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THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ALBANIAN CHORAL MUSIC

Abstract

The article explains the origin and development of Albanian choral music from its beginnings in the first half of the 20th century until the present day. In this brief review, the author identifies the events, groups and individuals whose efforts throughout history were crucial for the creation and advancement of this musical genre, as well as evaluating current music life in Albania.

Key words

Choral music, Albania, professional choral groups, amateur choral groups, contemporary Albanian music;

The outline of the development of choral music in Albania is closely linked to early cultural tradition, based either on Orthodox religion expressed through Byzantine music or on the Catholic faith articulated in the sacred music of the pre-classical and classical periods. Also, an important factor that should be considered within this developmental process is the profound influence of the neighboring countries of the Balkan region.

At the beginning, Albanian choral music progressed under the influence of the environment in which professionalism and amateurism intermixed. The first choral societies were established between 1916 and 1917, and the most significant among them were the Choral Society of Tirana founded under the patronage of the Orthodox Church, the Society of the City of Shkodra, established with the support of the Catholic Church, and others, created in cities like Korça, Berat, Valona and Pogradec.

Choral groups were part of these societies and in most cases performed on special occasions. Beside their performances, the Choir of the Orthodox Church of Tirana helped formulate several texts of vocal choral music based on Byzantine chants, as well as modern ones which were sung at religious services. Some examples are, for instance, the three-part choral hymn, *My God I called*, which accompanies the liturgy of St. John the Baptist built on Byzantine chants, as well as some works of Jan Kukuzeli.

Father Fan Noli published masses composed by various authors in Boston in 1936.

In 1917, there were two artistic societies established in Shkodra – *Rozafa* and *Bogdani*. The city choir was founded in the same year, at the initiative of the local priest and the mayor. The choir's repertoire consisted of sacred music composed by Western authors. In this period, vocal music followed the masses, but was also used for other religious activities.

It was this setting that helped young composers from Shkodra, preparing and educating them to become significant Albanian artists. Some of them became well-known authors, like Prenk Jakova, Cesk Zadeja, Tish Daija, and Tonin Arapi.

In the same period (1916-1917), another Albanian city – Korča – familiarized itself with contemporary events in vocal choral music. The opening of the first high school *Liceu i Korces* and the influence of the neighboring countries were factors that helped Korča to start developing its own vocal choral music tradition. The Orthodox Church established relations with Greece, especially Thessaloniki, and provided necessary support regarding this issue. The *Vatra* ensemble from Boston, consisting of Albanian boys, visited Korča in 1920, and the choir conductor, Thoma Nasi, later became the founder of the city choir. The *Vatra* association and the *Lira* choir were established at the same time in Korča. Their activity continues throughout the present day.

Despite these efforts, the development of choral music remained in a rudimentary phase until World War II. The first choral groups were established during and soon after the war, and in 1994 the Military Choir and the Youth Choir were founded. The Youth Choir later developed into the State Choir.

After World War II, vocal choral music in Albania developed quickly due to a general progress throughout the country. Choral groups whose activities were connected to cultural centers were instituted in all Albanian cities, with the support of the government. However, only two professional choirs existed in Albania, both situated in the capital city of Tirana. These were male choirs, led by conductor Konstandin Trako, who graduated from theology school in Rumania.

Vocal choral music was later supported by an exchange of experience with foreign countries, due to the politics which the Albanian Government conducted with neighboring countries. Guest performances of various foreign choral groups in Albania at the time encouraged the development of local choral groups, but the professional capacities which would ensure the stable progress of choral music in Albania were still lacking. The need for educating and the specializing of our artists was obvious. Therefore, the Secondary Art School was opened in 1946 and sent graduates on specialization to different art academies in Eastern Europe, especially Moscow, Bucharest, Sofia, and Prague, resulting in the advancing of the general artistic level, particularly in the field of choral music.

Moreover, students who graduated abroad gave the initiative to found the Academy of Arts in Tirana in 1962. Since then, this institution has had a crucial role in the process of developing art and music in Albania. It prepared many professional instrumentalists, conductors, and composers who managed professional or amateur choral artistic groups at that time.

During the fifties and sixties, several professional, semi-professional, and amateur choirs were established. In this sense, it is significant to mention the Albanian Philharmonic Choir (later the Opera Choir), the Military Choir, the Choir of the Ensemble for Folk Music and Dance, the Female Choir of the Art School *Jordan Misja*, the Philharmonic Choir of Shkodra, the *Lira* Male Choir from Korça, and other choirs in Drač, Valona, Elbasan, Gjirocastra, etc.

Some of them performed not only in Albania, but in other countries such as the republics of the former Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, Russia, Korea and almost all European countries. The development of Albanian art during this period followed the models of dogmatic socialism and the proletarian spirit, which became the reference point in the following decades when the freedom of music expression was very limited. This also encouraged the creating of many schematic, propaganda and conformist works and led Albanian music further away from the contemporary music of the 20th century and modern artistic trends.

Despite its very limited repertoire, Albanian choral music continued to develop. If we analyze the music created during these years, from instrumental miniatures to oratorios, operas, ballets, symphonies, concerts, and symphonic poems, we can conclude that some composers made a great effort to avoid the prescription of the Soviet music style and its social realism influence.

After this long period of stagnation, in the early seventies, several Albanian composers wished to avoid conformism and discover a “different” contemporary music. Thus, in the music of some Albanian authors we notice the use of “chromatics and unstable tonal harmony”, typical for contemporary music. In the late nineties, choral music was set free from conformism and censorship under the influence of the same factors which produced important changes in the country. In this period, music regained its contemporary features. Here we can notice that many artists inclined towards neo-classicism and neo-romanticism, which can be applied to choral music, while others emulated Schönberg, Messiaen, etc.

In the development of Albanian choral music today, several bold initiatives have a special role, for example, the *Golden Autumn* festival, which takes place every year and is organized by composer Sokol Shupo.

Despite the mentioned efforts, the changes “after the nineties” had a negative impact on the progress of choral music in Albania. It is unsettling that some choirs, once considered the most important for establishing and developing Albanian music, have now diminished and their influence is totally reduced and insignificant. Here we can mention the termination of the Military Choral Ensemble, the Choir of the Ensemble of Folk Music and Dance, and all amateur and semi-amateur choirs throughout the country.

At any rate, the fact that during the past decade Albanian music started to develop according to a concept derived from Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, as well as Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, etc., shows great potential.

There are many professional choirs in Albania today which perform successfully in the country as well as abroad, such as the Female Choir of the Albanian Academy of Arts, which won several international awards, the *Paks Dei* Choir, the *Preng Jakova* Choir of the Orthodox Church of Tirana, the *Rozafa* choirs from Shkodra, the *Lira* Choir from Korça, and others.

The International Choral Festival was organized in Tirana for the first time in 2001. Several choirs performed, among them the Female Choir of the Albanian Academy of Arts, which won first place.

At the present moment, everything is open, and while the common characteristics of contemporary European artistic language are being revealed, the authentic aspect of national culture, complex conditions and complicated international relations are still being emphasized.

Translated by Asja Radonjić

Summary

Choral music in Albania developed under the influence of the neighboring countries of the Balkan region. The first choral groups were established under the patronage of the Orthodox and Catholic churches in Tirana, Shkodra, Korça, Berat, Valona and Pogradec in 1916 and 1917. Despite various individual efforts, Albanian choral music remained in an embryonic stage until World War II, during and after which the first professional choral groups were founded. Throughout the fifties and sixties, some of the most significant choral groups in Albania were established, like the Albanian Philharmonic Choir, the Military Choir, the Choir of the Ensemble for Folk Music and Dance, the Women's Choir of Art School *Jordan Misja*, Philharmonic Choir of Shkodra, Men's Choir *Lyra* from Korça, and others in Drač, Valona, Elbasan, Gjirocastra, etc. Some of them performed not only in Albania, but in other countries such as the republics of the former Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, Russia, Korea and almost all European countries. In this period, Albanian music followed the models of dogmatic socialism and proletarian spirit which led Albanian music further away from contemporary artistic trends. After this period of stagnation, some Albanian composers in the early seventies tried to discover different, modern musical tendencies, which finally resulted in discarding conformism and censorship in the late nineties. Nowadays, Albanian music regains its contemporary features. Unfortunately, political and social changes during this period had a negative impact on choral groups, which resulted in the reduction and termination of some of the most prominent vocal ensembles. However, there is still a large number of professional choirs in Albania today which perform successfully in the country and abroad, as well as several bold initiatives that strive to develop and improve Albanian contemporary music (e.g. the International Festival of Choirs, established in Tirana in 2001, the contemporary music festival *Golden Autumn*, and others).