

Harmonization in the traditional music of Cyprus

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A practice which often leads to friction and heated discussions is the use of harmonies, either between two instruments or, primarily, through the use of two or more voices in our demotic songs. This is usually observed in mixed or equal voice choirs, but has recently been adopted by some traditional music ensembles as well.

The only arguments I have heard in support of this practice are:

- Harmonization makes the songs sound nicer;
- Harmonization constitutes modernization.

Whether or not the practice makes the songs sound nicer is a purely subjective issue. I don't consider this a valid argument and I shall let it ride.

Now, as regards the argument concerning modernization, who said that modernization is essentially an identification with western models? Harmonization has been common practice in western music for centuries now, and is fully respected vis-à-vis that particular tradition. It is not, therefore, a novel phenomenon, unfamiliar to previous generations. Why then, when the origins of our demotic music were respected by generation upon generation which preceded us should we ignore them?

My opinion is that harmonization is totally irreconcilable with our demotic music, and here are my arguments:

- The roots of our demotic music comprise ancient Greek music, Byzantine music, and the music of the neighbouring peoples inhabiting that which in one word can be described as the Levant. These musical cultures never incorporated harmonization or polyphony; their music was always monophonic (see "Cyprus – Demotic Music" published by the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation and "Cypriot Demotic Songs" published by the Cyprus Centre for Scientific Research).

- In our demotic songs, pride of place was always given to the spoken word. That is to say the content of the lyrics, and then everything else. Harmonizations weaken the power of the word, given that they bring into the spotlight other elements, and do not allow the lyrics to carry through as clearly as they would have without them.

- The most important aspect however is this: For a song to be considered demotic, it should lend itself to the following: If, in some random group of people, someone begins to sing such a song, the rest (those of course with even the most minimal of vocal ability) should, after one or two verses, be able to join in with the melody, irrespective of whether or not they've had any musical training. Can then the average Cypriot, without musical training, harmonize to a song? To me it is obvious that he (or she) cannot. The average westerner can though, without the prerequisite of musical training, since harmonization forms part of his or her culture. We cannot.

Bearing all this in mind, I believe that harmonization does not constitute a normal development of our demotic music but a significant alteration of its basic character, and it is for this reason that I disagree with its use.