

# **The historical development of Byzantine music in Albania**

## **from 1900 until nowadays**

**Η ιστορική εξέλιξη της βυζαντινής μουσικής στην Αλβανία:  
από το 1900 έως σήμερα**

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In this paper we will shortly present the historical development of Byzantine music in Albania, focusing our attention on the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before being referred in this period and in its *melopeia* activity, it is necessary to do a brief presentation of the anterior centuries in order to answer some questions that will be presented in this paper, such as: What is the tradition of Byzantine music in Albania and when did it began? When did we encounter for the first time the use of Albanian language in Byzantine music and what *melismatic* changes have this phenomenon brought? Is there any coherence between Byzantine musical tradition that dominated until the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the tradition that followed it? What was the path followed by the Byzantine music after 23 years of absolute pause (1967-1990)?

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We will divide the development of Byzantine music in Albania to three periods. First period started in the early Christian centuries until roughly the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century; second period started at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until 1967 while the third period started from 1990 until nowadays.

As we all know, in the past, Albania as it is today, was part of the Byzantine Empire. In this geographical part existed important ecclesiastical centres, such as Durrës, Berat, Elbasan, Korçë, Shkodër and so on. However, the development of Byzantine music followed the musical tradition of Constantinople. This fact is affirmed from Byzantine music manuscripts that are saved today in the national archive of Albania. The collection of these manuscripts is unique in the country. The only Byzantine music codices remaining today are only seven. The oldest codex is the *Heirmologium Berat 23*, of the year 1292. The other codices are posteriors – the last codex was written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – and are included in the last three periods of the Byzantine notation. Furthermore, we must emphasize that these codices are written in Greek and come from different parts of the country showing the tradition of Byzantine music until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The second historical period starts at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is marked by the strong movements for the liberation of the country from the Ottomans and from the attempts of transmission of the Albanian language.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were four official religions in Albania: the Islamic, the Bektashi, the Orthodox and the Catholic. At the same time, regardless of religions, the poets of the national renaissance use the faith and the religious verse in their poems. These verses became songs and in this way were understood by analphabetic people at that time. The main goal was to achieve the unity of the Albanians based on nationality. It was the era dominated by the slogan "*The religion of Albanians is Albanisem*". This slogan made young Noli furious. He strongly believed that the basic religions of Albanians must be "albanised".

The movement for the creation of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania was vivified in the spirit of patriotism created from national renaissance. The Albanian communities of Diaspora played a leading role, particularly the Albanian community of America represented by the priest Fan Noli, who was ordained as priest by Russian Metropolitan of New York, Platon Rozhdestvensky, in 1908. From the beginning the Russian Orthodox Church supported the work and the aspiration of Fan Noli regarding the foundation of the Albanian Orthodox church of America and Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Albania; they set as a condition the translation of the most important liturgical books. So, Noli started his translational work in 1908. Firstly, he translated the most important liturgical books and latter musical books. Noli's translational work opened a new unity in the Albanian language. His work is unique and it takes as base even today.

The Diaspora's movements gave "life" to the movements inside of Albania and according to the journal *Orthodox association (Lidhja orthodhokse)*, these movements were so strong that they were spoken about in the Turkish parliament.

Despite these difficulties, the Ecclesiastical Synod of Berat proclaimed on September 12, 1922, the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania. The Albanian language was defined as the official language of the orthodox worship and life. The Albanian Autocephalous Church was recognized by the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on 12 April 1937.

The first Orthodox musical edition with musical notation was the *Hymnal*, compiled by bishop Fan Noli and published on January 15, 1936, in Boston USA. The hymns of the *Hymnal* were written in pentagram and harmonized for four voices mixed choir. According to the preface of the *Hymnal*, the harmonization of the hymns was done with the help of the harmony's professor of the New England Conservatory of Music, Warren Storey Smith.

Hundred eight hymns are included in total in the *Hymnal*. Thirteen of them are Byzantine hymns, while the others are Russian traditional hymns, compositions of Kiev, Venevsky, Razumovsky, Chaikovsky, and others. The Byzantine musical forms are given in two versions, the Russian and the Byzantine. This edition gives also the only composition of Noli, the *tropario* «Χριστός Ανέστη» (*Christ is Risen*). Let see the example of the St. George *tropario*.

The *tropario's* text has been translated from the Greek language in to Albanian and has been adapted perfectly to the transcribed (in pentagram) Byzantine and Russian *melos*.

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were only two chanters (psalts), the right one and the left one. They used to sing the original chants of the Byzantine tradition in the Greek language. Because of the political situation, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tradition of the ecclesiastical music was influenced from the Russian Ecclesiastical Church Music. According to the Albanian theologian Dhimitër Beduli, in 1924 – the year that Fan Noli was prime minister of the country – in Albania was founded the first choir that sang the Russian traditional ecclesiastical music in Albanian language. This choir was organized and directed by a Russian professor.

At the end of the 1924, beginning of 1925, the situation in the country was destabilized and the Orthodox Church was living difficult moments. Its only allies were the Eastern Churches, in particular the Russian and Rumanian one. Remarkable is the fact that, the Rumanian Church gave scholarships for students that wanted to study Theology in Rumania. The main scope was to prepare a qualified staff to work for the Autocephalous Church of Albania.

In 1930, the Seminar of the Orthodox Church was opened in Durrës and one of the compulsory subjects was also the Byzantine music. The main scope of the seminar was to prepare Albanian clerics that would serve in the Albanian Churches. In 1933, the young theologian Dhimitër Beduli, returned from his studies in Rumania. Parallel to the theological studies, he studied also Byzantine music. Immediately, after his return he assumed various tasks and he worked hard for the amelioration of the situation in the most important ecclesiastical centres of the country. Among others, he also taught Byzantine music in the Seminar.

Differently from Noli, Beduli used the Byzantine notation and the traditional Byzantine songs. He "dressed" the Byzantine forma with Noli's translation. One of the biggest contributions of Beduli is organizing the ecclesiastical choirs in the main cities of Albania.

In the twenty-year-old period 1925-1944, despite all difficulties, the ecclesiastical music kept being fruitful and creative. We can say that this period is an acme period of Byzantine music in Albania during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fall started at the end of 1944; in this period the Seminar got closed, stopped the publishing of the orthodox journey and periodic and in general the cultural creation was suspended.

In the years that followed the musical activity stagnated and declined. The culminating was in 1967, when the regime forbade every kind of religion demonstration. This act was illegal and became legitimized in 1976, when in the Albanian constitution, the state was declared as "Atheist". Any religion expression was prohibited. The article 55 of the Penal Code for "agitation and propaganda" was also set. It was a difficult period for those who served at religion institution. The priests, theologians and others, were prosecuted, jailed and in the best cases must forget their wishes and beliefs and be adapted to the new life's conditions.

The year 1990 notes the beginning of the third historical period of the Byzantine music in Albania. A painful beginning! An almost destroyed country, a whole desperate nation; the old

religious sites were destroyed or transformed into volleyball stadiums and in the best cases into youth centres; the libraries were stolen, burned and some of the documents became part of the archive of the state.

What happened with the Byzantine music tradition? During our research we encounter elderly *psalts* that survive the regime. One of them answers us: - *Which tradition are you talking about? The tradition got lost at the moment that I couldn't teach it to my son and to my nephew, as my grandfather taught it to me.* Those words are enough to show us that for another time, everything starts from the beginning.

In the early years of the 90<sup>th</sup>s decade, the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania has serious problems, both practically and politically. Initially, the church had to fight for the property's acquirement of all religious sites that were illegally lost in 1967. Then, they must take care for the restoration of these sites to become operational. One of the initiatives of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartolommeo, the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate took measures to re-establish the Autocephalous Orthodox church of Albania by unanimously electing, on June 24th 1992, the following: as archbishop of Tirana and all Albania the serving metropolitan bishop of Androusa, Anastasios; they also elected as metropolitan bishops of Korça, Gjirokastër, and Berat with Vlora and Kanina, Greek nationalities bishops. At this point, Albanian government reacted strongly considering this decision as abroad imposition of Greek leadership in one of the three major religious communities in the country. After dogged discussions between representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the church of Albania, and the Albanian authorities (November 1997 to July 1998), the issue of forming a Holy Synod was in the end settled by agreeing to a format whereby the Synod was made up of two church leaders of Greek origin and two of Albanian origin.

From 1991 to 1998, the Orthodox church of Albania made very swift progress. The regional cultural activities became more and more important in the Orthodox life and started again the publishing of the Orthodox newspapers and magazines. In 1992 a Theological and Priestly School went into operation, its aim being to staff the church with native Albanians. From 1997 onwards this school became a privately-owned complex of buildings (the Monastery of Hagios Blasios at Dyrrachion), with the title "The Orthodox Theological Academy-Resurrection". In these cultural and social conditions, the Byzantine music starts flourishing. The elderly now Dhimitër Beduli attempted the organization of the Tirana's church choir. Initially, he used the same scores that he had used in the Seminar during the 30<sup>th</sup> decade. The presence of the Greek priests in Albanian churches, contribute to the revival of the forgotten musical Byzantine tradition. Tirana's Orthodox Church is offering free lessons of Byzantine music; this course is organized and directed from the Archimandrite Justinos Anthimiadis. As a result, during the last decade in the Tirana's Cathedral there are two choirs: the four voices mixed choir and the men Byzantine choir. The Orthodox Church gives attention also to the publishing of Albanian musical book with Byzantine notation; they used Noli's translation. Until now two books are published: *Anastasimatario* and the *Holy Week's hymns*. The mixed choir continues to sing Fan Noli's *Hymnore* using photocopied scores.

However, the publishing of musical books is also too important to the teaching of Byzantine music. During the last 20 years, the Autocephalous Church of Albania is giving scholarships for theological and Byzantine music studies in Greece. In this way, a lot of young people have had the possibility to learn the authentic Byzantine *psaltic* tradition. Furthermore, the Byzantine music is a compulsory subject in the Theological Academy.

Concluding, we can say that Byzantine music in Albania has gone through difficult paths and generally the 20<sup>th</sup> century has brought many changes. The *psaltic* tradition of 20<sup>th</sup>'s was little influenced from the previous centuries. At least this happened to the big ecclesiastical centres because in the small places the Byzantine tradition is really strong and almost impossible to "incorporate" in it the "new" tradition. However, the results of the 23 years of the absolute cessation were the same for the whole country. The continuity was lost!

Today the difficulties are bigger than ever and a lot of time will be needed for Byzantine music to set up its continuity.