



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37835/AMS-2024-17-18-04-1.02>

УДК 78.03 (450)

### **Sicily, a crossroads between East and West**

Sicily, in the extreme south of Italy and, therefore, of Europe, is the ideal laboratory to observe and study the reciprocal exchanges between Eastern European and Western musical culture. Let's see why!

Sicily has always been at the centre of Mediterranean trade and was a privileged seat for the Phoenicians, the Greeks who called it Magna Graecia, the Romans who structured it into a Province, one of the richest at that time nicknamed "granary of Europe".

Sicily also experienced periods of splendour in the Middle Ages, both for its unchanged economic importance and for the cultural flourishing favoured by the crossing, as had happened in ancient times, of numerous and vivid cultures. In particular, the island had the opportunity to experience the profitable Muslim domination for about two centuries, before getting to know the Norman government and becoming the fulcrum of the imperial designs of the Hohenstaufen.

The admirable and original Arab-Norman architectural evidence, the presence of a flourishing literary tradition in the vernacular and a tradition of studies (in Sicily in the eleventh century some of Plato's Dialogues were translated into Latin for the first time) make medieval Sicily a cultured and essential land for the understanding of the entire European history.

In 491 Theodoric's Ostrogoths annexed the island: the administration was reorganized inspired by the imperial one. The land holdings owned by the Roman Church are extensive.

In 535 Belisarius, Justinian's general, at the beginning of the Goth-Byzantine war, annexed Sicily to the Eastern Roman Empire: Sicily, where both Greek and Latin were still commonly spoken, was culturally close to the Byzantine East.

Since his accession to the throne of Constantinople, Justinian I (527-565) pursued the idea of rebuilding the Roman Empire in its ancient geographical extensions and political dimensions. With this in mind, he initiated the recovery for Byzantium of those western regions that once belonged to the Empire, but were occupied during the fifth century by Germanic peoples: North Africa held by the Vandals and Italy by the Ostrogoths.

Sicily had a logistical function for the Byzantines, as a naval base, a granary for the army and sometimes even for the starving cities of Italy, and as a safe place where aristocratic refugees retreated. People of different ethnicities lived on the



island: locals, Greeks, Latins, Orientals and Jews, and all contributed with their own culture to the artistic enrichment of the works in progress.

Important is the Byzantine figurative culture consisting essentially of the art of mosaic – of which floor fragments with geometric, zoomorphic and floral motifs remain – frescoes and furnishings belonging to newly founded liturgical buildings or built inside pre-existing buildings. The term mosaic defines the decoration of an architectural surface (floor, wall, ceiling), made by means of fragments of stone, terracotta, glass paste, worked in the form of small cubes and fixed on a support layer with a smooth surface. The remains of Byzantine mosaic floors found in various cities of Sicily and inside the cathedral of Cefalù (Palermo) are well known.

The sculpture sector also shows a remarkable variety of types and decorations and a substantial adherence to Byzantine artistic dictates. A widespread custom of the time was the reuse of blocks and decorative elements from disused or partially destroyed monuments as well as many works such as: columns, icons, sarcophagi, plutei, architraves, sculptures and architectural decorations and liturgical furnishings.

In Sicily, there are also important Byzantine testimonies of rock chapels, in the transformation of pagan temples, in some churches and basilicas outside the towns, sometimes heirs of the hermit tradition, and in the self-celebratory solemnity of Norman cathedrals.

Deeply influenced by Christian culture, Byzantine architecture manifested itself above all in a different conception of sacred space, in churches with a centric plan and in the exaltation and diffusion of the Dome which was also imposed by the presence of its figurative decorations, becoming for the faithful a point of direction for prayers, "image and door of heaven".

In 827 the Arabs landed in Sicily and in 831 they conquered Palermo, transforming it into the capital. It is important to underline the large presence of Persians among the populations generically called "Arabs". The arrival of the Arabs caused a fracture in the political and economic life of the island: if the western part experienced a fruitful age of collaboration between natives and invaders, the region of Syracuse was never fully subjected to Arab rule, even if their arrival marked the decadence of the ancient metropolis and of eastern Sicily, of Greek language and culture. The northeaster part of the island, which is even firmly Christian, offers stiff resistance.

Palermo became the symbol of the Arab-Sicilian civilization: populous (about three hundred thousand inhabitants) and rich, it had a strip of agricultural and administrative suburbs around its ancient center: it had 300 mosques and as many madrasas (Koranic schools). The emir was flanked by an influential assembly composed of the local aristocracy.



Alongside the richness of material life, culture flourished, nourished by contacts with the civilization of Mediterranean Islam (Andalusia for literary culture, the Maghreb and Egypt for scientific culture). A shining example of this is the splendid Arabic language literature that flourished at the court of Palermo. In particular, it is poetry that is loved and cultivated and with it, music.

In 1061 the Normans landed in Sicily. The Christian reconquest took thirty years to drive the Arabs out of the island. Despite this, Islamic culture flourished until the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The history of music appears as a tall tree, which doubles here and there, and with some large branches that have expanded as far as they could and then dried up, remaining there to witness their distant bright inflorescence. One of these branches belongs to the great Eastern Church, born in the bosom of the Eastern Roman Empire, distinct from the rising Roman Christian Church by the orthodoxy with which it approached Christian worship.

The history of the Byzantine and Orthodox liturgy draws on the Greek, Syriac and Palestinian proto-Christian heritage, and even on the ways of understanding music that the early Romans had. A solid legacy, which will give many fruits musically although a bit all the same and as it will happen, very sensitive to the strongest influences with which it will have to confront.

Until the eighth century, Byzantine music developed in a rather similar way to what was happening in the rest of Europe, but with a greater passion for hymns, which were more flexible than other forms of liturgical chant.

But there was a problem of tradition, the only cage from which Byzantine or Orthodox chant could never free itself. The hymnographic inspiration had to be limited to the elaboration of pre-existing hymns, linked to the ancient original tradition. No new music except variations on pre-established themes and schemes.

Then, from the fourteenth century, the inexorable decline began. The Byzantine clergymen found themselves having to teach music to the supervening Turkish rulers, who instead of learning were the ones who subtly spread the sounds of their music. All Byzantine musical heritage was corrupted by Turkish music.

In Sicily at the same time, the same phenomenon took place: Byzantine liturgical music encountered Arab culture, creating a very particular style that was different from Constantinople because in Sicily there was also a strong Latin tradition.

In Western Europe, the history of music is linked to the history of the Christian church, even if, until shortly before the Carolingian age, the centuries-old Western Roman Empire was reduced to rubble. The church, overwhelmed by the Lombard Kings, the Byzantine "Basileus" and continuous questions of "internal politics"



(heresies, unfavourable edicts, turbulent monks and so on), had to find a crutch on which to re-establish its power; this crutch he found in the Franks faithful.

The contact between Rome and France allowed the papal ambassadors to become acquainted with the Christian chant that was performed beyond the Alps. At the beginning, Rome decided to impose the Roman style on the Gauls, but what happened instead was that Roman chant became Gallic, forming a new tradition that was the sum of the two: this is how the great Gregorian tradition began. Obviously, it is a summary reconstruction, but it is enough to affirm a basic concept, which will often help us in the history of music.

Gregorian chant is the child of the great crisis of the Western Roman Empire, and also of that of a church that, after the period of affirmation following the liberation of the cult, found itself losing power, especially political. A strong and powerful church would have annihilated the Gallican chants, as well as the others that had developed in the empire. A weak church, on the other hand.

This multiplication of songs, traditions, styles and musical practices made necessary what for the previous millennia (musically very devoted to stability) was considered superfluous: a system of musical writing. It is around the ninth or tenth centuries that the origins of "neumatic" musical notation, i.e. based on neumes, can be seen.

The Norman kings were of French culture that they moved to Sicily after the establishment of the kingdom. Sicily, which has always been accustomed to osmosis and the contamination of different styles, absorbed the Gallic culture and enlivened it within the Greek, Byzantine, Latin and Arabic traditions, creating a unique style.

The Cefalù's cathedral is the emblem of the coexistence in Sicily of Eastern and Western Christian liturgy: in the cathedral of Cefalù the Byzantine mosaic depicting Christ Pantocrator has the inscription of the Gospel in two languages, Greek and Latin, and for the feast of the Transfiguration (6th August), the Gospel is still recited today in a double language, Greek and Latin.

To all this must be added the paintings on the wooden ceiling depicting the Muslim earthly paradise complete with Arabic instruments faithfully depicted!

In Sicily there are other oriental survivals: *Piana degli Albanesi* (also known as *Piana dei Greci*), is a charming town located on a mountain plateau in the province of Palermo, Sicily. Its Arbëreshe population (of Albanian origin) is known for jealously preserving traditions, language, habits and customs, especially in religious rites. The Holy Week in Piana degli Albanesi is a solemn and magnificent moment, characterized by celebrations that have been handed down over the centuries.

Today it is not easy to distinguish precisely all the traditional musical components that can be found in Sicily: the long work of assimilation and contamination sometimes makes it difficult to reconstruct the origins: it is difficult to



understand how much the vocalizations with quarter tones derive from the Greek, Byzantine or Arabic tradition but, perhaps, this vocality is to be considered a single cultural strain that belongs to the Mediterranean.

In this sense, the Arabic music culture must be more closely connected to the great Mediterranean culture, which is, in turn, the origin and foundation of Greek and Latin culture.

The particular position of Sicily makes this exploration fascinating precisely because in a geographically fairly small area it is possible to trace all these cultural components described above.

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