

## The new album - Recension

### Eda Zari and *Entropy* – Where Byzantium meets Jazz –



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In a conversation of two years ago, Eda Zari was telling me about her idea for a new album, which would be inspired by Byzantine music, or to be more specific, by the byzantine chant. Essential to the spiritual tradition of the Christian East, this liturgical chant is still being practiced nowadays in several local forms and in different languages.<sup>1</sup> Cantillation is the principle of giving voice to the Sacred Word, thus distinguishing such practice from other forms of secular singing. Although sublimated to the sacramental setting, the music of this chant achieves a distinct emotional power, in certain situations. This might have inspired Eda Zari to delve deeper into the chant's vocal qualities. So almost two years later, her preliminary idea has become an album: *Entropy*, released by Enja Records in December 2016.

The album aims to bring together the byzantine chant and jazz music. It locates them in a musical universe in motion. Entropy is the measure of the transformations that happen within this universe. This is the artistic credo of the album, evoked literally by the verses of William B. Yeats: "Sailing to Byzantium". As a matter of fact, the Constantinopolitan tradition has been the one to inspire Zari's project.

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<sup>1</sup> The repertoire put down roots at the time of the Christian Empire of the East, founded by Constantine the Great and centered in Constantinople. Nowadays, the area of practice goes from Turkey, to the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Italy, Egypt, Ethiopia, Turkey, Middle East, to southern India.

Yet, from the various local or individual styles that have flourished from it in the Balkan and east Mediterranean area, Eda Zari seems particularly attracted to those found in Albania, her birthplace.

The Eight hymns that have been selected for the album - eight a number that seems symbolically associated with the *oktōēchos* (eightfold sound)<sup>2</sup> - are performed in the Albanian language. The artistic work for this album has been preceded by a careful research on the contemporary traits of the Byzantine chant in Albania. For the translations of the religious texts, she relies on Fan Noli, a prominent personality of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Three of the hymns are performed together with the Byzantine choir of chanters “Joan Kukuzeli”, from Tirana’s orthodox cathedral with Theodor Peci as choirmaster. Yet, the most significant aspect of her research is the way she approaches the repertoire: being at the same time observant and sensitive towards it. Each of the tracks in the album conveys the archetypal celebrative dimensions of the sacramental musical tradition. Beyond that, she seeks also the intimate dimension, that arises from the self-involvement in the adoration process.

Two of the most known hymns of the East Christian tradition can be heard in the album: “Kyrie Eleison” (Lord have mercy) and “Krishti u ngjall” (Christ is risen), a troparion from the Easter Sunday. Nevertheless, “O bukuri me nam”, “Eni shihni”, and more especially “Lavirja” and “Zoti është bashkë me ne” (track no. 3 and 4) achieve a thrilling climax, which seems to be the outcome of the evocative and transparent way in which the vocal lines intersect with the ensemble.

This energy blurs the dividing lines between those strict poetic formulas of the chant and the principles of musical composition and improvisation; between voice and instruments; between cantillation and secular singing. It is mediated by echoes from the European Renaissance, from the Ambrosian (Milanese) chant, as well as the universal status of chamber music.

The melody remains however the main musical focus. Eda Zari embodies the poetic and musical devices of the byzantine cantillation, while implanting there her own secular singing experiences. The latter draw on traditional singing models from her native Albania, imbued with a very refined *blues* vocality, all produced by an excellently trained voice.

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<sup>2</sup> *Oktōēchos* is the system of eight church modes of medieval Christian music.

<sup>3</sup> Fan Noli (1882-1965) was a leading intellectual and complex figure in the Albanian history of the first half of the twentieth century: writer, politician, scholar, diplomat, orator, and also composer. In 1908, he was ordained Orthodox priest. In 1923 was consecrated bishop and a year later served as prime minister of the country for nearly six months.

If the *Sacred Word* of the Byzantine chant sublimates music, Eda Zari turns her attention towards it and conveys to music the same significance as the *Word*. Jazz, on the other side, attributes to cantillation the aesthetic value of an artistic performance. This is not something artificial, but as an outcome of a crash, of a collision that brings them together and opts for a mutual consent. This is what *Entropy* does. An act of deconstruction lies on the foreground of this process. Yet, instead of carrying the discussion on any semiotic or philosophical level, this act reminds us a passage from a Christmas troparion: “The earth presents the cave to Him who is beyond reach.”

Essential to this process are the musicians that take part in this project: Ibrahim Maalouf, featured on the album with his distinctive sound of the quarter tone trumpet, the long-time teammate of Eda Zari’s band: Rhani Krija (percussion and gumbrie), and then Ditmar Fuhr (contrabass), Hayden Chisholm (saxophone, sruti box), and Florian Weber (piano). Weber also contributed to the arrangements. With an expressionist and relatively minimalist approach, an outcome of his omnivorous musical appetite in contemporary music (jazz, avant-garde and even a few excursions in popular music), Florian Weber renders a natural harmonic environment for the modal melodies, while enriching them with a sensible piano playing, with incisive polyrhythmic patterns and instrumental grooves.

What provides that incandescent sound to the listeners is, however, the ability of all the musicians to bridge together different musical cultures in a very natural way. From this point of view, *Entropy* might be considered a “concept album”, conceived around a key concept (entropy) and a sense of musical cohesiveness. Herein lies the novelty and audacity of this album. Novelty because it tries to embody the essence of this chant, without being impertinent to the rigorous and ascetic ways it has been practiced and preserved, but rendering them in a very personal manner.

Furthermore, this album is audacious because, departing from a community based practice (that of the Christian-orthodox Albanians), it evolves into a more cosmopolitan level and conveys a universal message through music-making. In a world where everything you do becomes political, especially in terms of religion, it is audacious to bring to the audiences (both western and non-western ones) something that provokes the ear and the mind of the listener with a powerful narrative and a strong emotional energy. This is how *Entropy* should be understood: as a listening experience that sails, via Byzantium towards a music universe that has an immensurable value for our humanity.