

Polyphonic Singing: A Diachronic Emblem of a Multicultural Environment

Panajot Barka

Department of Greek Language, Literature and Civilization,
University of Gjirokastra, ALBANIA.

pbarka@uogj.edu.al

ABSTRACT

Three, four-voice vocal polyphonic singing of Epirus constitutes the longest-living, cultural phenomenon of this area, which has rightfully won it the status of the identifying symbol of the area. Its beginnings are related to the beginnings of the linguistic and musical articulation accompanying the processes of foundation, cultivation and functioning of the oracle of Dodona. Its ability remains that of the preservation of its individuality by appropriating influences and significant achievements of any time and culture. Especially significant are the relationships with the Byzantine music and the culture of this empire. Today in Epirus polyphonic songs are sung in three languages, Greek, Albanian and Vlach, in a variety of typologies, which is linked to the special characteristics of each region, or community, be it linguistic, ethnic or religious. In its functional aspect, polyphonic singing is built on the “iso”, on the basis of which the three other voices develop their musical line the taker, thrower and the turner, all of whom together constituting a unique vocal symphony. Declaration by UNESCO of a part only of this polyphony as “masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity” damages the reality and history of this heritage.

Keywords: Byzantine, identity, song, polyphonic, music, tradition, cultural

INTRODUCTION

On November 25, 2005, UNESCO declared Albanian folk iso-polyphony to be a “Masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity”. This decision is obviously a deserved appreciation for such a long-lived and immensely interesting monument of popular culture. However, it must be stated that in this case UNESCO took under protection only a fragment and not the whole polyphony, which constitutes the emblematic characteristic of the broader Epirus area.

The three and four-voice polyphonic singing of Epirus is characterized by its own vocal way of interpretation. Its melody has a rhetoric character rather than a musical or melodious one and it is built on the basis of the combination in different forms of the pentatonic, anhemitonic scale realized over a timeframe of hundreds of years. The way anions and cations are formed, the short or long musical spaces, the rhythmical form and color, the rhetorical expression, the establishment of the scales and the other expressions of the Epirote’s (Llolis, 2006) musical consciousness generate over the centuries the possibility of co-existence of the harmonious sound in a simultaneous, vocal, four-voice, a capella interpretation. In this collective, vocal, polyphonic interpretation, each melodic line has its own function. Together, they express the unity between the harmonious sound and the

artistic, aesthetic power. The iso¹ constitutes the melodic basis. The melodic line of the ‘taker’ (the first voice), ‘thrower’ (second voice) and the ‘turner’ (third voice) build on it.

Polyphonic singing goes back so early in time that it exceeds the borders of history to meet the structures of the myth. As such, it constitutes the aesthetic value of its carriers and it is a product of the conception of the ecumenical and autochthonous character of Epirus as a geographical area of diachronic exchanges between the East and West, as a meeting point and boundary between empires and empire cultures, integrating processes, the co-existence of differing values as well as the co-existence of opposites. It was never isolated in its narrow geographical area, it was never prejudiced against borrowings and influences; nor, however, was it ever assimilated. It constitutes a harmonious alloy between the inner organic evolution and outer influences (Llolis, 2006). A long-lasting aesthetic value, it is an embodiment of the co-existence at any time of its centennial past. A product of this value is the fact that it constitutes the living emblem of the collective identity of its people. It is significant that even nowadays it is sung in three languages, Albanian, Greek and Vlach and in a variety of tipologies.

In this framework, the polyphonic song constitutes the most undisputable argument for the common, cultural substratum of the Epirus area and its people. Various features of language, culture and nationality thrived in it. However, no matter how far they have gone, no matter how deep the gap between them at other levels, polyphonic singing will always remain the identifying argument of their common origin and eternal communication.

This present article comes with an original contribution to issues such as the origin or beginnings of polyphonic singing, stages of its evolution, its present form, geographical extension typological varieties, naming etc.

AN ESSAY ON THE GENESIS OF THE THREE, FOUR-VOICE POLYPHONY

As far as its “date of birth” is concerned, almost all scholars agree that polyphony has its roots in “the existence of a common, ancient musical substratum that belongs to the period before the crystallization of the two musical groups or categories, two-voice and three-voice polyphony (Krut, 1989).

In the 80s, Ismail Kadare considered polyphony an ancient way of musical interpretation, a development going back to the chorus in ancient Greece. The preservation and development of the phenomenon of polyphony in southern Albania is, according to Kadare, related to the “contacts of the local population with the Greek classic culture”. Taking “iso” as an argument, Kadare says that “polyphonic singing is even older than the ancient chorus” (Kadare, 1980). According to him, the conservation of this way of development has to do with the Albanians’ closed way of living up in the mountains, which brought about the idiorhythmic evolution of the ancient chorus into polyphonic singing.

The French scholar of Epirus singing and polyphony, Samuel Baud Bovy, referring to the Greek scholar, Spiros Peristeris (1958) takes the view of the later that “...the “iso” and the melodic movement of the second singer in the tonic and hypotonic part are elements that are found even in the Byzantine church music” (Baud Bovy, 1984).

Kostas Llolis says that polyphonic singing “is older than singing in Byzantium” (Llolis, 2006). His view is based on its rhetoric character, which means that the melody in polyphonic singing is closer to the human voice than to the musical melody proper and it occurs on the

¹ Choral drone that accompanies polyphonic singing

basis of the combination in various forms of the pentatonic and anhemitonic scale. He also states that the musical and artistic evolution of polyphonic singing has happened over a very long period of time... and it is part of the artistic evolution of homophony into two-voice polyphony.

With regard to this conclusion by the musicologist K. Llolis, the Greek ethno-musicologist Llabros Liavas says that “this musical scale, as shown by recent musicological studies, is identified with the doric style of the ancient greeks, “the greek harmony proper” (Lavas, 1988).

The Dutch musicologist Jaap Kunst, to whom Llabros Liavas refers (Lavas, 1988), links the Epirus polyphony to distant Indonesia. He finds similarities not only in the structure and names of the singers but also in the motifs that decorate their costumes.

Vasil Tole, talking about attraction to the iso-polyphonic areas of Epirus, links polyphonic singings to the sirens from Homer’s Odyssey and in general to the tradition of sirens and lamentation (Tole, 2005).

Conclusions are crystallizing that the pentatonic, anhitonic musical scale by means of which the “a capella” way of interpretation of polyphonic singing develops and its rhetoric rather than melodic character stem from the influence of the melodic anhemitonic rhythms of the Dorics defined as “the greek harmony” or of the ancient Frigases. These melodic rhythms, themselves, are affected by the onomatopoeia of the wild nature of the region of Epirus. Selioi and Karets, two other Epirot tribes, seem to be the first to have embodied them in their language and music.

Even the anthropological argument, that of the relationship the man of this area establishes with nature, leads to this conclusion. In the ancient, prehistoric tradition, gods are represented here by natural elements and the Epirote man embodies in them his own desires and aspirations. Later on he turns this relationship into a system of reference for determining his own personal and collective behavior. A typical example is the oracle of Dodona and a long series of other oracles in Epirus.

In our opinion, of importance is the fact that the identity of the polyphonic way of singing was created by aesthetically appropriating elements and structures of the environment where it was incepted, developed and inherited. (The vocal way of singing, the oratoric character of the melodic line, the positioning of the interpreters and at the same time its creators, their movements etc.)

In view of the above, it can be said that, just like Hellenic Gods have their origin in the oracle of Dodona, even the choruses of the ancient Greek tragedies have their origin in this immortal conception of polyphony.

Scales of Evolution

All the above mentioned authors and many others seek the beginnings of the Epirus folk polyphony in the early period which precedes the mythological and classical Greek art. The following is an outline of an attempt to determine the main stages of its development:

FROM PRIMITIVE INFANCY TO THE CHORUSES OF THE ANCIENT TRAGEDIES

The oral mourning melody, imbued with the anhemitone melodic rhythms of the ancient Dorics, Kars and Frigases, served as the permanent substratum feeding this polyphony.

In the dictionary of Isyhios of Alexandria, the word “Karinai” is defined as “threnodic music that accompanies the dead to the grave interpreted by Karinas women”. Maria Stoupi², the well-known Greek musicologist of the ancient Greek music, underlines that the pentatonic scale, the forerunner of world music, which along with the language created polyphonic singing, the Kares melody (threnody) and Skaro (pastoral music played by flute), derives from the root of the word “kar”, the name of the Kares tribe. “It is known that Skaros moves along an indeterminate, imaginary model, from which there came the infinite variety of skaros which refer to the unwritten characteristics of an inviolable law of ancient Greece (Kallojeripoullou, 2001). The Kars were one of the ancient tribes of Epirus, like the Lelei, Seliots, Aitiops, Dorics Frigases,...

The prophecies of the sacred oracle of Dodona, whose founder, according to a variant, was the leader of Seliots, were given in the form of a polyphonic interpretation as the sound of the rustling of the oak leaves, the gurgle of water and the song of the pigeons whose nests were in the branches of the holy oak. That is to say, it is a polyphonic sound. This means that the conception of the present musical polyphony goes back to the time of the creation of the oracle of Dodona.

Even Pythagoras based his musical theory on the pentatonicism of the Epirus polyphony. Plato, among the 7 Greek harmonies known in the Greek space, of which 3 were originally from Epirus, considered the Dorics’ the real Greek harmony.

The chorus of the ancient Greek tragedy seeks in the dithyramb the special origin of its music. But, in general, it retains the vocal polyphony of the Epirot threnodies and ceremonies as the main elements of origin and functional nature.

The same idea that threnody makes up the substratum of polyphonic singing and that as a musical phenomenon it has been received from the ancient chorus is taken even by Ismail Kadare (1980). It has often been stated, says Vasil Tole in his book “Odyssey and the sirens, attraction to the iso-polyphonic regions of Epirus”, that the threnodic cosmos of the Koefores – alternated elegy between the actors and the collective character represented by the chorus – could be taken as the perfect type of those noble poetic and musical architectures in which Eschilus, among others, became known (Tole, 2005).

THE GEOGRAPHY OF POLYPHONIC SINGING PROVES ITS OWN EPIROTE SUBSTRATUM

Polyphony extends geographically all over Epirus with the heterogeneous ethnocultural boundaries of this region as its dividing line.

“The geographical area proper of the polyphonic singing in the Greek language lies on both sides of the Greek-Albanian border in the villages of Llaka of Pogoni and some of Konica of the Ioannina district, in a few villages at the foot of the Murgana mountain of Thesprotia, the whole upper and lower Dropoli region, the villages of Reza and upper Pogoni in the district of Gjirokaster, in the villages of Theollogo, Grava, and Vurgu of the districts of Delvina and Saranda as well as in the villages of Himara” (Llolis, 2006).

On the Albanian side, according to B. Kruta, S. Shituni, K. Llolis, the area of polyphony is divided into two geographical units: - the one lying between the Shkumbin and Vjosa rivers and the other south of the Vjosa river up to the regions of polyphony in Greece. In the Albanian literature, terms such as Tosk and Lab polyphony have been employed for

² Stoupi M., <http://filonoi.gr/f-oi-kares-ths-hpeiroy/>

determining the broader typology of polyphonic singing. These two terms are related to two Albanian, ethnocultural regions (Kruta, 1989). They are distinguished, among others, by their religious belief; the first generally preserved the orthodox belief, the second was converted to the muslim faith. According to Rrok Zojzi (1983), Toskëria includes a mainly christian orthodox population, whereas Labëria a muslim population.

The authentic, polyphonic singing, just like the whole Epirus cosmos, did not remain isolated within its narrow geographical area. Maria Stoupi³ says that the polyphonic song was not sung only by the Epirotes but it was also sung in other parts of Greece such as Mani, Crete etc. Llabros Liavas (1998), referring to the geography of polyphonic singing says that “there seems to really exist an imaginary line (which probably comes from the pre-hellenic periods and which was reborn later on during the Alexandrine period) linking culturally the Balkans with the Southeast Asia, from Caucasus to northern Persia, Afganistan, northern India, constituting, i.e. the geography of the empire of Alexander the Great.

Ioannis Ksenakis⁴ states that he heard this music in Persepolis by three local musicians who claimed that the melody, a composition dedicated to the sun, had its origins from the time of Darios. Knowing that Iranians had no contact with Epirus, he understood this was the music taken by Alexander the Great in his military campaigns and that it was this very music which influenced to some extent the music of the countries of his empire.

Only in this way can we understand the fact that the composer of the soundtrack for the last Hollywood movie on Alexander the Great, E. Papathanasiu, who is originally from Epirus, used Epirote polyphonic motifs to accompany key moments in the movie.

Polyphonic singing survives in southern Italy, Sicily, Corsica, too. Even though here it is accompanied by the Gregorian melody, it does not cease to bear testimony to the ancient relations between Epirus and southern Italy, as well as to the extremely old roots of polyphonic singing.

THE LONG COEXISTENCE AND MUTUAL INFLUENCE ALONG WITH THE BYZANTINE MUSIC

Within the organizational structure of Byzantium, the longest-lasting empire in history with a twofold and equal political and religious power, the Orthodox Church constituted the central, cultural and organizational institution of the closed traditional society. As such, the orthodox religion has an extraordinary impact and presence in the local customs and the spiritual constitution of Epirus in particular. We say Epirus because at the time Epirus and Macedonia were two of the most important provinces of Byzantine Empire, with their own cultural development taken into consideration by Constantinople, as well as contacts with the West.

On the other hand, as polyphony constitutes the consistent, distinctive, diachronic emblem of the Epirote culture, before Christ and after Byzantium – this quality is due to its ability to creatively appropriate influences of all kinds in time and space without violating its own identity – it could readily be accepted that polyphonic singing had reciprocal relations and communication with the byzantine-orthodox church hymnography.

It could even be said that the byzantine and post-byzantine church liturgy, in Epirus and elsewhere, drew heavily on folk polyphony. This is totally justified if we consider the fact that the byzantine culture, as well as the Christian faith carried a series of elements from the pagan cultural tradition.

³ Stoupi M., <http://www.filonoi.gr>

⁴ <http://www.ekivolos.gr>

The opposite is true as well, that church hymnography influenced in its own way the traditional polyphony.

“The byzantine music of the time failed to undo the pentatonic scale of polyphonic singing from Epirus” says the well-known musicologist Antonis Lavdas (1958), the first to have linked Epirote polyphony to the ancient pentatonic scale.

The development of the Byzantine music is linked to the decree of the year 313 by the Great Constantine and it is known for its intertwining of the musical elements of ancient Greece with eastern influences. It is also known that in its long history, the byzantine music and hymnography was based on 8 sounds (notes) which constitute a developed form of the ancient Greek tropes (notes, scales) of the Pythagorean theory, the main being the Dorics’, Frigases’ Lydios’s Myksolidios’s, which take us again to Epirus.

The element that mostly proves the dialectic relationship between the Byzantine polyphony and the traditional one is the “iso”. As far back as 1958, Spiros Llambros claimed that “the iso and the musical movement of the turner on the tonic and hypotonic scale are elements that are also found in the byzantine church music” (Peristeri, 1958). Whereas the Greek ethnomusicologist Llambros Liavas emphasizes that in the polyphonic singing of Epirus “the individual combines with the group turning asymphony into symphony and the ancient scale intertwines with the ‘iso’ in order to convey new sensations” (Liavas, 1998).

This claim allows us to state that the byzantine music borrowed the “iso” from the tradicional polyphony, or that this polyphony constitutes the womb of the “iso” in the byzantine music. Later on this “borrowings” returned to the traditional polyphony in the form of anti-borrowings – well-known phenomena in the Epirote culture.

Ioannis Koukouzelis, considered as a reformer of the byzantine church hymnography after its stagnation in the 13th century, introduced into this hymnography elements of the traditional music of his own country, which was Epirus (Durrës). His life leads us to believe that he was quite knowledgeable about the Epirote polyphonic music.

But even the latest bright name of the Orthodox Church hymnography, Jerasimos Mikrajannanitis, was from Dhrovjan, Sarandë. He was proclaimed by the Istambul Patriarchate as the greatest hymnographer of the Orthodox Church of the post-byzantine period. He died in Agios Oros in 1993. The curious fact is that he was an autodidact in his work.

It must also not be forgotten that the carriers of the byzantine church himongraphy in this region, priests, church singers, monks and igumens, influential in the entire spiritual and cultural life of the region, were at the same time knowledgeable about and great interpreters of polyphonic singing. A comparison between the orthodox hymnography applied in the Ionian islands (Zakynthos) with western influences and the Epirote hymnography highlights essential differences. The first is closer to the polyphony cultivated in the west. The second to the popular polyhony. The element which is the most evident link of the mutual influence is the “iso”.

With regard to this, Llambros Liavas says that “new influences were added to polyphonic singing over the centuries such as that of the byzantine church music, which undoubtedly affected the melodic line of the turner (see above) (tonic and hypotonic) as well as the melodic line of the drone (Liavas, 1998).

These relationships obviously have a visible influence as far as the later and present-day typology of the popular polyphony is concerned.

Concerning this typology, if we refer to Prof. E. Cabej (1975), as well as other scholars of the field, Benjamin Kruta (1990), Vasil Tole (2005), Kosta Lloli (2006) etc., we hear them speak of the “vertical multi-tier” “lab” polyphonic singing and the “horizontal multi-wave” “tosk” polyphonic singing.

The religious split in Muslims and Christians after the ottoman occupation leads to the preservation of a tamer way of interpretation, “the horizontal multi-wave”, by those who ensued their religious belief. Those who left the faith and cut their ties with the direct byzantine church hymnography introduced new developments in polyphony, the multi-tier “lab” singing, considered as a male form of interpretation.

THE POST-BYZANTINE PERIOD AND WESTERN INFLUENCES ON THE PRESENT-DAY FORMS OF A CAPELLA POLYPHONY

Considering these and other conclusions, as well as judging from the present reality, we would say that the present forms of polyphony, as a musical trend of the autochthonous tradition is a result of the development of the common musical substratum of the Epirus area and other influences, in our case cultivated and specialized.

We are talking about influences from the polyphony of the Catholic Church hymnography. This process seems to have occurred due to the impact of Venice at the end of the 14th century and the beginning of the 15th century on the west coasts of Epirus, especially in the Himara region. The presence of Venice for such a long time in Himara was accompanied by historically known attempts for the spread of catholicism and the Venetian culture in this area. It is also a common fact that the polyphony of the Catholic Church hymnography was so developed that even the tzarina Katerina of Russia liked it and asked for it to be applied in the Russian church.

To prove the weight of the impact of the western polyphony, we refer to the French scholar, Samuel Baud – Bovy. He says that “polyphony in Eptanisa (islands south of Corfew where Venice ruled for three centuries) is different from Epirus. The first tenor utters half of the line. He is accompanied by a second and third one and one or two bass voice. No second or fourth voices are heard here as in Dropoli, but European choruses (Baud Bovy, 1984).

These developments could not but leave traces in the culture of the Himara polyphony. Himara, like Parga further south, due to its position and its relations with Venice constituted a crossroads of trade and human relations from and towards the West. This was a region which favoured a different kind of development in the function of a new cultural and ethnic conventionalism.

This perspective allows us to say that Himara, in a broader geographical sense and under the influence of the Venetian or western tradition of instrumental polyphony, served as a basis for the cultivation and development of the musical folk tradition, into the present-day three or four-voice polyphony. Under the conditions of the existence of a vocal polyphonic tradition, there is a new development under an equally powerful influence, that of the western instrumental-vocal polyphony. The strong autochthonous vocal or “a capella” tradition, the social-economic conditions, a permanent state of war as well as the existence of a religious orthodox tradition impeded the use of musical instruments or the adjustment of this new form of singing. On the other hand, this influence leads to the crystallization of a new vocal form of polyphony corresponding to the present three, four-voice form.

From here, due to its favored status during the Ottoman occupation, but also due to its commercial superiority and its wide relations with the west, this polyphonic way of interpreting spread to other broader regions.

Each region, on the basis of different combinations of pentatonics, added or removed elements, which justifies today the typological variety of polyphony in a wider area.

An additional argument in support of Himara as the mother of the present-day three, four-voice polyphony is the following phenomenon. We are talking about the decline of the polyphonic way of interpretation of many songs in other regions surrounding Himara. This happened due to the pressure from folk orchestras lead by clarinets towards solo interpretations or of a special polyphonic repertoire, but accompanied by musical instruments.

This is proved by a simple examination of the new discography with folk songs from the areas of the Albanian polyphony, even in the areas that claim the vocal polyphony to be an autochthonous value. Almost the entire repertoire of the songs which were once interpreted using the characteristic “lab” way is interpreted today accompanied by the tunes of the folk orchestras from the Greek part of Epirus. They, themselves, were once sung according to the vocal polyphonic way. This is a common phenomenon in folklore. The melody of a song or different type of song is carried over and used for another song, which in our case used to be sung with the three, four-voice polyphony in the Albanian language.

On the other hand, in the Greek part of Epirus, the tendency of adopting a special kind of polyphony is noticed – that of the interpretation of polyphonic songs accompanied by folk orchestras and demand for original polyphonic songs sung in Greek or Albanian.

This descriptive essay would suffice to show that the vocal polyphonic singing (a capella) comes from the ancient mythology. It constitutes a harmonic combination between its inner organic development and outer influences. Not allowing for a moment the loss of its identity, it found ways and means to become an expression of the permanent aesthetic values of its carriers. It was never isolated in its narrow geographical area, it was never prejudiced against borrowings and foreign influences, nor was it assimilated. It remained the embodiment of the integrating processes, the co-existence of differing values and co-existence of opposites.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baud Bovy, S. (1984). *Dhokimio gia to elliniko dhimotiko tragoudhi*. Nayplio.
- [2] Çabej, E. (1975). *Studime Gjuhësore V*. Priština.
- [3] Akademia, E. S. (1983). *Fjalori Enciklopedik Shqitar*. Tiranë.
- [4] Kadare, I. (1980). *Autobiografia e popullit në vargje*. Tiranë.
- [5] Kallojeripoulos, T. (2001). *Leksiko tis Ellinikis Mousikis*. Athens.
- [6] Kruta, B. (1989). *Polifonia dyzërëshe e Shqipërisë jugore*. Tiranë
- [7] Kruta, B. (1990). Vendi i polifonisë shqiptare në polifoninë ballkanike. *Kultura Popullore*, nr.1.
- [8] Lavas, L. I. (1988). *Apeiros*, nr 1. Janninë.
- [9] Llolis, K. (2006). *To ipeiritiko polyfoniko tragoudhi*. Janninë.
- [10] Peristeri, S. (1958). *Dhimotika tragoudhia Dhropoleos Voreiou Ipeirou*, Epet. Λ. Α., Θ'-Ι'.
- [11] Stoupi, M., <http://filonoi.gr/f-oi-kares-ths-hpeiroy/>
- [12] Tole, V. (2005). *Odiseja dhe sirenet, grishje drejt viseve isopolifonike të Epirit një temë homerike me variacione*. Tiranë.
- [13] Zojzi, Rr. (1962). *Etnografia Shqiptare 1*. Prishtinë.
- [14] <http://www.ekivolos.gr>