From Myth to Reality: 
Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac and Serbian Church Music*

Od mita do resničnosti: Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac in srbska cerkvena glasba**

IZVLEČEK

V prispevku se bomo osredotočili na zgodovinsko rekonstrukcijo dela Stevana Stojanovića Mokranjca na področju melografije (melography) in pedagogike srbskih cerkvenih napevov. O prestižnem statusu, ki ga je kot melograf (melographer) in strokovnjak za srbske cerkvene napeve pridobil tako v očeh svojih sodobnikov kot pri današnjih muzikologih in zgodovinarjih glasbe, je redko kdo podvomil ali ga obravnaval objektivno, zato sva

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will focus on the historical reconstruction of Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac’s work in the field of melography and pedagogy of Serbian church chant. Since the prestigious status he reached among his contemporaries, as well as musicologists and music historians of the recent past, both as a melographer and expert in Serbian church chant of his time, has rarely been questioned or objectively approached, we decided to reconsider

* This article was written as part of the Project no. 177004: Serbian musical identities within local and global frameworks: traditions, changes, challenges, funded by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development.
** Prispevek je bil napisan v okviru projekta št. 177004 Srbske glasbene identitete znotaj lokalnih in globalnih okvirov: tradicije, spremembe, izviri pod okriljem Ministrstva za šolstvo, znanost in tehnološki razvoj.
Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, who was considered a “mythical structure”\(^1\) even during his life and the key figure of the Serbian musical canon, was the focus of Serbian musicological research more than any other Serbian composer.\(^2\) Despite that, his compositional, melographic, and pedagogical work in the field of church music has not received a critical interpretation prior to this paper. The conflicting evaluations of Mokranjac’s approach to musical folklore in his attempts to preserve traditional Serbian church chant were not considered in studies dedicated to this topic. During his life, rare critics of his entire work and even of his engagement in the field of church music remained on the margins,\(^3\) unlike many writers who promoted his preeminent position among the predecessors and contemporaries.\(^4\) The same situation is typical nowadays.\(^5\) In fact, the composer who was known as the founder of Serbian musical nationalism, conductor of the most important choral ensemble in the Serbian capital, some of the dominant interpretations of his activities in this domain. For that purpose, we conducted a thorough research of archival resources and press material from the late 19th century onward aiming at a critical examination of Mokranjac’s role in the popularization of concepts of the Karlovac and Belgrade church chant styles, his undertakings in the documentation of monophonic church chants, and, finally, his approach to the teaching of chant singing in Saint Sava’s Seminary. We will underline the discrepancy between the created image of Mokranjac as an indisputable authority in the field and historical data, which point to the significance of his symbolic (and social) capital in the process of gaining broader recognition.

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5 Some important works of this kind will be referred to in this paper.
the most famous Serbian cultural diplomat at the time of deep social and political changes in the Balkans, was also the first among the melographers of church chants. His written chants, known as the “Serbian national church chanting tradition”, became the basis for musical education in seminaries, as well as the official chanting material of the Serbian Church. Even today, “Mokranjac’s” chanting is a synonym for monophonic (and even polyphonic) Serbian church music practice.

As a result of the revitalization of religious life and traditional Serbian values in the 1990s, which contributed to a renewed interest in church music, a national church music project was initiated and, consequently, Mokranjac once again gained a prestigious position. Perhaps the impetus for such eulogizing of Mokranjac’s work in the field of church music came from the appearance of the so-called Byzantine psalmody in the Serbian Church. Under the “threat” of this type of singing tradition once rejected by Serbian music professionals who were educated in the West and who sought to emancipate Serbian national music, the myth of Mokranjac was revived. The stereotype of a national artist who saved the national church music tradition from “oriental” influences, i.e. who removed aesthetically inappropriate musical ornamentations from it and gave it a proper harmonic grounding, became an axiom in recently-published research. Mokranjac’s melographical work was again considered as long awaited and most successful, while Mokranjac himself was thought of as an “icon” of Serbian culture, protector of original and authentic Serbian musical identity, and the artist who recognized the value of church chants for artistic remoulding.

It is not possible to reject these views completely as being incorrect, but the entire narrative on Mokranjac requires a thorough critical reassessment. Therefore, in this paper we would like to re-examine 1) the process of Mokranjac’s melographic work on church chanting, particularly the frequently accentuated difficulties in its publishing, and 2) his role in the development of pedagogy of church music in Saint Sava’s Seminary in Belgrade.

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In 1894, Stevan Mokranjac, as a member of the Commission of the Ministry of Education and Church Affairs of the Kingdom of Serbia, gave a negative opinion on

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the collection of church chants whose authors believed it would become an official textbook. The report for the Board of Education, signed by all members of the commission, it was stated that, among the Serbs, “since Kornelije Stanković, many have tried to notate our church melodies”, but “none of them appeared as serious followers”. The writing down of local variants of melodies had been carried out, as emphasized in the report, without precise criteria and critical comments, and mostly in an incorrect manner. The commission concluded: “All collections of this kind published until now can only be considered as attempts based on proper motives, but none of them, including Kornelije’s collection, is a result of critical and systematic work”.

Pointing to the alarming state of singing practice in Serbian churches, the commission also recommended possible solutions. First, the entire oral tradition of church chanting ought to be written down all over again. This work was supposed to be conducted by the musicians of Orthodox faith. One of the main goals was to give an opportunity to students at the seminaries, so they would learn church chants from a credible source. Besides this, the project of professional melography had another significant purpose: to “standardize” the church chants or, in other words, to remove the “oriental ornaments”: “The singers perform melodies, each in their own way, and melographers, most of whom did not have skills and experience similar to that of Vuk (Karadžić, V. P. & I.V.), were not able to establish national chanting tradition or to gain a single follower”.

Mokranjac, with his first and only published collection of church chants (at least in his lifetime), in which he removed “all the excessive decorations and vocal effects (...) from the throat” and “all those tasteless and old-fashioned ornaments from every note”, would be recognized as an expert in this field and given a chance already in 1894 to become the Vuk Stefanović Karadžić of Serbian music.

No matter how much the title of “new Vuk” was important to Mokranjac, the melographic work was not his primary activity because of other, socially more significant and respectable engagements. The affirmation of four-part choral music in the services of the Serbian Church was an important manifestation of the change of cultural, musical and national ideology in the 19th century, to which Mokranjac responded
enthusiastically.\textsuperscript{18} As a conductor of the Kornelije Stanković Choral Society, the official choir of the Belgrade Cathedral Church since 1897, Mokranjac was able to gather the necessary literature. Owing to this fact, Mokranjac's faithful student and biographer Kosta P. Manojlović, marked this year as crucial in the context of his melographic work.\textsuperscript{19} Manojlović's claim that Mokranjac was active in this field for more than fifteen years was repeatedly referred to in many subsequent works without being examined.\textsuperscript{20} In Mokranjac's manuscripts, however, there are no preserved autographs which could confirm this assumption. Certain facts from his professional biography cast doubts on his allegedly "committed" melographic and pedagogical work.

As a part-time teacher of "Church chant singing" which included the performing of sacred choral literature in the Belgrade Seminary,\textsuperscript{21} Mokranjac faced the damaging consequences of outdated methods of teaching church chanting,\textsuperscript{22} as well as the general musical illiteracy of the pupils. It all happened in 1894 – the year he wrote a negative opinion on the collection of notated church chants as a member of group of experts appointed by state officials. Until 1901, when he became a full-time teacher, he was not motivated to note church chanting in a more systematic manner, for he was already focused on his work as a composer and a conductor. He put his creative energy and concentration into multipart choral compositions for the central church service – the Liturgy and, above all, into secular works\textsuperscript{23} which made him famous both as a composer and as the conductor of the Belgrade Choral Society in Serbia and abroad.\textsuperscript{24}

Although Mokranjac's students and followers idealized his work in the domain of music pedagogy, the testimonies on the results of his attempts to advance general music education in the First Belgrade Lyceum,\textsuperscript{25} as well as the Belgrade Seminary arouse scepticism. Even if the fact that he abandoned the position of professor of music in the Lyceum

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{22} On many problems in the chanting classes due to the use of the collection of church melodies notated down in so-called \textit{trile} and made by Nikola Trifunović see: The Archives of Serbia; A Report of the Head of the Belgrade Seminary no. 69 from 28th February, 1895; Pavlović, "Kornelije Stanković's Manuscripts," 165.
\bibitem{23} By 1901, Mokranjac has completed the entire \textit{Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, ten Garlands}, and many other church and secular compositions. At the same time, he was collecting folk-songs from different regions (for example in Kosovo, 1896). In 1899, Mokranjac founded a School of Music in Belgrade in collaboration with Stanislav Binčić and Cvetko Manojlović. Mokranjac was the first director of this school. Manojlović, \textit{St. St. Mokranjac}, 65–88; Dejan Despić and Vlastimir Perić, eds., \textit{Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac - Life and Work}, vol. 10 (Belgrade – Knjaževac: Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids, Nota Publishing House for Music Editions, 1998).
\bibitem{25} The students of the First Belgrade Lyceum, educated in Western European notation, theory, and choral singing by Mokranjac, such as Josif Svoboda and Toša Andrejević, took part in Sunday and festal Liturgies in the city’s Cathedral Church. Manojlović, \textit{St. St. Mokranjac}, 72–73; Vasiljević, \textit{The Struggle for Serbian Musical Literacy: From Milovuk to Mokranjac}, 181–182.
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with resentment is not taken into consideration,26 the opinion that he was generally not enthusiastic about working as a teacher/professor27 is confirmed by Mokranjac himself. The composer, whose work was already at the time considered as a core of the “national” music tradition, was hired in 1900 as a music teacher in the newly-founded Saint Sava Seminary in Belgrade.28 Mokranjac’s engagement at this school is significant for the following reasons. First, it was marked by the definite abandonment of textbooks with trills.29 Second, it encompassed his endeavours to improve knowledge of theory of music among the students. For the first time, this subject was taught in a greater number of classes at the expense of practical singing lessons. Mokranjac had written detailed reports on the activities of students in the classes of theory of music, unlike the reports on the classes for monophonic chanting.30

It was clear that the goal of the new teacher was to raise the musical literacy of students, for which him, being an educated musician and not a church chant singer, was certainly more important.31 An interesting fact is that Mokranjac, unlike other teachers who wrote lists of recommended literature in their reports, did not mention any (at that time) available textbooks for the theory of music32 or any notated collections of church chants.33 The initial zeal of this experienced and ambitious musician was, however, quickly lost in the reality of seminarian atmosphere.

By an official act of the Ministry of Education and Church Affairs, in 1902 Mokranjac was also appointed as a teacher at the Old Seminary. Nevertheless, in December 1902, Archimandrite Kirilo (Ružićić), the director of this school, informed the minister that Mokranjac was not fulfilling his duties. Without any previous notice, Mokranjac

26 The Belgrade press reported in detail on the “incident” at the Lyceum. Even Kosta P. Manojlović could not ignore the circumstances that provoked a conflict between Mokranjac and the school’s director. As is known, Mokranjac prolonged his absence from school, disregarding the rules and usual procedures so he could travel to Vienna and hear Anton Rubinstein’s concert. Manojlović, St. St. Mokranjac, 66. Zorislava Vasiljević attempted to interpret this case differently to depict Mokranjac as a victim; cf. Vasiljević, The Struggle for Serbian Musical Literacy. From Milovuk to Mokranjac, 241–245.

27 The view that Mokranjac’s teaching was not original and that he was not a good and responsible teacher was expressed by a composer, conductor, and a great expert on Mokranjac’s life and work Vojislav Ilić during the public lecture “Stevan Mokranjac as a teacher of sol-fa”, given at the symposium “Mokranjac Days” in Negotin in 1982. He pointed out the press articles that criticized Mokranjac’s work. Zorislava Vasiljević tried to dispute his opinion, claiming that Mokranjac, “as every other great man, had enemies among his contemporaries” and that their criticism was unfair. Cf. Vasiljević, The Struggle for Serbian Musical Literacy. From Milosav to Mokranjac, 169–171.

28 From 1900 to 1903, there were two Seminaries in Belgrade: the Old Seminary that has existed since 1836, and the New Seminary of Saint Sava, founded in 1900. Cf. Monah Igrašije (Marković), 175th Anniversary of the Saint Sava’s Seminary in Belgrade (Belgrade: Saint Sava’s Seminary, 2011), 103–104.

29 In April 1901, the Board of Education, which was under Mokranjac’s influence, decided to stop printing Trifunović’s textbooks, “since there are better ways to study church singing”. Cf. Anonymous, “The Work of the Principal Educational Board, Minute-book of the 784th Meeting from April 11th 1901,” Prosvetni glasnik (1901): 549.


31 Cf. Manojlović, St. St. Mokranjac, 91.


33 All we know is that Mokranjac asked for a copy of Tihomir Ostojić’s score which was considered the best anthology of old melodies from Karlović in Vojvodina at the time. Even though he had a chance to perform Ostojić’s work with the Belgrade Choral Society, Mokranjac never mentioned that he was familiar with the work of the famous professor of literature from Novi Sad and an esteemed cultural worker.
simply did not attend classes. After the correspondence between the minister and the rector, the “accused” teacher finally declared that he found the position of the director of the Serbian school of music more important than the post he had been given at the Seminary. Angry at the fact that even a high-ranking state representative did not recognize the value of an institution that he had founded and governed on a voluntary basis, Mokranjac ended his letter with the following words: “I think that it would be in the best interest if the minister would relieve me (...) from the useless and pointless classes at the Old Seminary, thus granting me more time to lead and develop the school for future experts and artists (and the Ministry of Education itself should care about this), and also for the work that everybody rightly expects me to do”.

There are no further records on this case in the archives, but the reports from the Seminary prove that Mokranjac was not relieved from his service. However, these reports also reveal that Mokranjac rejected his ambitious plan to educate young Seminary students, despite the exalted testimonies of Kosta P. Manojlović who attended it at the time. Mokranjac himself noted that, in classes of church chanting, he taught students the chants from Octoechos leaning on the notated versions. He emphasized the improvement that was reached, while noticing that it would be even greater if there were a printed textbook: “Two thirds of the time were lost because the students had to copy melodies into their notebooks that I had previously written down on the blackboard.”

Although he did not describe in detail the content and quantity of songs he mentioned in the report from 1903/1904, Mokranjac has probably notated certain chants from Octoechos by that time. Allusions to the time he spent on the process probably represented a strategy for the promotion of the book he was preparing. However, was the book indeed ready for printing or did Mokranjac’s claims serve as a justification for the postponement and the denial of his own responsibility?

Already in 1898, the church press announced that Mokranjac’s Octoechos was ready for publishing, which was a clear misinformation. Two years later, by the end of 1899,
the famous musician was granted absence from the First Belgrade Lyceum so he could “prepare Octoechos for publishing”. Although Mokranjac was relieved from teaching duties, he failed to complete the manuscript. Six years passed until, in December 1905, in the name of the Council of Saint Sava’s Seminary, the new rector, Stevan M. Veselinović, wrote to Metropolitan Dimitrije of Serbia about the necessity to “begin (sic) work on a notated textbook as soon as possible, so that the teaching of this subject (church chanting – V. S. P. & I. V.) should not be compromised.” The request evidently produced no results, since neither the Council of Bishops nor the Ministry of Education and Church Affairs had the necessary means for the publication of Mokranjac’s textbook. Mokranjac’s estimation of the costs for the publishing of Octoechos was never found, and, therefore, it is hard to conclude whether it was too much for the budget of the Church and State, or whether there was simply a lack of interest on the part of officials who did not consider it urgent.

An interesting piece of information from other documents that refer to the preparation of Octoechos for printing indicates the fact that the problem was not only of financial kind. In the rector’s second letter, written on November 23rd 1905, it was confirmed that funding had been acquired. Once again, the public was informed that Mokranjac and protodeacon Kostić “have finished the notation of Octoechos, and that they are preparing to write down melodically more complex festive chanting”. In the same year, the musician and critic Dušan Janković (1861–1930), one of the rare critics of Mokranjac’s authority, expressed his doubts regarding the quality of the announced but still unpublished textbook.

In the biography written after he was elected as a member of the Serbian Royal Academy of Sciences, it was mentioned that Mokranjac prepared Octoechos in 1905. The preface of the book (and probably the entire book) was completed in May 1908, when Octoechos was finally printed in a small number of copies.

Serbian Church and the tendencies of the Serbian elite to unite all the Serbs in Southern Europe. See: Peno, Orthodox Chanting in the Balkans in the Examples of Greek and Serbian Traditions. Between East and West, Ecclesiology and Ideology, 139–150.

42 He was absent during the second semester, from March until the end of the year; cf. The Report of the King Alexander I Lyceum (Belgrade, 1900), 65.
43 It remains unclear what exactly the words “beginning work” mean: the beginning of the preparation for printing or the beginning of printing?
45 The last sentence seems less credible, since, in the given period, Mokranjac had an influential social position. Although he was not politically engaged, his role as a founder of a Masonic lodge, Pobratim, in 1891, whose members consisted of distinguished intellectuals and entrepreneurs, was of great importance for achieving his professional goals with the Belgrade Choral Society. Zoran D. Nenezić, Freemasonry in Yugoslavia, 1764–1999 (Belgrade, 1999), vol I, 235, vol II, 272; Biljana Milanović, “The Attitude of the State Sphere Towards Choral Associations in Serbia and Kingdom of Yugoslavia,” Muzikologija no. 11 (2011): 224 (219–234).
46 Manojlović points out that Mokranjac paid the costs of the trip and accommodation of the singer Jovan Kostić who came from Požarevac. Nevertheless, as far as we know, Mokranjac was the only composer who received financial support from the Holy Synod of the Serbian Church for his works in the domain of church music. He was given a payment from both the Synod and the Ministry of Education for the repurchase of his Liturgy (1901). Belić, Stevan Mokranjac, 61–62.
47 As the rector underlined in the letter to the Ministry “without this textbook (…) no real progress can be achieved in this subject”, The Archives of Serbia, Ministry of Education, letter from November 23rd 1906, 11.
52 The unofficial textbook for the subject Church chanting, printed in 500 copies, finally came to the attention of the Holy Council of Bishops, whose members unanimously agreed to give financial support to its author. In the reports made on Church chanting at the time, Mokranjac’s Octoechos is mentioned as a primary textbook.
Based on these facts, it can be concluded that, during his work at the Seminary in 1894, as Mokranjac became aware of the “danger” of the potential formal approval of the problematic textbooks from Karlovci in the curriculum of the Belgrade Seminary and arrived at the idea of writing down the chants of Octoechos. Although he mentioned his (un)finished book several times, as did his followers, the Octoechos was not ready for printing until 1905, or, more precisely, until 1908.

Nevertheless, Mokranjac had no trouble in publishing his second book of monophonic chants. It is not clear whether he wanted to convince Church leaders directly or with the help of state officials along with some influential individuals. It is also not known when exactly the second part of Mokranjac’s manuscript, the so-called Strano pjenije, was finished and presented to the Holy Council of Bishops. It is certain that Mokranjac was waiting for a response regarding the process of its printing, and the delays had clearly upset him. In a letter written on 16th May 1911 to an unnamed bishop, Mokranjac asked for help in procuring funds for the publishing of his work while threatening to dispose of the manuscript.53 Finally, his collection of written chants received material support,54 and a commission was appointed to review the manuscript, including the young composer Stevan Hristić.55 For unknown reasons, the prepared autograph was kept out of the reach of the public by church officials,56 while the lithographed edition was used in classes in 1914.57

A detailed analysis of Mokranjac’s collections of church monophonic chants requires a separate study.58 Instead of a conclusion, I shall point out the (un)fulfilled melographic tasks and criteria on which he wrote to the Board of Education in 1894. Mokranjac did not leave any testimony on the process of writing down church melodies in the Preface to his Octoechos.59 There are also no data regarding the singers with whom he collaborated.60 The procedure of the selection of the variants also remained unexplained. While not giving comments on the criteria he used for putting certain variants in the main text and others in the footnotes, Mokranjac obviously thought it acceptable simply to indicate the existence of various variants. However, he did give an indirect clarification of his methods and strivings. Traditional chanting with “outdated ornaments” among Serbian singers of church music was finally stylized and prepared for artistic elaboration. The great self-confidence of an experienced musician expressed in the section of the

53 In this letter Mokranjac asked for a quick decision of the Council of Bishops and, unless it was positive, warned that “with all pain and sadness (he would) burn the entire work,” see: Kosta Manojlović, “Preface,” in Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, General Chant (Belgrade: The State Publishing Company of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1935), 2.
54 Mokranjac received 6,000 dinars according to the anonymous writer of the journal Brankovo kolo. Anonymous, “Mokranjac’s Church Chants,” Brankovo kolo no. 9 (1912): 287. Manojlović adds that Mokranjac was supposed to give 1,000 dinars to the members of the commission. Manojlović, “Preface,” 2.
55 There are still no findings that explain Hristić’s position in the commission or the reasons for the postponement of the publishing.
56 According to Manojlović, the manuscripts were last seen in the monastery of Studenica. Manojlović, “Preface,” 3.
57 The manuscript was lost during the First World War. Owing to Kosta P. Manojlović, the lithographed edition was prepared and published in 1920. Almost a decade later, in 1934, Mokranjac’s devoted student and faithful follower released this edition under Mokranjac’s name and entitled it General Chant. On Manojlović’s interventions, see his “Preface,” 3–13.
58 Except for Bingulac’s objective but still affirmative review, the reviews that followed conformed to Manojlović’s appraisals given in his Commemorative Book.
60 Although Mokranjac was familiar with Serbian church chanting, as Manojlović stated, he wrote down melodies by listening to good singers of the time including those who used the Karlovci variant. Mokranjac referred to his “informants” by their names and even described what they were singing. Cf. St. St. Mokranjac; “Preface,” 3.
Preface in which he proclaimed the longevity of his melographic work and predicted many followers cannot remain unnoticed. His commitment to artistic stylization, whatever its nature and results might be, came to the fore once again. Claiming that he had been a singer since his childhood and that church chanting tradition was familiar to him, Mokranjac tried to impose his own aesthetic norms upon that very tradition, creating what would become known as the “Mokranjac tradition”. Therefore, he gave Serbian national church chanting an undoubtedly European character, which was also an aim of many melographers before him. When it comes to professional expertise and the ability to transpose the melodies from oral tradition to written form, none of them was equal to Mokranjac, but there are certain similarities. Except for noting down the variants of the melodies in his collection, Mokranjac did not surpass his predecessors in any other elements of melographic work. In other words, Mokranjac himself ignored the very criteria he assumed to be necessary to evaluate a melographical process as adequate. This fact, however, did not provoke Mokranjac’s supporters to reconsider the sacrosanct position he has attained since his lifetime which continues to be reified in musicological research.

Srđan Atanasovski, “From Folk Songs to the Garlands: Mokranjac as a Composer,” Zbornik Matice srpske za scenske umetnosti i mužiku no. 51 (2014): 135–152 (with a detailed review of existing literature on the given subject).