

Summary

Athos. The Sounds of the Holy Mount

This monograph presents an analysis of the acoustic dimension of the religious and cultural heritage created by orthodox monastic communities which have existed on Athos, a Holy Mount in Greece, for a thousand years. Our research presents the scope and ways of utilizing the sense of hearing and the use of sounds as both receptors and creators of material and spiritual reality. The use of the sense of hearing and sounds is manifested in liturgical hymns, in the arts, mysticism, prayers and in the way of everyday living of the monks. The book also deals with the specific architecture subordinated to voice acoustics. Two factors demonstrate the scale of the commitment of the sense of hearing in the creation and interpretation of the Athos reality. They are: 1. sounds generated by natural objects such as human voices and animal sounds and 2. the sounds produced by manmade objects. The acoustic landscape of Mount Athos, an expression of the emotive perception of the reality acquiring a profound human dimension, is created as a result of the integration of the world of sounds. This process becomes a part of the metaphysical perspective of experiencing God in acoustic hierophania.

The proposed methodology relates both to the emotive turn as well as, to a certain extent, to Actor-Network Theory (ANT) even though it is determined by the orthodox theological perspective. Three questions seem particularly important here. First of all, in what way spiritual and material dimensions of reality are incorporated in the harmony of sacral silence and the polyphony of the sounds of the mundane world? Secondly, how do the versatile and changing natural sounds combined with the sounds of culture created the acoustic landscape of the Holy Mount? And thirdly, in what way the sounds of the sound-producing objects as well as human voices present on Mount Athos are rooted there and thus integrate the mundane and the heavenly realities?

The first question refers directly to orthodox theology since silence constitutes the foundation of the hesychasm of Mount Athos, a mystic trend in orthodoxy which looks for man's deification (in Greek *theosis*) in the isolation from the world's commotion guaranteeing internal peace and concentration. In such silence, neither sacrum emanating sounds of nature nor sacrum emanating manmade ones create a noisy and disturbing disharmony. On the contrary, they present themselves as a tonal dominant of audio sphere. This aspect is closely related to the second element concerning the nature of these sounds, or in other words, with the perception of these sounds and whether we hear them through our senses or we evoke those sounds spiritually in our conscience.

Depending on our sound perception, the acoustic landscape of Mount Athos is realized either acoustically or noetically, i.e., when we experience acoustic hierophania. The third element refers to manmade sources of sounds on Mount Athos. It may seem to be restricted exclusively to the material aspect of audio sphere yet thanks to the concept of the acoustic icon it gains its spiritual dimension. In orthodoxy, icons, including acoustic ones, transform the sensory experience of sacrum by moving perception from the material reality into the human heart where the metaphysical transcendence takes place.

Chapter One entitled *The World of Divine Sounds* deals with the reception and contemplation of sounds in the context of the orthodox specific spirituality and the cognitivist perception of sounds. In order to understand the acoustic sacrum of the Holy Mount, one needs to relate to the concept of the music of celestial spheres which determines the sacral dimension of singing orthodox church hymns, as well as the understanding of the harmony of the world in which all human reality is immersed. In the tradition of Mount Athos, the teaching of Saint Athanasius of Alexandria and that of saint Gregory of Nyssa has played a very important role. To the same extent, it would be wrong to abstract from limited but confirmed in the East reception of the Boethius' theory of music. Boethius distinguished three types of music: *musica mundana* (heard in space), *musica humana* (harmony of body and soul) and *musica instrumentalis* (vocal and instrumental music).

Boethius' theory makes it possible to detect the multisensory dimension in the audio sphere of the Holy Mount which is manifested not only through the sense of hearing but also by other senses, namely by the senses of sight, smell and touch. At the same time this concept relates to the permeation or perlocation of human and divine elements in the material and spiritual world. The cosmic dimension of man's commitment to all aspects of existence is demonstrated here. This constatation becomes obvious when we realize that sounds may be perceived by the sense of sight in the form of scenes presented on frescos and in illustrated codes presenting acoustic hierophanes, as for instance the images of Apocalypse in the Dionysiou Monastery.

These images reflect the meaning of the perception of sounds as a multisensorial experience leading to the harmony of the supernatural and material being. This harmony reconstructs the unity of nature and culture disturbed by the commotion of the mundane world and makes it possible for man to hear the sound of God resounding in space. It is in this sense that the acoustic dimension of sacrum of Athos exceeds all sensory experience and becomes a mystic experience integrating all dimensions of reality. This experience is of therapeutic significance to the contemporary man. It assigns a new sense to our acoustic perception of the surrounding world and of ourselves as well as to what is supernatural and elusive through sensory perception.

Chapter Two called *The Mystagogy of Silence* deals with not so much the absence of sounds but rather with the space of silence, peace and undisturbed harmony of man and nature required for the sounds to resound in it. On the Holy Mount silence is audible not sensorily but metaphysically. It constitutes a warp or a matrix of sounds which acquire a profoundly spiritual dimension. The image of Christ as an Angel of Great Advice on the fresco in the Karakalou Monastery is an exemplary manifestation of such experience.

The image relates to the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the Suffering Servant (Is 53,7) where the value of silence and humility have been stressed.

The Holy Mount is a space where exactly this kind of silence may be experienced and where Athos is turned into a desert on which “the Lord is in his holy temple” (Ha 2,20). This charism has attracted anchorites since the 8th century who expelled from their hermitages in Egypt, Syria and Cappadocia as a result of Islamic conquests went there. The isolated and hard-to-reach Athos Peninsula provided them shelter from mundane problems and offered space conducive to prayer and contemplation.

With time thanks to natural conditions and ascetics’ deep spirituality, hesychasm perceived as a way filled with silence leading to God developed on the Holy Mount. The silence of their lives was filled with continued Jesus’ Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me, a sinner!” Saying this prayer and moving fingers along the string of prayer beads, Athos monks considered them icons allowing them to come close to God and participate in the hierophane of the supernatural light. Caverns and cells in which first hermits lived and later cells in large and small orthodox monasteries were filled with silence and metaphysical peace and they performed a similar function in hermits’ souls contemplating and finding God on the Holy Mount. These places of isolation offered conditions for concentration indispensable for the experience of meeting God in the hierophane of supernatural light. *Stasidia (hinged seats), as indispensable pieces of equipment in Athos churches, also provide monks with the isolation from the mundane reality. Thanks to their construction, they make it possible for monks to immerse in silent individual prayer during which monks’ fingers are free to move down the prayer beads. Stasidia silence is in a sense the silence of the monk’s cell and to a certain degree they are equally isolated similarly to monastic morgues. The doors of monastic morgues always remain open in order for monks and pilgrims to hear individually not so much the silence of death but rather the silence of eternal life prepared for them in heaven.*

The architecture of the church matching the specific hesychastic spirituality plays an important role in the manifestation of Athos silence. It is related to the liturgical context and in particular to the nature of orthodox singing. Complete silence which is present in particular moments of the Athos liturgy is a time to contemplate the word of God. At the same time, silence may be treated as the echo of the sounds of hymns sung in the church. These sounds are reflected from the dome vault and return to the interior of the church after the singing has ceased. The echo of the reflected sounds has a metaphysical dimension since it comes down from the dome vault as if it were a voice coming down from heaven and also because it is experienced as the voice of angels depicted on the frescos attending the church service celebrated in heaven.

The voices of nature present in a plurality of Athos sounds are analyzed in Chapter Three of the book entitled *The Polyphony of Nature*. The description of those sounds is presented from the perspectives of four elements, i.e., fire, air, water and earth, which – according to ancient philosophers – made the universe of the mundane world. This concept was adopted by the Fathers of the Church, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa. They interpreted the concept more broadly than just as material conditioning constrained by God to our temporary existence and saw in it the theological and eschatological

depth revealed by God when he became man with all human earthly limitations. God did it through the deification of fire, air, water and earth resulting in the acquisition of the transcendental dimension extended to all people who partake in sacraments.

One of these elements, i.e., fire, appearing in the highest sphere surrounding the Earth resounds on Mount Athos in a variety of ways. Its nature is similar to a glow of supernatural light. Symbolizing a prayer of all nature and filling Athos with its glow, it produces mystical sounds heard not so much with one's ears but with one's heart. The sounds of fire may be perceived as the sounds or voices of 26 Zograph Martyrs, monks who were burnt alive for their defense of the orthodox faith by Latinists. It should also be considered that the sounds of fire on Mount Athos bring to our attention an ominous meaning since fires burn vast areas covered with forests and turn monasteries and sketes to ashes. One of the most tragic fires took place in 2012 in the Chilandar Monastery where more than a half of the structure was destroyed.

The air on the Holy Mount plays the music of the wind and birds and in a metaphorical sense it makes its presence on the icons depicting the Pentecost (the outpouring of the Holy Spirit). One of the icons attracted our attention since it had been created by famous Theophanes the Cretan. The icon presents the emanation of the Holy Spirit with a lot of commotion as if the Holy Spirit had come with a strike of a strong gale (Acts 2,1–2). Air on the Holy Mount makes its presence and manifests life since it allows the living beings residing on Athos to breathe and makes it possible for birds to fly in the skies. The 204 species of singing and chirping birds fill the air and hark back to their descriptions in the Holy Scriptures as well as in Fathers of the Church as for instance in the Hexaemeron by Basil the Great. The relations between birds and Athos monks speak a lot about Athos spirituality as for example described in Saint Paisius' parable. Eventually, air makes its presence on Mount Athos as an element since periodically blowing winds contribute to the creation of a specific audio sphere on the Holy Mount to a similar degree as other sources of sounds.

On the other hand, water on Athos symbolizes not so much sounds but silence expressed by silent fish which for Athos monks are an image of humility and silence before God. The sea waters are also present in the Athos hierophanes related to the appearance or the discovery of icons. The act of Athos monks fishing out of the *Streides* icon (Saint Michael with an oyster) from the waves is a good example. That is why the acoustic dimension of water as an element is celebrated in the ceremony of blessing water accompanied by rich acoustic elements including not only prayers and singing but also by striking the metal Athos *phiale*.

In terms of location, the Earth is the lowest element of all cosmic spheres. Its screaming is heard in the voices and sounds of the living wild and domesticated animals. Today, the grunting of boars may be heard in vineyards where monks cultivate grapevines and even though boars cause damage, they are not only tolerated by monks but also fed by them since they have been created by God. Athos monks demonstrate a similar attitude to domesticated animals such as, for instance, mules whose braying may be heard on Athos paths. In the monasteries one may hear the meowing of numerous cats kept by monks in order to exterminate mice and rodents posing danger to monastery pantries.

The Earth also produces sinister sounds during frequent earthquakes on Mount Athos. Its roar spreads along with the rumble of falling walls and the sounds of tsunami. One of the biggest earthquakes which destroyed many monasteries in the area in 1585 was depicted on the afore mentioned frescos of the apocalypse of the Monastery of Dionysiou. The acoustic aspect of this tragedy has been very expressively presented by the painter which makes it possible for the viewer to imagine the acoustically most awesome moments of the event.

Chapter Four entitled *Listening to Objects* is devoted to artificial sounds generated by manmade objects. The key to understanding them is referring their nature to the materials from which the sound-producing objects were made. Among these objects are holy icons painted on wood which spoke there to people, for instance Panagija Antiphonitrija from the Vatopedi monastery. However, the most important sound-producing materials used in objects on Mount Athos include stone, bronze and iron each of which has a different characteristic and, what comes with it, a different meaning manifested in sacral applications and listening.

Wood is most frequently used as a material. It was sanctified by Christ's crucifixion and thanks to that it acquires a metaphysical dimension. At the same time, it immerses its sound in living nature which is closest to man. That is precisely why semantrons and talantons are made from wood. These wooden instruments are used by monks to announce and invite monks and pilgrims to church services and to meals consumed collectively in the refectory. The sounds produced by semantrons and talantons have a symbolic meaning related to Patriarch Noe who is believed to have called on people and animals to come to the arch in a similar way. Therefore, the talanton sounds three times. The first sound summons snakes and other crawling reptiles, the second goes to quadrupeds and the third summons people.

Stone, not a living material, is less noble and is used on Mount Athos mainly as a construction material in church building. Acoustically speaking, stone is an important material providing a clear echo of the liturgical hymns sung in the church as well as a mystical dimension. Hymns sung in the church are naturally provided with a "stone accompaniment" conducive to spiritual contemplation of the Holy Scriptures and hymns. Athos paths are paved with stone which account for the rhythm of steps of walking people. The rhythm of the stepping on stone-paved paths becomes a prayer of legs in a way. Stone is a durable and almost indestructible material; hence it stores the memory of ancient sounds unheard today on the Holy Mount. The quern used for the purpose of pressing olives in the old times is a good example here. Not so long ago the sounds made by querns before olives were pressed could still be heard on Athos but not any longer.

Bells cast in bronze still toll in the audio sphere of the Holy Mount. The sound of the Athos bells may be heard on Sunday and on feast days. The sound of the tolling bells seems to be coming from heaven since the bells are mounted on very high belfries. Athos bells are made from bronze, i.e., an alloy of copper and tin. They not only ensure a beautiful sound but have a symbolic meaning as well. In Ancient Israel, the sounds of gold and copper bells signalized the presence of *sacrum*, both in time and space. The first

church bells appeared in the West as early as the sixth century, however in the Middle Ages they were not very popular on the Holy Mount at that time. The situation changed after the Latins conquered Constantinople in the year 1204 and when Greeks became more familiar with those monumental instruments. Church bells became very popular on Athos as late as the second half of the nineteenth century. When the Ottoman Empire lifted the ban the use of church bells, their import from Russia started. The largest of all Athos church bells comes from 1884 and is now in the Saint Panteleimon's Monastery, whereas the most beautifully sounding church bells were placed in the Russian belfry of Saint Andrew's skete in 1888.

Iron is considered the most controversial material from which sound-producing objects are made and used on the Holy Mount. It has always been perceived as unclean and contaminated since it would have been mined from the interior of the Earth, hence close to the depth of hell. Agiosiderons (Holy Iron) are made from iron and are used on Mount Athos within the Monastery for communication purposes. They call for prayers in the church which relates to silver trumpets in the Old Testament used to call for God's support and help. Introducing to human existence fear and anxiety, the Holy Iron reminds us also about hell and condemnation.

On the other hand, sounds produced by iron objects are associated with commotion on the Holy Mount generated by various mechanical devices and cars. Many Athos monks are of the opinion that those devices destroy the hesychastic silence and introduce spiritual and moral chaos. Since iron presents its negative dimension, it juxtaposes *sacrum*. Recently, noise made by iron objects has also been perceived as threat for the ecosphere of Athos because it scares and disturbs animals, jams and deafens the singing of birds as well as it destroys the silence of the sea to ferry boats.

In the acoustic landscape of the Holy Mount, the most profound *sacrum* of sounds is manifested in orthodox music described in Chapter Five entitled *Singing along with angels*. Actually, Athos singing is the quintessence of all Athos sounds which transcend and become the voice of entire nature. Orthodox music is a perfect fulfillment of the unity of *musica mediana*, *musica humana* and *musica instrumentalis* and combines human and terrestrial elements with what is angelic and heavenly. It seems to be a space in which God meets man in a most natural way. The divine liturgy celebrated in the church finds its equivalent in the liturgy celebrated in heaven and human voices are combined with angelic singing thus creating one chorus jointly praising God.

The strictly vocal character of Athos music results from the fact that human voice is the most perfect instrument in orthodox music. This is why on the Holy Mount the technique of singing has been perfected for ages and not in order to impress the audience with its virtuosity but to in order for it to praise God and to express his dignity. It is for this reason that monks criticize all unnatural ways of using the voice consisting in singing with ajar glottis where vocal cords vibrate only on their edges producing a characteristic nasal timbre. Here, seeking the most perfect sound has mainly the spiritual dimension and has been cultivated by excellent cantors such as father Papa-Vasilis from the monastery of Vatopedi.

The essence of Athos singing is in fact the imitation of the angelic choruses in human hymnody. Traditionally, it is not man that creates music but music is transferred metaphysically to a few chosen people, i.e., to hymnographers who make it acoustically available to people. Throughout the ages there have been many excellent hymnographers of whom Saint John Koukouzelis distinguished himself by creating complex melodies to the Hymn of the Cherubim, a permanent part of the divine liturgy. The music he has created allowed to feel the close presence of God in the church filled with vocal music both sensually and spiritually.

On the Holy Mount monodic singing is simply a theophanic experience of sounds. It is not meant to be listened to but it rather constitutes an experience of meeting God himself in human voice. What is significant is its direct oral transfer to the following generations creating an oral tradition. It was therefore included on United Nations Intangible Heritage List in 2019. The said tradition developed a specific space infrastructure conducive to antiphonal singing performed by two choirs. At the same time the tradition of oral transfer refers to a rich music literature. Local monasteries have libraries in which one third (approximately three thousand) all Byzantine and post-Byzantine music manuscripts may be found.

Today the tradition of Athos singing is developed in those local monasteries which lead to the establishment of schools of singing in the monasteries of Dionysiou, Vatopedi and Dochiariu. Particularly interesting is the approach used by the monks of Vatopedi, who try to follow the most ancient Bizantine techniques of singing which often times conflicts with the currently adopted rules. Many performances, also by choirs from other monasteries have been recorded on CD's thus making ancient Bizantine ways of inspired human singing available to wider audiences. What transpires in this kind of singing is profound prayers for the chaotic world; a prayer filled with joyful hope in which the lost man finds his or her space in the cosmic order of being.

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