

Article

The Idea of Byzantium in the Construction of the Musical Cultures of the Balkans [†]

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Abstract: In this article, I discuss the persistence of Byzantium as a cultural model in the arts, and in music in particular, in the countries of the Balkans after the fall of Constantinople. By examining ways in which the idea of Byzantium persisted in Balkan artistic cultures (and especially in music) after the fall of Byzantium, and the way in which this relates to the advent of modernism during the later construction of the Balkan nation-states, I illustrate not only the pervasiveness but also the strength of Byzantinism as a pan-Balkan characteristic.

Keywords: Byzantinism; Balkanism; modernism

1. Introduction: Byzantium after Byzantium

The significance of Byzantium, and by extension Byzantine culture, might be thought to be so evident in the cultural history of the Balkans as to need little explanation, but western perspectives have rarely, until relatively recently, seen any need to take it into account, not least because Balkan cultures have been largely overlooked in cultural narratives dealing with music in Europe as a whole; at best, they have been relegated to the untidy back yard of the “Eastern European”, incomprehensible and therefore unclassifiable (a notable exception in historical musicology is [Samson 2013](#)). This is related to a wider dismissal of “the Byzantine” in the West, as Dimiter G. [Angelov \(2003\)](#) and Averil Cameron have shown (see, for example, [Cameron 2006, 2014](#)), the latter also demonstrating a profound understanding of the fundamental role of Byzantium in the construction of mediaeval Europe in general.

But Byzantium does not, of course, merely refer to the city of that name (indeed, while that city ironically lost its original name once it was rebaptized in honor of the Emperor Constantine, the terms “Byzantine” and “Constantinopolitan” are far from interchangeable). It refers to a complex web of cultures and values that made up that city, and by extension, the world that grew up in its long shadow, under its sometimes enlightened, sometimes despotic, tutelage. If we believe, however, that these complexities make a discussion of the influence of Byzantine culture more complicated than a discussion of the western Middle Ages, we delude ourselves in a fashion both thorough and useless. As [Cameron \(2014, p. 1\)](#) notes, “Byzantium lies outside the standard western narrative of the formation of Europe. It is consigned to the twin spheres of exoticism and the east, and above all to the realms of ossification and pointless bureaucracy”.

When Byzantium the city disappeared, as it did to all intents and purposes in 1453, when it was conquered by the Turks and vast numbers of its inhabitants had fled, it was natural that there would be not only attempts to reconstitute it politically (and spiritually), but a continuation of its cultural inheritance in places where Byzantines had found refuge. Thus, the idea of “Byzance après Byzance” (the phrase is the title of a book by the Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga, published in Bucharest in 1935, see [Iorga 1971](#)) has always been a potent one in the Balkans, in which area the Byzantines did

indeed find refuge, for obvious reasons of cultural continuity and nostalgia. There was nostalgia for a lost, glorious empire, nostalgia for a lost Orthodox world, and a desire for freedom from enslavement. It is that cultural continuity with which I am concerned here; it is something visible in literature—one might think of the literary work of Pajsije I, Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church from 1614 to 1647, or the poetry of Ivan Lalić (1931–1996)—and the plastic arts, and audible (though subject, of course, to changing ideas of performance practice and the simple fact that there are no recordings to which we may refer) in music. The force with which this continuity has manifested itself, and continues to manifest itself, is astonishing. And this is not a simple case of nostalgia; it is a phenomenon far more deeply entrenched, etched into the cultural memory of a number of what we now call nations.

While this may in many ways seem an obvious point to make, when considered on a larger scale, rather than examined in the context of a single modern country, and when viewed as a specifically Balkan phenomenon, the idea of the Byzantine, or, to be more exact, the post-Byzantine idea of the Byzantine (that is to say, the Byzantine legacy), can, I would argue, be seen to be one of the defining and one of the most original aspects of Balkan art (the concept of the Byzantine Legacy is examined at length in the essays included in [Clucas 1988](#)).

To look more specifically at music, it is obvious that after the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, the culture of the City would be continued in more remote places of the Empire, by the spread of folk music, and by means of the continuation of Byzantine chant in the ceremonies of the Orthodox Church, generally referred to as “post-Byzantine.” Some writers, such as Dimitri [Conomos \(1988, p. 85\)](#), have proposed the use of the term “neo-Hellenic”, rather than “neo-Byzantine” or “post-Byzantine”, for the period of musical creation from the 16th century up to 1820, arguing that this phenomenon was part of the more general renaissance of modern Greece and its culture. Indeed, it was during the final period before the Fall of Constantinople that the word “Hellene”, with all its implications of a direct connection with the world of Ancient Greece, rather than Byzantine civilization, came to be revived (see [Runciman 1970](#), pp. 22–23). I would argue, however, that it is also extremely important not to minimize the sense of continuity between Byzantium and its successors, dispersed as they were; and it is for this reason that I prefer to speak of a “Byzantine legacy”.

Legacies are, by definition, simultaneously ends and beginnings, inheritances and opportunities to build and strike out in new directions. In the case of Romania, for example, this may be seen in the gradual and careful adaptation of the repertoire of Byzantine chant to the Romanian language over the course of the 18th century; it is enough to consider the *Psaltichia Românească*, published in 1713 by Filothei sin Agăi Jipei (c.1650–c.1720), or to look at the sheer quantity of highly skilful adaptations that took place between the generations of Macarie the Hieromonk (1770 or 1775–1845) and Dimitrie Suceveanu (1816–1898), in order to understand that this is a phenomenon at once genuinely Byzantine and genuinely Romanian, the very definition of a legacy (further on this, see [Gheorghită 2015](#), chp. 2). Similarly with Bulgaria; while the period of Ottoman rule meant that the Bulgarian Church was once more subject to Constantinople and consequently to a policy of aggressive Hellenization, Bulgarian national identity and culture were preserved in such monasteries as Rila, Troyan, Etropole and Cherepish in Bulgaria itself, and at Zograph on Mount Athos. From the mid-18th century onwards, there was a gradual national awakening, beginning with an exhortation to the Bulgarian people written by St Paisy of the Monastery of Hilandar on Mount Athos, as part of his history of Bulgaria, *Istoriya Slavyanobolgarskaya*, completed in 1762. Chant began to acquire a distinctively national character with the work of such cantor-composers as Neofit of Rila (1783–1881), and Joasaph of Rila and Dimitar Zlatanov (“Gradoborcheto”), both active in the first half of the 19th century; one of the most important aspects of their work was the use of Church Slavonic rather than Greek ([Kujumdzieva 2003, 2019](#); [Moody 2013](#)).

The Byzantine Legacy in Serbia was different in kind and produced different results. The continuation of the tradition of Byzantine chant in Serbia during the course of the 14th and 15th centuries was extraordinarily rich; there survives a unique and fascinating corpus of music, written in late Byzantine notation, and the names of a number of composers are known to us—Isaiah the Serb, a

monk, Kir Stefan the Serb and Nikola the Serb, a protopsaltis (for transcriptions see [Stefanović 1975](#)). Compositions by Stefan and Nikola may be found in the earliest dated neumatic source, the Anthology of the Lavra Monastery, Ms E-108, which was compiled in the last decade of the 14th century and which is bilingual, written in both Greek and Slavonic. The gradual subjugation of Serbian territories to the Ottoman Empire—by means of the battles of the River Marica (1371), Kosovo Field (1389) and the fall of the capital, Smederevo (1459)—led to the displacement of the Christian population towards the north and to the territories of the Serbian despots, with enormous implications for the spread of Christian culture, spirituality and liturgical knowledge ([Petrović 1999, 2007](#)). Musical culture thus became an oral tradition, so that what is familiar today as the monophonic chant of the Serbian Church (*srpsko narodno crkveno pojanje*—Serbian folk church chant—or *karlovačko pojanje*—Karlovci chant) only began to be written down, in western staff notation, in the second quarter of the 19th century. While the names of the most prominent of these transcribers, or what the Serbs call melographers, Kornelije Stanković (1831–1865) and, later, Stevan Mokranjac (1856–1914), are well known, such work was undertaken by a considerable number of Serbian musicians who produced their own anthologies and octoechoi, such as Tihomir Ostojić (1865–1921), Nenad Barački (1878–1939) and Branko Cvejić (1882–1951). It is quite clear, upon even a cursory examination of these publications, that Byzantine chant logically played a formative role in the creation of the melodic “skeleton” of the repertoire. It is very often enough to compare an apolytikion (dismissal hymn) in a transcription by Mokranjac or Barački, say, with its counterpart from the received Byzantine tradition to demonstrate this. The question of the relationship of Serbian church chant to both Byzantine and neo-Byzantine repertoires is nevertheless still very much open, though research is in progress; recent work by Vesna Sara Peno in particular has begun to shed light on a period during which there has been (until now), precisely on account of the lack of written evidence, a huge gap in the history of Serbian music ([Peno 2005, 2008](#)).

Another important aspect of the post-Byzantine phenomenon is the interaction between composers of chant and their surroundings, most notably in the form of an involvement with Ottoman court music, something that is being increasingly studied by Greek and Turkish scholars, and others besides ([Tsiamoulis and Erevnidis 1998](#); [Feldman 1991](#); [Wright 1991, 2000](#)). John Plemmenos has made a particular study of the role of clergymen in this context in his article “The Rosary and the Rose: Clergymen as Creators of Secular Poetry and Music in Early-modern Balkans”, which raises many fascinating and difficult questions regarding the parallel developments of Greek Byzantine and Ottoman musical cultures during this period; he notes that “If so far Greek clerics approached profane music as a marginal and theoretical activity, the turn of the century [18th–19th] witnessed their involvement in a more systematic way”, and proceeds to give as an example the creation and collection of secular music by Archdeacon Nikephoros Kantouniades, born in Chios, whose extensive anthology of settings of poetry by Greek and Turkish composers is now preserved in the library of the Monastery of Vatopedi, on Mount Athos ([Plemmenos 2014](#), p. 87). Indeed, as far as the present study is concerned, the significant change with regard to these cultural interactions, and the increasing prominence of secular music, comes precisely with the disengagement of the Balkan countries from the Ottoman Empire.

2. Post-Byzantium after Post-Byzantium

The evolution of nation-states during the 19th century, and the establishment of an “official” culture as a result of that, is what marks this change ([Moody 2019](#)). Just to look at dates for a moment, in chronological order, the country we now know as Greece was officially recognized as such only in 1830; Serbia became technically independent in 1867; the autonomous Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia in 1868; and Romania and Bulgaria became independent in 1878. Obviously, what used to be called the “Great Powers” were not exempt from such organizational problems, but what makes all these countries particularly interesting and, indeed, agents of cultural definition, in the present context, is that, just as they were seeking to establish themselves as nation-states, they were simultaneously confronted with the advent of modernism (or more accurately, “modernisms”) (See [Moody 2014b](#), *passim*).

As I have noted elsewhere (Moody 2019), modernism thus becomes part and parcel of the self-defining myth of these new nation-states, and is absorbed in cultural terms by sending promising and talented artists to “developed” countries in order to become educated and bring back knowledge, thus entrenching the idea that these new countries form a “periphery” around some center. That center will vary—for Serbs it might be Leipzig, for Greeks Paris, and so on—but the essential idea of living on the edge of some greater phenomenon from which one might learn, and by which one might be inspired, is constant. That phenomenon is both European and northern in character—the Austro-Hungarian heritage in Serbia, for example, made Germany a natural point of orientation in part for linguistic reasons—because the new requirement for modernity necessarily involves the rejecting of a past tied to an aggressive occupation, such as was the case with the Ottoman Empire; there is a need, in other words, to move beyond the status of colony.

In using the term “modernism” in this context, I am doing so in a broad sense, but one that implies learning from countries, such as Germany, the means of bringing Balkan cultures into line with those of the “developed” countries. After all, Mokranjac’s teachers Rheinberger, Parisotti and Reinecke (in Munich, Rome and Leipzig respectively) are hardly considered to be paragons of the avant-garde. As I have also argued (Moody 2011a, 2011b, 2014a), however, what Mokranjac went abroad to do was to learn the craft of composition according to the best models available to him (and learn he did, in the most thorough way possible), in order to return to his native country and apply his knowledge to Serbian culture, whether by means of working with folk song or ecclesiastical chant, something he was uniquely equipped to do.

Appreciation of the role of modernism in the arts in the Balkans has, of course, always existed, but there have been some interesting limitations. Augustin Ioan, reviewing in 2007 a recent book on modernist architecture in Romania, wrote the following:

Neither do the authors mention the Orthodox architecture of churches and monasteries from the decades covered in the book, even though much could be said about the effort to modernize what has been, and to a certain extent still is, seen as an ‘outdated’, timeless, or even ‘Byzantine’ architecture. If this architecture had been taken in consideration, the scope of Machedon and Scoffam’s book would have become richer and more diverse. (Ioan 1999)

This is a telling comment. Though the dynamic approach to the Byzantine past in Serbian architecture has also been dismissed by at least one historian as “a new aberration of the Byzantine paradigm” (Blagojević 2003, p. xi), such an attitude is impossible to maintain in the face of the rampant creativity of architects such as Momir Korunović (1883–1969) and Branko Tanazević (1976–1945), which manifested not only a quest for a post-post-Byzantine heritage, but envisaged a radically new way of so doing that corresponded fully with the simultaneous quest for a Serbian identity—hence my subtitle, “Post-Byzantium after post-Byzantium”. At least some Serbian composers of this period evinced a similar stance: the settings of the Divine Liturgy made by Milenko Živković (1901–1964) and Milivoje Crvčanin (1892–1978) are comparable in their attempts to reconcile the Byzantine past and contemporary Serbian reality and, more importantly, to fuse them into one creative endeavor that was anything but nostalgic.

Similar observations might be made about the works of Paul Constantinescu (1909–1963) and Marțian Negrea (1893–1973) in Romania. The combination of neoclassicism (or, more accurately, neobaroque) and Byzantine-inspired melody in such works as Negrea’s Requiem and Constantinescu’s two Byzantine oratorios provided the impetus for a tradition of concert works in which, while the neobaroque element might naturally be considered nostalgic, the Byzantine aspect was a force for modernism (Anghel 2018; Temeș 2010, 2011; Coroiu and Belibou 2017; Ionașcu 2019). It might also be seen as an anti-Slavic element, given the quest for an historical foundation for Romanian identity during the communist period (Boia 2001, pp. 81–89). A Byzantine cultural orientation had, in addition, already existed in Romania, whereas the connections with Slavic culture were, though extant, more tenuous.

The situation in Bulgaria was somewhat different: while composers of church music, such as Dobri Hristov (1875–1941) and Petar Dinev (1889–1980) in particular, certainly took account of the

Byzantine inheritance, using Bulgarian versions of Byzantine chant as the basis for polyphonic works, composers of specifically liturgical music were bound to take this into account, even if that meant essentially ignoring it, as had been the case with Atanas Badev (1860–1908). It was rather later, in the works of composers such as Ivan Spassov (1934–1996), that Orthodox spirituality came to be a potential, and potent, source of inspiration for some Bulgarian composers, building, paradoxically, upon the advent of the avant-gardism of such innovators as Konstantin Iliev (1924–1988), who never worked with church music, but incorporated elements of Bulgarian folksong into his radically new compositional vocabulary (Moody 2014b).

3. Byzantinism and Balkanism

Byzantinism is intimately connected with Balkanism, and, as I have suggested above, the quest for the rehabilitation of the former has much to do with the need for the self-affirmation of the latter, a phenomenon that may be read negatively just as easily as it may be read positively. As noted earlier, Dimitar G. Angelov has discussed in detail the invention of “Byzantinism” in connection with Balkanism, and the usage of these terms, especially by western scholars, who find them both detrimental to the development of what was once part of the Byzantine Empire, and subsequently became, in the western perspective, Eastern Europe, and then South-Eastern Europe. According to this view, “Byzantinism,” he says,

... is a concept of ‘otherness’ by which Byzantium is turned into the crippled ‘other’ of the cultural construct of Europe. As such, Byzantinism, like Balkanism, involves the stereotyping and categorization of a world that lies on the borders of what the West sees as its own cultural territory. Byzantinism, like Balkanism, categorizes the ‘other’ as an imperfect and incomplete image of the self, thus fitting it into the common cultural construct of European civilization as a sort of caricatured self-reflection. (Angelov 2003, p. 3)

This connects closely with Helena Bodin’s concept of the Byzantine and western “semiosphere”, “interacting and interfering within a larger cultural polysystem” (Bodin 2016, p. 16). If we examine the “semiosphere” of the Balkans, or rather, the Byzantine–Balkan “semiosphere”, it is clear that the Byzantine, as viewed from within the Balkan, is not necessarily crippled or caricatured at all, even though it of course involves stereotyping and categorizing (after all, which worldview does not?). Rather, when possible, the Byzantine functions as a means for the Balkan to assert its identity, aware as it is of the importance of this ancestry not only as a delineator against western identity, but also against Ottoman and Slavic-communist identities. But, inevitably, that delineation never in reality prevents contamination by the very sources against which the Balkan seeks to delineate its identity.

As far as music is concerned, there is a paradox here in one respect, in that the advent of harmonized choral singing in Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia came about in great part through Russian influence: the originality of the combination of that tradition with the Byzantine *melos*—and its consequent expansion into the realm of concert music—has not received the attention it deserves. Composers who developed a musical vocabulary in this way include Ioan Chirescu (1889–1980) and Nicolae Lunghu (1900–1993) in Romania; Petar Dinev (1889–1980) and, to a lesser extent, Dobri Hristov (1875–1941) in Bulgaria; and, at something of an angle, because of the codification of the oral tradition by the melographers of preceding decades, Živković and Crvčanin in Serbia.

It would clearly be a grave mistake to leave Greece out of this discussion of the Byzantine “semiosphere”; whilst composers such as Petros Petrides (1892–1937) and Marios Varvoglis (1885–1967) were certainly concerned with the Byzantine legacy, using chant melodies in their instrumental works, they left church music alone, whereas Emiliios Riadis (1880–1935) and Georgios Ponirides (1887–1982), to take two examples, did not, and sought to establish a polyphonic repertoire that might be used in liturgical ceremonies. The great debates during the early decades of the 20th century between the “westernizers” and the “orientalists” may now have been forgotten by the majority of those active in propagating Byzantine chant today, but this does not mean that the arguments on both sides are not

worth revisiting in a quest for greater understanding of the elements that shaped cultural life in Greece at that time, and it needs to be understood too that these arguments covered all the arts, including not only music, but art and architecture too, understood as part of a much wider cultural and political context. Artists concerned with this question include the painters Konstantinos Parthenis (1878–1967) and Spyridon Papaloukas (1892–1957), and the architect Anastasios Metaxas (1862–1937, responsible for the Cathedral of St Andrew in Patras, begun in 1908) (Moody 2014b; Hadjinicolau 1975; Schizas 2017; Apostolopoulos 2013).

That context is brought vividly to life by the novelist and critic George Theotokas (1905–1966), who, in a book published in 1929, *Ἐλεύθερο Πνεύμα* (“Free Spirit”), wrote the following:

“Suddenly, from one day to the next, we found ourselves in this jumble of modern life, swept along by the great winds of post-war Europe. Our teachers, carefree people who had dedicated their life to the study of ancient grammar, Roman law, Byzantine history and the Greek folk song, were suddenly faced with the mad speed of our century, the rapid development of society’s mores, our radical political and economic upheavals, the struggle of the classes, jazz and all the world of passions which it expresses, the concerns of the post-war generation, modern girls with their hair cut short, with their skirts above their knees, with their suntanned skin, emancipated all at once from centuries-old social conventions. These good people understand nothing and say that the world is going to rack and ruin. It would be strange if they understood. Greek letters felt frightened and fell silent.” (Theotokas [1929] 2010, p. 134)

This remarkable passage neatly encapsulates the fear of the adventure of modernism felt at the time, and though Greek letters did not entirely fall silent, of course, there was a period of cautious investigation and adaptation; in the musical sphere, the work of Petrides, using Byzantine chant as the basis of works otherwise entirely conceived in a western spirit, is an outstanding example of this. Mutatis mutandis, this situation was reflected throughout the Balkans—one might think of the painting of the Serb Kosta Bogdanović (1930–2012), for example, with his series of *Vizanthemes*, or the incorporation of Romanian–Byzantine elements in the architecture of Cristofi Cerchez (1872–1955), as well of the work of younger Serbian composers (Moody 2014c). And if the shadow cast by Byzantium was a long one, the manifold attempts to bring it into creative dialogue with modernism were, and are, evidence of a dynamic pan-Balkan culture—the Byzantine–Balkan “semiosphere”—that retains its power still today.

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