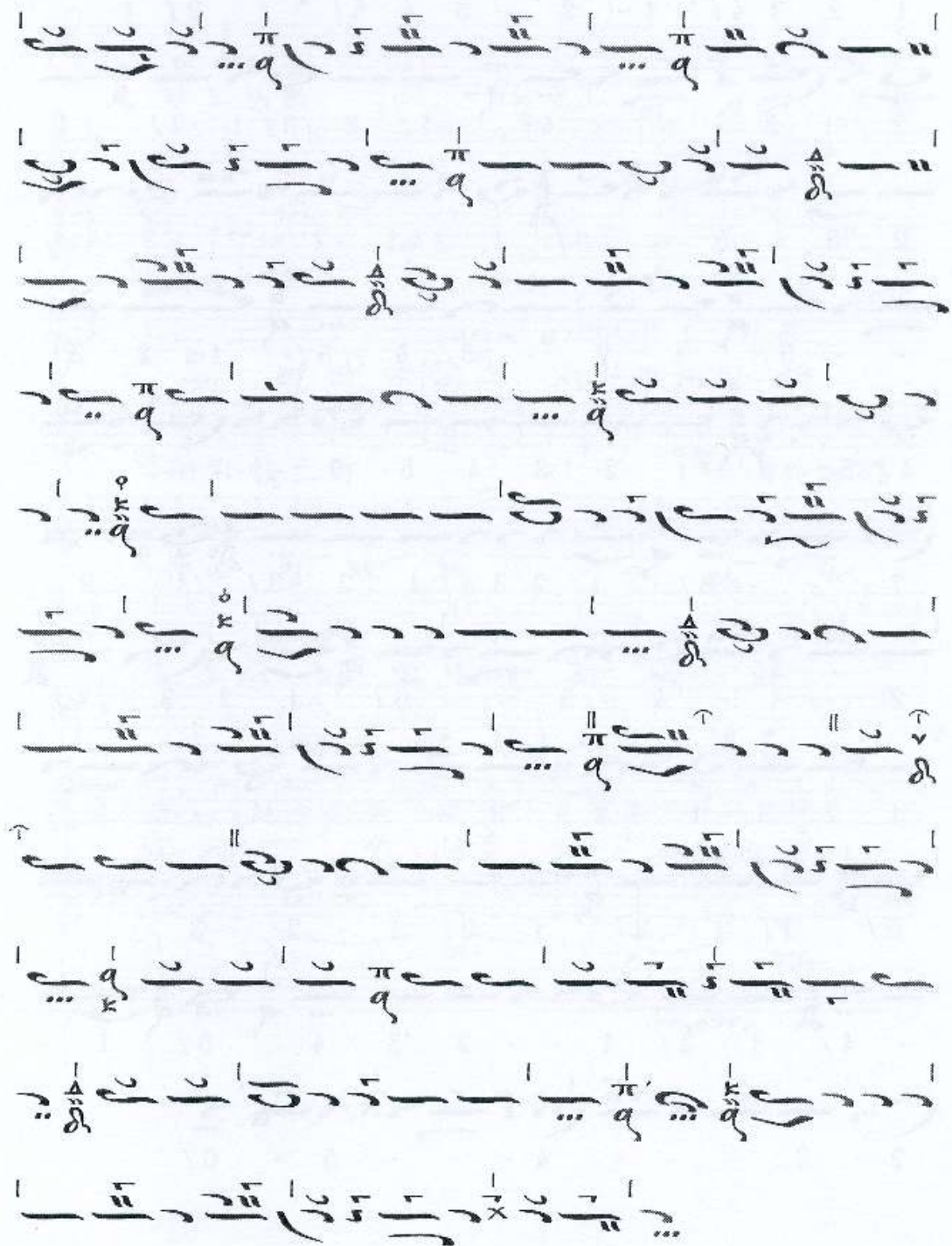
Figure 4

The same as above, but under the notation (instead of the usual text, in this case the Korean one) you can see just the aforementioned series of numbers, referring to syllables and words of the text.

1 2 3 4 / 1 - 2 - 3 4 5 / 1 2 / 1 -

2 - 3 - - - 4 / 1 2 3 / 1 2 / 1

2 3 4 5 - - 6 / 1 2 / 1 2 - - 3 - 4

- - 5 / 1 2 - 3 4 5 / 1 2 3

4 5 - 6 / 1 2 3 4 5 6 - - - -

7 - - - 8 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 / 1 - 2 -

3 - - - 4 - 5 - - 6 / 1 2 3 - 4 /

1 2 3 / 1 - 2 - 3 - - - 4 - 5 - -

6 / 1 / 1 2 / 1 2 / 1 - 2 - 3 - -

- 4 / 1 2 / 1 - - 2 3 4 5 / 1 -

2 - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 - 6 /

Figure 5

The rough sketch in which I wrote the melody into a staff, while Gabriela Kim, the foregoing pupil and colleague of mine, added the words below the notes.

Figure 6

The same score (translated into the staff notation) electronically re-written in "Finale" software by Justine Kim, my pupil and colleague in S. Korea.

하느님의 아들이시여
5조

Figure 7

Suggested form of the final score, written both in Byzantine (first line) and staff (second line) notation, while Korean text is also written (as a third line) below the notes.

ㅡ 고 강ㅡ도 처ㅡ럼 주님 께 고ㅡ백

ㅡ 하 ㅡㅡㅡㅡㅡ 나 ㅡ이ㅡㅡ 다 오 주

여 주 의 나ㅡ라 에 ㅡㅡㅡㅡㅡ 서 나

를 기ㅡㅡ억 해 주 길 간ㅡ구ㅡ하 ㅡㅡ

ㅡㅡ나 ㅡㅡㅡ 이ㅡㅡ나

Summary

As the major proportion of written (as well as the relevant oral) tradition of Byzantine music is delivered (uninterruptedly from the 10ᵗʰ century until now) listed (or expressed) in Greek, it seems perhaps obvious that Greek language has to be recognized as "mother tongue" of psaltic expression. And although, even from a very early age, similar formulations of Byzantine music in other (mostly Balkan) languages have not only been attempted, but they have also been successfully listed, this attempt seems to be absolutely adherent to every initial Greek musical model (as every foreign musical formulation is usually shaped and formed towards it).

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