
CORE ISSUE – STEVAN ST. MOKRANJAC AND MUSIC ‘AROUND’ FIRST WORLD WAR

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*Ivan Moody**

University of Eastern Finland
Department of Orthodox Theology

MOKRANJAC, CULTURE, AND ICONS

Abstract: The 100th anniversary of Mokranjac’s death provides an opportunity to consider his work from the perspective of a “cultural icon”, insofar as his music and the composer himself have gained such an iconic status in the context of Serbian music. His output in ethnography and composition alike has not only itself become an “icon”, but also paved the way for younger composers.

Key words: Mokranjac, icon, Serbian chant, Octoechos, Marić

The 100th anniversary of the death of Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac (1856–1914) will doubtless provide many opportunities for celebratory evaluations of his importance in Serbian musical culture. Today, an outsider to the Serbian context may find striking not only the reverence that the composer still commands in Serbia (his status may be called “iconic”: he is described as both “the Serbian Beethoven” and “Serbian Palestrina”), but also his own reverence for his country’s musical past. He seems like a colossus, straddling and surveying from his Olympic heights the lengthy process of the modernization of Serbian music.

Emblematic of Mokranjac’s reverential attitude to the past in musical terms was the monumental concert he proposed for the 15th anniversary of the founding of the Belgrade Choral Society (*Београдско певачко друштво* / *Beogradsko pevačko društvo*) on 25 May 1903, itself an “icon” in Serbian

* Author contact information: ivanmoody@gmail.com

cultural history, a pioneering attempt at a renewal of Serbian musical culture. The concert was planned as a “history of Serbian song”, beginning with an epic song – *Смрт мајке Југовића / Smrt majke Jugovića* (The Death of the Jugović Mother), with *gusle* accompaniment – and then proceeding chronologically, to arrangements of 16th-century songs and folk songs, examples of choral songs that Mokranjac labelled as composed under “foreign” influence (by Nikola Đurković [1812–1875] and Atanasije Nikolić [1803–1882]), to nationalist works by Kornelije Stanković (1831–1865), Aksentije Maksimović (1844–1873), and Mita Topalović (1849–1912), works by foreign composers on Serbian themes, music by younger composers, and finally Mokranjac’s own *Peta Rukovet* (Garland No. 5) from 1892. The importance of the 15 *Rukoveti* is too familiar, even outside Serbia, to require further comment here, but I believe that examining a little further the historical and cultural context of Mokranjac’s work in church music is a worthwhile undertaking in this centenary year, precisely in light of current controversies about what precisely church music is or should be and the doubly iconic status of Mokranjac’s contributions to both sacred and folk Serbian music.¹

One may broadly divide the liturgical works of Mokranjac into three categories: artistic arrangements of Serbian chant, simple arrangements for regular liturgical use, and original compositions, such as the remarkable *Opelo* of 1888.² However, the liturgical music of his successors is much more difficult to classify. In truth, Mokranjac was able to effect his quiet revolution because he was simultaneously interested in the idea of Serbian liturgical tradition³ and the wider (though hardly modernist) musical environment to which he was exposed by his studies with Rheinberger in Munich, Parisotti in Rome, and Reinecke in Leipzig. Of course, he was neither the first nor the last Serbian composer to study abroad, but his processing of what he had learnt in his studies and its application

¹ Mokranjac’s contribution as a melographer and ethnographer is covered in detail in Dragoslav Dević, “Стеван Стојановић Мокрањац – мелограф и етномузиколог” (“Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac – a Melographer and Ethnomusicologist”), *New Sound*, 2006, 28, 17–38, available at [http://scindeks-clanci.ceon.rs/data/pdf/0354-818X/2006/0354-818X0628017D.pdf#search="mokranjac"](http://scindeks-clanci.ceon.rs/data/pdf/0354-818X/2006/0354-818X0628017D.pdf#search=), and in Ivana Perković, *Muzika srpskog Osmoglasnika (The Music of the Serbian Octoechos)*, Belgrade, Fakultet muzičke umetnosti, 2004.

² These categories are itemized in Bogdan Djaković, “Serbian Orthodox Choral Music in the First Half of the 20th Century”, in: Ivan Moody and Maria Takala-Roszczenko (eds.), *The Traditions of Orthodox Music: Proceedings of the First International Conference on Orthodox Church Music*, Joensuu, University of Joensuu/ISOCM, 2007, 174.

³ As his enormously influential *Osmoglasnik* proves in particular (Стеван Ст. Мокрањац (Stevan St. Mokranjac), *Осмогласник*, Belgrade, Српска православна црква, 1997 [fourth edition]); this publication is discussed further below.

to Serbian Orthodox chant, or *pojanje*, as an aspect of Serbian cultural heritage, was unique. As Bogdan Đaković put it, Mokranjac retained “the original spirit of the chant while placing it, aesthetically speaking, within new musical surroundings”.⁴

I have written elsewhere about the unique fusion of Western harmonic thinking and the characteristic modal *melos* of Serbian chant in Mokranjac’s work,⁵ audible in his harmonizations of Serbian chant, for example, his collection of music for the Beatitudes, *troparia*, *kontakia*, and *prokeimena*: no other Serbian composer has achieved such a feat. While Stanković is a comparable figure as a transcriber, his liturgical settings stop well short of Mokranjac’s search for a coherent artistic language looking both inwards, to traditional Serbian culture, and outwards, to the modernist West.

Mokranjac was able to reconcile the specific melodic (that is to say modal) language of Serbian chant with the harmonic techniques he had learnt abroad, preserving the melodic idiosyncracies (from a Western point of view) of Serbian Orthodox chant and yet setting them within a harmonic frame that was, whilst certainly not exploratory, at least firmly derived from, and entrenched within, Western idioms.

As a transcriber and melographer, Mokranjac was obviously preserving a cultural and spiritual “icon” in the form of Serbian Orthodox chant, something that was not necessary for composers from other countries, who in other respects offer parallels, notably Dobri Hristov (1875–1941) and Petar Dinev (1889–1980) from Bulgaria and Ioan Chirescu (1889–1980) and Nicolae Lungu (1900–1993), amongst others, from Romania. Such a conscious act of recording and preservation was unnecessary because these musical cultures had retained the continuity of the Byzantine chant tradition; whether they chose to work with this polyphonically, as Dinev and Lungu did, or were more inclined toward a Russian-derived style, either way there was no need to recover a lost tradition.

The enormous lacuna in the written history of Serbian church music meant that the creation and flourishing of polyphonic church music required that a written tradition be re-established, though Mokranjac did not, of course, quite accurately transcribe what he heard, as he was the first to recognize.⁶ Such tech-

⁴ Đaković, *op. cit.*, 173.

⁵ See Ivan Moody, “Integration and Disintegration: Serbian Monophony in a Polyphonic Context”, *Muzikologija*, 2011, 11, 147–158 and “Interactions between Tradition and Modernism in Serbian Church Music of the 20th Century”, *Muzikološki Zbornik*, 2011, 47, 217–224.

⁶ See Mokranjac’s comments in Коста Манојловић (Kosta Manojlović), *Споменица Стевану Ст. Мокрањцу* (In Memory of Stevan St. Mokranjac), Belgrade, Државна штампарија, 1923; re-edition: Negotin, 1988; Војислав Илић (Vojislav Ilić), Foreword to

niques still lay in the future, part of the ethnomusicologist's toolbox. While one may lament the lack of technical sophistication in the structure of the Serbian *Octoechos*,⁷ it nevertheless constitutes both a record of a living tradition and a basis for the continuation of that tradition; transcribing melodies from oral tradition and including a substantial number of variants, Mokranjac provided something that was absolutely essential to the survival of Serbian church music. Mokranjac himself was quite explicit about his methods in his introduction to the *Octoechos*:

I have put this Octoechos ... together with the whole of our Serbian Church chant into notation in accordance with the way it was sung by that excellent singer and expert in our church chant, Mr Jovan Kostić. I took down a good part of the chant for Feasts from the singing of Archimandrite Arsenije Branković.

The author then acknowledges further singers who assisted him and observes that "these also have sung for me many hymns chosen at my request, for me to be able to compare various ways of singing them, and choose those that are the most frequently used and the best".⁸

While later composers such as Petar Konjović (1883–1970), Miloje Mi-lojević (1884–1946), and Stevan Hristić (1885–1958) certainly built upon the research and compositional activity of Mokranjac (and Stanković) in many ways, still interested in continuing the Serbian church tradition within a broadly modernist context, they pursued, as one might expect, different aesthetic directions. Mokranjac's achievement, that of a composer of "art music" who was also profoundly and creatively interested in the sacred and folk traditions of Serbia, itself became a monument, a cultural "icon", in the sense that an icon may have a very strong meaning outside strictly religious contexts; the popular "canonization" of composers and artists in general working in the liturgical sphere creates a secondary level of the concept of icon. Icons themselves may indeed become icons in another sense, as the double status (spiritual and national) of the 13th-century "White Angel" fresco from the Monastery of Mileševa shows. The fact that he was a pioneer in this contributed to the consolidation of his status: by the time later composers became interested in composing liturgical music, the

Стеван Стојановић Мокрањац: *Духовна Музика III*, Vol. 6, Belgrade, Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства, 1996, and Ivan Moody, *op. cit.*, 148–149.

⁷ See, for example, Vesna Peno's detailed discussion in "Great Chant in Serbian Tradition: On the Examples of the Melody *It is truly meel*", *Зборник Матице српске за сценске уметности и музику*, 2009, 40, 19–38.

⁸ Стеван Стојановић Мокрањац (Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac), *Духовна музика IV: Осмогласник* (Sacred Music IV: Octoechos), Belgrade, Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства, 1996, 3.

main corpus of Serbian Orthodox church chant had been collected, transcribed, and published, which means that it was a readily available resource, rather than requiring additional ethnographical research.

Mokranjac's *Osmoglasnik* itself became more literally an "icon" in the work of Ljubica Marić (1909–2003).⁹ In compositions such as her *Byzantine Concerto* (1959) or *Ostinato super thema octoicha* (1963), as their titles suggest, there is clearly conscious use of the Octoechos as a symbolic element, which may be construed as an aural analogue of an icon.¹⁰ The power of that icon is thus reaffirmed and retransmitted, and, as the title of the *Concerto* indicates, placed in direct lineage to Byzantine culture, but completely outside any liturgical frame of reference. As Jim Samson has observed: "The appeal of the *Octoechos* was less to do with religion than with collectivity, with the quest for deep communal structures that might be re-activated for our own times".¹¹

It is also true that Marić herself has become something of a cultural "icon", a brave emblem of Serbian engagement with the ideas of the avant-garde, retaining the iconicity of Serbian spiritual tradition in her use of the Octoechos. As Danica Petrović has noted: "This approach of Marić's brought about a completely new branch of contemporary Serbian music, and influenced a whole group of Serbian composers of the younger generation to go also to the roots of our preserved musical heritage".¹² It seems entirely appropriate that, as a composer of concert music standing apart from the Church, Marić thus re-enshrined the extraordinary achievements of her illustrious predecessor and reconfigured them for a different world.

⁹ Ivana Perković has discussed in detail Marić's use of the Octoechos in "Šta je to u srpskom crkvenom pojaњу inspirisalo Ljubiцу Mariћ?" (What Was It about Serbian Orthodox Chant that Inspired Ljubica Marić?), in: Dejan Despić and Melita Milin (eds.), *Spaces of Modernism: Ljubica Marić in Context*, Belgrade, SANU, 2010, 331–344.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of Marić's work, see Ivan Moody, "Re-inventing the Icon: Approaches to the Sacred in the Music of Sofia Gubaidulina, Ljubica Marić and Ivan Spassov", in: Валерија Каначки (Valerija Kanački) and Сања Пајић (Sanja Pajić), *Српски језик, књижевност, уметност: зборник радова са VI међународног научног скупа одржаног на Филолошко-уметничком факултету у Крагујевцу (28–29.X.2011)* (Serbian Language, Literature, Art: Conference Proceedings from the Sixth International Symposium held at the Faculty of Philology and Art in Kragujevac, 28–29 October 2011), Kragujevac, Filološko-umetnički fakultet, 2012, 51–59.

¹¹ Jim Samson, *Music in the Balkans*, Leiden, Brill, 2013, 478.

¹² Danica Petrović, "The Octoechos in Serbian Chant and in the Melographic Works of Stevan St. Mokranjac", in: Стеван Стојановић Мокрањац, *Духовна музика IV: Осмогласник, оп. cit.*, 1996, xv.