

The Iso(n)—a Participatory Component in the South Albanian Multipart Unaccompanied Singing and in Byzantine Chant

Abstract: *The Iso(n), as a participatory component of the multipart pentatonic singing of south Albania and north Epirus, and the Byzantine chant, has evolved, integrated and has been orally transmitted to both southwest Balkan oral traditions: the multipart unaccompanied singing and Byzantine monodic chant.*

Participation, as a universal way of sharing, joining, strengthening the sense of community, has little to do in the musical field with the formal harmony or intervallic relationship. However, in the aspect of social activity and ecumenical sense, participation, being an old phenomenon, has been reflected also in the musical iso(n). The basic need of human nature is to participate and in multipart singing case this has been associated with the integration of the iso(n), an element of heterophonic and polyphonic musical design. The structure of the iso-based multipart unaccompanied singing (IMUS) involves two or three soloists engaged in a kind of musical “call and response” interaction, backed by the participatory component, the vocal iso. The latter feature plays an organisational role as well as a participatory one.

When the ison was initially incorporated in the Byzantine chant, it only sustained the singing in a straight line, in a pedal-note fashion. The ison participatory component was an unchangeable underlying tone and apart from functioning as the key/basic note was to allow for participation, without having any intention that this second voice would create, in a technical sense, polyphony.

The members of traditionalist IMUS communities and the members and congregations of Orthodox religious practitioners do not acknowledge any relationship between the two repertoires. However, based on what has been revealed as traces of microtonic intervals, free rhythms, improvised ornamentations, intoning process, tragic element or the laments, modal character; and, above all, the iso(n), all of which are found in both traditions, makes one believe that based on the common local inheritance and patrimony these kinds of parallels cannot be entirely neglected.

An Ison, a drone holding-note, comes from the Greek (ἰσον) and is the voice that provides the drone in a Byzantine chant (Eastern Christian Chant). The latter is the liturgical music of the Orthodox Churches, whereas

the *Iso-based multipart unaccompanied singing* (abbreviated in this paper as IMUS) has developed as a secular repertoire. In Albanian, the same word for the same function in the oral traditional IMUS is spelt *Iso*. Both versions of the spelling will be used throughout this survey, *Ison* in the sense of the Byzantine chant and *Iso* to refer to the South Albanian IMUS. An intermediate form of spelling with the use of parenthesis, *Iso(n)* will also be used in order to characterise a liaison between the two linguistic forms. In both types *Iso* was never written down, but in Byzantine ecclesiastical chants *Ison* is a written neume, the earliest scored records of which can be found only from the beginning of the 19th century.

Iso(n) or drone, as a participatory component of the IMUS of south Albania and north Epirus, and of the Byzantine chant, has evolved and has been orally transmitted and integrated to both southwest Balkan oral traditions of multipart pentatonic singing and univocal Byzantine monody. The integration and then consolidation of *Iso(n)* into secular multipart singing and liturgical singing with its function as a sustained final in relation to the melody, might have occurred roughly at the same period, Late Middle Ages, although it cannot be excluded that the drone used in both forms of unaccompanied singing may have originated earlier. Nevertheless, further investigation into the possibility of the use of *Ison* is to be carried out, as no written records support its existence.

From the social activity viewpoint, and in genuine and ecumenical sense, participation is an old phenomenon which has been reflected also in the musical *Iso(n)*. Participation is a universal way of sharing, joining, strengthening the sense of community; it appears that the participation is the basic need of human nature. Participatory culture is applied in secular and ecclesiastical cultures and the participatory element has been associated with *Iso(n)*, an element of heterophonic musical device.

The multipart expression, which covers a significant geographical area of the Southwest Balkans, is characterised by the collective sense of community and its importance as a social activity, compared, for example, with the monodic expression of the music of north Albania and mainland Greece, is a living manifestation of the group memory. In the beginning IMUS was used only at family or communal social gatherings, being a shared collective heritage, such music becomes necessity for the Southwest Balkan population during weddings and funerals and in everyday life too. The songs are functional and closely bound to specific occasions and customs, and people attribute IMUS an honorary place in their festivities. This repertoire was initially associated with indoor group singing “around the table” or “around the outdoor fire”. In post-WWII period it was transformed into a festival-type singing as well and was organised in the form of an institutionalised ensemble culture under the state patronage

and state censorship, a feature that developed along socialist lines.

In the multipart unaccompanied singing the Iso feature plays organisational and participatory roles, as in the Albanian ethnic communities of the Lab, Tosk, Cham (Çam) and Myzeqe versions, as well as in the North Greek (North Epirus) types; it organises the phrase and calculates the pause before restarting the main tune; it adds to the precise timing, allowing the first soloist (Alb. *marrës*, taker) and second soloist (Alb. *kthyes*, answerer) to be clearly heard. The Iso part, the participatory component, requires several people to create more density in order to “hold” the singing, but the right balance has to be always checked in order to achieve the best resonance required. IMUS structure involves two or three soloists engaged in a kind of musical interaction, “call and response” interplay, backed by the vocal Iso. Eqrem Çabej states that the “songs of Toskëria are polyphonic, choral, social songs . . . a symbolic expression not of the solitary dwelling, but of the community one” (Çabej 1975, 129).

At the dawn of its formation as indigenous cultural contexts, IMUS embedded languages and social activities practiced in the Byzantine world interacted with this culture. Iso itself did not play the same role as it did in a later period; its sound production was much softer and its mission was only to participate in, rather than support the harmonised melodies. There are still remote areas where an embryonic and undeveloped Iso can be heard, away from the festival-type performances. As IMUS structures, styles and linguistic idioms developed, its predominance, extended as more of an Albanian-speaking musical culture from around the 14th century onwards.

Ison is an important component, as a participatory, integration and unifying element of the Byzantine ecclesiastical music as well. It is performed in the churches of towns and villages at religious ceremonies. When Ison was initially used in Byzantine chant, it only sustained the chant in a straight line in a pedal-note fashion. The drone was (as in IMUS) an unchangeable underlying tone, which is different from the present-day Greek chant; its main role, apart from functioning as the key/basic note was to allow for participation, without having any intention that this second voice would create, in a technical sense, polyphony. On the Mount Athos, where Late Byzantine Period singing is practiced, the practitioners are trying to preserve the earlier tradition of Byzantine chant in which the harmony does not change, so Ison is a basic one and does not play harmonic or rational role, but it is, more than anything else, participatory. The drone/Ison reflects the way one participates in the singing. It is of a heterophonic design, which means nothing but humming along.

Between the 15th and 19th centuries, during the Neo-Byzantine period, Ison took a totally different course, that is a participatory role with the aim to reinforce the melody in the form of a sustained single tone within

an originally monophonic, non-harmonised, chant. Its basic role relied on maintaining the pitch, helping the chanter learn correct intervals, moving within a Tone (shifting to the prominent tones of the tetrachords in the melodic movement) and participating in chanting. In Greece and elsewhere in Middle East, the novelty features such as the timbral nuances, size of intervals comprising fluctuation in the intonation (expansion and contraction of intervals, the augmented seconds in particular), semi-nasal tone qualities, highly wrought melodic embellishments developed with different inclinations.

In ex-Roman Epirus zone of the Balkans (Vetus and Nova), the oral traditions of the Iso(n)-based multipart unaccompanied singing (IMUS) coexisted with Byzantine Ison of the same region. Interaction of the local tradition of IMUS with Byzantine music in southwest Balkan area would have been normal because the populations of this region, Albanians, Vlachs, Greeks, and, to a lesser degree, Slavs, had contacts not only in their places of worship but, more importantly, in their everyday life as well. Therefore, borrowing and lending was a natural and often an unconscious process, particularly among the Chams, who, in the past, used to live on the present-day Greek lands and close to their Greek neighbours. They sang songs in their own Albanian local dialect, which is very distinctive even among the Albanians themselves. Parakalamos, in Epirus, in the Albanian neighbourhood, although the songs are sung in Greek, the singing, as well as the dress and certain characteristics of these ethnic group peoples are very much related, if not almost similar, however, with some nuances between the areas. The same analogy could be applied to Aromanian/Vlach ethnic groups who live in communities between Albanians and Greeks.

Neo-Byzantine ecclesiastical Iso(n) has more in common with the secular oral tradition of IMUS of the southwest Balkans than with the *falsobordone* type of Ison used at the Badia di Grottaferrata. The oral tradition of liturgical chant of the Arbëresh Diaspora of South Italy and Sicily it can be said that it is based on *classical* Byzantine, Medieval style of chant, and it is closer to Western chant than Neo-Byzantine music.

Investigating the possibility of liturgical Ison tradition among the Arbëresh, Kruta notes that “an important fact which makes the genesis of the drone appear more complex and that puts a question mark to its early existence in Byzantine chant, is the link with the polyphonic song of the Orthodox Church of the Arbëresh of Italy, which, despite its ancient tradition, does not identify Ison . . . At least until the 14th century when the migration movements of the Arbëresh towards Italy began, the Byzantine liturgical chant in South Albania developed without Iso” (Kruta 1991, 68-9).

Kruta’s assessment is accurate. During my visit to Sicily in the summer 2006, I found no evidence to suggest such Ison ever existed in the in the

Byzantine liturgy of the Arbëresh Diaspora residing in five small towns in the province of Palermo. Main centre of this Arbëresh musical patrimony—Byzantine church of the Piana degli Albanesi in Sicily (known as Piana dei Greci before 1914)—has its own specific repertoire, transmitted orally, melodically different from Neo-Byzantine liturgy; the latter employs Ison, whereas Arbëresh Byzantine musical practice does not. Neo-Byzantine music uses hard and soft chromatic intervals (augmented seconds) in its Eight Tone (Oktoechos) modal system, whilst Arbëresh Byzantine musical tradition has its own specific organisation of this system largely unaffected by Neo-Byzantine. During the Ottoman occupation of the Balkans, from the 15th century onwards, new components of Byzantine singing, harmonic and modal (i.e. Iso(n) and augmented second) became very important, whereas for Arbëresh Byzantine singing outside the Balkans, the Iso(n) component is treated as a modern aesthetic feature and as something of recent novelty. In Sicily, Calabria and in the Abbey of Grottaferrata in particular, classical Byzantine chant is still practiced in liturgy, whereas in nearly all monasteries of the Greek Orthodox Church they use Neo-Byzantine music.

Based upon medieval theoretical texts and notated manuscripts, Lorenzo Tardo of the Badia of Grottaferrata conceived the performance of Iso(n) not as it developed in reality in the Balkans after 1453, that is as the lowest sound and foundation of the mode, but in organ-pedal or *falsobordone* style, specifically the solo melody with a triadic form of choral accompaniment.

Tardo put a great deal of effort into the practical revival and performance of ancient Byzantine chants. If other scholars of his time were interested in the theoretical aspect of this field, Tardo's inclination was both in theoretical and practical matters. However, Tardo, apparently, conceived the Iso(n) not as an element of participation but as an *expressive means* contributing to the *aesthetic* performance of chant. There are some contemporary theories, which suggest that the Ison, as Tardo also believes, was used in medieval Italy. He stated: "On the practice of this kind of Ison, that is the *sotto voce* chord, records are preserved also in Rome. When the Greek colony was flourishing, the Greek chants alternated with the Latin ones, not only in the liturgical but also extra-liturgical functions" (Tardo, 1938: 392). It is on this basis that "the Gregorian chant, the far filiations of the Byzantine chant, has started to be accompanied by the organ" (Tardo, 1938: 392).

He also gives an explanation of the use of a "simple" Ison based on the tonic, and a "double" Ison, as he named the movements from the tonic to the dominant; he was inclined to perceive these movements as harmonic, or a certain form of polyphony. "There are parts", he explains, "where the

Ison should not be heard, in some other parts where the Ison should be slightly heard, and there are points where the Ison should really sustain the fundamental tone of the whole singing part" (Tardo, 1938: 393). "The Ison", he wrote "corresponds to an accompanying note similar to the organ pedal or the so-called *falsobordone*" (Tardo, 1938: 390).

Listening to Tardo's own performances of Byzantine chants where he acted as conductor, his perception of the "accompaniment" used in some of liturgical pieces is obvious. Although several Arbëresh clerics studied and worked at *Grottaferrata* and the *Collegio Romano* in Rome from the end of 19th century to this day, none of them tried to methodically introduce Iso(n) practice into their everyday musical liturgy of the Arbëresh churches of Sicily and Calabria. Just as they were loyal toward the preservation of ancient Byzantine rite in their church, sung in traditional Greek and recently in Albanian, so were they reluctant to introduce "new" features into their chants, such as the case with the Iso(n), borrowed either from the post-Byzantine new tradition of the Balkans or the Byzantine medieval tradition of Italy. However, in recent times in Sicily the Iso(n) component started to be treated as a modern creative feature, as a kind of novelty. Thus, efforts have been made to adopt a kind of Iso(n) to the traditional Arbëresh chants, but, in my view, it sounds a bit peculiar. I believe that no Iso(n) was brought onto Italian soil from the Balkan church singing when its practitioners left the peninsula after the Ottoman conquest. This is because the Iso(n) had only begun to be disseminated from the main centres of the Byzantine Empire and it took decades if not centuries to get introduced into the remote areas of Epirus.

Those who are interested in melurgic studies should not ignore the fact that the branch of Byzantine music, where the Albanians of Sicily are involved, has an abundant, precious and living melurgic tradition conserved with religious meticulousness. In the same way that the manuscripts of ancient Byzantine music are characterised by their grammar and style, so the Sicilian tradition follows particular, some very important norms which determine the structure of their melodies; these are the *Οχτώηχος* and Sicilian traditional melodies: *melismatical*, *heirmological* and *sticheraic*. The Arbëresh scholar, Papas Matteo Sciambra (1914-1967) revealed that the Sicilian-Albanian tradition also follows the principle of composition of melodic formulae. It has been shown that "the melurgic tradition, which reached Sicily with the clergy originating from the isles of Peloponnesus, Crete and Cyprus and in the end from Himara in Epirus, was found in the same ambit as the music coming, according to Wellesz, from Syria" (Sciambra, 1965-66: 316). This characteristic, the Mediterranean-like melodic formulae, concluded Sciambra, can be considered as an original value of the Sicilian- Albanian tradition. In discussing Byzantine melodies

and their melodic formulae Wellesz asserts: “The discovery of this principle of composition is of far greater importance than was at first thought. Further investigations have shown that it was not confined to the melodies of a few areas, but was the ruling principle of composition in Oriental music and, with the expansion of Christian music, it spread all over the entire Mediterranean basin” (Wellesz, 1949: 269).

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The members of traditionalist IMUS communities and the members and congregations of Orthodox religious practitioners do not acknowledge any relationship between the two repertoires. Nevertheless, we may suggest some similarities in the traces of microtonic intervals, modal character, free rhythms, improvised ornamentations, process of intoning, as well as a thoroughly vocal repertoire posed to the process of oral transmission, and—above all—the Iso(n), all of which are found in both traditions. Further research is required to sufficiently identify the relation between these two very different traditions but nevertheless there seems to be scope for further study in this area.

Being the strongest bond between these two forms of singing, Iso(n) served in the best way to convey the feeling of the music that was practiced in the Southwest Balkans. Both traditions, secular and ecclesiastic, tend to preserve their traditional participatory musical cultures by directing the focus not to individual expression, but to community involvement in order to participate in community life.

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