

The Relation of Cretan Music with Byzantine Music

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Abstract: In this paper, we explore the deep-rooted connections between Cretan music and Byzantine music, both of which share historical, cultural, and musical ties. We examine the influence of the Byzantine Empire on Crete's musical traditions, analyze the modal systems, vocal styles, thematic similarities, and instrumental continuities, and consider how these elements have evolved and been preserved through oral tradition.

Keywords: Cretan music, Byzantine music, modal system, Orthodox chant, rizitika, lyra, oral tradition, Byzantine influence

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1. Introduction

Cretan music, known for its distinctive character and vibrant tradition, represents a unique blend of ancient, medieval, and modern musical elements. Central to its evolution is the profound influence of Byzantine music, which shaped not only the religious life of the island but also left a lasting imprint on its secular music traditions. Understanding the relationship between Cretan and Byzantine music requires a multidisciplinary approach, encompassing history, musicology, ethnography, and religious studies. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of this relationship, emphasizing continuity and transformation over time.

2. Historical Continuity

The historical interaction between Crete and the Byzantine Empire began as early as the 4th century AD, when Crete became an integral part of the Eastern Roman Empire. For over 800 years, Byzantine rule provided a stable and influential framework for the island's cultural and religious development. During this period, the Orthodox Church emerged as a dominant institution, with its liturgical practices, including the rich musical tradition of Byzantine chant, permeating all aspects of life. Even after the fall of Byzantine political control in the 13th century, the ecclesiastical and musical traditions of the Orthodox Church remained strong, especially in rural and monastic communities. The persistence of Byzantine music on the island, despite Venetian and later Ottoman influences, highlights its foundational role in the development of Cretan music.

3. Modal System (Echoi)

One of the most distinctive features of Byzantine music is its use of the Octoechos, or eight-mode system, which organizes melodies according to specific scales and tonal characteristics. This modal system, deeply embedded in Orthodox liturgical practice, significantly influenced the melodic structure of Cretan music. Traditional Cretan songs, particularly the solemn and heroic rizitika, often employ modes that mirror the emotional and spiritual character of Byzantine chant. The echoes of the eight modes can be detected in the phrasing, ornamentation, and tonal centers of Cretan melodies. Moreover, the improvisational practices of Cretan musicians reflect the modal flexibility found in Byzantine psaltic art, where each mode is not a rigid scale but a framework for expressive melodic exploration.

4. Melodic and Vocal Style

Byzantine music is renowned for its elaborate melodic lines and vocal techniques, including extensive melisma (the singing of multiple notes on a single syllable), microtonal intervals, and highly ornamented phrases. These features are also prominent in Cretan vocal traditions. The singing style of Cretan performers, particularly in solo and duet contexts, often involves intricate melodic embellishments and expressive use of pitch. This vocal aesthetic, which prioritizes emotional intensity and spiritual resonance, is a direct inheritance from Byzantine chant traditions. The connection is particularly evident in religious and commemorative songs, where the aim is to evoke a sense of transcendence and communal memory. Through the continuation of such vocal techniques, Cretan music maintains a living link to its Byzantine past.

5. Instruments and Performance Practice

While Byzantine music was primarily a vocal tradition, supported by the acoustics of church architecture and the symbolic power of unaccompanied chant, its influence extended to instrumental practices as well. In Crete, the principal folk instruments—the lyra, laouto, and askomandoura—demonstrate a musical logic and aesthetic that parallel Byzantine modes and styles. The Cretan lyra, a pear-shaped bowed instrument, may trace its origins to earlier Byzantine bowed instruments such as the lyra of Constantinople. The improvisational character of lyra performances, particularly in instrumental introductions and interludes, reflects the same modal and ornamental principles found in ecclesiastical music. Additionally, instrumentalists often mimic the vocal style of chant, blurring the lines between sung and played music. These continuities suggest that even in the realm of instrumental music, the Byzantine legacy remains influential in shaping Cretan musical expression.

6. Themes and Lyrics

The thematic content of Cretan music also reveals strong parallels with Byzantine hymnography. Both traditions emphasize themes of heroism, martyrdom, spiritual struggle, and divine providence. In Byzantine hymns, narratives of saints, biblical events, and theological doctrines are set to music that enhances their emotional and didactic impact. Similarly, in Cretan rizitika and mantinades, the lyrics often recount historical events, praise heroic deeds, or reflect on existential and moral dilemmas. The poetic structure of Cretan songs, with its emphasis on metaphor, repetition, and solemn tone, mirrors the stylistic features of Byzantine liturgical poetry. This thematic alignment reinforces the idea that Cretan music, while serving a secular and communal function, remains deeply imbued with the spiritual and ethical concerns of Byzantine religious culture.

7. Preservation and Transmission

Both Byzantine and Cretan music traditions rely heavily on oral transmission, which has allowed them to preserve archaic features that might otherwise have been lost. In Crete, musical knowledge is passed from generation to generation through performance, mentorship, and communal participation in festivals and religious events. This method of transmission, similar to the oral training of Byzantine cantors, ensures not only technical continuity but also the perpetuation of interpretive styles and cultural values. The resilience of this oral tradition has enabled Cretan music to retain its distinct identity even in the face of modernization and globalization. Moreover, the continued presence of Byzantine chant in Cretan churches provides a direct and daily connection to the island's musical heritage, serving as both a source of inspiration and a standard of aesthetic excellence for secular musicians.

8. Thanassis Skordalos

Thanassis Skordalos (1920–1998) was a legendary figure in Cretan music, particularly known for his mastery of the lyra, the traditional bowed string instrument of Crete. While he is most widely celebrated for his contributions to Cretan folk and traditional music, his work and musical style also reflect deep roots in Byzantine music, though indirectly. Skordalos grew up in a deeply Orthodox Christian cultural context, where Byzantine music was part of daily life, especially in church. This ambient exposure influenced his musical sensibilities, even if his performances were secular.

Many who listened to Skordalos' lyra playing remarked on its spiritual quality, often describing it as “psalmodic” (chant-like). His ability to evoke reverence and introspection through his music links him emotionally and aesthetically to the Byzantine tradition.

Thanassis Skordalos was not a Byzantine chanter, but the aesthetic, modal, and spiritual elements of Byzantine music subtly influenced his Cretan musical style. His works reflect a fusion of folk expression and Byzantine ethos, demonstrating how deep cultural traditions often intertwine in Greek music.

8. Conclusion

The relationship between Cretan and Byzantine music is a testament to the enduring power of cultural and spiritual traditions to shape artistic expression. From modal structures and vocal techniques to thematic content and modes of transmission, Cretan music bears the unmistakable imprint of its Byzantine heritage. This connection is not merely historical or superficial; it is embedded in the very fabric of Cretan musical identity. As such, any comprehensive study of Cretan music must take into account its Byzantine roots, which continue to resonate in the melodies, rhythms, and emotions of contemporary performers. In celebrating this legacy, we also affirm the importance of preserving and studying traditional music as a living archive of human creativity and cultural continuity.

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