

## Bangor Chaplaincy Thought for the Week

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

### Peter the Church Chanter



*Manuscript Θ178, f. 2v, 1815, Great Lavra Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece.*

Born in the Ottoman Empire around 1730, and dying during a plague in 1778, little is known about the early life of Peter who later became one of the most famous and influential amongst the extraordinary succession of Orthodox Church singers of Constantinople. He also consolidated and built cultural and religious bridges in his cosmopolitan

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society, and his example can inspire, illuminate and even amuse us during the challenges of the current pandemic.

He is thought to have been born in or near Kollines in the Morea 'Eyalet'<sup>1</sup>, in the Peloponnese, and to have been brought up in poverty.

When Peter was still young, an Orthodox Christian merchant from Smyrna (İzmir) noticed his musical potential, and enabled him to move to that ancient city – a cosmopolitan and vibrant Anatolian port. A city mentioned in the New Testament, Smyrna had a large population of Orthodox Christians. Often referred to as 'Greeks' (although not by themselves), the *Rumlar* (Romans/ Ρωμαῖοι) are Turkish-speaking Christians - descendants of the Orthodox population that had been in Anatolia and elsewhere in what is now Turkey since the earliest Christian centuries.

In Ottoman times, they formed part of the Rum Orthodox 'Millet' (faith community) headed by the Archbishop of Constantinople – the New Rome - the Ecumenical Patriarch, whose administrative headquarters remain to this day in the Fener district of İstanbul.

Peter is understood to have been taught for some years in the monastic communities of Smyrna. In his *'Historical survey of Byzantine Church Music'* (1904), Georgios Papadopoulos<sup>2</sup> quotes Hatzegiakoumes<sup>3</sup> as evidence that Petros' teacher in Smyrna was the famous cantor, Archdeacon Theodosios of Chios. But by 1764, Peter was in Constantinople, studying at the feet of John of Trebizond (Turkish: Trabzon), the Arch-cantor of the *'The Great Church'* – the Patriarchal Cathedral of St. George. After John's death, Peter was promoted and retained his elevated rank until his death.

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<sup>1</sup> Ottoman administrative region

<sup>2</sup> Georgios Papadopoulos worked as a legal employee for the Patriarchate in Constantinople.

<sup>3</sup> Hatzegiakoumes, Manoles K. "Πιέτρος Πελοποννήσιος' 1760-1777

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Familiar with living in a highly cosmopolitan city, Peter forged excellent relations in the capital with communities other than the Rum Orthodox Millet to which technically, he belonged, and his profound understanding of music and his amazing ability to record music in notation after just having listened once, meant that he easily crossed over religious and cultural divides, so greatly were his skills appreciated and respected.

He had, after all, lived in Smyrna, which was regarded as the capital of Ottoman music, and the Orthodox population of the city was familiar with Ottoman 'makam'<sup>4</sup> musical genres.

His engagement with the Mevlevi 'whirling' dervishes was particularly striking. This Muslim religious order – founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Mevlana Celaddin Rumi - makes significant use of music and dance, notably in their famous '*Semâ*' ritual. The relations of Ottoman Orthodox Christians with the dervishes go back to Mediaeval times and the Order of Mevlevi Dervishes seems to have co-operated closely with Christian musicians because the latter used musical notation which was a useful skill. In fact, so greatly was Peter respected amongst them and so valuable to them his engagement with them, that he is recorded in dervish documents and monuments with titles of great honour, such as 'master of music'.

The scholar John Plemmenos notes that '...there was an inscription of Petros' name preserved until the Great War on a tomb of the Dervish lodge in Galata district, Istanbul. ... Therefore, the mere fact that Petros' name has survived suggests that it was considered important by the Dervishes. The graves of some of the *tekke*'s poets and musicians were contained in two wooden appendages in the entrance of the lodge, which were demolished around 1941, the tombs being relocated'.

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<sup>4</sup> A system of melody types in Turkish classical and folk music.



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Whirling dervishes in the Tekke of Pera, İstanbul (Jean Baptiste Vanmour: 18th-century painting in the collection of the Rijksmuseum)

An equally poignant aspect of Peter's engagement with his Muslim neighbours was his familiarity with Turkish music, including Ottoman 'makam' genres<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, there are manuscript transcriptions in Peter's hand of secular songs in Ottoman *makam* and *usul*<sup>6</sup>. Of 72 manuscripts from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which have *makam* music transcribed into Byzantine notation, one hundred compositions are attributed to Peter. There are love-songs by Peter, with the melody written down in Byzantine ecclesiastical notation.

Amusing anecdotes are related about Peter of which the following is one of the most famous<sup>7</sup>— all the more amusing because Peter was closely

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<sup>5</sup> Such a Peşrev, Taksim, and Saz Semai.

<sup>6</sup> An underlying rhythmical cycle in Ottoman classical music.

<sup>7</sup> Papadopoulos p322

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connected to the Ottoman Court, and the Sultan had previously ordered that he be allowed to enter the palace freely.

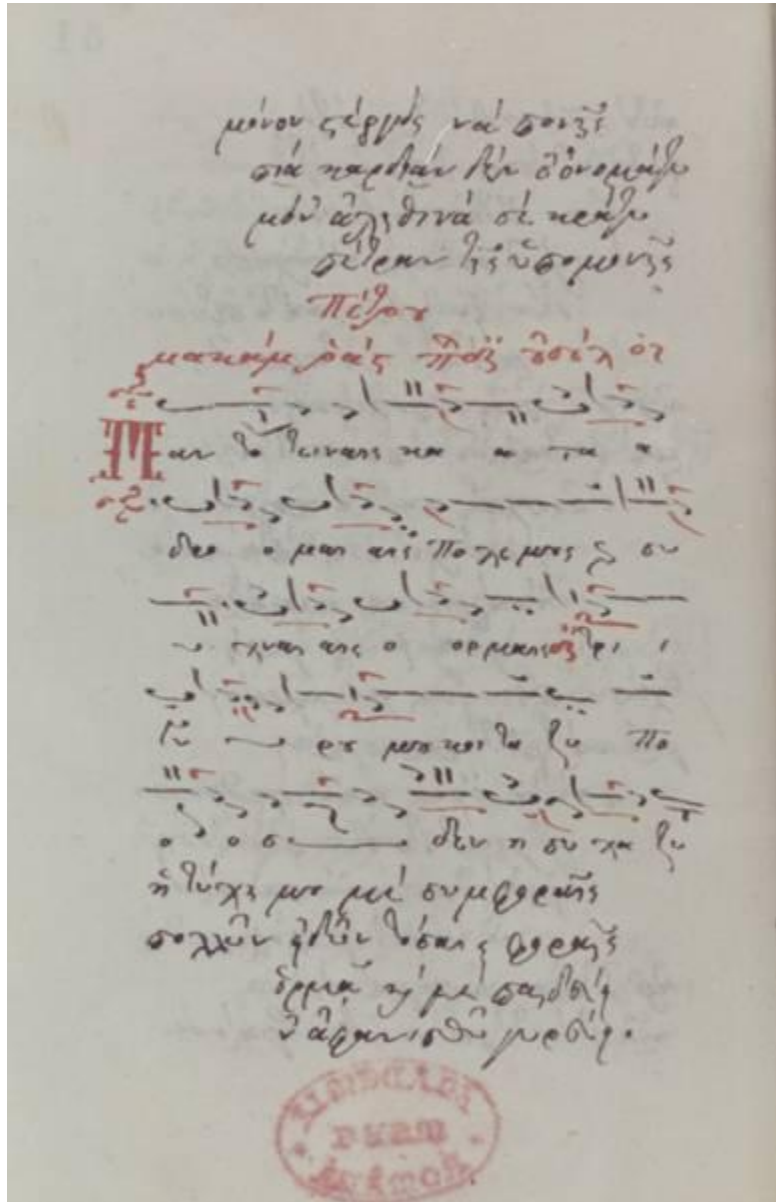
‘One day, the Sultan set out from his palace in Istanbul, and went to the Yeni Cami mosque in Balık Pazarı where he dined and spent his night at the mosque’s pavilion. By chance, that very evening, Petros went to pay a visit to the Turkish *muezzin*<sup>8</sup> of the mosque, by whom he was invited to stay for dinner. During the dinner, they spoke of the *selak* (recitation) melody which was executed on a certain *makam*; Petros undertook to chant it on a *makam* in the early morning, though not over the rooftops of the minaret. The *muezzin*, instead, to benefit from his art, and putting aside any religious prejudices, obliged him to chant the new melody on the minaret. After doing this, Petros went away to the Phanar (the Greek [Rum] Patriarchate). The following morning, the Sultan wanted to know who the composer of the new *selak* melody was. After getting the news, he got very angry, and ordered two public prosecutors to go to the Greek Patriarchate to inform the Patriarch of the incident, then arrest the trespasser, and prepare him for a trial. During much of the interrogation, Petros remained silent and pretended to be mentally deranged, by looking around and observing the dimensions of the courtroom. Suddenly, he opened his mouth, and, uttering the following words “what a nice place for someone to play with walnuts”, he jumped into the middle of the courtroom, and took from his pocket some walnuts, with which he began to play whilst prattling and insulting those trying to stop him. At this sight, everybody present said: “*Vah, zavallı, yazık divane olmuş*” (that is, “alas, poor him, what a pity, he went crazy”) So, the court decided to send him to the national psychiatric asylum at Eğri-Kapı, where he remained for forty days; then, he was released to go back to take up his duties’.

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<sup>8</sup> The mosque’s official who sings the Call to Prayer from the minaret.

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Not to be deterred by having been refused pen and ink whilst in the asylum, Peter composed one of his masterpieces of church music, using the cherry juice that was provided for him to drink, and naming the composition 'Cherry-ish'!



One of Petros' secular songs on *makam Rast* and *usul Sofyan*, Ms. Gr. 784, c. 1815, Romanian Academy, Bucharest.

Within his own community, Petros' contribution to Orthodox Church music is colossal. He taught at the Patriarchal music school in Constantinople, composing musical settings as well as lessons and

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exercises for students of Church chant, and his reputation as a teacher and prolific composer became established. He advanced and perfected the musical notation, composing new, simplified versions of the ecclesiastical chant, and the musical books he wrote were accepted and have been widely used ever since.

*'Petros advanced and perfected the analytical musical notation, becoming the decisive link between the preceding musicians and the new period, which led to the New Method of musical notation, which has been in use since 1815'<sup>9</sup>.*

He had many students: Rumlar, Ottomans, and Europeans to whom he taught music. His contribution to the Armenian Church was greatly appreciated.

To this day, his influence on church music is not only to be felt in The Great Church in Constantinople, but in Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia, Serbia and Greece.

Petros' amazingly productive and influential earthly life ended in his forties when he died during the disastrous plague of 1778 in Constantinople which killed a third of its population.

Nevertheless, he must be regarded as one of the most remarkable and most gifted Christian Ottoman musicians who - during his short life span - did wonders during those years in İstanbul from 1764 and 1778.

There could be no more eloquent and poignant conclusion to Peter's earthly journey than the well-known and unforgettable funeral which, thanks to Papadopoulos, history has preserved. When Peter died, the dervishes from every 'Tekke' (Dervish Lodge) of İstanbul gathered together and requested permission of Patriarch Sophronios II to play on their flutes in the funeral procession as a sign of respect for their late master.

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<sup>9</sup> Emmanouil Giannopoulos

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The patriarch replied thus: *'I empathise with your great sorrow caused by the death of the late master; so, I don't mean to reject your request, but, in order not to offend the Sublime Porte<sup>10</sup>, I beg all of you to follow the procession in silence, and pay your respects on the grave'*. The dervishes accepted the kind words of the patriarch, and followed the funeral until the Eđri-Kapı Orthodox cemetery. As soon as the corpse was buried, one of the Great Dervishes descended into the grave and, holding, like a flaming candle, a *ney*<sup>11</sup> in his hands, said tearfully in Turkish: *"Oh, late master, will you accept from your orphaned pupils this last offer, in order to accompany your hymns with the angels in Paradise"*. And, after he had placed the instrument in the deceased's bosom, he returned full of tears. (Papadopoulos 1890, p323). Then the Christians concluded the burial service as prescribed.

During the present plague, there will be many poignant and eloquent tales that will be told for generations to come. That is something precious that pandemics produce.

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Blaenau Ffestiniog, 23 01 2021

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<sup>10</sup> i.e. the Government

<sup>11</sup> A flute used in Sufi music, for example, in the Semâ ceremony.