

PALERMO 1140

Chants from the Normans in Sicily

This programme is no doubt the first attempt ever to recreate, or better, reanimate – the notion of 'anima' taken as the living soul blown into an empty, museal, but potentially reverberating space – the psychoacoustics of one of the world's most intriguing buildings: the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, built by the Norman king Roger II around 1140.

Recreating the psychoacoustics implies not only to reanimate its (f)actual or even potential soundscapes or performed rituals, ceremonies, cantorial traditions, but also to present them in a sort of sonic tableau which necessarily needs to include all virtual sonorities. These are not so much repertoires, reconstructed by knowledge or 'historically informed performance', but rather the sounds recollected, reinvented by a sort of dramatizing act, a transposition of internal tensions, climates, conflicts, dialogues, underground knowledge, practices.

Reanimation means the historical fact plus something else. However, this surplus, which is the drama, the intense complexity of the flowing past itself, definitely changes the nature of every possible pure experience of an event for ever.

The main key to this programme is of course the interior of the Palermitan Cappella Palatina.

Today visitors can still discover the chapel's extraordinary and almost original decoration organized in a very specific way: the sanctuary is decorated with impressive Byzantine frescoes, whereas the nave is provided with a painted wooden 'muqarnas' ceiling. This ceiling is similar to well known examples in Andalusia, but could also be constructed under influence of Tunisian or Fatimid artists of Caïro. The royal platform in the nave and the balcony in the sanctuary reveal the original idea and function of the chapel: the Norman king could follow the Norman-Sicilian and Italo-Greek liturgy at one side. Standing on his platform at the other side, he could assist the non-Christian ceremonies or more public séances in the nave. We have to imagine the nave around 1140 as much more Arabic designed as it is nowadays. The Byzantine decoration of the nave was added later on in the 12th century during a process of slow annexation, integration and hybridisation of the different 'exotic' styles from the point of view of the new Norman inhabitants. This process slowly diminished the knowledge and articulation of the proper styles to a mere ornamental use, often totally disconnected with the original context. In the beginning however the idea of Roger II clearly was the construction of a complex space which connected and segmented micro-spaces of different signification at the same time.

The psychoacoustic, sonorous, liturgical or ceremonial equivalent of the Cappella Palatina, revealing a large part of its practical rationale, consists of the following repertoires:

1. the Normans introduced what is called the Norman-Sicilian liturgy, a combination of the catholic liturgical practices in Normandy and in Sicily. The manuscripts with the repertoire connected to the Cappella Palatina or the cathedral of Palermo are kept in

Madrid : Ms.288, 289 and Vitrina 20-4. We added Ms.19421 connected with Catania to offer examples of early polyphonical practice.

2. the Byzantine repertoire can be found in Italo-Greek manuscripts of the University library of Messina , the library of Firenze and the monastery library of Grottaferrata.
3. the non-Christian, Muslim repertoires are for several reasons quite complex: first of all because we are dealing with oral traditions concerning the melodies of the chants, and secondly because Sicily has been ruled by Shiite royal dynasties (Fatimid, Kalbid) although the population, coming originally from Tunisia , was Sunnite. For this reason we chose some poets who were intimately related to one of the important religious doctrines known around 1140 and relevant for several reasons to the religious, cultural and political situation of the Cappella Palatina. At the same time we tried to present their poetry as much as possible in a performing tradition which goes back to the medieval period.

We didn't try to stress the many similarities of traditions, religious and performance practices, but in fact to point at the micro differences on several crucial levels. For the first time we perform together the different acclamation-styles which were in common at the Cappella Palatina at least in Latin and Greek. The Greek acclamations were discovered by Neil Moran in the '70's but still never performed. Before the arrival of the Normans , the Greek liturgy was the main Christian liturgy in Sicily . Although the Norman court had its own Norman-Sicilian rite, Roger II had always stimulated the rise of Byzantine monasteries and was even excommunicated by the Pope. Obviously the special powerful position of the emperor in Byzantine Church , stimulated Roger to put himself above the power of the pope and the Catholic Church.

But it is clear that also the typical Fatimid acclamations for the Caliph-Imam, a genre which shows much in common on the ideological and religious level with the Greek and Latin acclamation style, were at least known and possibly practiced as well. The several Fatimid inspired inscriptions and designs proof the strong affinity with Fatimid Caïro. It is clear that ideologically seen Roger mirrored his kingship according to the two most powerful imperial forces at that time, which were neighbours and rivals at the same time: the Byzantine and the Fatimid court.

Epiphany and Easter mark both very clearly the similarities and essential differences of the traditions. For the Catholic Church Epiphany is concentrated on the adoration of the Magi which stressed the link between Christ and the king (the impressive Nativity/Epiphany fresco in the Cappella Palatina is another proof), while the Byzantine church put the accent on the baptism of Christ. Although the Muslim tradition recognized the miraculous conception of Mary and the birth of the Messiah, he was not seen as the son of God. The same is true for the complex Christian and Muslim interpretations of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. Although the Sufi master and scientist Al-Ghazali was critical against the Fatimid/Isma'ili doctrine of that time he wrote similar explanations on the Crucifixion and analyzed in a superb way the several different Christian interpretations.

For the dedication of a church we brought together some chants from the remarkable Norman-Sicilian office, the Italo-Greek chant, the Fatimid tradition and the Tunisian Sufi-practice. The Fatimid text by Al-Shirazi points directly to some kufic inscriptions which partly

survived in the Cappella Palatina and which, in typical Fatimid style, connect the special ritual of kissing the corners of the Ka'ba, part of the pilgrimage to Mecca, with the palace of the caliph and finally with the caliph himself.