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Prehistoric Mode and Polyphony in the Balkans

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PREHISTORIC MODE AND POLYPHONY IN THE BALKANS

This is a rather short talk compared to others, because I want to give you the opportunity to listen to a set of exciting examples and devote ample time to discussion. Please pardon my limited mastery of English. The discussion will be conducted with the help and contribution of Dr Lekkas. I would like to begin with an attempt to connect to what you already heard from him, as a specific group of Greek musicologists is at a stage of coordinating its steps towards reaching a common goal.

The idea here is that musical material, organization and suprastructure is already inherent in the periodic nature of sound, and that its elements have a way of springing up spontaneously and being heard, even at a raw level, provided musicians are capable of discovering and utilising them.

We know that ancient Greeks, as regards their descent and civilization, were a synthesis of a locally settled pre-Hellenic (Pelasgian) population and a gradual invasion or infiltration of Hellenic (Greek) tribes from the North. All available evidence (from linguistics for instance) tends to drive us to the conclusion that the two constituents date back to a common origin, very few millennia in advance. Greek pre-history, therefore, thus viewed, presents itself as a distinctive course of: a. divergence, b. collision, c. re-convergence.

What does music practice show us on this subject? What was the collision all about during the archaic period, what was the historical mechanism of a subsequent synthesis, what are the short- and long-term outcomes and how is all this manifested in music? You already heard about diatonic tetrachords, scales and hues (*chroæ*) produced on the flute and Aulos as subdivisions of the perfect fourth. And now we shall turn our attention to the western Balkans. This side of the juxtaposition revolves round a concentration on the perfect fifth as key interval. How does the choice of a fifth change the musical landscape?

We shall soon see that. But let us note, first, that, already by 6,000 b.C., each of these cultures carries a different long and sacred tradition, with its own intervals, instruments, style and character of execution. Colossal clashes and syntheses of this kind, between entire societies and civilizations, aren't usually confined to one cultural sector alone; most of the times they indicate real wars between tribes, even organized armies. Our own musical conflict is but one facet of the forceful clash between a Pelasgian West and a Thraco-Phrygian East, culminating, in military history, with the Trojan War described by Homer in the *Iliad*. In mythology there will be a musical contest between "hyperborean" god Apollo playing the *kithara* (compare him to Celtic god Bélénos) and Thraco-Phrygian Dionysus through his representative, or follower, or a sort of *alter ego*, aulete satyr Marsyas. Troy shall be defeated and levelled to the ground. Marsyas shall lose, because of his provocation, impudence and *hybris* rather than his musical ineptitude, and shall be skinned alive.

You see, already, how the West is associated with strings and the East with winds. This may seem a bit strange, given our firm knowledge that the great ancient Eastern kingdoms knew both. This is beside the point; the issue is more about what instruments were sacred in either side of the Balkans. The rugged, snowcapped western terrain was marked by small isolated patriarchal communities that revered hunting and conducted their worship indoors. This factor encourages ritual chanting and quiet stirring music played on strings, that are mystically associated with the string of the hunting bow, being descended from it. The East, with its vast plains and nomadic

mobility, practises worship outdoors in the open air. Rituals need space and loud piercing music and they typically end up in orgiastic ecstasy.

Anyone aware of overtones of strings, but also flutes and especially closed panpipes, is bound to be familiar with the twelfth, the octave and the fifth. And anyone familiar with these is also capable of knowing the cycle of fifths and the octave-reduction principle. But, as has carefully been pointed out, the method we use at present is to try to check what is inherent in theory and leave application for last.

We are only too familiar with the modal product of the reduced cycle of fifths, the fourth taking part in the sense of a reduced descending fifth. Suppose we start with an octave, say C to C' and work only in the direction of fifths. Superimposition of the first fifth at G splits the octave into a fifth (C to G, symbol V) and a fourth (G to C', symbol IV). The second fifth, reduced within the octave, is at note D, and the octave is split into a tone (C to D, symbol T) and two fourths (D to G and G to C'). We have created the familiar classical external frame of *proslambanomenos* and two conjunct tetrachords, all notes fixed. But the system is unbalanced. Why? Because the discrepancy in perceived "size" between a tone and a fourth is too great, since a fourth is nearly 2½ tones (2.44 to be more exact). For better balance, there is motive to introduce one more fifth from the cycle. The upper fourth will be split into a tone (G to A+) and a *trihemitone* (A+ to C', symbol □). The situation improves, as the trihemitone is less than twice a tone, in fact even slightly less than 1½ (1.44 to be exact again). But we cannot stop here, as only half of the scale is now balanced, and for another reason too: if we stopped, we would have three sizes of steps. Introduction of one more fifth balances the scale and returns to only two sizes: three tones and two trihemitones. And the pentatonic setup thus obtained is stable.

Our end-product scale has steps T, T, □, T, □ in between notes C, D, E+, G, A+ (and C'). It is an example of a no-semitone pentatonic scale and mode. By rotating the set, we get four more. See the table for their steps and notes, all transposed to C. Please note that these modes are not done full justice by the adjective "no-semitone"; as an extra feature, they never have two consecutive trihemitones or three tones in a row.

1. T, T, □, T, □	C, D, E+, G, A+
2. T, □, T, T, □	C, D, F, G, A+
3. T, □, T, □, T	C, D, F, G, Bb-
4. □, T, T, □, T	C, Eb-, F, G, Bb-
5. □, T, □, T, T	C, Eb-, F, Ab-, Bb-

From what I am given to understand, anybody employing a methodology like ours, even if they had no access to practical information, would be in a position to predict:

- The cycle of fifths would spontaneously produce five no-semitone pentatones.
- These pentatones could spring up at different spots in the world; there is no particular need to suppose a mutual influence.
- They would be stable and lasting.

The next thing to check would be the harmonic potential of pentatones, meaning what chords, if any, would sound best in this pentatonic environment. And here results are very interesting indeed. This modal frame does yield one triad, whose sound fulfils all æsthetic requirements of euphonicity. I am talking about the *bi-quintal* triad obtained by piling two fifths, conventionally often labelled "empty (or thirdless) chord of the ninth": C / G / D'. This triad exceeds the octave.

build our woodwind-based harmony according to this principle, harmonic potential is launched sky-high: every conceivable chord sounds good. All this agrees perfectly with a patriarchal tribal social organization. Apart from a conceivable drone now, one could predict a possibility of extra voices carrying extra notes to the chords. And, if one should decide not to dwell on their more assonant or dissonant elements, one would most probably revert to either embellishing them or jumping back and forth between more consonant notes and them, providing a filament of “broken dyads” according to the shape of the tune. You see, even the much later principle of “broken chords” can be traced back to the primeval seed of music.

The problem of dating traditional European polyphonies, and tracing their historical course, is tough and officially unsolved to this day. But we believe that our approach brings fresh ideas that help tackle it from a different angle. We have shown that the potential for a pentatonic modality already lay in the basic interval from the start. Furthermore, it *did* carry the makings of a polyphony, which *could* have evolved in exactly the way that it has, given the right initial social conditions. So we can conclude, rather safely, that *the* particular polyphony *could* have developed “very early”. Let me add some more facts. a. There is no record indeed that the music we are going to talk about was ever polyphonic; but, nevertheless, there is no record, either, of its ever *changing* into polyphonic, which is what it *is*; one should think that such a revolutionary innovation would have been noticed. b. It is a feature of extremely conservative music cultures. c. It never turned heptatonic, so its demands for a more advanced elaboration would be forced to be directed to the vertical (harmonic) dimension, given the staticity and limitations of the horizontal (modal, melodic) component. d. A counterpoint, such as this, does reflect the actual social organization of pre-historic Balkan communities as we know it from other sciences. e. The geographical distribution, dispersion and diversification of these polyphonies agrees with a very old set of linguistic (and racial) bonds, namely focal areas of definite and identifiable pre- and proto-Indo-European strata.

So far we have been focussing on vocal polyphony, as instrumental music has exhibited a much looser attitude towards multiple voicing. Folk polyphony, whether vocal or instrumental, is a typical feature all over the Balkans. Greeks, in the district of Epirus and sparsely in Thessaly, Eubœa, Peloponnesus, Grevena – Macedonia, Villia – Attica sing in two, three or four voices. So do Albanians and Rumanians. Serbs, Bosnians and Bulgarians sing in two. Greek islanders play their bagpipes in diphony, probably carrying on an unbroken chain since the classical double Aulos, and some obsolescent singing is recorded along the same lines. Folk polyphonies of various kinds are found in Slovakia, Southern Poland, Georgia, mainland Italy and Sardinia.

Greece has an extremely rich and diverse tradition of folk songs. Most of it is in various tetrachordal genera; the style, well established and dominant from around 700 b.C. on, has largely replaced pentatonic music. This music is usually labelled monophonic, though an incumbent moving drone could place it in the area of an elementary diphony. A lot of it is played with a simple chordal backing nowadays. The main air is all important though; sometimes simple, syllabic, other times richly ornamented, it is typically sung by a soloist or a group with or without instrumental accompaniment. Pure instrumental versions are not uncommon, especially for dance; those do approach a genuine diphony a bit more.

A striking exception to this rule is a unique survival of pentatonics, dominant throughout prehistory and archaic times, up to the 700 b.C. landmark, and remaining pentatonic and elaborately polyphonic, to the point where one can talk of counterpoint, strongly to this date. We already talked about the origins of this polyphony which are lost in time. This “applied” part of

the talk will analyze these precious “living fossils”, a haunting all-European patrimony, with their unique captivating sound and their high degree of artistic achievement. Their domain lies in certain regions of Epirus north of capital Yiannina: Northern Epirus, Lacca of Pogoni, certain villages of Konitsa and isolated communities in neighbouring areas of Macedonia. The same general musical climate continues in Albania, with variations in local styles.

These songs are executed by typical mixed groups in 3 or 4 parts. It is not always feasible to assemble the group needed, so even solo renditions have been recorded. Even in these cases, the other parts are filled in on clarinet, violin and lute. Anything lacking the necessary melodic layers is understood as incomplete. The basis is firmly in the hands of the main tune, dominating the song and surrounded by two or three more auxiliary voices. This is the only truly surviving case of polyphony / counterpoint in Greek tradition, but also one of the most interesting musical forms not only in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans, but possibly the world over, thanks to its intricacy and long history.

Every singing group must consist of at least 4 members. One of them is the singer of the solo voice called *partis* or *sikotis* (= *catcher* or *holder*). No matter how big the group of singers, there is but one *partis*. The second singer, usually a man, is called *yiristis* or *tzakistis* (= *twister* or *snapper*), because he twists or snaps the tune. The other two voices are called *isocrátes*, meaning *level-holders*, because they hold the *ison*, literally level, a *drone* in music. The constitution of this group can be altered only as regards the *yiristis*, who can be replaced by another singer, the *clóstis* (= *weaver*). If the singing is done by one or the other, the song shall go *yiristà* or *clostà* (“twisted” or “weaved”).

In the old days, all main singers used to be men, while *isocrátes* were usually all women (drone from above or in the middle) or mixed with men (drones also below, an octave lower). A possible exception was the pair of *partis* and one other main voice, which could be mixed. In later times, as social organization altered, application of this principle became looser. In our days, one can find different combinations. One departure from the norm is all-men or all-women singing; but the antiquest and most authentic composition is one of mixed groups, as it reflects prehistoric tribal social organization, function and hierarchy. Furthermore, the *partis* (catcher) nowadays is quite commonly a woman, while the part of the *yiristis* (twister) is normally not given to one, unless there be no proper-voiced man available. All-men *isocrátes* are also common. This is a Byzantine-derived factor whose disruptive force on “goodness” of sound has been underestimated or even overlooked.

When the group numbers more than 4 people, *isocrátes* are increased, the rest of the parts still sung by one person. It is highly irregular that a *yiristis* and a *clóstis* participate in the same song; usually one excludes the other. This principle is kept in all-men and all-women singing. Positioning of singers relies on the *partis* and adheres to basic acoustic and auditory principle. It is best for the *partis* to stand at the left, followed by the *yiristis* and *isocrátes* towards the right. There is an instance where an *isocrátes* stands directly on the *partis*'s (catcher's) right, followed by the *yiristis* (twister). This particular *isocrátes*, separating catcher and twister, has a particular function and is called *ríchtis* (= *lander*). The *clóstis* (weaver) usually stands in the third or fourth place to the (catcher's) right.

I know this is starting to sound like a baseball game. I assure you, singing this polyphony is tougher than playing baseball. Participants in the group must have good strong resonant voices and, more important still, they must have breathed these songs since early childhood. It is reckoned impossible for singers from other areas, no matter how accomplished or technically

equipped, to dare sing them. An analytical presentation of the function of each of these voices follows.

- **Partis (catcher).** He must have an excellent voice and know the song well. He always “catches” the song first, so sets the tonality for everybody. He does a musical phrase covering one full stanza of the lyrics or half of it, which is more regular, or just the four first syllables. He then “cuts”, while the *richtis* comes in to give him a chance to recover full strength, and then all voices (*partis*, *yiristis* or *clóstis* and *isocrátes*) repeat. The actual tempo giusto begins when they all join in. In his initial entrance, the *partis*’s singing sounds more like a recitativo. There is never a case of all singers coming in at the same time *a tempo* from the outset. The *partis*’s range doesn’t exceed a perfect fifth, consisting of a trihemitone and two tones. Only rarely does he utter the note below the tonic.
- **Yiristis (twister).** His rôle demands vocal talent and agility for the ornamenting called for by “twisting”. Normally, his part is very limited in range, confined to two notes, tonic and subtonic, forming an interval of a pentatonic “second” (tone or trihemitone according to the mode). But oftentimes he descends another tone below that, thus completing a perfect fourth. His most idiomatic feature is that he never ends a phrase on the tonic; instead, he lands on the subtonic with an intensely abrupt snapping, namely a sudden halt. Thus there is a peculiar intervallic juxtaposition to the *partis*, which sounds indeed empty and stong and a bit jazzy. Sometimes he lands on the dominant, as suggested by the accentual pattern of the text.
- **Clóstis (weaver).** The most outstanding part in the vocal group is that of the *clóstis*, who must be a vocal “virtuoso”. He does a highly unusual acrobatic part of jumps and glissandi, which seems as though it weaved into and through the other voices; unless it be carried out to perfection, it can utterly tear the polyphony to shambles. His social significance is that of holding the social fabric of a community together, and that may be a long-lost reason for the fact that his sound is vaguely reminiscent of a shepherd’s or herdsman’s call. It’s a man most of the times, though some believe that the part is better suited to a high-voiced woman. His melodic movement is directed to three notes mainly: the first, fourth and fifth notes of the pentatone or, in terms of pitches, the tonic, the dominant and the sixth or seventh (diatonically speaking); the last one is reached via a special tricky embellishment, something like a *glissando appoggiatura* which, more often than not, leaves a distinct flavour of something else that may even be alien, like a supermajor sixth or subminor seventh. The *yiristis* or the *clóstis* controls the *cadenza*, so to speak. The *yiristis* snaps the song at the subtonic and the *clóstis* at the note one octave higher. The *clóstis*’s ornaments are also very peculiar in technique. The *clóstis* puts his natural voice aside and posts a certain head voice, something like a falsetto vaguely reminiscent of Tirol yodelers and singers of the Argentinian pampa. He speaks no words; only syllabic vowels between an *oh* and an *ah*. The techniques of *clóstis* and *yiristis* clearly reflect techniques of polyphony and pseudo-polyphony played on bagpipes and, later, on violins and clarinets. The *clóstis* in particular does sing a part which is not essentially different from a broken chord, which firmly establishes a harmonic context in the modern sense of the word. It alternates all the notes of a “chord” that would certainly sound harsh if they were held, given the resonant timbres of voices. If, in time, we manage to establish a linguistic and anthropological bond among Pelasgians, Illyrians and western / Goidelic Celts (Irish, Manx and Scottish), a lot of the broken

chord technique prominent in western Europe will be able to be traced here. There are other data of extreme linguistic significance, and we'll see them shortly.

- **Isocrátes.** Though their task is auxiliary, it is essential to every group of singers. They always sing the tonal centre, following upon the partis's rhythm. But, where main voices snap, they carry on, like a tragic chorus that will not allow the social process to be interrupted. They do not pronounce or enunciate clearly though, thus giving an unclear light or "remote" character to their syllables and words. The same thing is observed in isocrátes of Byzantine hymns, and may have happened in early Gregorian Chant. They are usually five. Men tend to stick to the tonic, but women, in the upper octave, will also sing passing neighbouring notes.
- **Ríchtis (lander).** At a certain point in the song (the end of the partis's first recitativo phrase), one of the isocrátes executes the dominant note a perfect fourth below the tonic, sometimes embellishing it. The sudden sounding of this note makes the phrase "land on its feet". This intervention allows the partis to take a deep breath. This "landing" can sometimes be heard from the clóstis on the upper dominant, or by the partis himself a tone or trihemitone above the tonic. In intermediate cadenzas of the partis on the tonic, the ríchtis may freely introduce a similar embellishment to the drone, returning to the tonic in a slow majestic glissando.

Polyphonic songs used to be sung unaccompanied. Instruments (clarinet, violin, lute, tambourine) have come in strong in the last 30 years. Similar vocal techniques and styles are to be found in neighbouring southern Albania (Lyab and Toshk poyphony), while a monophonic rendition of this type of songs prevails in middle and northern Albania (among Ghegh, Malesorë, Mirditë). A simpler polyphony returns in former Yugoslavia, without a clóstis. Isolated elements can be spotted in the singing of southern Italy, at 15th century settlements of Albanians and Arvanites who came from Albania and Peloponnesus respectively. Dutch musicologist Jaap Kunst compares and associates Epirote polyphony to that of Indonesia.

The most prominent modal feature is the no-semitone pentatone, as we have gone over in some length. Modes of this kind are also found in Scotland, in Berber northern Africa, in India, in the entire eastern Asia (Siberia, China, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, Indochina, Indonesia etc.) and in pre-Columbian America. The most widespread forms in Greece tend to have both a perfect fourth *and* fifth: the "minor" one, D – F – G – A+ – C' (– D'), number 4, in the district of Deropolis around Argyrocastro (Gjinokastër) and provinces of Paramythia and Pogoni, and a more "major" one, C – D – F – G – A+ (– C'), number 2, in the areas of Korytsa (Korçë), Konitsa and Pentalophos Kozani.

The lyrics of the songs are in harmony with the natural, anthropological and historical background: episodes from medieval epic Acritic Cycle, stories, historical narrations, songs of love, of wedding, of emigrants, of the carnival a.s.o.

I have saved one major point for last. The extreme antiquity of all these elements, that make Epirote music into a living fossil, are also verified by the exceptional linguistic load they carry. Ancient Greek was a language semantically spoken in a musical way, a fact that will remind many of Chinese: the three accents (acute, grave, circumflex) were marks of pitches, and the lengths of syllables were a definite rhythmical element, their successions standardized in classical poetry as patterns called *feet*, and promoted to the supreme technical feature of making

verse. The only European languages presently keeping something like this alive are the Baltic ones: Lithuanian and Latvian.

The music and dance of Epirus, being archaic as it is, has preserved all the sound and rhythm of classical Greek most faithfully, where it was lost everywhere else. You see, all Greek traditional dance has its steps attuned to the syllables of classical verse even as we speak. But Epirus is a noteworthy exception: only there do *syllables correspond to syllables* and *feet to steps* of the dance.

Epirote music is the foremost and scientifically dependable source we, modern Greeks, have in order to gain access to the sound and style of the language of our ancestors, a source which was unavailable to Erasmus and remains undiscovered by Western classicists. Epirote melody bears the distinct markings of ancient Greek accent, even in the way it “misplaces dynamic accent”, as some old-fashion grammar teachers protest. Even more than that, the extensive glissando you hear in these polyphonic songs, apart from endowing this almost square-cut modal language with an amazing fluidity, also carries the ageless bending of the voice effected by the ancient *perispomene* (circumflex). As for rhythmic and dance pattern, we get a substantial amount of ancient epic *dactylic hexameter*, the meter of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (6 measures of 4/4), a profusion of the ancient *sung* genus of *iambic tetrameter* and its variant, *choriambic tetrameter* (4 times 6/8), a considerable amount of different kinds of quintuple *pæon*, whether *epibatos* (5/4) or some other faster form (5/8, whether 3+2 or 2+3), some rare assorted *trimeters* and *pentameters*, all the way to meters that are intricately composite, such as *anacreontean* (4+3+5).

[Several polyphonic examples will be heard, mainly from Epirus but also from other areas of Greece, going into more examples from the Balkans and other parts of the world, notably Sardinia and Georgia, Caucasus. Our own attempts towards modern renditions of traditional pentatonic material will also be illustrated. In each case, a brief musicological comment will be in order.]

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Figures and tables

No-semitone pentatones: steps and notes from C

1. T, T, χ T, χ	C, D, E+, G, A+
2. T, χ T, T, χ	C, D, F, G, A+
3. T, χ T, χ T	C, D, F, G, Bb-
4. χ T, T, χ T	C, Eb-, F, G, Bb-
5. χ T, χ T, T	C, Eb-, F, Ab-, Bb-

Chords mentioned in the paper

A. Euphonic triad

- fifth / fifth e.g. C / G / D' (: the *bi-quintal* triad)

B. Fairly consonant triads

- fourth / tone e.g. C / F / G
- tone / fourth e.g. C / D / G
- fourth / fourth e.g. C / F / Bb- (: the *bi-quartal* triad)

C. Mildly dissonant triads

- tone / fifth e.g. C / D / A+
- fifth / tone e.g. C / G / A+ (: "empty chord of the sixth")
- fifth / trihemitone e.g. C / G / Bb- (: "empty chord of the seventh")

D. Best tetrad

- tone / fourth / tone e.g. C / D / G / A+, greatly improved thus:
- fifth / fifth / fifth e.g. C / G / D' / A+' (: the *tri-quintal* tetrad).

Overblown notes on "Pelasgian" flute

C'	D'	E↑'	G'						
			G'	A+'	B↑'		D''		
						C''	D''	E↑''	G''

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