

## A musical tradition for the 22<sup>nd</sup> century: A report on a cultural Lebanese initiative

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Recently, I have been informed of the launch of the first ever FM radio station dedicated to the Byzantine Tradition and of the *Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East*.

This radio channel is known as “Voice of Grace” and the only radio transmitter<sup>1</sup> for the whole of Lebanon is located at “Achrafieh-Beirut”. Voice of Grace is also available online at:

<http://www.antiochpatriarchate.org/radio.php>.

Since I am now involved with this channel, my judgment as well as my report might be biased. I am of the opinion that it is not possible to report about a musical event without being fully immersed in it. However, rather than imposing my appreciation of this station in this paper, I am more inclined in presenting facts and inviting my readers to join in and hear for themselves. After all, this is music.

It seems appropriate to introduce the Antioch Patriarchate in residence at Balamand, Koura, in the north of Lebanon, since they are the initiators of this channel, first of its kind in Lebanon, to broadcast Byzantine music.

The channel is in its Beta period as from 25/05/2014. The Orthodox Media Group (OMG)<sup>2</sup> are currently running the show. Their Facebook page states that they

“... produce audio-video programs to help Orthodox TV and radio channels promote their Church at its best.”

The Beta period will end as soon as the Balamand administration feels ready to take over.



Fig. 1 Logo of OMG, copied from their Facebook page.

Partners of OMG, two of them based in Lebanon, include the “Mount Lebanon School of Ecclesiastical Music” (SEM); the “Byzantine Collection”, and “Radio Orthodoxy”, an internet radio station. I shall only comment about the SEM and the Byzantine Collection. I have known the SEM for some time having recorded choir rehearsals and tutorials, a few years ago. The SEM choir has acquired a well-deserved reputation based on its members and the style of their repertoire. During the past years I have attended numerous events and have noted that SEM performances always attracted the largest attendance which is certainly the consequence of their teaching methods.

The group “Byzantine Collection”<sup>3</sup> is a recent project which emerged in 2014 and is set to follow on in 2015. They are publishers, unrestricted to any specific form, and open to all talent which may contribute to the enrichment of recorded Byzantine chant. They aim at a comprehensive collection both of Arabian/Byzantine printed and recorded materials. At present, their compilation includes 12 CDs. BC are affiliated to SEM as well as with other choirs and soloists of which they make recordings.

According to their Facebook page<sup>4</sup>, Orthodoxy would be the first Arabian Orthodox radio station in the world. However, they only broadcast online and have no air-space up to now. Nevertheless, they acknowledge their affiliation to SEM and have a good informative pool.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Joseph Yazbeck, interviewed on the 30.9.2014, who is the current manager of the temporary phase of trial, subject to be extended some few more months.

<sup>2</sup> Check their FB page <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Orthodox-Media-Group/263939597123510?fref=photo>.

<sup>3</sup> [http://byzantinecollection.com/index.php?route=information/information&information\\_id=4](http://byzantinecollection.com/index.php?route=information/information&information_id=4).

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/AlOrthodoxyRadioStation/info?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/AlOrthodoxyRadioStation/info?ref=page_internal).

Joseph Yazbeck, OMG coordinator explained how he managed to collate these groups into a partnership with a broadcasting objective.

At present, there are ten daily diffusions and it is expected that within the next weeks forty-five programs will be available. The running strategy consists in scheduling the recorded material, and requires little else.

SEM and BC provide their recordings to OMG who schedule their diffusion. Additionally, there are seven other sources throughout Lebanon providing more recordings. Once a week, these are collected from each studio and delivered to OMG where the material is edited to a specific schedule and in keeping with the broadcast style.

It was fortunate that BC, having no relationship with OMG, was launched only a few months before. Initially, BC's aim was to create a repository which could be used for various purposes such as television documentaries. It was the lack of material which prompted Joseph Yazbeck, composer and archivist of the Byzantine *turāth* (tradition), to record and collect his own compositions.

BC produce 3 CDs each month and commercialize one of them for their funding. A few months after the project had started, Joseph was informed about the Beta launch of the channel. He was grateful for having been informed just after having concluded a comprehensive series of recordings without which he would have been caught short for lack of material.

Asking him about the difference between them he said that while Radio Orthodoxy plays all forms of Byzantine music, Voice of Grace broadcasts its music in relation to religious events.

"It's the first year which is the hardest as a schedule of religious celebrations must be scheduled. Once done, all will run on its own." The following years will only need variations on the original planning.

There are two types of music broadcast on the FM: byzantine liturgical and the instrumental ones which constitute mainly the signature tune of many programs.

Foremost, the signature tune has a double purpose as firstly it introduces the program and secondly that its prolongation until the end rests the ear from liturgical chanting while remaining musical.

The second phase would be to create a para-liturgical folk music related to byzantine chant, a type of hymns: *anāshid*, the concept is still developing. The concert for Christmas 2014 will be about this new folk music. This whole idea is now in progress: composing, arranging, rehearsing and preparing for the public première.

Would the need for a new form of music be that while non stylistically liturgical, this novelty would remain Byzantine, spiritually, with instrumental inclusion, since the strictly vocal Byzantine tradition does not forbid such usage in a secular context. Man is not exclusively locked in a liturgical environment and musically requires new challenging inputs.

Adhering to the Byzantine vocal tradition and wishing not interfere with it since formulations repeated over two thousand years remain powerfully congregational, even in our times, it is for that very reason that it will remain at the core of our broadcasting, for the sake of its perpetration. However, this does not preclude inventiveness within the eight traditional Byzantine modes which along limitless instrumental arrangements may lead to the composition and performance of a Neo-Byzantine style, which might entice as well as the old repertoire, has, as long as somehow, these compositions remain respectful of the tradition.

Additionally, each mode may be delivered with three different tempos each allowing for multiple and unlimited ornamental formulaic combinations. This creational field is vast while still remaining respectful of tradition.

Having discussed feedbacks of the broadcast, Joseph Yazbeck expressed his delight in taking part. His "parishioners", term by which he means the listeners, have greatly contributed with their criticism, their favorite tunes, their likes and dislikes, their preferred schedules, all essential for improvement.

"It's a live lab and the learning is huge."

It may be useful to point out that these programs are not restricted to the Orthodox flock. All are welcome to enjoy and partake, as numerous phone-in calls from all boards voice their pleasure getting hooked to our shows.

At present, I would like to discuss the addictive nature of this music as I got hooked with it. As soon as I tuned into the channel and listened to the music, I found it difficult to switch off, even having stopped my car and reached destination. However, tunes kept stuck in my head and turned over and over until I tuned in again, the next day, bringing joy to my ears, as it did the day before. This went on for a few days, still astonished at this phenomenon, and tried to analyze what was going on. Although I could have made my own compilation since I own a good selection of Byzantine music and CDs of the BC, I simply did not feel like it. I was only satisfied with

the radio program although at times I needed to switch off for a rest.

Why did I get withdrawal symptoms only after a day without it? I am not really religious but more on the spiritual side and I guess that this new form of music recorded by BC and created by SEM voices, somehow reached my innermost. I have been less bothered by the lyrics than the music and how letters and rhymes evolved through trained vocalization and found out that this is what was missing when I switched off. I missed the prolonged ornate sequences responding to faster ones with intermittent instrumental breaks leading to a new song.

Each broadcast of "Voice of Grace" has generated a unique charismatic performance form of religious inclination. For example, there can be a mature voice followed by a fast pace leading to the slow tempo from a female solo, all punctuated with liturgical programs with instrumental background lifting up words; there are stories, saint days, and whatever the lyrics may be, there is always music in the background forcing its way to the ear. I believe that this is the cause of the addiction.

Joseph Yazbeck said:

"What is beautiful with music is its ability to lift up anything and therefore we should use it as much as we can? The longer, slower chants, are better suited to evening listeners while solo faster beats are more suitable for mornings. We have invited a young girl to record morning sung prayers at that time. She will be scheduled at seven as nothing can be gentler to the ear than a sweet voice to wake you up, and then again, she will be played in time for the midnight prayer, to soothe the mind. It is our aim to use at best these aptitudes within the Byzantine tradition. Female voices appear to be mostly suited to morning hours and we shall follow this tendency."

A new style now lives alongside an old tradition from which it was inspired, with voices of older singers, of young ones and children's with fast or slower beats, Arabic, Greek and Russian lyrics, blending the sacred with the secular. All live on VoG.

Talking about instrumental music, Joseph Yazbeck said that the choice of pieces was based on their similarity to Byzantine formulas. There always must be unity between the sacred and the secular.

Recapping Voice of Grace's strong points with him, it was noted that all music, whether secular or religious share common features as they both speak to the mind, both are serious, have an ancient side to them and share Byzantine formulations and appear in between programs lasting for a maximum time of six minutes. This gives a "time-travel"<sup>5</sup> feel for this channel.

Towards the end of our discussion about the paraliturgical folk-inspired Byzantine tradition with JY, he came to the conclusion that his challenge was to have the music reflect the listener's identity as it comprises a complex mix of Greek, Arabian, Byzantine, Syriac and of many other cultural components.

I am really looking forward to hearing this new form of composition and hope to be around for the launch of this new folk music.

To conclude, I would like to add that all traditions must evolve fault of which they will die out. Many have gone without any hope for revival.

Projects such as with BC will help archiving musical treasures for posterity. Ears and memories are too impatient as our listening attitudes are different, getting quickly bored. In this respect, I praise VoG's efforts to make music kind to the ear while including a wealth of information and music played under the Byzantine shield.

Theirs is a well done job and my words are here to pay tribute to all who contributed to this 22<sup>nd</sup> century Lebanese phenomenon in a very complex and self-destructing culture lacking of open-mindedness. They have done well and fast. It is working.

A new musical tradition has hatched from the Byzantine tradition with which, however, it is not restricted. This tradition goes further when the future will prove in due time.

<sup>5</sup> The expression is Joseph Yazbeck's.



