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ENIGMATIC NEUMES IN THE KONTAKION REPERTOIRE. AN EXAMINATION BASED ON THE AKATHISTOS HYMN

To introduce my problem I will start by singing a Danish song, composed by the Danish composer Carl Nielsen in 1921 (*example 1*).

Just like our Byzantine composers Carl Nielsen is now dead, so we cannot ask him and we cannot ask the Byzantines how to perform their music. We can sing *example 1* in three ways: 1) as a foreigner would sing it right from the notes: plain, slow and without text-expression; 2) as a Dane would sing it following the danish song-tradition and Carl Nielsen's own performance indications: "Lively and expressful"; 3) in a "jazzified" version which is nowadays popular.

Tradition and Carl Nielsen's written indications tell us that version 2 must be the right one, but this knowledge we do not have about the Byzantine manuscripts from the 13th century.

Tillyard says in his "Handbook of Middle Byzantine notation" from 1935: "If the student is to appreciate and enjoy a Byzantine hymn it must not merely be played over on the piano, but thoroughly mastered and sung with the words and with due regard to rhythm and expression".

Research has helped Western scholars a long way to solve the performance problems. We can also listen to how monks and choirs sing in the contemporary Eastern churches, but it is very important to experiment yourself and sing the hymns over and over again following the neumes, the Greek text and its meaning.

Material and method

A volume of the periodical "World of Music" from 1978 is devoted to Arab art and music, and all articles are written by Arab scholars. When I read that volume my eyes had at the same time wandered through the melismas in the Akathistos hymn (melisma means "a sweet song" in Greek), melismas that like arabesques, develop through the 24 hymns, page after page, not two of them completely alike. I thought that I could learn a little about the Eastern way of composing and performing music by reading those articles, and also to understand why the Byzantine

composers put such an uncomprehensible care in details of expression, which we have great difficulties in expressing.

Concerning the arabesques, Carsten Høeg says it in his introduction to the Ashburnhamensis Kontakarion from 1956: "The structure of the Kontakarion melodies is very different from what we find in the Hirmologion and the Sticherarion. It is based on waves of groups of "Big Signs" or Hypostases which have no step value". And he adds in a footnote: "Transcription into modern notation — as necessary as it is — disfigures the Byzantine music, especially the Kontakion melodies, because our system does not have a semiography which can express or explain these signs. Also we only know their approximate value — or, in fact, we do not know their value at all!"

The Akathistos hymns goes back to centuries where Persian and Arab culture had a strong influence on Byzantine culture and vice versa. Even if they were fighting they also had strong inter-cultural relations. Johannes of Damascus spoke and read Arabic and had theological discussions with Arabs and Jewish intellectuals.

I suggest that the Kontakion hymns, taken from the Ashburnhamensis manuscript from 1289, is a result of Byzantine-Persian-Arab-Jewish intellectual and artistic collaboration, or rather: inspiration through hundreds of years (see *example 2* with important events).

The Akathistos hymn is said to have been sung after the ikon of Mary had saved Byzantium when the Persians attacked in 626, the Arabs in 673, and in 718 when the Arabs tried for the last time to conquer Byzans. The music of the hymn has changed many times since then. It is performed as a whole the 25th of March, the day of the Annunciation, and also, with 6 hymns each time at the 4 Saturdays in Lent. It is still sung today and I have been told that it is very reviving to sing after the hard period of Lent. It is also said as a prayer without music by many orthodox Greeks. Sometimes Akathistos-paintings are watched while praying or singing.

Brief resume of the 24 Oikoi of the Akathistos hymn

The last 12 hymns have dogmatic content, which shows that the hymn was composed after the Council of Efesos in the year 431.

Oikos 1. Gabriel is surprised of the message he is going to give Mary

Oikos 2. Mary knows she is virgin and needs a man to become pregnant

Oikos 3. Mary cannot understand how a message can get her pregnant

Oikos 4. Mary obey the order of God and gets pregnant

Oikos 5. Mary visits Elisabeth who's unborn child immediately recognizes the unborn child in Mary's womb

Oikos 6. Joseph is in doubt whether Mary has been with other men.

Oikos 7. The shepherds get the message that Jesus is born

Oikos 8. The Wise Men walk towards the star

Oikos 9. They give gifts to the child, king even if he is poor

Oikos 10. They inform Herodes that a king is born

Oikos 11. The flight to Egypt

Oikos 12. Jesus and Simeon

Oikos 13. A wonder came from a virgins womb

Oikos 14. Jesus became man so that we can think towards heaven

Oikos 15. Jesus was both on earth and in heaven

Oikos 16. As God he is untouchable, as man we can reach him

Oikos 17. Nobody understands the wonder of the birth

Oikos 18. Jesus is both God and Man

Oikos 19. Mary is a castle where we all can find security

Oikos 20. The pity of God is greater than all our praises

Oikos 21. Mary is the fire in the dark

Oikos 22. Jesus tore to pieces our guilt and trespasses

Oikos 23. The Mother of God is the living temple

The 12 "Chaire": She helps us in wartime

Oikos 24: Mary, Mother of God, help us in our misfortune.

In "The World of music" Dr. Lois Ibsen al Faruqi writes as follows: "In Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1961) a musical ornament is defined as "an embellishing note or notes not belonging to the essential musical harmony or melody and indicated by the performer for decorative effect". It is a cultural determined definition which may be adequate if one is applying it to most examples of art and music in Europe and America, but it can only mislead the person who is seeking to understand the role of ornamentation as used by the Arabs. In both Western and Arab cultures ornamentation signifies a beautification of some basic or core element.

But in the West the role of ornamentation is that of an added luxury, a luxury which is not necessary. In the West the

melody or theme has to be clearly recognizable beneath the surface of the decoration applied to particular notes by composer or performer. The underlying melody is in other words the main substance of the musical composition or performance, the ornamentation only a subordinate and dispensible means for emphasis and variety.

Ornamentation plays a very different role in the arts of the Arabs. The Arab artist has made his goal that of expressing himself through the manipulation of abstract and stylized motifs. From these he creates compositions conveying sense of never — ending design. Ornamentation for the Arab artist, therefore, is not an addendum, or a superfluous element in his art. It is the very material from which his indefinite patterns are made.”

Carsten Høeg says almost the same in his introduction to the Akathistos hymn: “It is not a melodic line of intervals decorated with supplementary signs. It is the dynamic and expressive structures which dominate the neume picture much more than the intervals.”

As I understand it the stems of the flowers, that is: the basic melody, is not as important as the structure of the flowers carried by the stems. In other words: the basic sceleton melody is not as important as the melismas and arabesques, the artistic ingredients which carry the words of the hymns (*example 3*).

In *example 4* you will see that the arabesques with the many hypostases (“big signs”) are most clearly seen over the repeated letters. When they are sung, the elegant “waves” are very audible.

The “waves” of the arabesques can be seen in the western transcription in *example 5*, but the thorough, refined details of the neumes and their combination are only expressed by letters and accent signs which are almost impossible to transfer to real singing.

In *example 6* you will also see the same part of Oikos I but in a 1992 version where the melismas have disappeared.

How can we perform these signs and letters from the 13th century whether we have them in front of us as neumes or in transcription? Oscar Fleischer says that for about 300 years learned scholars have tried to solve the enigma of the Byzantine notation. The MMB people have come to the solution we see in Wellesz transcription (*example 5*) but still there are difficulties and doubts as Carsten Høeg says. The Arab scholar says in the above-mentioned article that we in the West have no oral or “inside” information about the Eastern tradition. I analyzed the

material from the facsimile edition of Ashburnhamensis 64 from the year 1289.

I examined the ca. 2000 signs in the first of the 24 Oikoi and its 12 additional Chairetismoi.

It turned out as you can see in *example 7*, that average 52% of the neumes are definable stepsigns with only step-value. Average 35% are enigmatic neumes with both rhythm and expression value. Average 13% are half enigmatic, half definable, and have both step-, rhythm- and expression value.

I also examined how often the single neumes occur in the first Oikos and its 12 Chairetismoi. This result could be discussed in depth, but there is not time for it (*example 8*).

The possible meaning of the names concerning performance

Oscar Fleischer tried to translate the Greek neume names from the Papadike in 1904 as Tillyard, Høeg, Wellesz and I myself also have done. I will mention some of the explanations (*example 9*).

Petaste means that you broaden your voice, while going one step up, and *Oxeia* means that you make your voice sharp and short while going one step up. It is not explained anywhere, how this is done, but I try in my performance.

Hyperrhoe is enigmatic. You have to “gurgle” your way down a third, like water slipping out.

Elafron means “go a third down very light” (so you won’t be too low, I presume).

Kouphisma is enigmatic, or rather: half and half (and perhaps it should be counted with *Oxeia* and *Petaste*) because we know that it goes one step up, but it also “holds the tone like a hand” whatever that means. MMB gives *Kouphisma* as a thrill.

Tzakisma, *Diple*, *Kratema* and *Double Apostrophos* give prolongation, but only the double apostrophos must for sure have the double value of a single apostrophus. The others are enigmatic. Fleischer translates the non-Greek word *Tzakisma* with “a brake” and proposes a bar. MMB says that it means half prolongation.

Gorgon is in my opinion the most enigmatic neume and very important in the arabesques. It means “vigorous”. The MMB people has: “accelerando”.

Bareia means: depress, weigh down.

Piasma means: makes fat and rich.

The Apoderma which always stand at a middle cadence is probably not a prolongation, but rather an abrupt stop of the voice. It means "to rip the skin of a fish".

My studies give me the impression that the 4 signs: *Psephiston, Homalon, Strepton and Tromikon* include the same ingredient, namely the big, snakelike "S", *Psephiston*, which I propose indicates an "Eastern" quavering with the voice.

Antikenoma, Parakalesma and Xeron Klasma also hold together groups of ordinary step neumes and enigmatic neumes, and give them a special expression value.

Around the "big signs" or Hypostasis the known and unknown neumes are grouped with great precision.

The more a melisma or an arabesque develops and the more we approach the end of a hymns the more the "big signs" appear, but combinations and refined details vary, apparently following hairfine rules.

The English translation of what I now will sing is: «A captain of the angels was sent from heaven to say to the Virgin "Hail". And seeing thee, Lord, become corporal at the incorporeal voice, *he was amazed and stood still* (repeated 3 times) *and cried out to her: "Hail, thou through whom joy will shine forth"».*

A great problem in preparing the performance was the question of speed and the rhythm, a problem I also showed when I sang the three versions of the Danish song. I had to sing slowly to include all the nuances of the various neumes and neume-groups, but without destroying the flow of the music.

To conclude I will say that singing Byzantine hymns, and especially melismatic ones, claims voice, voice control, training and repeating the singing of the hymns over and over again. And you have to experiment. I suggest that the "Eastern" or "Arab" way of singing is more likely than the "Western" way for the performance.

This suggestion I base partly on the meaning of the neume names, partly on their design, partly on the historical influence from the East.

Even if scholars have tried through centuries to study and analyze theory and hymnbooks and have listened to monks singing, the enigmas concerning the performance of the neumes are still many. The names, and thereby the meaning, of the "big performance-neumes" vary through the centuries and in the theory-books, surely because of changes in performance tradition.

Each genre and each period must therefore be studied apart, considering at the same time the continuity of rules and tradition for all Byzantine art.

Literature

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Example 1

Jeg ved en lærkerede

Muntert fortællende. Carl Nielsen.



1. Jeg ved en lær - ke - re - de. Jeg
si - ger ik - ke mer. Den fin - des på en
he - de, et sted, som in - gen ser.

2. I reden er der unger,
og ungerne har dun.
De pigger. De har tunger.
Og reden er så lun.

3. Og de to gamle lærker,
de flyver tæt omkring.
Jeg tænker nok, de mærker,
jeg gør dem ingenting.
4. Jeg lurer bag en slåen.
Der står jeg ganske nær.
Jeg rækker mig på låen
og holder på mit vejr.
5. For ræven han vil bide
og drengen samle bær.
Men ingen skal få vide,
hvor lærkereden er.

Harald Bergstedt.
(Af „Oskil spiller“, 1921).

Example 2

Timetable

Byzans 330-1453

Justinian and Theodora 527-565

Hagia Sophia built 532-537

San Vitale, Ravenna, built 526-547

The Akathistos hymn 6th century (Romanos?)

The Byzantines struck the Persian fleet 626

Muhammed 570-632

The orthodox Caliphs 632-661 (inspiration from Persia)

The Ommeyade period 661-750 (Caliphs in Jerusalem and Damascus)

The Byzantines struck the Arab fleet 677

The Byzantines struck the Arab fleet 718

The Abbasidean period 750-1250 (Byzantine and Arab culture side by side on Sicily since 827. Science, literature, art, musicology is flowering)

Rich culture in Andalusia, Spain ca. 900-1200 (Byzantine, Jewish and Arab people side by side)

Byzans taken by the Venetians and the Roman Church in 1204

Bagdad taken by Djengis Khan's grandchild 1258

The Turks conquer Serbia and Bulgaria at Kosovo Polje 1389

Bagdad taken by Timur Lenk 1393

Byzans taken by the Turks in 1453

The muslim Persia taken by the Turks 1514

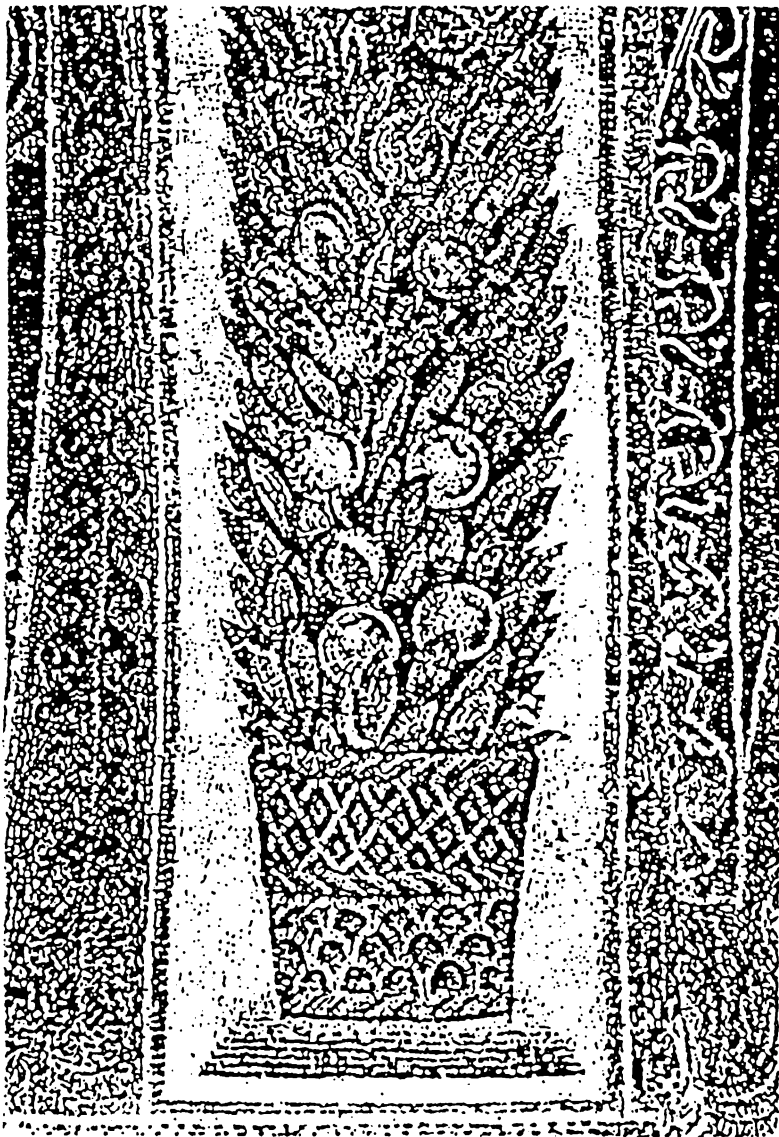
Vienna resists the attack of the Turks 1529

Example 3

Arabesque frame with fruit plant.

A pity we do not have the top of the plant, so we could have seen how the plant develops. The leaves (the interval neumes) on the stems carry the fruits (the ornaments-hypostases-arabesques).

(Mausoleo de Galla Placidia, Ravenna, 6th century).



Example 6

The same part of Oikos 1 as Example 4 and 5, but in a 1992 version where the melismas have disappeared. All 24 Oikoi are published by Monk Fotius in Oropos, Attica, with neumes as they are written now, a transcription, a Danish translation and an introduction.

For-fær-det blev han stæ-ven-de og ud-brød for-an ken-de det-te:
 a.
 Gled dig, ved dig stær Gled-en i Op-gang,

Example 7

Oikos 1: *Ἄγγελος πρωτοστατησ* with its 12 *Χαιρε* exclamations.

Column 1: total number of neumes

Column 2: percentage of well defined neumes ("known")

Column 3: percentage of enigmatic neumes ("unknown")

Column 4: percentage of neumes, halfway "known" (Oxeia and Peta-ste).

	neumes in all	k %	u %	k/u %
Oikos 1	529	54,6	34,4	11,0
Χαιρε 1	103	55,3	34,0	10,7
- 2	173	59,0	31,0	9,8
- 3	90	45,5	36,7	17,8
- 4	182	51,6	36,3	12,0
- 5	162	52,5	34,0	13,5
- 6	179	52,5	34,0	13,5
- 7	142	54,2	33,1	12,7
- 8	117	48,7	38,5	12,9
- 9	82	43,9	37,5	18,3
- 10	96	50,0	34,4	15,6
- 11	84	48,8	39,3	11,9
- 12	51	56,9	33,3	9,8
Average		51,8	35,1	13,0

Example 8

How many of each neume are found in the Ashburnham 64:

Oikos 1 and the 12 Χαίρε: Ca. 2000 neumes specified.

9 "known" neumes, 2 "known/unknown", 16 "unknown".

	Oil	χ1	χ2	χ3	χ4	χ5	χ6	χ7	χ8	χ9	χ10	χ11	χ12
"k"	23	2	8	4	7	7	7	5	7	2	3	5	2
⋮	76	18	27	10	19	23	23	15	12	10	12	10	8
⋮	82	18	35	8	28	29	37	31	16	8	13	9	10
⋮	22	4	9	4	7	6	6	6	4	4	5	5	2
⋮	20	7	6	3	8	7	6	5	2	2	2	2	1
⋮	23	5	6	2	11	4	6	10	8	1	3	2	2
⋮	39	3	10	10	13	8	8	5	8	8	9	7	4
⋮	1		1		1	1	1			1	1	1	
⋮	3												
k/u	16	3	3	1	4	3	7	5	1	3	5		1
⋮	42	8	14	15	18	19	17	13	14	12	10	10	4
"u"	31	7	8	6	15	7	8	8	10	5	6	7	6
⋮	2		2										
⋮	51	7	12	16	14	15	16	10	17	12	13	9	4
⋮	26	2	8	1	13	13	13	8	4	4	2	5	1
⋮	4		2			1	1	2	1				
⋮	3	1	2	2	2	1	1				1		
⋮	15	6	11	1	5	5	6	6	2	2	3	1	1
⋮	13	4		2	1	1	1	4	3	1	1	1	1
⋮	6		1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	1	
⋮	8	3	1	1	5	3	5	2		1	1	3	
⋮	11	1	2	2	4	2	3	2	2	2	3	3	2
⋮	7	3	1	2	1	5	6	4	2	1	1	1	
⋮	1	1	1		3					1	1	1	
⋮	1		2	1	1				1	1	1	1	
⋮	2												
⋮	1												2

Example 9

List of the neumes in Example 8 with their names

ISON Oligon Apostrophos kentema Elaphron.

Hypsele Chamelc Duo kentemata Duo Apostrophoi.

The 9 "known" neumes

Petaste Oxeia Kouphisma

The 3 half-known half enigmatic neumes

Izakisma Diple Kratema

Piasma Darcia Hyperrhoe Gorgon

Psephiston Homalon Strepton Tromikon

Apoderma Xeron Klasma Parakalesma Antikenoma

The 15 enigmatic neumes

Резюме

В докладе прослеживаются арабо-персидско-турецкие и еврейские влияния на византийский мелодический стиль (на примере акафиста Пресвятой Богородице), в частности роль орнаментики в византийской мелодике. Рассматриваются проблемы исполнения некоторых византийских неум, в том числе "загадочных" больших ипостасей.