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The Past is Always Present. The Revival of the Byzantine Musical Tradition at Mount Athos

TORE TVARNØ LIND

Lanham, Md., Scarecrow Press, 2012

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Located in northern Greece, the peninsula of Mount Athos has been a stronghold of Orthodox Christian male monasticism for over a millennium, with numerous large coenobitic monasteries, smaller communities ('sketes'), and hermitages. Entrance to the Holy Mountain, as it is commonly known to Orthodox Christians, requires a special permit that is granted only to strictly controlled numbers of men (and never women) for reasons of pilgrimage, scholarship or work. Since the 1970s monastic life on Athos has undergone a remarkable revival, with nearly empty monasteries now repopulated with vibrant communities that exercise spiritual and, thanks to the concurrent revival of Byzantine liturgical chanting, musical influence that extends far beyond the borders of the Holy Mountain.

In the present book Danish ethnomusicologist Tore Tvarnø Lind revisits material gathered originally for his 2003 doctoral thesis on the revival of Byzantine chanting on Mount Athos. His fieldwork on the Holy Mountain initially embraced several monasteries, but was later concentrated in periods of residence and chant instruction at the Great and Holy Monastery of Vatopaidi in 2000–2001, supplemented by a return visit to this community in 2007. Historically one of the largest and richest monasteries of Athos, Vatopaidi was near dereliction when a vigorous new brotherhood of monks arrived in 1990 and boldly set about the task of restoring it physically, spiritually, and financially. The vast majority of Lind's fieldwork took place when the project of restoration was well advanced but external criticism of some of its aspects was only just beginning to appear. There is no mention in the book of the events that have catapulted Vatopaidi into the mainstream media since 2008, namely the controversies surrounding a land-swap deal with the Greek government that climaxed with the arrest on Christmas Eve 2011 of its Abbot Ephraim, the international appeals for his release, and his subsequent acquittal of all charges. Lind's choice of Vatopaidi as the primary site for his fieldwork is thus both fortuitous and problematic. It is fortuitous because he allows its monks to speak in their own voices about musical aspects of their project of monastic renewal (a term they dislike in its Greek forms, preferring instead *anthisi*, 'blossoming'), and problematic because the monastery is in some respects unrepresentative when viewed within the wider context of the Athonite revival.

Lind writes that his book 'is written from an outsider's perspective and is an attempt to communicate, within a certain theoretical framework and methodology, understandings and interpretations of Orthodox musical life' (p. 6). This theoretical framework brings standard academic perspectives on such issues as authenticity, modernity and the invention of tradition into dialogue with the spiritually centred views of monks. Although the latter invest a great deal of effort in interpreting the technical minutiae of chant notation, they nevertheless maintain that it is ultimately unimportant 'whether', in the words of Father Maksimos, 'the small musical signs should be performed this way or the other' when 'the essential question is what will happen to your soul when you die' (p. 209). Lind is similarly ecumenical in developing his methodology, combining ethnography with due concern for the frameworks provided by Orthodox theology and liturgy, both as articulated historically and as lived out now by modern Athonites for whom, as the volume's title suggests, 'the past is always present'.

The book is divided into seven sensibly illustrated chapters and is packaged with a fine CD containing both field recordings made by Lind and excerpts of professionally produced recordings released commercially by Vatopaidi. Its case studies are always pursued with profound respect for his subjects, but vary in their range and quality of insight. Lind displays mastery of a wide range of Western scholarly literature when identifying how Athonite monks and the general public negotiate historical consciousness and modernity in contemporary Greek Orthodoxy through liturgical performances and commercial recordings of Byzantine chant. Discussing the cooperation of monks and chant scholars at Vatopaidi, for example, he draws illuminating parallels with the Western Early Music movement in general and the so-called 'restoration' of Gregorian chant by the monks of Solesmes in particular. The relative paucity of writings by contemporary Greek authors in Lind's bibliography, however, is symptomatic of problems that arise as he attempts to situate what he learned studying chant at Vatopaidi within broader musical, historical and political contexts.

In contrast to the subtle and meticulously documented expositions by Herzfeld (1986) and Romanou (1996) of relationships between Greek folk or sacred song and societal debates over modern Greek identity, Lind at times appears to have neglected or incompletely absorbed the relevant musical and textual sources. This may be seen, for example, in his lack of precision about details relating to debates over the tunings of Byzantine modes, the content and ideological programme of the notational system of George of Lesbos, variant approaches to the transcription of pre-modern repertoires of Byzantine chant and their political implications (about which, see Lingas (2003)), and differences between the cultivation of Orthodox liturgical music as practised during the nineteenth-century in the Kingdom of Greece and in the Ottoman Empire (to which Mount Athos belonged until 1912). Furthermore, Lind vaguely attributes Western elements in Byzantine chanting to purported 'Venetian' influence while ignoring John Sakellarides (d. 1938), an Athenian cantor who promoted chant allegedly 'purified' of Oriental corruption and often harmonised in parallel thirds.

Much more serious in its potential to mislead the unsuspecting reader is Lind's failure to address comprehensively the position of Vatopaidi as an affiliate of the so-called 'Karas School' within wide-ranging debates over musical authority that have preoccupied Greek Orthodox cantors since the late 1990s and most recently found expression in an encyclical released by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) on 29 March 2012 (<http://www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=gr&id=1480&tla=gr>). In addition, the book contains a number of comparatively inconsequential but nonetheless unfortunate errors, including the misapplication of Roman Catholic terminology to Orthodoxy ('rosaries' instead of 'prayer-ropes' and the 'Order of St Basil' instead of the 'Typikon of St Sabas') and the misidentification of several medieval and post-Byzantine composers (e.g. the seventeenth-century musician Panagiotes the New Chrysaphes, who is confused on p. 54 with his fifteenth-century predecessor 'Manuel').

Given the factious nature of the Greek cantorial scene, it would not be surprising if musical connoisseurs whose allegiances fall outside the orbits of Simon Karas (d. 1999) and his students—full disclosure: I studied chant with Karas pupil Lykourgos Angelopoulos and have sung numerous times with the Athenian cantors mentioned by Lind as contributors to the 'blossoming' of chant at Vatopaidi—will be unable to move beyond these lapses. That would be a great pity, because this book is an important contribution to the small (but growing) number of ethnographic studies of Orthodox liturgical singing. As such, *The Past is Always Present* forms a

companion piece to Alexander Khalil's doctoral thesis on patriarchal cantors (2009), whose style (yphos) of Byzantine chanting bears an authority within Orthodoxy comparable to that of Mount Athos. Both Lind and Khalil alight upon technical matters of notation before finding themselves engaged with profound questions of history and memory. Thus Lind turns decisively to the spiritual significance of chanting in his final two chapters. , Writing in perceptive and often moving prose, he offers a brilliant reading of music and silence in modern Athonite life that is steeped in fourteenth-century Byzantine monastic theology. Here Lind has succeeded admirably in his aim 'to understand the meaning of Byzantine music as sacred music, and understand it in its spiritual and ritual context' (p. 196).

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