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The Origins of **Western Notation**

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Chapter I: The Relationship between Byzantine and Latin Neumes (Introduction to the Problem)

Qui igitur cantum ignorat planum, frustra tendit ad mensuratum. Prius enim in cantu plano se debet quisque fundare; de hinc ad mensurabilem potest accedere. De cantu igitur plano primo prosequamur; infra vero libro septimo aliquid de mensurabili tangemus. Adhuc, antequam agamus de speciebus et modis cantus plani, de notis musicis quibus cantus notantur et de modo dicamus notandi; non enim valet quis in cantuum libris cantus decantare, nisi figuras vel notas quibus claves et voces designantur atque dispositionem illarum sive notandi modum cognoverit, sicut legere non valet qui litteras ignorat.

Jacobus Leodiensis¹

1. Previous theories

HYPOTHESES ON THE ORIGIN OF THE NEUMES

If one were to attempt to determine the current state of knowledge on the neumes with respect to one of its most important problems, namely the question about the origin of the neumes, so it can be stated that only one feature can be regarded as generally commonly agreed upon – and that is that the numerous neumatic notations of the East as well as the West can be traced back to a common root, i.e. Greek accent system devised by Alexandrian grammarians in the 2nd century BC. Soon after Edmond Coussemaker² developed his concept in a publication of 1852 that the Latin neumes developed out of the grammatical accents of the ancient Greeks, older theories over the derivation of the tone signs from Anglo-Saxon runes³ or from the stenographic Tironian symbols⁴ were driven from the field, and this insight, if not without resistance, quickly spread and has attained, with respect to all the families of neumes, almost the value of an official doctrine.

1 *Speculum musicae*, lib. VI, Cap. LXXI (CoussS II, 303 b).

2 *Histoire de l'harmonie au moyen âge* (Paris, 1852): 154-160.

3 F.-J. Fétis, “Résumé philosophique de l’Histoire de la musique” *Biographie universelle des musiciens* I (Brussels, 1837), CLX-CLXVI; *Histoire générale de la musique*, IV (Paris, 1874): 181-195 and 467-469.

4 Th. Nisard, “Études sur les anciennes notations musicales de l’Europe” *Revue archéologique de A. Leleux*, Paris, V (1848): 701-720; VI (1849): 101-114, 461-475, 749-764; VII (1850): 129-143.

Still unexplained and therefore highly disputed, on the other hand, is the eminently important question about the genetic development of the individual neumatic notations and their mutual relationships. That a clarification of this question is dependent on the fulfillment of several prerequisites hardly needs to be emphasized. A detailed investigation of the oldest attainable evidence of Byzantine and Latin semiography is just as necessary as a clarification of the development of the Armenian, Syrian, Georgian and Coptic neumatic notations, areas which even today remain largely *terrae incognitae*. Just as indispensable is a coordination of all the different disciplines dealing with neumatic notation. An overwhelming series of prerequisites still remain to be addressed, so that it is not surprising, that many scholars, in view of the difficult material and in consideration of the precarious research situation, have resigned themselves to the conviction that now is not yet the time to deal with these questions.

It must have been just such deliberations which prompted the learned editors of the *Paléographie Musicale* around the turn of the century to concentrate their investigations on the Latin neumatic notations and to not delve into the relationship of the Western and Eastern families of neumes. At the same time it must be said that there was no lack of early attempts to establish a broader basis for the investigation of the neumes. As an initiator (if not the founder) of a "universalle Neumenforschung", Oskar Fleischer must be named, who examined in the first volume of his *Neumenstudien* the accentuation systems of the Indians, Greeks and Armenians, and defended the thesis of the Oriental origin of "*chironomy and its signs, the neumes*".⁵

Proceeding from Fleischer and the art historical researches of J. Strzygowski, the late Egon Wellesz⁶ expressed the opinion that the notation of the neumes possibly would have already had its roots in a system of signs of Babylonian origin in Pre-Christian times. Thus Mesopotamia and Iran were to be regarded as the original homeland of the neumes (as the notation of the *lectio solemnis*) and from there they found their way to Byzantium and to the West via Armenia. According to Wellesz, the Armenian neumes did not develop out of the Byzantine (as the older research had supposed), but it was rather the reverse, namely that the Byzantine system developed out of the Armenian.

THE THEORIES OF LAMBILLOTTE, RIEMANN AND FLEISCHER

Within the convoluted complex of questions dealing with the 'origin of the neumes' the dispute about the relationship between the Latin and Byzantine neumes naturally took a central position. From our reading of the material, it

5 *Über Ursprung und Enzifferung der Neumen* (Leipzig, 1895): passim, cit. 33.

6 „Probleme der musikalischen Orientforschung“ *Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters für 1917* (Leipzig, 1918): 1-18; *Aufgaben und Probleme auf dem Gebiete der byzantinischen und orientalischen Kirchenmusik* (Münster in Westf., 1923): 28-39.

seems to have been first raised by Père Louis Lambillotte,⁷ who, confronted with the numerous Greek terms in the Middle Latin music theoretical treatises, developed the hypothesis that the West did not only borrow the liturgical music from the Greeks but apparently the neumatic notation as well:

Ces analogies semblent prouver que les Latins empruntèrent aux Grecs non seulement leur Musique, mais même leur notation neumatique. Comment s'expliquer autrement les noms des neumes, qui sont presque tous d'origine grecque : Podatus, Cephalicus etc., etc.?

Adopting a similar line of argument, Hugo Riemann⁸ came to the conclusion that “*the Roman church probably received the beginnings of tonal notation as so much else*” from the Greek Church. Similarly Oskar Fleischer⁹ expressed the opinion, in consideration of the numerous chants contained in Latin neumatic monuments in Greek as well as in view of the many Greek names in Latin tables of neumes, that Byzantine semiography must have been exercised a strong influence on the neumatic notation of the Latin Church from 9th to the 11th century.

THIBAUT'S THESIS

This question was however first specifically delved into in detail at the beginning of our century by Jean Baptiste Thibaut.¹⁰ With his *Origine Byzantine de la notation neumatique de l'église latine*, Thibaut distinguished himself as one of the best connoisseurs of Byzantine church music, next to Fleischer. Thibaut undertook comparative terminological and etymological examinations of the names of the signs and compared Latin, Byzantine and Armenian neumes according to their forms. Drawing on these comparisons Thibaut defended the bold thesis that the Latin neumatic notation could be directly traced to the ekphonic notation of the Byzantines and it represented nothing else than a simple conversion of the Constantinopolitan notation, that was introduced in all probability into the West around the middle of the 8th century:

La notation neumatique de l'Église latine, comme celle de toutes les confessions chrétiennes primitives, tire indirectement son origine de la sémeiographie ekphonétique des Byzantins; elle n'est en soi qu'une simple modification de la notation Constantinopolitaine, et, selon toute vraisemblance, on doit assigner le milieu du VIII^e siècle comme époque probable de son introduction en Occident.

7 *Antiphonaire de Saint Grégoire – Fac-simile du manuscrit de Saint-Gall*, (Brussels, 1867): 196 / footnote 1.

8 *Studien zur Geschichte der Notenschrift* (Leipzig, 1878): 112f.

9 *Neumenstudien I* (Leipzig, 1895): 113-115.

10 *Origine Byzantine de la notation neumatique de l'église latine* (Paris, 1907): 16.

Under the term *Constantinopolitan* notation Thibaut understood the Paleo-Byzantine notation, i.e. primarily the Coislin notation, while with the term *hagiopolitan* notation he meant the Middle Byzantine semiography. He imagined the historical development of neumatic notation to have taken the following course: At the end of the 5th century the ekphonetic notation, that is the notation of the *lectio solemn*is of the Greek Church, evolved in Byzantium out of the Greek prosodic signs and out of this again, after a period experimentation in the course the 7th century, the Constantinopolitan notation came into existence. This was then the ‘mother script’ of all neumatic writing systems of the East and the West and thus formed the basis not only the Latin family of neumes, but also the Armenian, Georgian and Syrian neumes, as well as the Hebrew (Masoretic) accent writing system. (With respect to relationship between the Byzantine and Armenian neumes the thesis proposed by Wellesz cited above is the reversal of Thibaut’s position).

THE POSITION OF PETER WAGNER

Thibaut’s thesis found a very reserved reception and considerable modification in Peter Wagner’s *Neumenkunde*, whereby a certain embarrassment vis-à-vis the question of the Latin neumes can be detected.¹¹ On the one hand Wagner could not ignore the numerous signs of a vibrant Byzantine influence on the West and there were obvious graphic resemblances between the Latin and Byzantine neumes yet he wanted on the other hand to justify his opinion that there also were dissimilarities between them. Thus he rigorously rejected the hypothesis of a direct acceptance of the Byzantine neumes by Rome and proposed instead the hypothesis “*of a relationship of Roman neumes to one of the notations which historically preceded the Byzantine or perhaps to a contemporary or parallel non-Byzantine notation as for example a Syrian-Greek type of neume*”.

THE VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL OF SOLESMES

It can be said that a special characteristic of the school of Solesmes is the complete exclusion of any question about the relationship of Latin and Byzantine neumes from the research program of the *Paléographie Musicale*. Even if representative volumes of this monumental series include several fundamental studies on problems of Gregorian rhythm as well as on the individual Latin notations, one will search in vain for an indication of possible relations between the families of neumes in the West and the East. Even if this reserve with respect to such a fundamental problem may appear strange, it is the result of the realization, that productive comparisons were not possible at that

11 *Einführung in die gregorianischen Melodien, Zweiter Teil: Neumenkunde* (Leipzig, 1912): 95-114, cit. 113.

time due to the state of research on the Paleo-Byzantine notational systems. To be sure, there was also the (unfounded) conviction that Latin chant notation had developed autonomously.

In his thorough investigation of Aquitanian notation which encompassed the literature on ekphonic and early Byzantine neumes up to the year 1925, Dom Paolo Ferretti came to the conclusion, that the East and the West both used a few fundamental neumes for notating the *lectio solemn* as well as simple liturgical phrases which were generally derived from the Greco-Roman prosodic signs.¹² As however the chants grew melodically richer and the primitive notational system strove to overcome its inadequacies, the two systems must have gone their separate ways. Independently of each other, East and West multiplied and developed the original signs, endowing them with quite different meanings.

Scepticism with respect to this question is also the keynote in Dom Gregoire Suñol's *Introduction à la paléographie musicale grégorienne*, a manual summarizing the research results of the school of Solesmes.¹³ Suñol warns against premature conclusions and points out that the oldest known Latin and Byzantine neumes most probably date back to the same period, the 9th and 10th century. In addition, he doubts that the Greek names of numerous Latin neumes can be taken as a compelling argument for the dependence of the Latin semiography on the Byzantine. Such names did not necessarily have to have been the original names of these *semata*. They could have very well been introduced within the scope of a Hellenizing movement, possibly in the 7th and 8th century.

THE STANDPOINT OF JAMMERS

A brief, but essential contribution to our problem has recently been formulated by Eward Jammers, who replaced Wagner's hypothesis with his view that all neumatic notations had a common basis in the prosodic signs, i.e., the *προσῳδία* or indications of rhythm, stress, and intonation derived from the acoustical characteristics of speech.¹⁴ As these signs evolved, a split developed in the manner in which the lengthening signs were indicated. While the Gregorian and Byzantine repertoires indicated a lengthening by doubling certain signs rather than using the original prosodic long signs, the metrical prosodic signs were adopted and maintained in the Gallican (Aquitanian) notational system from the beginning. At the same time a series of signs based on the original prosodic markings developed in both Byzantium and Italy, which in the Latin repertoire were all distinguished by Greek names (eg. strophicus, quilisma, liquescents,

12 "Étude sur la notation aquitaine d'après le graduel de Saint-Yrieix" *Pal Mus* XIII (Solesmes, 1925): 61.

13 *Introduction à la paléographie musicale grégorienne* (Paris, 1935): 17f.

14 „Byzantinisches in der karolingischen Musik“ *Berichte zum XI. Internationalen Byzantinischen-Kongreß* (Munich, 1958): V. 2.