

Review Essay:  
Tore Tvarnø Lind, *The Past  
is Always Present: The Revival  
of the Byzantine Musical Tradition  
at Mount Athos*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman  
and Martin Stokes (Lanham:  
The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 224pp.

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In my article “Byzantine Chant, Authenticity, and Identity,”<sup>1</sup> I suggested that an ethnomusicological approach might help resolve the apparent disconnect between Western and Eastern conceptions of “authenticity” with respect to contemporary reception and performance of Byzantine chant. In other words, ethnomusicology, as the study of how musical practices are received and performed in the context of a living community, can show how to bridge the gap between the West’s concerns about rupture from a past constructed according to a scholarly rubric defined almost entirely in terms of Western assumptions, and the East’s performative approach that sees a fundamental continuity with historical practice. A key example of this is Jeffers Engelhardt’s 2009 article, “Right Singing in Estonian Orthodox Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> In the time since I wrote my

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Barrett, “Byzantine Chant, Authenticity, and Identity: Musical Historiography through the Eyes of Folklore,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 55 (2010): 181–98.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffers Engelhardt, “Right Singing in Estonian Orthodox Christianity: A Study of Music, Theology, and Religious Ideology,” *Ethnomusicology: The Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology* 53 (2009): 32–57.

essay, an additional study has been brought to my attention as an exemplar of the kind of work I mean: Alexander Khalil's 2009 as-yet-unpublished dissertation "Echoes of Constantinople: Oral and Written Tradition of the Psaltes of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople,"<sup>3</sup> a study of how the chanting "style" of the *psaltes* of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is itself a dialogue with the past, informed by how oral tradition is understood.

Now we have Tore Tvarnø Lind's *The Past is Always Present: The Revival of the Byzantine Musical Tradition at Mount Athos*, which studies how the monastery of Vatopaidi has consciously used Byzantine chant as a means of situating itself in a historicized context. The assertion of this continuity with history through an emphasis on performance-practice informed by manuscript study and oral tradition, with the location of Mount Athos itself providing a great deal of supposed historical weight, enables Vatopaidi's monks to negotiate the monastery's identity amidst the concerns of modernity, as well as to use the tools of modernity itself to disseminate its practices in an authoritative fashion.

In the first chapter, Lind situates his study as the meeting of several concerns: Mount Athos and modernity; the modern Greek state and the European Union, Byzantine musicology and Western scholarship; Orthodox Christian identity constructed out of an imagined Byzantine past; the ongoing problematization of terms such as "revival" and "authenticity"; and even the methodological problems inherent in basing studies on the subjectivities of fieldwork. The central problem that emerges is how has the association of Byzantine chant and monasticism with tradition as a conservative force meant for the relationship of current musical practices and the past, when the past itself is always open for re-interpretation?

Chapter 2 discusses the ways in which Vatopaidi has constructed its "revival" of Byzantine chant, and how the monastery has used it to assert a relationship to present-day Orthodox tradition, as well as historical Byzantine tradition, which is dif-

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Konrad Khalil, "Echoes of Constantinople: Oral and Written Tradition of the Psaltes of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople" (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2009).

ferent from how Western voices have sought to represent that relationship. The monks make use of manuscripts and personal instruction to inform their practices, with both representing links to the historical past – written and oral tradition, in other words – but this relationship with the past is complex and itself a modern phenomenon. The interpretation of the written record is informed by modern scholarship; oral tradition is influenced by recordings. Notation is a problem because the Chrysanthine reform of the nineteenth century itself represents a set of difficult hermeneutical choices that present-day cantors must make. The monks synthesize their work into their practice of singing services, but they also produce their own recordings and publications, which is its own curious negotiation between tradition and modernity. Finally, many of these forces are themselves reacting to Western constructions of chant, monasticism, and the post-Byzantine Greek world.

Chapter 3 is an overview of how notational issues relate to Lind's questions. Psaltic notation consists of a series of signs that function more like turn-by-turn directions rather than, as with staff notation, a route plotted on a map. The values of the signs, however, can be qualitative as well as quantitative, and interpretation in a performance context must be informed by a link to the oral tradition of Byzantine chant, not merely a calculation of the intervallic relationships represented by the neumes. Employing signs eliminated by the Chrysanthine reforms in their transcriptions, reintroduction of modes that have been phased out, and a practice of *isokratema* (the drone underneath the melody) that resists any impulse to harmonize are all ways that the monks seek to maintain and strengthen the connection to the past. There are, however, various centers jockeying for interpretive authority, and Vatopaidi is only one of them. Vatopaidi's own practice is informed by the work of scholars and cantors from academic centers such as Athens, who are involved in their own debates about authenticity and tradition with cantors in other locations with significant historical weight, namely the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople.

Chapter 4 examines how Mount Athos represents itself publicly as a holy site of pilgrimage, again marking an uneasy