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GERLACH, O.
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The Use of Microtones in Plainchant since Pythagoras in Italy, Boethius in Rome and Justinian in Constantinople

- Publié par [Oliver Gerlach](#) le 2 novembre 2012 à 16:27 dans [Méloi et leurs microtones](#)
- [Revenir aux discussions de Méloi et leurs microtones](#)

Neil Moran wrote:

"Byzantine liturgical music is based on the principles of Pythagoras, classical Greek music theorists and Boethius, the contemporary of Justinian, who established a corps of 25 singers (including eunuchs) in the Hagia Sophia (consecration date: Dec. 27, 537).

The nasal qualities and microtones of the Late Byzantine repertoire can be attributed to the influence of Turkish music. In fact the complete structure of the Hagia Sophia and even the date of the consecration are based on Pythagorean mathematical principles.

The inhabitants of Constantinople referred to their state as 'Romaneia' since it was a continuation of the Roman Empire. The general use of the term 'Byzantine' dates from the 18th century."

The relationship between the liberal art ("science") music, part of the "Pythagorean" Quadrivium, and chant theory has been very different in Greek and Latin treatises.

On the level of performance practice, the vocal technique based on the local pronunciation of the sung language has an impact on the habit and cognitive patterns of intonation and the use of musical intervals.

A principal discussion has been opened by Neil Moran.

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A principal discussion has been opened by Neil Moran.

You are welcome to join it!

Some recommendations:

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2) Pythagoras and the Mathematikoi:

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Réponses à cette discussion



[Lien permanent](#) Réponse de [Oliver Gerlach](#) le 11 janvier 2013 à 12:28
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Pythagoras and the Mathematikoi

Everybody who has seen the beautiful train port of Messina, knows this large panorama of Sicily that the fascist mosaic inside offers, and the Pythagoreans are there represented as well. This was the humanist view on them, and Walter Burkert's book came like a shock, when it had been published the first time in 1962. So the few things that we really know about Pythagoras, are that he was not based in Sicily, but he lived as a charismatic leader of a hermetic sect (the "Mathematikoi") at a seaport called Croton (ἑρότων, in Italian "Crotone"), situated at the Ionian coast of Calabria. And mathematics played a certain role in their way of regarding the world, but Pythagoras did neither invent them nor had he the ultimate knowledge of his time, he learnt about them at Miletus, Alexandria, and by other prisoners at Babylon, but he contributed with own original ideas, as Zhmud emphasized in his late rehabilitation of Pythagoras. The "Pythagorean principles" are summarized briefly in the biographies of the School of Mathematics at St. Andrews University of Scotland (see the summary according to Heath):

<http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/Pythagoras.html>

Nevertheless he had something in common, if you like to compare Pythagoras with Boethius. Both had been charismatic personalities and as such they both got into trouble with politics, after they had established useful contacts with local authorities (in the case of Boethius, his good relationship with the Emperor Justinian I became finally dangerous for his own life and that of his father). Their religious way of regarding the world was not in contradiction, but rather inspired by mathematics (which is not the point of view that Europeans have today, who tend to regard both as separated—I will here not comment on the evolutionists' efforts to re-install this "harmony"). Despite their charismatic appearance they had only a limited view on science in comparison with the contemporary knowledge of the Mediterranean. Today we know very well this problem.

The Roman Decline of Science

Concerning your allusion to the "Romans": Who are the Romaioi and what did they know? Since Cyril and Methodius until the end of the Ottoman Empire the pair "Romaioi—Voulgarioi" has been used as a distinction among (Orthodox) Christians, whether they celebrate the Greek or the Slavonic rite.

Concerning science and humanities of the Greek civilization, some historians of science assume that Archimedes' death who was killed by a Roman soldier (212 BC), marked the end of a free Mediterranean exchange of knowledge which allowed to realize an abstract mathematical formula by practical inventions. It is said that his mechanical inventions which he made to defend the Greek Polis Syracuse against the Roman invaders, helped the King to withstand them for more than two years. It had been finally conquered, because nobody did longer care about the invaders. According to Archimedes the use of aqueducts, one of the famous symbols for Roman technology, could have been easily replaced by water tanks, as they had been found in other urban civilizations of the Amazonas.

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[Lien permanent](#) Réponse de [Oliver Gerlach](#) le 16 janvier 2013 à 8:13
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The Decline of Science under Justinian I and the Neoplatonic Renaissance

In the time of Emperor Justinian I Isidore of Miletus was not only one of the architects who designed and supervised the construction of the Hagia Sophia. Obviously he still kept some of the knowledge, once collected

at the library of Alexandria, and he could use it to construct the cathedral's dome (which later collapsed several times during earthquakes). Today, Isidore's compilation of Archimedes' mathematical writings is one of the earliest and most important sources of Archimedes' works. But the dark side behind the construction of Hagia Sophia was a civil war, during which huge parts of the town had been burnt down, which allowed the construction of such a monumental building, and theological arguments had been often instrumentalized for political campaigns. This is the background of the discussion around Emperor Justinian which is usually about the fact that he closed down the Academy of Athens by an edict. Did he support or suppress science? This is a controversial question which I will not discuss here, but you may find different opinions among my recommendations.

Boethius' eclectic approach to science was the translation of Plato and Aristotle and the restoration of the 4 mathematics (geometry, music, arithmetics, and astronomy) as *quadrivium*, and he translated from certain Greek treatises of Archimedes (if we believe Cassiodorus, like Boethius a scientist and courtier). Nevertheless, he was for centuries one of the very few Latin authors who had a profound knowledge of Greek and who studied and translated directly from Greek manuscripts (unlike the Italian Renaissance which discovered Ancient Greek treatises during the 15th century). Hence, he had been regarded as the pioneer and as first authority (after Cicero) concerning the Latin translation of Greek philosophical terms. Christian Meyer [pointed](#) at the common opinion that the translation of Euclid's *Elements* which have been ascribed to Boethius in medieval treatises, are not identical with those by Boethius, mentioned by Cassiodorus (at least not the *Geometria I* and *II*).

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[Lien permanent](#) Réponse de [Neil Moran](#) le 16 janvier 2013 à 15:30
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[Pythagoras and the Hagia Sophia](#) / re: JUSTINIAN AND MATHEMATICS

Justinian didn't closed down the Academy of Athens - he stole the library and the academy could not exist! Cf. the kontakion by St. Romanos the Melodist on *On Earthquakes and Fires* mentions violent earthquakes that shook the Near East in 552, 554, and 555 AD - and there are reports of a comet ([Procopius](#) recorded of 536 that or "during this year a most dread portent took place. For the sun gave forth its light without brightness...and it seemed exceedingly like the sun in eclipse, for the beams it shed were not clear."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9a-qCIBdAw>

<http://youtu.be/x9a-qCIBdAw>

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[Lien permanent](#) Réponse de [Oliver Gerlach](#) le 17 janvier 2013 à 1:24
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Thank you for this nice answer, its beautiful title and the *Earthquake* Kontakion.

The stolen books hint to another interpretation of the Hagia Sophia cathedral, and unlike these nice fairy tales which Mr. Hannan likes to tell us, it had certainly nothing to do with the wishes of the emigrated scientists, that they returned from Persia. They had just been ordered like the books... But the lecture of this blog was not less amusing than the Pythagorean contemplation about the Hagia Sophia by Dr. Ruth Dwyer.

I can clearly see that there are still deeply hidden Pythagorean needs in us, like a sleeping beauty behind the thorns of political history.

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[Lien permanent](#) Réponse de [Oliver Gerlach](#) le 4 février 2013 à 8:53
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Greek and Latin Chant Theory and the Arabic-Islamic Reception of Science

You might have laughed by reading about microtones and plainchant in connection with Pythagoras, and here we have arrived the typical musicological point of view which never hesitates to ask for the practical relevance of music theory. It is not easy to imagine how this can be meddled into Pythagoras' cosmological point of view.

Boethius had been most influential as music theorist, because he founded a medieval way of Latin music theory which tried to treat traditional topics of the Greek *harmonikai* and the practice of contemporary liturgical chant at the same time. This approach was motivated by the contemporary Christian interest for Neoplatonic mysticism, which consequently tried to ignore older debates around the differences between Plato and Aristotle and between Aristotle and Aristoxenos.

One of Boethius' main sources was Ptolemy who referred to several tetrachord divisions by various scientists. What is the impact on the so-called "Pythagorean" tuning, the favoured tetrachord division in Latin music treatises? It was invented by the time of Archimedes by Eratosthenes, and it is the only example within Ancient Greek music theory of a tetrachord division which uses not three different intervals. After Eratosthenes' proposition, it was an uneducated point of view to believe that a *semitonium* divides the *tonus* into two equal parts. The rest of the *tonus* was called ἀποτομή (Chrysanthos', by the way, calls the rest between the fourth and the *ditonus* "leimma" as a kind of simplified Pythagorean (§ 235), while the ἡμίτονον defines all kinds of intervals between diesis and the small or minor tone (p. 100) which is much larger than the "Pythagorean" *semitonium*).

Chrysanthos' *Mega Theoretikon* is a long and interesting chant treatise, which had been published by his student in 1832 and according to my knowledge it is the first Greek treatise concerned about "Byzantine chant" which mentioned any interval measured as an exact proportion (p. 28).

This is the main difference between Latin and Greek chant treatises, the *harmonikai* as science has never been mixed with a chant manual, despite the fact that the practice of transposition, as it has been described as μεταβολή κατὰ τόνον in science, is very relevant since three models appear in the *sticherarion* which pass through all the eight *echoi*, not without temporary transposition of the whole tone systems and the position of the *echoi* as its tonal elements.

Quite different from Greek chant manuals, Arabic music theory since Al-Kindi follows the empiric way of localizing all intervals on the keyboard of the a four-stringed lute ('*ūd*'), but here without transpositions (in the 15th century Gabriel Hieromonachos does the same in his treatise dedicated to the art of chant or psaltic art).

About 200 years later Al-Farabi who profited from the translations of Ancient Greek music treatises in Baghdad, did not only localize a diatonic tetrachord division with two and another with three intervals on the lute keyboard, but also localized the frets needed or all the possible transpositions. Only on this level, Aristoxenos' polemic against the Ancient Greek letter notation meets the Aristotelian empiric task to localize all the needed intervals.

Aristoxenos was against the Ancient Greek letter system, because it numbered all the positions within the double octave according to the local order on the keyboard, but not according to the order of the tone system. The invention of neumes as a consequent notation of melodic steps (the Middle Byzantine notation since the 13th century), which refers by its modal signatures the elements of the tetrachord, had finally solved Aristoxenos' problem.

In Arabic theory there had been a consequent separation between the translation of Ancient Greek treatises of the mathematical science *harmonikai* and treatises concerned with the autochthonous theory of Arab music defined by a system of rhythm (*ṭqā'at*) and a system of modes (*nağme*), and called *musīq*.

- [▶ Répondre](#)



[Lien permanent](#) Réponse de [Oliver Gerlach](#) le 16 février 2013 à 9:01
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I hope that this explains that there is nearly just the Hagiopolites which has survived as a Greek chant treatise before the 13th century, and in a complete form it dates back later, to the 14th century. Hence, we need to study Arabic and Latin sources to understand. No manual has survived which explains Constantinopolitan psaltes the modal system of 4 kyrioi, plagioi, mesoi, and phthorai. We just have this paragraph in the Hagiopolites which mentions it as the one of the Asma, but the reform of 692 already aimed to replace it. No manuscript with the Constantinopolitan notation has survived except Kastoria, which dates back to the 14th century as well and transcribes its notation into the contemporary one.

But Eckhard Neubauer pointed at a certain odd terminology in Al-Kindi's treatise which he obviously translated from Greek terms. Liberty Manik interpreted the tetrachord division (note that Al-Kindi just treated the intervals by the frets of a four-stringed ud keyboard, but he did not mention any tetrachords) as the one of Eratosthenes. This is the same speculation common with the one among Byzantinists Egon Wellesz and Jørgen Raasted. Nevertheless, there is no evidence whatsoever about the proportions of the intervals, not before Al-Farabi.

But Al-Kindi can be interpreted, that the way to demonstrate the tone system on the ud keyboard starting from the third chord (or the middle one in the later 5-stringed ud) had already been common among Greek singers of the 8th century, 700 years before Gabriel Hieromonachos mentioned it.

It does not explain another tone system which is generated by the tetrachords of an oktoechos notation (whether 10 modes or 16), mentioned in the *Musica enchiriadis* as the "Dasia system".

- [▶ Répondre](#)



[Lien permanent](#) Réponse de [Oliver Gerlach](#) Il y a 4 heures
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A Debate about Performance Practice of Byzantine Chant and the End of the MMB Transcripta series

"The nasal qualities and microtones of the Late Byzantine repertoire can be attributed to the influence of Turkish music."

As usual Neil Moran makes a lot of allusions, and in order to finish this discussion, I would like to go further on with a last reference relevant to fundamental issues of performance practice today (see point 7 of my bibliographical references). There was once an article by Daniel Leech-Wilkinson on his web page, which also treated a very particular "necessity" of "ancient music" (as a marketing lable) and the pioneer work of its performers: the re-invention of a lost tradition between making music strange and making it familiar (a rather ethnographic aspect).

The following might help to understand, why there was once a difference between protopsaltes of the living tradition and Henry Julius Wetenhal Tillyard's approach towards a "pure Byzantine tradition," "liberated" by the "Turkokratia." I always found it amusing that some Greeks regarded their own history without being neither able to recognise nor to appreciate the musical culture and its exchanges, as they had taken place between Sufis, Kurds, Sephardic Jews, Armenian and Greek Christians. It reminded me somehow of Western European tourists who tend to look for the idealised Ancient Greek statues among the living population, usually with the result, that they explain their definite dissapointment by the very influence of Ottoman history. It was so often replaced by the attribute "Late" or "post-Byzantine," that this label already included a bizzare concept, how to clean "the Byzantine tradition" by un-Byzantine (=Ottoman) influences. It is bizarre, because Constantinople always profited by trade and by many exchanges of knowledge over the centuries, and this was exactly the reason, why it always attracted conquests under the condition, that these exchanges will continue. And so they do, until today in the town known as Istanbul.

It was Tillyard (together with Egon Wellesz) who regarded a nasal vocal style and microtones as well as any *change* to the *chromatic* or to the *enharmonic genus* (already known as μεταβολή κατὰ γένον since the mathematic science of *harmonikai*) as corruptions of the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, there was as well

a counter-movement among academic musicians against the current vocal aesthetics of the 1980s. They indeed tried to establish the other way round, that Renaissance and Medieval Music has to be sung with a nasal voice. I have to admit that the singers of my ensemble got so used to a stable frequency of certain harmonics that we no longer care about the aesthetics of a certain Belcanto style, because we are neither used to it nor affected by it. It is simply a different style, that is all. But the so-called "nasal technique" which can hardly be avoided during the articulation of any language, though there are always thousand nuances to use a nasal sound, helped a lot to sing also frequencies and proportions less known among singers trained at the classical conservatories.

The *Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae* was once a very ambitious project of the founders Carsten Høeg, H.J.W. Tillyard, and Egon Wellesz, the *Transcripta* series which was finally not continued, in particular (see Alexander Lingas' article). One of the reasons which might have convinced followers to rethink carefully the MMB transcription norms, was Manouel Chrysaphes' treatise, which testified the ignorance of contemporary musicians after the fall of Constantinople (see Spyridon Antonopoulos about its reception history until today). According to Manouel they were ignorant, whenever they wanted to sing simply, what was written in the phonic neumes, or whenever they tried to transcribe the very detail into phonic neumes, without making any difference between a notated background and a performed foreground, which can always be realised in rather different ways. At this point I have to defend Tillyard against Lingas' accusation, that microtones and the sound colours belong to an accidental level. He simply mentioned, that these were details not fixed by notation (unlike the notation as it has been used by certain editions of the Karas school today). The simple fact that it was not notated, does not imply that microtones and certain vocal techniques have not any relevance for chant performance, it does mean that, like cadence formulas, they belonged to an oral transmission, which was not necessarily identical between different local schools (in this respect I also inserted the introduction of my doctoral thesis, because it is addressed to scholars and performers of Eastern as well as of Western chant).

The conflict between the "Occidental" philologues and different representative psaltes of certain Oriental schools (I am thinking here of Oriental Orthodox traditions, whether they are Greek-Orthodox or not), is not only the dilemma, that Tillyard sometimes tended to radical positions, which had nothing to offer to them. It has been always opportune to blame psaltes for their ahistorical attitude, but his philological point of view did definitely not help to integrate valuable experience of the living tradition, since he regarded "Gregorianik" and its common performance practice, as it has been established since the 19th century, as an essential part of it. This had nothing in common with the formers' point of reference, while Marcel Pérès' approach could also serve as an example, that some fundamental principles of modal music practised by traditional psaltes could even be used for the re-invention of Western plainchant.

Neither Chrysanthos during the 19th century, nor the preceding generations of teachers at the New Music School of the Patriarchate who already redefined the tradition during the 18th century could escape the very dilemma, as Manouel Chrysaphes described it: that those who believe, that the oral tradition behind psaltic art can be improved by an analytical use of notation, replacing the knowledge of the different "methods," how to do the "thesis of the melos" according to a certain chant genre or according to certain composers and their local schools, are fundamentally wrong. These were Manouel's words which had just been replaced by Chrysanthos' dichotomy *metrophonia* and *melos* in the writings of Konstantinos Psachos and Gregorios Stathis.

What lies behind us, is the former practice of "polysyllabic" (and tetraphonic) solfège (*parallage*), as it has been replaced by Chrysanthos' "monosyllabic" (and heptaphonic) one. Until now there is a very poor understanding of this transformation concerning the MMB transcription norms. The real problem of an ever-growing chant can only be studied by the transcriptions of Chrysanthos' generation, including those which had been never printed in the books for a liturgical performance: Chourmouzos' own realisations of the "old sticherarion" for instance, in his own version as well as based on 17th-century composers like Panagiotes the New Chrysaphes and Germanos of New Patras. This is the background behind later abridged editions like Petros Peloponnesios' *Doxastarion syntomon*, published first by Petros Ephesios (1820), Iakovos the Protopsaltes' *Doxastarion argon*, based on the transcriptions into round notation by Georgios of Crete, later published and transcribed according to the New Method by Chourmouzos (1836), and finally, Konstantinos the Protopsaltes' *Doxastarion argosyntomon*, as it has been transcribed according to the New Method and published by his student Stephanos the Domestikos (1841). While Stephanos prepared the printed edition, Konstantinos continued to write chant manuscripts using the older notation system. As his response to Manouel's dilemma, he consequently refused the New Method as a whole. Others like Iakovos Nafpliotis refused any kind of notation and his proper purely orally based tradition was finally transcribed by his student Angelos Voudouris—into a hand-written New Method notation. It seems that some of his abbreviations are even more radical than those by Petros, and it was continued by the editions of Konstantinos Pringos.

If we regard all these transcriptions and editions like archeological layers which tried to continue the chant genre of the *sticherarion*, and quite often in contradiction to other layers, we will find, that there has been obviously no longer a clear distinction between the *kalophonic method* and the traditional (*palaion*) *method* of the *sticheraric melos*—already during the time of Petros Peloponnesios. Nevertheless, I found Frédéric Tavernier's assumption very plausible, that we should not only regard the genre *sticheron* simply as a choral and short form, we should also consider a change between soloistic and choral parts. Especially Petros has to be regarded as a very talented, but also self-confident and charismatic musician who was able to convince his audience in such a degree, that they believed more in his than in anybody else's version. It was simple and rhythmic, but capable to use virtuous effects in a very economic and efficient way, while he always avoided to tire the voice. Nevertheless, his very radical abbreviation, which usually did not care much about the models written in 14th-century *sticheraria*, and his very strict use of rhythm had never been accepted by a traditionalist like Iakovos the Protosaltos, a teacher of the following generation, whose free rhythmic style could hardly be transcribed by the resolute notation system of the New Method.

From this point of view we have also to discuss newer approaches to "decipher" the old and simple way of the *sticheraric melos* like the one by Ioannis Arvanitis—the "traditional method of the thesis," as Manouel Chrysaphes, one of the last Byzantine masters, once called it. Ensembles which rely on his approach, cannot avoid this dilemma.

At least I hope, that my studies could convince my readers that neither microtonal shifts nor ornaments, unknown to singers of Western chant today, were something particular Turkish or Byzantine. Latin authors of chant treatises, who were usually interested in everything that matters chant performance (in most of the cases it does not make any sense to differentiate between *cantors* and *theorists*, after Boethius' "De institutione musica"), were quite concerned about it. If some scholars nowadays are not, because they have no longer experience there, we can hardly blame medieval authors for it.

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