

# A Brief Discussion of Byzantine Secular Music

Tianhua Dong

Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

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## ABSTRACT

The origins of Byzantine secular music exhibit multiple characteristics. First, it was rooted in the musical theories and performance practices of ancient Greece and Rome. As history progressed, the ancient Greek region became the core area of the Byzantine Empire, with its musical culture serving as the primary source of Byzantine secular music. Simultaneously, the Byzantines' self-identification as "Romans" naturally led to the inheritance of Roman musical instruments and musical styles. Second, the formation of the Byzantine secular music system was profoundly influenced by Christian musical concepts. Although Christian theology clearly distinguished between church music and secular music, the imperial centralized governance and emperor-centered social structure determined that these cultural differences "were not opposing forces but complementary elements." Finally, during its development, Byzantine secular music absorbed musical cultures from neighboring regions, ultimately forming a rich and unique system. The diversity of Byzantine secular music reflects the multifaceted nature of Byzantine culture, encompassing both theoretical considerations and practical aspects. The former involves considerations of scales, modes, rhythms, melodies, and deeper reflections on the essence of music-- demonstrating the integration of ancient Greek cultural heritage with Christian orthodoxy within the empire. The latter includes synthesizing vocal and instrumental styles, as well as performances ranging from imperial rituals to folk secular activities. Despite the scarcity of Byzantine secular music records, we can still identify some distinctive features that differ from church music.

## KEYWORDS

Byzantine Secular Music; Performance Forms; Instruments; Vocal Music.

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## 1. PERFORMANCE FORMS OF POPULAR MUSIC

As a performing art, music "must go through the intermediary process of performance to authentically convey artistic works to audiences and realize their aesthetic value" [1] This fundamentally distinguishes it from non-performing arts in terms of expressive forms. Take painting as an example: once an artist completes a painting, it can be directly presented to viewers without any intermediary steps. However, the performative essence of musical art requires its expression through instrumental performances and vocal singing in various performance settings.

## 2. USE OF INSTRUMENTS

Instrumental music has always been an integral part of human culture, evolving alongside civilization. Historical records reveal: "In ancient times, people discovered various natural sounds. Wood fragments, buffalo horns, bamboo, animal bones, and leaves gradually became tools for communication and organization. Later, these materials evolved into vehicles for expressing emotions during leisure time" [2] These early performances marked the birth of primitive

instrumental music. By the Hellenistic period, two major categories of instruments-stringed and wind instruments-had taken shape, with performance techniques reaching remarkable sophistication.

During the Byzantine Empire, instrumental music faced condemnation and suppression from Christian authorities. Critics argued that these sensual yet weak vocal performances corrupted morality, while their association with pagan rituals was seen as a catalyst for public madness. The revelatory elements inherent in Eastern rituals were not only preserved but even intensified within the empire, compelling the Christian Church to intensify its resistance against musical temptation. Christian poet Κλημησο Αλεξανδρου (ο Αλεξανδρου) active between 150-215 AD asserted that flutes belonged either to pastoral life or pagan revelry, emphasizing that Christians could fully express emotions through hymns alone. By the 4th century, Γρηγοριος ο Ναζιανζηνος (329-390 AD) of Constantinople warned believers: "Let us replace drumbeats with hymns and vulgar physicality with poetic verses." Thus, instrumental music gradually became a unique presence in secular Byzantine culture.

In the 9th century AD, Persian geographer Ibn Khaldun (820-912) listed the lyre, organ, and bagpipes as representative instruments of the Byzantine Empire in his musical dictionary, reflecting the rich diversity of instruments in Byzantine secular music. Byzantine instruments are primarily categorized into three types based on their playing methods: stringed instruments, keyboard instruments, and wind instruments. The kithara, a typical stringed instrument, is characterized by its square wooden resonator and two curved arms connected by crossbeams. As early as the 5th century BC, this instrument could accommodate up to eleven strings. Performers typically sat while holding the instrument, using their right hand to pluck the strings with a leather plectrum while their left hand controlled accompanying notes.

The kithara, a traditional instrument, is widely regarded as requiring exceptional technical mastery. The Byzantine epic "Dikines Akritos" (Διγενης Ακριτας) documents Saint Basil's performance on this instrument, with the text specifically noting that "he received professional musical training in his youth," which underscores its specialized status. Primarily used for accompanying dance performances, epic recitations, hymns, and harp songs, the kithara also saw solo performances at banquets, celebrations, and athletic competitions.

During the Byzantine Empire, the kithara continued its tradition as an emotional accompaniment. According to Procopius (c. 500-565 AD) ο Καισαρευς, Pharas led Roman troops to climb Mount Paphos (Παπουα) in an attempt to attack the Vandals led by Garamas (Γελιμερ). However, due to the enemy's advantageous position and the difficulties of winter siege, Pharas decided to stand firm and wait for an opportunity to force the enemy to surrender. Garamas lived in hardship with the local Moors, struggling even to secure basic necessities. Upon learning of this, Pharas wrote a letter urging him to surrender, but Garamas replied: "Dear Pharas, I beg you to bring me a kithara, a loaf of bread, and a sponge-- I implore you." Pharas later realized the depth of this letter: Garamas yearned to see and taste bread again, as he had not seen baked bread since arriving at Mount Paphos. The sponge was equally crucial-- Due to long-term neglect of hygiene, one of his eyes had become inflamed and swollen. As a skilled kithara player (Κιθαριστη), he composed an elegy, hoping to express his sorrow through the music of the instrument [3].

The pneumatic organ stands as the quintessential keyboard instrument, tracing its origins to the hydraulic organ (hydraulis) that emerged in the 3rd century BCE. Unlike their cumbersome predecessors, these mechanical marvels achieved remarkable compactness and portability. The earliest documented evidence appears on a monument at the Colosseum of Constantinople-- erected during Emperor Theodosius I's reign (Θεοδοσιος Α', 379-395 CE). The marble pedestal features a relief depicting Theodosius crowning a chariot race champion, with a striking detail in the lower right corner showing this miniature organ (see Figures 1 and 2).



**Figure 1.** The base of the Dio Deo Western monument



**Figure 2.** Portable organ: Detail of the lower right corner of the relief on the base of the Diostra Western monument

The memoirs of Harun ibn Jahāh also contain references to pneumatic mechanisms. After his capture in 867 and his subsequent transfer to Constantinople, he described a Christmas banquet held for the captives before the Emperor:

The musicians then began performing on the "Urgana" organ-- This square wooden instrument features a thick leather exterior and contains sixty copper pipes, each slightly longer than the previous one. The exposed pipe walls are gilded with gold foil. On the opposite side of the wooden body, a bellows is installed in the cavity... Two performers commenced their ensemble... Each copper pipe produces a unique pitch based on its length, paying tribute to the emperor. Subsequently, twenty musicians holding cymbals took the stage, continuing their performance until the banquet concluded.

The golden organ he mentioned was a royal instrument exclusively used for ceremonies conducted or attended by the emperor. According to the 10th-century Ritual Book, pneumatic organs played a crucial role in imperial ceremonies where emperors received citizens and held ceremonial songs. Meanwhile, the empire's honor guards used silver organs, primarily to create harmonious musical ambiance during solemn moments of national significance.

The aulos (aulos) is a classical wind instrument resembling a modern oboe or Armenian duduk. Its cylindrical body is typically played solo using paired reeds. The performer holds the reeds in their mouth, generating a bellows effect through cheek muscles. A cheek strap (Φορβεία) secures the instrument and regulates airflow (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** An Aphrodite player wearing a cheek belt(Φορβεια)

It is speculated that one branch of the Orpheus flute was once used for "sustained sound production" [4]. Its penetrating tone could ignite passion and enthusiasm, and as early as the ancient Greek period, it was employed in military music performances [5]. In Greek mythology, the god of forests, Marsias (Μαρσίας), invented the Orpheus flute (see Figure 4), or retrieved it after Athena (Αθηνά) discarded it-- because playing this flute would cause Athena's cheek to swell and disfigure her. Despite this, Marsias challenged Apollo (Απολλωνας) to a musical duel (see Figure 5), boasting that the victor could indulge in his "lewd desires" at will. However, Apollo and the lyre ultimately defeated Marsias and his Orpheus flute. Apollo celebrated his victory by suspending the opponent on a tree and skinning him alive, after which the gods transformed him into a stream. This myth reflects the tension between the Greeks and the lyre and Orpheus flute, which often symbolize the opposition between restraint and excess, reason and passion. Plato also pointed out in *The Republic* that the Orpheus flute promotes excessive indulgence and harms health, advocating that such instruments should not exist in an ideal state, nor should their makers be supported [6]. Yet in Byzantine secular life, the Orpheus flute remained active in folk feasts, street processions, and theatrical performances [7].



**Figure 4.** Marussus on a painted pottery from Paestum (c. 4th century BC, Louvre Museum)



**Figure 5.** The musical battle between Marsus and Apollo

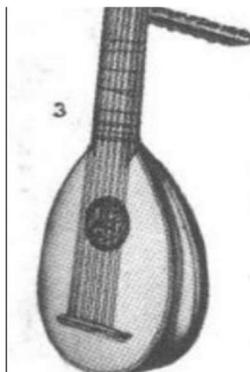
In addition to the three representative documents mentioned above, other documents were also widely used in Byzantine society.

The lyre traces its origins to ancient Greece around 1400 BC, serving as a simplified version of the kithara mentioned earlier. Constructed from turtle shells or wood, this instrument features angled wooden arms connected by a crossbeam. Its string count closely resembles that of the kithara, typically ranging from three to twelve. Resembling a miniature harp in appearance, it employs finger plucking or plectrum sweeping techniques during performance (see Figure 6). As one of the most iconic plucked string instruments in Western classical culture, the lyre was frequently used by Byzantine minstrels to create musical ambiance.



**Figure 6.** The three Muses playing the lute (right), kithara (center) and harp (left)

The lute, a cornerstone of Byzantine folk music, features a distinctive hemispherical body with a backward-curving neck (see Figure 7). As ceremonial instruments in both liturgical and military contexts, cymbals are documented in the Book of Rites as part of wedding performances (Figure 8). Beyond these three iconic instruments, Byzantine society during the reign of Queen Anna Κομνηνη (1083-1153 AD) utilized various other musical instruments.



**Figure 7.** Lute



**Figure 8.** Cymbals

### 3. VOCAL PERFORMANCE

In vocal performance, medieval manuscripts contain relatively few records of secular music performances, which may indicate that such music was primarily improvised and lacked strict fixed

notation. Documents documenting secular music often also include mixed narratives of religious music from the same period.

However, we can learn a thing or two from the records of that time.

The Akraman, a vital vocal ritual form in imperial ceremonies, conveyed loyalty, devotion, gratitude, and reverence to emperors, empresses, royal family members, high-ranking officials, and religious leaders. These ceremonial hymns were performed by two distinct choirs: the secular choir (Κρακται) for court audiences and the religious choir (Ψαλται) serving clergy. The secular choir, composed of court officials and commoners, was led by a "choir master" who served both as conductor and performer, typically representing the Blue and Green factions. During secular ceremonies, these choirs were accompanied by instrumental music. According to Codinus' records, the emperor's ceremonial band consisted solely of trumpeters, horn players, drummers, and flutists, with no use of bass instruments.

Akiyrik songs are narrative folk songs or epic poems that tell the stories of legendary heroes. These songs may be performed by professional folk singers or by amateur "singers" (Ποιηταραδες), who take time off work to perform regularly during festivals.

According to the Byzantine Chronicle, performing arts such as dance, musical theater, ballet, and pantomime were staged in theaters and public performance venues. Among these, the mask-wearing pantomime tradition originating from ancient Rome featured masked performers who narrated stories through choreographed movements accompanied by choral singing and instrumental accompaniment. During the Byzantine Empire, pantomime performances often included elaborate orchestral music and lavish choirs, becoming a distinctive component of secular music.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The flourishing of secular music during the Byzantine era significantly enriched the empire's musical and cultural landscape. The diverse instrumental genres and varied vocal performance styles provided citizens with a rich array of spiritual and recreational activities. When studying Byzantine music culture, we should not focus solely on Christian music as the state religion. The exploration of secular musical practices from this period also holds immense academic value.

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