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I compositori greci del maqâm *ottomano*
The Greek Composers of the Ottoman Maqâm
by Ensemble Bîrûn and Kudsi Erguner

Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, 2017

A musical release on the subject of "Greek composers of Ottoman music" is not anymore a revelation or a shock to musicians and audiences in Greece and Turkey (or their respective diasporas), as Panagiotis Poulos has already shown in his insightful exploration of this trend (Poulos 2016: 83-108); for this "genre" (if I am allowed to use this term) has become a sort of fashion (within or without brackets) on both sides of the Aegean (if not further west, as will be shortly shown) since the late 1980s. That should be credited to Bosphorus ensemble inaugurating both the term and the trend (Bosphorus 1990), which he bequeathed to the following generations of musicians and music-listeners. Yet, it still has strong resonances and sends strange and (for some) inexplicable vibes to quite a few eastern-music-lovers from a (not so remote yet very different in other respects) past: the Ottoman Empire in her "middle-late" phase, that is the 18th century, just before her becoming the "sick-man [or -woman] of Europe". The most capable heir-manager of this "cultural capital" (to use Bourdieu's term) was until recently the En Chordais ensemble which, since 2000, has included in its repertoire and music productions, a substantial number of Ottoman music by Greek composers, upgraded now to "Great composers of the Mediterranean" (En Chordais 2001).

It is within this context that we (musicologists and music critics) should place and approach the present musical album, once more dedicated to Greek composers of Ottoman Music, now rephrased to Ottoman *maqâm* (instead of the standard Turkish version, *makam*), that is, *grosso modo*, the near-eastern modal system. Undoubtedly, the Arabic version of *maqâm* gives a different aura to the present endeavour, imaginatively transmitting sounds and memories from the deserts and oases of Africa and the peninsula. The same spirit must have inspired the editors of En Chordais to spell the name of an important Greek Ottoman composer of the same period, Zacharias (Gr.) or Zaharya (Turk.) as Zakharia *Khanendeh* (instead of the simpler Turkish form, *hanede*, i.e. the Ottoman Court singer). Apart from carrying and transmitting a musical tradition, this album continues the (commercial) "custom" of live-recordings-turn-to-"cultural products" (another of Bourdieu's terms) initiated by Bosphorus ensemble, and adopted by En Chordais. In the case of Bîrûn ensemble (headed by Kudsi Erguner) the recording was made during the annual workshop in Ottoman music of the Giorgio Cini Foundation, under the theme of "Greek Composers in Ottoman Classical Music" (2016).

Yet, if here we have a tradition, we also have a transition – and this becomes obvious by the accompanying bilingual texts: "In the beginning was the Word". The Bosphorus recordings contained a booklet in Turkish and English text, En Chordais opted for Greek and English, and Bîrûn relied on Italian and English. Of course, this can first be explained by geography. Bosphorus was based in Turkey, En Chordais in Greece, and Bîrûn in Italy. Besides, we live in the aftermath of the so-called "Babel effect" (to recall Daniel Hecht's homonymous fiction): language division. Yet, the transition seems not to be only geographic and linguistic but also symbolic and apocalyptic. It signifies the "relocation" (to use a popular sociological term) of cultivating a musical heritage from its birthplace in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) to the land of its former *rayahs* (Greece) and now to a *giaour* country *par excellence* (Italy). On the other hand, one should not forget that Venice had long established an embassy in Konstantiniyye (the historical name of the Ottoman capital from 1453 to 1923), and the dwellings of the Venetian diplomats in Pera were described as the most "sumptuous and delightfully situated" (Dallaway 1797: 127).

This cultural transfer is symbolically epitomized in the very name of the ensemble, *Bîrûn* (literally "outside"), a term used by the Ottomans for the Outer Courtyard of the Topkapı Palace, as opposed to the Inner one (*Enderûn*), only accessible to the Ottoman Sultan and his entourage. Hence the metaphorical christening of the project as "The Venetian Bîrûn" by the two Giovannis (De Zorzi and Giurati), editors of the album and authors of

a forward, who consider Venice "an ideal place" for such an endeavour, on the basis of the city's neighbouring with the former Ottoman Empire, and its long and strong relations with the former "antichrist" of Europe (Pedani 2017). Nostalgia or a mission? Rather, a coincidence (though not a chance): the presence of Kudsi Erguner, a *neyzen* (master of *ney* or the Turkish transverse flute) in Venice and his inauguration of a project on Ottoman music that has already included other workshops and musical albums on the same broad topic.[1] Erguner's short chapter ("Modal and Tonal Music") is quite enlightening for the uninitiated reader/listener, except for two points: Petros Peloponnēsios (1730 [not 1735] – 1778) was not "a player of the *ney* flute" but most probably of *tambur* (the long-necked Turkish lute), according to 19th century sources (Papadopoulos 1890: 319); the excerpt of J. J. Rousseau does not refer to his contemporary Greek music in the Ottoman Empire but to ancient Greek (Hellenic) *mousikē*, which was the imaginary prototype of the European artists of the time and a point of fierce debate between the so-called "ancients" and "moderns" (Grant and Stewart 2001).

The following two chapters of the booklet (representing the "main dish" of the album) are written by Giannis Koutis, an active Greek-Cypriot performer of the *oud* (the Turkish short-necked lute). Koutis has studied in Rotterdam with Erguner, is a member of *Lingua Franca* ensemble, and is currently organizing a similar project in Cyprus (*Labyrinth Music Workshop*). As a founding member of an ensemble playing modal music in Greece, Cyprus and Europe, Koutis was entrusted with the writing of the chapter "Greek Composers of the Ottoman *Maqâm*". Besides his artistic identity, Koutis is self-defined as a music enthusiast-optimist, who is ready to select from two tables at all costs: the musical and the musicological. There is nothing wrong with that provided one has enough time, energy, and training to cope. Koutis is a member of a new generation of musicians cum musicologists who try (and to some extent manage) to cross the academic borders, and project (and market?) a new version of *mousikos anēr* or *musical man* (sorry, girls, it's an ancient term!). Neyzan De Zorzi is an older and experienced member of the "club": I still recall with delight his sentimental *ney* performance during a 2012 conference in Nicosia (De Zorzi 2012). In classical Greece (according to Plato's *Laws*), *mousikos anēr* was the ideal type of a cultivated citizen in his youth, trained in music and poetry, and dedicated to democratic principles (nothing to do with oriental despotism and the likes…) (Bundrick 2005: 60-74).

[1] *Composers at the Ottoman Court* (2012), *Armenian Composers of Ottoman Music* (2013), *The Maftirîms and the Works of Sephardic Jews in Ottoman Classical Music* (2015).

Yet, "enthusiasm and optimism" are not enough to come to grips with musicology (and possibly any other -ology, too). Before one begins "hunting for a musical treasure", one should check whether his/her supposed discovery has already been noticed and studied by others, and whether one should dig a little deeper to find more precious "treasures". *Il meglio è l'inimico del bene*? Maybe, but not always. Take, for example, *Melpomenē*, a musical anthology held in Vatopedi Monastery, Mount Athos (MS 1428), and the main source for the Bîrûn recordings. Though a precious anthology, *Melpomenē* draws its material from previous collections, mainly MS Gr. 927 held in the Romanian Academy Library, Bucharest. Why is this important to know? First, because the latter collection has been compiled by Petros Peloponnēsios, composer of the vocal pieces heard in the Bîrûn recordings, and second, because this is one of his very few autographs to have been discovered (both on sacred and secular music) (Plemmenos 2005-2006: 220-241). As to the long-awaited copy of *Melpomenē* (that one had to beg on bended knee, in the past), this is long ago provided by the Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies in Thessaloniki, in digital or other form (though at a smart price, to be sure!).

There are some "technical" albeit important details to note (since, as we all know, "the devil is in the detail"). Greek songs in *Melpomenē* and other Greek anthologies/collections do not usually conform to the form of *şarkı* per se, for the latter has a concrete internal organization, the most important being the treatment of the third line so-called *miyan* or middle, both in poetic and music terms. *Şarkıs* were also part of a *fasıl* or suite, whereas the Greek equivalent did not have such a function but stood on its own. Although dealing with love, the Ottoman *şarkı* is usually gay in tone, contrary to its Greek equivalent which is one of melancholy and distress (though often on a superficial level) (see the classic work on the subject in Gibb 1900: 96-97). To be fair though, Kantouniarēs (the compiler of *Melpomenē*) used the appellation *şarkı* in the frontispiece of his anthology to describe the contents (*Μελπομένη*... 1818), but this should be considered an approximation. Speaking of Turkish songs, one should not overstress the appearance of non-Greek pieces, such as Turkish, Arabic, French and Italian, since they only appear in Kantouniarēs' anthologies (mainly in *Melpomenē* but also in MS Gr. 784 of the Romanian Academy Library in Bucharest) and make only a very small percentage (about 5%) of the entire repertoire. A vast majority of the songs registered in Greek anthologies/collections employs a Greek language (though with occasional inserted Turkish words).

The same repertoire as attested in anthologies/collections of the time does not contain instrumental pieces and has no indication to this effect. This

of course cannot be a reason to exclude the possibility of an instrumental accompaniment, but at the same time we cannot overlook (let alone hide) this absence. Even the few Turkish songs of the anthologies (*Melpomenē* included) do not contain any information of instrumental accompaniment. The lack of musical instruments is also found in other literary sources of the time describing musical activity (and recording song-texts), such as the Greek romance collection *Erotos Apotelesmata* or *Effects of Love* (*Ἐρωτος αποτέλεσματα*... 1792 [1809]). A possible explanation may lie in the broader context of Christian Orthodox liturgy, where musical instruments were completely prohibited. The music heard in the Phanariot salons or gardens may belong to the secular genre but its composers (and poets) have been identified with the cantors of the Greek Patriarchate of Istanbul, such as the often mentioned Petros Peloponnēsios, Iakovos Peloponnēsios (1740-1800), Petros Byzantios (+1808), Grēgorios Byzantios (1777-1821) et al.[2] Besides, the consumers and performers of these songs were amateur Greeks of the Phanariot society (in Istanbul and the Romanian Principalities), who had no special training in musical instruments.

The "Byzantine *terirem*" is given a separate chapter and treatment in the booklet (Bîrûn 2017: 43-45), thus requiring some more attention and comment here. *Terirems*, properly called *kratēmata* (from the Greek verb *krato* or hold, sustain) are not placed "often at the start", but at the end of long pieces of the so-called Papadic genre of church music, mainly Cherubic and Communion hymns. Even the appearance of some *kratēmata* "in the middle" of some works (usually in Cherubic hymns) is misleading for this happens just before the priest makes his Great Entrance (thus interrupting for a while the cantor). The idea that the *kratēmata* (*terirems*) "expressed the nature of Byzantine ecclesiastical music" after the dissolution of the Byzantine Empire must be read with a grain of salt; one could better say that these meaningless syllables (from the 14th and 15th century) formed what was left from the "lost" secular music of Byzantium – but this again is a supposition. Equally problematic is the opinion that *kratēmata* are "the most interesting part of a composition" due to their "melodic development" and representation of the "ethos" of a given mode. On the contrary, melody can better develop its "potential" (e.g. cadences, modulations etc.) in the slow-tempo Kalophonic works rather than in the rhythmically "fast-track"

[2] This is not to say that these composers were not familiar with musical instruments, for most of them have been reported to have mastered various Ottoman instruments, such as the *tambur* and the *nay*.

kratēmata. Similarly, the idea that *kratēmata* were open to secular influences (indicated by occasional appellations of oriental instruments or *makams*), though challenging, has not found adequate evidence, with the exception of few cases (one of which I have provided), i.e. the Persian prototype of a *kratēma* by Panagiotēs Hallaçoglou, *protopsaltēs* or first cantor of the Greek Patriarchate (Plemmenos 2010: 37-41).

Jumping now to the Western elements of the recording, the inclusion of an Italian song in *Melpomenē*, though an isolated case, should not be considered "strange and fascinating", for several Western observers of the time had reported on the Greeks' predilection for Italian tunes, such as the following one from the 1790s: "what airs are now in popular use are borrowed from the Venetian mariners. . . . This observation refers only to the vulgar; those of education perform Italian music" (Dallaway 1797: 414). One of the best-known "specimen of their poetic compositions" is the last stanza of Metastasio's canzonet *La libertà* in Greek translation (followed by English translation) provided "by a Greek gentleman of rank well known for his erudition and elegance".[3] The Italian song of *Melpomenē* is also recorded in MS Gr. 784 of the Romanian Academy Library in Bucharest which predates the former anthology. And what about the Greek adaptation of the song made by Chrysanthos of Madyta, one of the reformers of Byzantine notation? In his *Grand Treatise on Music* (1832), Chrysanthos mentions some Italian theorists, such as Galileo and Zarlino (Chrysanthos 1832: xxxi), but provides no other information. So, we are still left to wonder as to the origin of the song in Italian sources (has anybody made a research in Italian archives?).

The same applies to a song supposedly written by the sultan Selim III (reign 1789-1807) "at the time of his downfall" (*εν καιρώ της εκπτώσεως αυτού*): "Oh vanity of the world" (*Ω ματαιότης κόσμου*). In *Melpomenē*, the lyrics of the song are said to have been "translated and composed by someone unspecified" (*μεταφρασθέντες και μελουργηθέντες παρά αδήλου τινός*) right from the Turkish (*τουρκιστί*) – yet, so far nobody has checked the information in the Ottoman archives or other contemporary sources. The same song has since reappeared in subsequent anthologies, including Keivelis' (1873), on the same *makam* (Rast) but with melodic variations. The co-existence of *Melpomenē* with Keivelis' anthology creates some confusion to lay listeners, for the former represents mainly an 18th-century reper-

[3] Italian: "Io lascio un' in constante / Tu pardi un cor sincere"; Greek: "Ego apheno to loipon mian astaton kardian / kai esu khaneis mia kardian athoan kai kosmian"; English: "I, in leaving so fickle a maid / You, in losing so constant a heart".

toire, while the later was published a century later. It should also be stressed that, although employing the Ottoman modal system (*makam*), the songs in *Melpomenē* and previous collections treat variously the Ottoman *makam*, in a syncretic way with the Byzantine *echoi* or modes. The same applies to *usul* or rhythmic cycle, which is often adapted to serve the Greek (musical and poetic) metre of the lyrics.

It seems that the translator must have taken more "artistic freedom" than usual in transferring the song lyrics from Greek to English: for example, the song "I scourge myself with two sufferings, they are frightful and I fight them" (*Με δυο πάθη τυραννούμαι φοβερά και πολεμούμαι*) could better have been rendered as: "I am tortured by two dreadful passions, and besieged by them".

Finally, a word for the recording per se. The interpretation sounds very florid and does not stay true to the original (as recorded in *Melpomenē*). This not necessarily a defect from the performative point of view, since the interpreter has the "right" to take his/her own liberties as an artist, provided though that this is clearly stated. Besides, it seems that there are (at least) two methods of transcribing these melodies from the original notation to the stave, a long and a shorter one (as happens, *mutatis mutandis*, in the Byzantine chant, too). Therefore, I may be allowed to present an example of the short way through my transcription of a song from Petros' autograph (MS Gr. 927, Romanian Academy Library, Bucharest), for the curious readers/listeners.

What remains then? Well, the sound, the feeling, and the art, which are all above any words and criticisms!

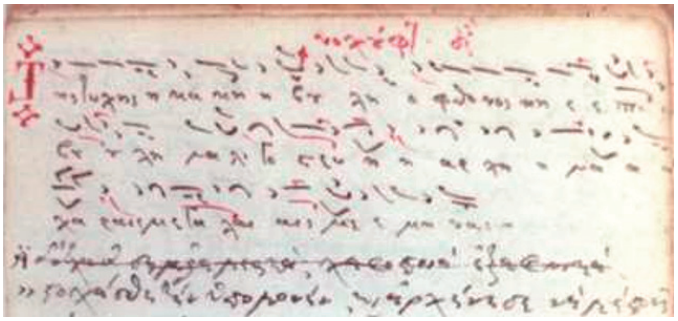

Fig. 1. *MS Gr. 927 (Petros Peloponnēsios' autograph), Romanian Academy Library, Bucharest.*

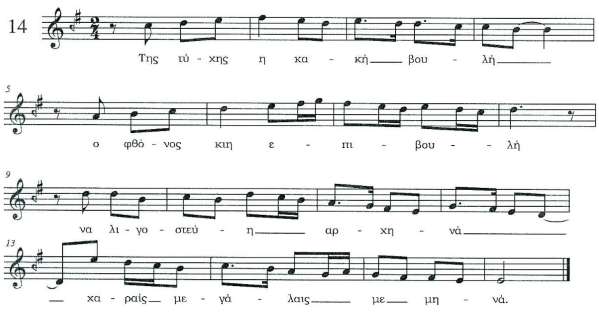

Fig. 2. *Transcription of the above song in Western notation by the reviewer (see Fig. 1).*

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1792 [1809] *Έρωτος αποτέλεσματα, ήτοι ιστορία ηθικοερωτική με πολιτικά τραγούδια, συντεθείσα μεν εις την απλήν ημών διάλεκτον, προς ευθυμίαν και εγλεντζέν των ευγενών νέων* [*Erotos apotelesmata*. Effects of Love, or *Ethicoerotic History*, with polite songs, composed in our own common dialect, for the gratification and diversion of the noble youth] (Vienna).

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Discography

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