

Trifon G. Geropoulos:
A pre-eminent representative of the Church Chanting Art in
Magnesia

Τρύφων Γ. Γερόπουλος:
Ένας κορυφαίος εκπρόσωπος της Εκκλησιαστικής Ψαλτικής Τέχνης στη
Μαγνησία

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The figure of Trifon Geropoulos, one of the top representatives of the Church Chanting Art in Magnesia, will be the focus of my paper. Following his family tradition in the area of Byzantine music, he created versatile and multidimensional works of music art with fervent enthusiasm, diffusing and preserving the style of the Patriarchal Tradition of Constantinople, in Magnesia. His modest disposition may have contributed to his not being nationally renowned. However, his signature is engraved on the pages of his works on the lecterns of his many disciples, who take pride in their teacher today.

His birthplace, Magnesia is dignified through him too. Situated in the heart of Greece, this geographical and cultural crossroads has always been a passage of people as well as a melting pot for ideas, manners and morals. Asia Minor, Epirus, Vlach, Sarakatsani, Crete and Pontus refugees settled in the hospitable Magnesian land. Their associations played an active role and still contribute to the cultural life of this land.

Magnesia can thus be defined as a cultural creation crossroads, an intercultural music thought centre, where representatives of the three major music branches of Greece (Byzantine, Folk and European) meet, coexist, collaborate and co-create. This is true, if we consider the numerous events, meetings, conferences and publications attributed to the religious, social and educational institutions of the area, from churches and monasteries, to conservatories and radio stations.

Let us now focus on Church Chanting Art. Chanting traditions of Constantinople, Mount Athos and Smyrna converge and complement each other on

the land of Volos, while creatively encountered with the local chanting traditions of Pelion, Sporades and other Magnesian regions.

The Magnesian chanting tradition is closely tied to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, as numerous chanting art deacons were taught Byzantine Music in Constantinople.

The interesting findings of the 3rd Scientific Conference held in December 2004 by the Historical Archives of the Holy Metropolis of Demetrias are worth to be mentioned. The conference was entitled: “Mount Athos-Magnesia: A Reciprocal Relationship: 15th - 21st century” and has scientifically proved the long-standing relationship between Magnesia and the Holy Mountain, a relationship resulting in the constant transmission of spiritual and chanting experience. We may hereby suggest that the reviewing of historical archives is a procedure that should be followed by other Metropoleis or different organizations wishing to uncover important details in a modern scientific way. The entire process may activate people, shed some light on the truth and yield profound work both for the present and future generations.

The figure of Tryfon Geropoulos appears in the famous site of Magnesia, a land with vast chanting heritage. We shall start with some biographical elements, focusing next on his contribution to the Chanting Art of our Church. He was born in Agria, Volos on February 1st, 1914, and was first taught Byzantine music in the age of five by his father George, a Great National School of Constantinople graduate. George Geropoulos exerted an extremely beneficial influence on his charismatic child, introducing him to the archaic performance style of the Great Church of Christ. Though lacking formal certificates, his insight and numerous skills were certified both by his work and overall presence. At the age of 16 he was hired in the St. George of Baxedes Church as the left chanter. Anthimos Chatzivasileiou served as the precentor in the same church. Geropoulos later characterized him as “literate from Constantinople in Chanting Art”. He becomes the precentor of the Church of Holy Mary at Ano Volos at the age of 20, while during the years 1937 to 1939 he served as the left chanter of St. Demetrius at Almyros. From 1939 to 21986 he is found at St. George of Agria as the precentor, and after that in the Churches of St. Athanasius at Velestino and St. Apostolos the New at Volos. He passed away peacefully in 2009.

A reference to Tryfon Geropoulos' family would be worthy, before we actually attempted a detailed study of his profound work. The art of music played an important role in the lives of most of the family members.

This music tradition started with George Geropoulos who graduated from the Great National School with honor, under the instruction of Iakovos Nafpliotis. It was he that introduced his son Tryfon Geropoulos into the Chanting Art. The two sons of Tryfon, George and Konstantinos Geropoulos, preserve the family chanting tradition. What is more, his son-in-law Vlassis Mastrogiannis excels in both Byzantine and European music as a professor, conductor and composer. Tryfon Geropoulos' grandchildren, namely Tryfon Geropoulos and father Demetrius Callis also perform the chanting art, while his grandson Dinos Mastrogiannis is an internationally renowned pianist. As for the girls of the family (Sofia his daughter and Olga his granddaughter) they too were introduced in the art of Byzantine music by Tryfon Geropoulos.

Let us now consider the music family phenomenon from a sociological and anthropological perspective. The existence of a musical family is of great importance for a provincial town, where social bonds are tight. Such families tend to be highly considered by members of the local society and admired as idols. For, it is generally acknowledged that what flows through generations as a tradition (like in our case from father to son) is by definition both genuine and true. As for the members of the music family, they are certainly aware of their responsibility to bequeath their heritage to their children and elsewhere. It is easy to feel the joy and satisfaction of the late George Geropoulos. He lived long enough to hear not only his son but also his grandchildren following the chanting art tradition he had transmitted. The recognition of the music family's members as connoisseurs and genuine carriers of music tradition is deeply embedded in the conscience of the local society and lasts through many years.

Let us now focus on Tryfon Geropoulos himself and on his great contribution to the Chanting Art of our church. This multifaceted contribution is structured in the following levels: Teaching of the Chanting Art, Composition, Chanting and Hymnography.

Concerning the first level, he is recognized as one of the most capable teachers of the Chanting Art during the 20th cent. He successfully discerned the two dimensions of his teaching: the theological and the musicological one. As regards

the first, he was a teacher of orthodox ethics apart from being a Byzantine music teacher. He utilized word and example, practical application and experience while teaching. His teaching program was systematically and artfully founded on the worth, value and aim of the Chanting Art. In parallel he implanted motivation and inspiration to worship God through chanting in the souls of his students and future chanters.

Regarding the second dimension, his starting point was his father's instruction and his initiation into the patriarchal chanting style. It is worthy to note that he often characterized George Geropoulos, his father as "the tireless lover of our forefathers' music". Aware of the fact that Byzantine music is preserved in Constantinople he attempted to impart his insight and respect for the Great Church of Christ and its constant concern for church music to his students. He bore the original form and value of byzantine music as a genuine guardian of Constantinople chanting tradition at Volos, preserving and diffusing its style to his Magnesians students. He always honored and exalted former representatives of the Magnesians chanting art (Christos Mahairitsas, Alexandros Margaritopoulos, Christos Pantas, Demetrios Mitrou, Konstantinos Koutoumpas, father Konstantinos Katsolas) for he believed that tradition embodies beauty. His quote: "We should retain the severe and serious performances of the former maestro" expresses his wish to stick to tradition and avoid improvisation. Here lays the reason why Magnesia is dignified through him: he helped the genuine Byzantine music to survive and to develop at a high level, irrespective of the difficulties of a provincial area.

Coming to his work as a composer, we have to note that he identified music with worship. The aim of his compositions was to worship the Divine. Such an aim conferred to his work extra beauty and durability.

We will now present Tryfon Geropoulos' surviving manuscripts. We deal with a considerable number of music manuscripts filed in notebooks and brochures. They include the date of composition along with the name of the composer and scribe (usually Tryfon Geropoulos himself) as well as the place of composition. Even more, they are all characterized by excellent handwriting, readability and perfect music spelling.

Tryfon Geropoulos grappled with all genera and species of Byzantine music composition. He wrote about fifty services devoted to saints (many of them

locals) taking extra care for their doxastika and idiomela stichera. Note that towards the end of each service he piously addresses the honored saint for whom he composes, seeking for his/her mercy and aid. Among his numerous compositions we also find idiomela stichera for the periods of Triodion and the Pentecost, Polyeleoi, Doxologies, Trisagia, Cheroubika, Leiturgika, Koinonika, Axion Estin, Polychronismoi, Psalms and Heirmoi covering the full range of the eight modes of Byzantine music. He also composed special hymns for social occasions and an impromptu exclamation in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Clear influences of the Constantinopolitan chanting style can be detected in all his work. Through his manuscripts it is also possible to discern his musical influences and his relationship with other chanters of the same or different areas. In many cases he wished to include in his manuscripts also compositions of his colleagues, mainly representatives of the style he advocated. Most of these compositions were written down after a performance transmitted on radio – a fact that demonstrates his impressive capacity of listening and notating Byzantine chant. Geropoulos' manuscripts inform us about his own career in Byzantine music, but also about the state of the Chanting Art during his years in Magnesia. In numerous pieces of music he adds notes like: “chanted this way at Mt. Athos” or “as my late father chanted it”. This way he saves and transmits tradition not only orally, but also in a written form through his manuscripts.

We may also detect some relationship with Mt. Athos through his surviving manuscripts. In a letter from 1972 written by monk Iosif we find a plea to Geropoulos to simplify an Axion Estin hymn. This simplification he says, should not be performed at the cost of its value. The event proves that Geropoulos' reputation as a composer has spread and reached even Mt. Athos.

Apart from compositions, his manuscripts also include theory notes and speeches of theological content which he himself performed. He was a scholar of his time with excellent knowledge of ancient Greek and the ability to recite the entire book of Psalms by heart.

An analysis of his compositions primarily reveals a deep understanding of the poetic text. This characteristic of Geropoulos' music is evident in the way he frames the word meaning with music. The majesty and grandeur of the Constantinopolitan style, often originating from an apparent simplicity, can be discerned in his music lines even before they are performed. His compositions are

also characterized by classical formulas, analytical writing and traditional tunes, without sudden changes and voice swings.

Though the patriarchal or Constantinopolitan style is said to be transmitted merely through the acoustic channel, a close reading between his music lines does not fail to mystically discern it.

His performances were always kept close to the original music tune. As he said: “Throughout my life I have been trying to keep myself as a chanter and teacher, close to Byzantine music tradition and typical order as I have been taught them by my late father and instructor”. His musical prayer was characterized by sincere piety, faith and respect. Tryfon Geropoulos has been one of the few cantors who had literally devoted his entire life to the issue of church music, bringing in our mind David’s psalm: “I shall chant for my God as long as I live”. His 47 consecutive years of ministry as a precentor in the Church of St. George of Agria have established him in such a way that even today the congregation bears in mind his very own tunes.

Apart from all the above, Tryfon Geropoulos dealt also with hymnography. The Lete stichera for the Holy Martyrs Sophia, Pistis, Elpis and Agape day (acrostic with his name) as well as the Prosomoia and Kathismata of the same day are representative parts of his work. His hymnographic work also includes three Doxastika, an Idiomelon Letes and an Apolytikion in honor of St. Ioannis Koukouzelis as well as Doxastika and Prosomoia for St. Makrina and various Apolytikia in honor of many Saints. All of his works were blessed and approved by the Bishop of the time.

The answer to those who doubt about the present circumstances and if his work still survives, is obvious. Tryfon Geropoulos’ legacy has been great. Though young cantors of our days cannot directly experience his instruction, however his works and manuscripts combined with the rich experiences of his numerous students (among which we find Kyriazis Nikoleris, Archon Mousikodidaskalos of the Great Church of Christ) serving the region’s lecterns, are there for those wishing to learn more about this great teacher.

In 1992 Tryfon Geropoulos was honored in recognition of his long and important contribution both by the late Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Christodoulos (then Bishop of Demetrias) and his co-cantors. This practice, to annually honor a cantor in recognition of his contribution, established in the Holy

Metropolis of Demetrias should be imitated as such practices stimulate the region's liturgical, musical and social life.

Chanting art in provincial areas is an extremely interesting issue. It can be studied on a multidisciplinary level as it is a field suitable for further research and study. We are still at the beginning. However there is too much to harvest. What we need is worthy workers.

Bibliography

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