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Research Article

A perspective on our folk song and Byzantine Chant in the historical context of their development: Some aspects at the meeting point

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical and musicological intersections between Byzantine chant and Albanian folk music, with a particular focus on oral transmission and shared stylistic features. Initially developed within the Byzantine Empire, Byzantine music lacked a fixed ethnic identity, drawing from a range of influences including Palestine, Asia Minor, and the Balkans. Researchers like V. Tole and F. Hysi emphasize the folk roots of Byzantine religious music and its universal musical layer. The study highlights the coexistence of Byzantine chant and Albanian folk music, especially in southern and central Albania, where liturgical melodies share structural similarities with polyphonic folk songs. Although folk music was transmitted orally, the written tradition of Byzantine chant ensured its preservation. Byzantine chant was passed on both aurally and through formal schooling by psalmists, leading to regional styles and theoretical codification. In contrast, Albanian folk music remained an oral tradition until its systematic collection by Arbëresh researchers in the 18th century. Historical testimonies from chroniclers such as Ducas, Barleti, and Sabellici provide some of the earliest documentation of Albanian song. The paper notes that some folk songs from areas like Korçë, Berat, and Durrës incorporate modes and melismatic elements from Orthodox chant. Although the church largely resisted folk influences, amateur psalmists introduced localized variations in chant interpretation. Ultimately, the study affirms that these two distinct traditions, despite institutional boundaries, developed mutual influences over centuries, forming a unique cultural synthesis preserved through oral heritage and liturgical manuscripts.

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Introduction

Byzantine music initially existed as both church and secular music in the Balkan peoples who were under the Byzantine Empire, as it was performed both inside and outside the walls of the church by the Byzantines themselves. In this context, before this culture received the identifying term "Byzantine" (according to the historical period in which it was generated), we would refer to the researcher V. Tole, who claims that "Byzantine musical culture, like the religious songs of all other religions, derive from folk songs"[2]. This observation necessarily leads to the concept of the universal layer of music, its birth and existence, initially, as a folk musical culture, from which the various types or typologies of music that we know today were derived.

Regarding the origin and identity of Byzantine musical culture, musicologist F. Hysi argues that "[...] Byzantine music itself, in all its ecclesiastical structures, does not have any specific ethnic address" since "as is known, relying on the

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[2] Tole, S. V. *Folklori muzikor*, *iso-polifonia dhe monodia*, shtëpia botuese UEGEN, Tiranë, 2007, p. 43.

melodies of Greek antiquity, Byzantine music was formed according to their relationships with musical elements of Palestine, Asia Minor, but also of other countries that formed the Byzantine Empire"[3]. The Arbëresh researcher G. Ferrari also presents these facts earlier (in his articles) where, among other things, he concludes by arguing that "there is no doubt that Byzantine music is derived from this mixed musical culture"[4].

The transition to the known progressive stages of this church music, even after the fall of the Byzantine Empire (which is considered the post-Byzantine period), meant that in our country, too, this musical culture coexisted for centuries with the local musical tradition.

But, on the other hand, the issue that is most discussed in scientific researcher circles is connected, more specifically, to that "type" of local musical tradition that is identified as polyphonic and the initial relationship between it and Byzantine chant in the peoples of the Balkans (including our country).

Considering that the heritage of Byzantine music has come down to our days documented through manuscripts of the sacred word (from the 6th century) which, although few in number, have a very precious musicological value, that of folk music has not had such a chance, since its heritage has been passed down from generation to generation orally and the data of musicological interest, moreover, the studies ones, are much later.

In this context, if the first written evidence of the oral creativity of our people is documented as early as the 17th century with the proverbs published by Frang Bardhi in 1635, as an appendix to his Latin-Albanian dictionary, the scientific interest in folk literature and genuine systematic folklore research belong to a later period, thanks to the work and tireless efforts of the Arbëresh of Italy (where the first folklore collection by them is related to the Codex of Kieut in the 18th century: its beginning in 1737 and completion in 1770). The Arbëresh made a valuable contribution to the collection and publication of the folk heritage, as well as to the recognition and popularization of the treasures of our culture in Europe of that time[5].

Alongside Western sources, especially for the period before the Ottoman conquest of our country, the main place is occupied by Byzantine sources, which although few (limited) have great value for Albanian historiography. These sources shed light on facts and contain various information about Albania and the Albanians such as political and ecclesiastical history, documents and chronicles, official acts of emperors, the state and church institutions, etc.[6].

An interesting piece of information for our folklore and culture, according to researcher Gj. Misha, comes from the Byzantine chronicler Dukas, in his work "Ducae Michaels Ducae nepotis Historia Byzantina...."[7], where in a fragment it is mentioned about Sultan Bayezid I[8], who forced a group of war hostages, young boys and girls (during his stay in Bursa - the early capital of the Byzantine Empire) to sing in their own languages; among them were Albanians. But this data is not expanded with other facts, such as e.g. which song was sung (or which songs, if there could be more than one); what was the subject of its text; the way of singing (with or without musical instruments) or other identifying data. However, it can be alluded to that the way of singing these pawns may have been in a group, i.e. well-known songs that came from the popular environments of that time. Although Ducas does not give an exact date for this fact, the information that is brought, related to Sultan Bayezid I, covers the time span between 1396 - 1402, thus providing the first evidence of our folk song, about half a century before the evidence of Barleti and Sebeliko[9], which center on our national hero, Gj. K. Skanderbeg.

Specifically, the testimony of our researcher and humanist Marin Barleti[10], about Albanian folk songs, has at the center of folklore information, the period after the first siege of Kruja in 1450 by the Turks and the resistance of our

[3] Hysi, F. *Rrjedhat popullore të muzikës shqiptare*, SHBLU, ILA, Tiranë, 1990, p. 41.
[4] Ferrari, G. *L'Albania e la musica liturgica bizantina*, artikulli i botuar në revistën "Oriente Cristiano", anno XVIII, ottobre - dicembre, 4, Palermo, 1978, p. 118.

[5] Misha, Gj. *Një dëshmi e hershme e këngës sonë popullore*, published in the scientific journal "Popular Culture", published by AAS and IPC, Tiranë, 2/1988, p. 131; 135.
[6] See, for more: Bozhori, K. Liço, F. *Burime tregimtare bizantine për historinë e Shqipërisë, shek. X - XIV*, Tiranë, 1975.
[7] This work was first published in 1649 in the "Corpus Byzantinae Historiae" (*Corpus of Byzantine History*) which began to appear in Paris under the auspices of Louis XIV, from 1645 - 1711. See, for more: Ducas, G. V. *Istoria turco - bizantina, 1341 - 1462*, Bucuresti, 1958, p. 11.
[8] The period of his reign covers the time period 1389 - 1402.
[9] See, for more: Misha, Gj. *Një dëshmi e hershme e këngës sonë popullore*, ..., p. 132 - 135.
[10] Barleti, M. *Historia e Skënderbeut*, reprint, Tiranë 1964 (first edition in Latin 1508).

people under the leadership of Gj. K. Skanderbeg. Another early testimony comes from the Venetian chronicler Antonio Sabellici[11], which has at the center of information the popular inspiration, inspired by the situation after the death of Skanderbeg and the great pain that his loss left in the people.

It should be noted that the information conveyed by these historical and documentary testimonies is scarce, since the existence of folk songs is mentioned in passing (no detailed data or descriptions are given, let alone analytical elements for this folk phenomenon) due to the fact that such a thing was not the object of their topics and knowledge about this popular culture was limited[12].

These dating data are of interest, not only for documenting historical facts regarding our culture, but they also take on a special musicological value, illuminating even a little the antiquity of our song, this unwritten culture, passed down from generation to generation as a wealth of the soul, which has existed as long as other cultures developed in parallel, for which the evidence has been tangible - material (paintings, architecture, manuscripts, etc.).

But, returning to Ducas' testimony about the Albanian song sung 'in his courtyard', the fact that he mentions that the song would be sung by a group of young boys and girls (perhaps, separately, each group) as mentioned above, one can hypothesize that they may have sung in a heterophonic or polyphonic (multi-voiced) manner!

A specific aspect of the "meeting point" is the way of transmitting of Byzantine chant and our folk songs.

From the very beginning, we would like to highlight a very distinct and common characteristic for both musical cultures referred to: the way of transmitting folk songs as well as Byzantine chants by hearing, that is, through oral transmission from generation to generation.

In our folk songs (as well as in every other tradition in the world) this is the only way of transmission, while, in Byzantine chants, the way of transmission and practice continues through two ways by singers - psaltes. The first way is the form that we mentioned above, that is, of transmission by ear (of hearing), repetition and practice, but with a particularity regarding the method of transmission (compared to our folk tradition) since there was (and is) a form of organization, where the protopsalte (first psalte) prepared (prepares) in the form of a course the new psaltes with the first way by hearing. Whereas, the second way is the way of acquiring and practicing this music through theoretical preparation with basic knowledge of Byzantine music.

These types of courses became traditional for the transmission of psalms from one generation to another with the nuances and character of the place where they operated. Such schools existed in Korça, Elbasan, Durrës, Kavajë, Berat, etc. While, for the second form, the fact of compulsory teaching of the theory of this music in the schools of the time is known, as during the Ottoman rule, teachers, since they knew how to read and write, also performed the duty of psalmist, which is why psalmists were often called "dhaskal". Precisely, in the monasteries, musical texts were copied, which were then distributed to the village churches and used by psalm teachers. In these manuscripts there are also parts of hymns composed by the protopsalmists themselves with nuances of the local character, giving a beauty and charm to the traditional Byzantine melody.

So, through these forms and especially the first form, which is even older in our country, a continuity of the knowledge of Byzantine music and psalm singing in churches has been ensured. We would affirm that Durrës was the theoretical center of Byzantine music in the 19th century with Krisanth of Maditi, the reformer of this music, while Elbasan was the "best place" for practice. So, even in Albania there are several personalities[13] who preserved and cultivated this music, both as a theory and as a practice.

[11] Sabellici, A. *Historia de Rerum Venetarum*, ribotim, Basilae, 1556 (first edition 1477).

[12] Ref. Misha, Gj. *Një dëshmi e hershme e këngës sonë popullore*, ..., p. 131.

[13] Since the first half of the 19th century, there was a very popular protopsalt in Elbasan, Mr. Vladimir Gjini, a very good connoisseur and performer of it with a free spirit. His fame had reached Constantinople. He had regular correspondence with the protopsalt of the great Church of the Patriarchate and from time to time sent him original pieces composed by him for evaluation. His melismas (musical pieces) were liked and appreciated so much that they invited him to become a member of the Patriarchate choir, and even its protopsalt, but Vladimir Gjini did not accept, remaining in Elbasan until the end of his life, where he left many students who continued his tradition. See, for more, Beduli, Dh. Muzika bizantine në Shqipëri, ref. from Kostoli, S. në "Muzika kishtare bizantine në Shqipëri", lecture given at

With the reopening of churches and their reorganization after the 1990s, liturgical and musical books had almost completely disappeared. Those who tried to help in singing during sacred services, being of advanced age, had only the echo of traditional psalm singing left, and their singing resembled more folk songs than the pure sound of Byzantine music. Thus, a new era began in our country where great importance was given to the revival and cultivation of the tradition of Byzantine music[14].

In this context, in the Albanian Orthodox churches, the tradition of teaching the art of Byzantine music continues to be preserved and cultivated, also through the adaptation of liturgical melodies with signs (neuma)[15], which we judge to be an added documentary value, to continue the legacy from generation to generation of this centuries-old tradition, which derives from sacred manuscripts (codices), even some Western reaserchers such as E. Wellesz, C. Hoeg, G. Pantiru, L. Tardo, etc., for research purposes, have transcribed Byzantine musical notations on the pentagram, especially of the first period of ekphonetic musical notation and of the last period, the Christian one. Also, Th. S. Noli, has transcribed the chants of the Christian liturgy into pentagram and is credited with having Albanianized the liturgical texts, considering here the *Akathist Hymn* ("Hymn of Hymns"), skillfully adapted into the Albanian language so "that it encourages the idea of an original Nolian recreation"[16] from a poetic-translational point of view.

On the other hand, such a thing has also been done by Albanian researchers and ethnomusicologists, who have transcribed a considerable number of our folk melodies[17] and songs (reflected in various publications) on the pentagram, starting from monophonic ones, to polyphonic songs (with 3 and 4 voices) which are very demanding in terms of transcription[18], as the composer and ethnomusicologist Tole claims: "a true transcription is a challenge for a researcher and musician [...]"[19].

Returning finally to the issue of the meeting points between these two different cultures, we would affirm that although "the walls of the church were very high" and this music developed and develops even today within its walls, again, there were influences or interferences (although not numerous) between them.

In this context, the very gathering of believers to participate in the Sunday ritual in the church, on the day known as the day of *the Divine Liturgy*, was done for two no less important reasons: the first reason was understandable, in relation to strengthening faith in the Orthodox rite, while the second and very important reason was simply human, the union and staying as close as possible to each other, the socialization between them.

Precisely, at the end of this ritual, the men discussed the problems that preoccupied the place (area) where they lived, about various issues that concerned their families and their tribal and social circle, while during the celebrations they went to congratulate the name day of the one who had it, based on the chosen saint, by "entering and exiting" to each other. Also, the believers congratulated each other on the occasions of other religious holidays, which were determined in the calendar of the Orthodox Church (and recognized by them), thus further strengthening the friendships between them and creating, in this way, a peaceful and harmonious coexistence.

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the cultural event "Byzantine Evening", near the church "Annunciation of the Theotokos", in Tirana, June 7, 2010, on the occasion of the closing of the exhibition "Byzantine and post-Byzantine manuscripts in Albania", which opened at the premises of the General Directorate of Archives (GDA) in Tirana.

[14] In particular, this revival of Byzantine music in our country in recent years, became more tangible with the opening of the Theological Academy in 1992. See, for more, Kostoli, S. *ibid.*

[15] Here we have in mind the adaptation to the Christian musical notation (with neumes). The one who we can say with certainty that laid the foundations for the correct teaching of Byzantine music in theory and practice in Albania is Archimandrite Justin Anthimiadhi. This missionary, monk from the Holy Mountain, a profound master of Byzantine music, son of a psaltery and psaltery since his childhood, established the first local school in Albania, near the Cathedral of Tirana, for the theoretical and practical teaching of Byzantine music signs. He also made Byzantine music a compulsory subject in the curriculum of the Theological Academy "The Resurrection of Christ". He adapted the most necessary texts of religious services into Albanian with Byzantine signs. Cit. Kostoli, S. *ibid.*

Another great name with an extraordinary contribution is Th. S. Noli, who is not only the transcriber of Byzantine melodies on the pentagram, but also the harmonizer or arranger of Byzantine hymns, considering his collection of liturgical music, entitled "Hymnore" (134 pages, Boston, 1936) where there is more traditional Russian liturgy and Russian composers, but also traditional Byzantine music.

[16] Balli. K. *Himni i Himneve, Himni Akathist dhe ikona homonime e Kostandin Shpatarakut*, published in the cultural periodical "Tempulli", no. 12, Korçë, 2007, p. 66.

[17] This also includes transcriptions of instrumental melodies.

[18] Some of the names of these Albanian researchers and ethnomusicologists, as well as collectors of folk music, who have given their valuable contribution to leaving this music as a written document in their publications, are: R. Sokoli, E. Dheri, B. Kruta, S. Shituni, H. Filja, M. Daiu, L. Liço, O. Xhatufa, F. Daja, P. Miso, S. Shupo, V. Tole, etc.

[19] See, for more: The Preface to the book Dervishi, F. *Muzika popullore e qytetit muze të Beratit*, preface written by V. Tole, Berat, 2011, p. 4.

According to ethnologist A. Gjergji, "these visits were often accompanied by feasts, during which troparia and traditional songs were sung. On major feasts, and especially on *Easter*, at the end of the *Divine Liturgy*, believers sang and danced in the churchyard. There was great liveliness during the fairs, because believers from other regions also gathered, exchanging culture and traditions. The fair was held once a year, on the day that the saint whose name, the church bore was celebrated. These fairs were welcomed with pleasure by the population for various reasons. In addition to the worship of the saint at the *Divine Liturgy,* commercial activity was held in the churchyard, and then a large collective feast followed, during which *church chants and folk songs were sung*[20].

Thus, we can conclude that coexistence has left some traces of Byzantine music in our folk music, which are noticeable (due to the geographical distribution of the Orthodox population in our country[21]) in some areas of Southern Albania (Korçë, Berat, Elbasan), but also in Central Albania (Durrës, Kavajë) where some folk songs (not many in number) have motifs and points close to Orthodox church hymns, as well as melismas or vocal ornaments from them. Also, the use of the *Second Plagal Mode* (as one of the most famous Byzantine scales with the two tetrachords above re: re, mib, fa#, sol and la, sib, do#, re) is used in some folk songs of these areas.

While, on the other hand (as we said above that, the church was more hermetic about interfering in its music, elements from folk music) more influence is observed in terms of the interpretation of Byzantine music (especially in the way the psalms were sung in the Albanian language) especially, by amateur and uneducated psalters, who gave these psalms local colors. While the much-discussed issue of the *burdon* (isos) in both of these musical cultures, will be the focus of another research paper on its genesis and function in each of them and in comparison with each other. So, at the end of this paper we can affirm that different musical cultures (as in our case the folk and Byzantine ones) in their coexistence, create close or distant meeting points, like an oral heritage, which is inherited from generation to generation.

Biodata of Author

Assoc. Prof. Dr. **Holta Sina (Kilica)** is a musicologist and educator at the University of Arts in Tirana (UART). She studied Musicology at the Faculty of Music of the Academy of Arts (now University of Arts, Tirana) in the class of Prof. Albert Paparisto (1990–1994). She completed her degree under the academic supervision of Prof. Sokol Shupo (1994) with the highest results. She then worked as a scientific researcher in the Department of Ethnomusicology and Ethnochoreography at the Institute of Folk Culture (IFC) under the Academy of Sciences of Albania (1994–2000). In 1998, she specialized as head of the Ethnomusicological Archive of IFC at the PhonogrammArchiv in Vienna, Austria, under the direction of Prof. Ditrich Schüller. She completed postgraduate studies and a Master's degree in Musicology (at the Academy of Arts) under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Fatmir Hysi (2006) with top results. In 2011, she earned the title of "Docent" at the Faculty of Music, UART. She defended her Doctorate at the Albanian Institute of Studies (IAKSA/QSA, Tirana) under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Shaban Sinani (2013), again with the highest evaluation. Her scientific activity spans from 1996 to the present and includes participation in several research projects, such as: involvement in the development project of the National Folklore Festival 1995 in Berat, serving as a scientific committee member for the selection of folk music groups as an ethnomusicologist; and taking part in scientific expeditions organized by IFC (Academy of Sciences of Albania) in Himara (1995) and Durrës (1999), particularly among the Kosovar population displaced by Serbian genocide. She has participated in dozens of national and international symposiums, conferences, and scientific panels from 1996 to 2022 in Albania and abroad. She is the author of numerous scholarly, critical, and journalistic articles published in academic journals and media in countries including Albania, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Romania, and the United Kingdom. She is also the author or co-author of:

[20] Gjergji, A. *Refleksione të krishterimit në kulturën popullore*, ..., p. 13.

[21] As a result of the Islamization of Albanians by the Ottoman Empire, Orthodox Christians historically made up 30% of Albania's population. https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ortodoksia_Lindore_n%C3%AB_Shqip%C3%ABri

- *Music 5* (textbook for 9-year schools, 2007, Ministry of Education and Science), co-authored with Elira Aliaj;
- *Opera: Concept and Structure*, Express Print, Tirana (2016);
- *The Ekphonetic Codices of Albania* (scientific study), Academy of Sciences of Albania (2019);
- and co-author with Prof. Dr. Zana Shureriqi Prela of the book *60 Years of the Faculty of Music at the University of Arts (1962–2022)*, bilingual (Albanian-English), Naimi Publishing House (2024).

Academic contributions: She has developed course programs for musical form analysis (lecture cycles, recommended literature) and musicology; served as academic advisor and scientific opponent for undergraduate and master's theses in musicology and music education. She has been a member of admission and thesis defense committees in the field.

Since 2002, she has been a full-time lecturer in *Musical Work Analysis* and *Musicology* (bachelor and master programs) at UART. In 2023, she was awarded the title of *Associate Professor* at the Faculty of History and Philology, University of Tirana. She is a permanent member of the Doctoral Commission and its subcommittees, and a member of the Organizing Committee and Editorial Board of the International Conference on Arts and Education (ICAE, 2025).

Currently, she is the *Head of the Musicology Department* (chair of the subject group) in the Faculty of Music at UART.

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