

# *The Fall of Constantinople.* *Its musical remembrance in the 1950's*

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## **Introduction**

In my article I present a comparative analysis of Manolis Kalomiris's opera *the Constantine Palaeologus* and Cemal Resid Rey's symphonic poem *Fatih Sultan Mehmet* from the point of view of national canons, political backgrounds and aesthetics. Both pieces deal with the last siege of Constantinople (1453), which ended in the victory of the Ottoman army. This historic turning point inspired very sophisticated, interpretative compositions on both of sides of the former frontline. In the epilogue of my article this horizon is widened by the Hungarian musical reading of this great historical event.

In 1953 – 500 years after the siege – the contemporary artistic remembrance turned the fall of Constantinople into an important part of both national mythologies. These mythologies can demonstrate that Turkey belongs to Europe, and Europe is in debt to Greece. Both nations and even both states have problems with their respective political identities, with the acceptance of their near past and with their vulnerability to the new superpowers. Of course, the artistic pieces analysed below were composed not for political reasons, although their plots and receptions are understandable only with attention to the political background of their births.

## **Political and historical background**

### *The fall of Constantinople (1453)*

The siege of the Constantinople lasted from Friday, 6 April 1453 until Tuesday, 29 May 1453 (according to the Julian calendar). Constantinople attacked by the Ottoman army (80,000 men and large numbers of irregulars), under the command of Sultan Mehmed II was defended by the army of Emperor Constantine XI (whose forces, consisted of about 7,000 men, 2,000 of whom were foreign). The last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI Palaiologos, was last seen casting off his imperial regalia and throwing himself into hand-to-hand combat after the walls of the city were taken.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hindley, Geoffrey: *A Brief History of the Crusades*. Robinson, London, 2004. 300.

Even the siege was not a predetermined victory of the Ottomans, the overpower of the Turkish army was really frustrating – as the eyewitness wrote: “They found the Turks coming right up under the walls and seeking battle, particularly the janissaries... and when one or two of them were killed, at once more Turks came and took away the dead ones... without caring how near they came to the city walls. Our men shot at them with guns and crossbows, aiming at the Turk who was carrying away his dead countryman, and both of them would fall to the ground dead, and then there came other Turks and took them away, none fearing death, but being willing to let ten of themselves be killed rather than suffer the shame of leaving a single Turkish corpse by the walls.”<sup>2</sup>

During the two months’ battle the Turkish army started to be demoralised by the strong defence of the city. The Turks left their troops in a huge number, that’s why Mehmet II had no time to wait more. The fanatised army ran up on the walls on 28 May. In the savage final assault the gifted Genoese strategist, Giovanni Giustiniani was wounded, and this loss increased the chaos and rage in the city so much that the Ottomans could enter it. In the last hours the Byzantine army converged on the square in front of the great church of Hagia Sophia whose bronze gates were barred by a huge throng of civilians inside, praying for divine protection. After the doors were breached, the Turkish troops sorted out the people according their value on the slave markets. Mehmed II allowed his troops to plunder the city for three days, during which multitudes of civilians were massacred and enslaved.<sup>3</sup> According to the cited English historian John Julius Norwich and byzantinist Alexander Vasiliev there was rape, massacre, looting and pillage.<sup>4</sup> As the Venetian surgeon Nicolo Barbaro depicts: “All through the day the Turks made a great slaughter of Christians through the city.”<sup>5</sup>

The Byzantine historian George Sphrantzes was an other eyewitness to the fall of Constantinople. In his chronicle we can read about the third day of the conquest: „On the third day after the fall of our city, the Sultan celebrated his victory with a great, joyful triumph. He issued a proclamation: the citizens of all ages who had managed to escape detection were to leave their hiding places throughout the city and come out into the open, as they were remain free and no question would be asked. He further declared the restoration of houses and property to those who had abandoned our city before the siege, if they returned home, they would be treated according to their rank and religion, as if nothing had changed.”<sup>6</sup>

The Modern Greek and Turkish states forming the bridge between the East and the West are the heirs of the former Byzantine Empire, nationally and especially geopolitically. Thus, the fall of Constantinople is a very important event in the new states’ identity politics. Even in the near past Constantinople was considered as the hoped capital of Greece remaining

<sup>2</sup> Nicolo Barbaro: *Diary of the Siege of Constantinople 1453*. New York, 1969. Available at: <http://www.deremilitari.org/resources/sources/constantinople3.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Michael Llewellyn: *The Fall of Constantinople. History Makers magazine*, No. 5, Marshall Cavendish, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1969. 192.

<sup>4</sup> Vasiliev, A. A. (Alexander Alexandrovich): *History of the Byzantine empire, 324–1453* Vol.2, University of Wisconsin Press, 1964.

<sup>5</sup> Barbaro: *Diary...* Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Sphrantzes, George: *The Fall of the Byzantine Empire: A Chronicle by George Sphrantzes 1401–1477*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.

abroad. On the other hand even if Istanbul belongs to Turkey, it is still an alien part in the “body” of country, too cosmopolitan and European to the Turks, that’s why the capital was set in Ankara.

A city never integrated and much longed for. Similarly to several places of symbolic significance (e.g. Jerusalem, Strasbourg, Fiume) the fate of Constantinople presents the two sides of the same (hi)story, for which there is no solution that could satisfy all the claimants.

### *Greece and Turkey in the 1950's*

The modern Greece was created in 1830 by the victory of the war of independence against the Ottomans. Between 1830 and 1923 the so-called “Great Idea” aimed to reunite all the Ancient Greek regions. This politics failed in 1923, when the Turkish army expelled the Greek army from Asia Minor. Even a strong supporter of this ideology, Eleftherios Venizelos (Prime minister: 1910–1920) declared unrealistic the claims for Constantinople and Asia Minor.

Years of constant coup d’État followed and Venizelos seized power in 1928 (he fails in 1932). E. Venizelos was followed by Ioannis Metaxas in 1936, then the German troops invaded the country, finally a civil war raged from 1944 till 1949. Being in the focus of the attention for both the Western and Soviet Empires it was an unavoidable step to join the NATO in 1952. Democracy started to take shape only in the 1950’s – with the communists and ex-German-collaborators exiled on prison islands till 1963. Thus, Greece had to face three big political problems: its transformation into a democratic state, achieving independence from the Western empires and the Soviet Union, finally to redefine itself after the failure of the “Great Idea.”

Turkey is a new country in an old land. The creation of the new republic (1923) in the heartland of the old Ottoman Empire was achieved in the face of internal traditionalist opposition and foreign intervention. Atatürk’s goal was to build on the ruins of Ottoman Turkey a new country and society patterned directly on Western Europe. He equated westernization with the introduction of technology, cultural institutes, the modernization of administration, and the evolution of democratic institutions. Atatürk’s state was an etatist dictatorship later his successor, Ismet İnönü introduced democratic elections and opened the political system to multiparty activity in 1946. In 1952, similarly to Greece Turkey also became the member of the NATO. After a brief interval of military rule, in 1961 a new, liberal constitution was adopted for the so-called Second Republic, and governance was given to civic hands. Thus Turkey had also three political problems: its transformation into a democratic and secular state with Islamic roots, and to redefine itself after the fall of the Ottoman Empire while being its heir.

### **Parallel biographies**

The life stories of the below studied two composers, Manolis Kalomiris and Cemal Resit Rey contain many common elements. They were the heads of their respective “National school”, both composers had to establish the Western, symphonic culture in their

country, found national conservatories, symphonic orchestras, and both had to retell the national stories by means of opera, operetta and program music. Being the “fathers” of the modern Greek and Turkish classical music, they were supported and used by the actual political leaders irrespectively of their own intentions. In the following section their biographies are going to be compared. As a result the Hungarian reader can discover many common features with the life of Ferenc Erkel.

### *Manolis Kalomiris's biography (1883–1962)*<sup>7</sup>

Manolis Kalomiris was born in Smyrna in 1883 into a rich bourgeois family. He studied music first in Smyrna, Constantinople and Athens and completed his studies at the *Konservatorium für Musik und darstellende Kunst* of Vienna (1901–1906). From 1906 to 1910 he was teaching at the Obolensky School of Music in Kharkov, Ukraine, where he acquainted himself with the masterpieces of Russian music. In 1910 he settled permanently in Athens, which would be his “patria” for the rest of his life.

Returning from Austria and Russia his idea was to found the “Greek National School” similarly to the “New German School” which was created by the students and friends of Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, or to the “Russian Fives” led by Rimsky-Korsakoff. His ideas and activity caused a lot of controversy in the musical and literary circles of Athens. Kalomiris was inimical to Italian music and the so-called Heptanesian composers (who used the traditional Greek folks songs and Byzantine hymns to their compositions), to expressionism and atonality.

To reach a high-level Greek national symphonic culture Kalomiris founded conservatoires, orchestras and opera ensembles. His pedagogical career started in 1911 as appointed professor of piano and theory at the Athens Conservatory. In 1919 he resigned from this job and founded the Hellenic Conservatory, finally in 1926 departed from the Hellenic Conservatory and founded the National Conservatory. A new branch of the Conservatory was founded in Alexandria, Egypt and Kalomiris became its Honorary Director. For the institutes he wrote manuals for theory, solfège, harmony and morphology.

His other aim was to elaborate the Greek philharmonic culture, so he founded orchestras: in 1920 the Hellenic Symphony Orchestra, in 1932 the National Symphony Orchestra, and finally, in 1942 the first permanent, state founded symphony orchestra of Greece (Athens State Orchestra), in cooperation with conductor Filoktitis Economides and with the authorities. As we can see between the 1920s and the 1950s, at the peak of his artistic creativity, Kalomiris became the pillar of Greek musical life.

His third goal was to recreate the Greek opera culture, so he founded the National Melodrama Society, headed the Greek National Opera as the two-thirds of the artists were students and graduates of his National Conservatory.

He died in Athens in 1962.

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<sup>7</sup> Tsetsos, Markos: “Constantine Palaeologue”. In: Booklet of the CD “Constantine Palaeologue”. FORMIGX Concerts Company, 1997.

*Kalomiris' political attitude*<sup>8</sup>

Kalomiris' political attitude is closely connected to his relationship with the above mentioned "Great Idea". Kalomiris' views were formed by this patriotic political plan, but finally – together with the national leaders – he had to abandon it. His social-cultural-political activity represents his departure from the idea of the nation and his arrival to the society. His career deserves more precise research work, hereby the following facts are put in the highlight.

In 1918 Kalomiris was appointed inspector general of military musicians and in 1920, on the occasion of the liberation of Smyrna by the Greek army, his *Symphony of Valour* was interpreted in the Odeon of Herodes Atticus. In 1936 he was at the head of the band playing at the funeral of Eleftherios Venizelos (1864–1936) despite the current dictator, Metaxas' prohibition. This resulted in his dismissal from the Military Band. However, in 1938 he wrote a symphonic poem inspired by the famous novel *Good-for-nothing Minas* written by Kostis Bastias, Metaxas' cultural adviser par excellence.

Two years later, in 1940, his opera *The Mother's Ring* was produced in Berlin's Volksopera. During the German occupation he was accused of pro-Nazism by musical circles and he got life threats from the leftists of the period. Finally, he helped many communists find work as musicians and return from exile.

*Cemal Resit Rey's biography (1904–1985)*<sup>9</sup>

Cemal Resit Rey was born into one of the last Ottoman families on 25 October 1904, in Jerusalem. His father, Ahmet Resit Rey, was appointed as Governor, in Jerusalem. The family came to Istanbul, where he began to study piano at the age of five. Due to his father's political status the whole family was transported to Paris in 1913, where they had close ties – among others – with the French President of the time Raymond Poincaré.

Cemal Resit began his musical studies in the Parisian Conservatory with the support of Gabriel Faure. Ahmed Resit Rey and his family could not remain in Paris when the war broke out. Since they could not return to Turkey either, they settled in Geneva. Cemal Resit continued to study music at the Conservatory of Geneva. For a few months he visited the Istanbul Conservatory in 1919, but the level was so low, that he left for Paris. He studied Gabriel Faure's aesthetic lessons, and the technique of composing, conducting and playing piano.

In 1923 he arrived to Istanbul, the metropolis that remained for him the safe "patria" in his life. There Rey set out to found the institutions and the tradition of the classical music in the western sense. Before his activity there was not a classical symphony orchestra in Turkey. He had to educate the Turkish musicians for it. In the Conservatoire he started to teach piano at a very high level. Since 1926 he started to teach composition, thus all of the later composers were his disciples. In 1940 he was elected as the principal of the Conservatoire that Rey elevated into the western educational level.

<sup>8</sup> The summary is based on the text of Yannis Belonis in the booklet of the CD "Constantine Palaeologus". Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Yener, Faruk: Cemal Resit Rey – lexikon article. In: Stady, Stanley (ed.): *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Oxford University Press, 1980. Vol. 15. 782.

Rey was a conductor, as well. In 1926 he founded the first and only choir, which debuted in the same year. In 1934 some students were prepared enough to play in a string orchestra, so he founded the Istanbul Strings. Finally, the brass players were also prepared to play in an ensemble, thus he set up the Istanbul Philharmonic Orchestra, which was led by him till 1968 as their chief conductor.

He organised the first public concert in Turkey in 1926, but he realised, that it is not enough to play classical music in Turkey: Turkish classical music has to be spread abroad as well, so he decided to be a guest conductor all over the world. This gifted, but in Turkey moderately celebrated musician started his world career in 1949. In the next twenty years he was a regular guest conductor at Vienna Philharmonics, French National Orchestra, Sancta Cecilia Symphony Orchestra, the Athens Philharmonics, and several Eastern European state Orchestras, e.g. in Warsaw, Sofia, Beograd.

Rey's last remarkable job was his cooperation with the Turkish State Radio in Ankara, where he served as chief of Western Music Publishing between 1938–1940. In 1940 he left for Istanbul, being tired of Ankara's dreary cultural ambience. In Istanbul he had another chance to cooperate with the State Radio, for two years he was the chief of Istanbul Radio Music Publishing. Later he decided to return to conducting.

In 1969 Rey became a retired professor and a conductor, and composed again with full energy. In the last year of his life his favourite operetta, the *Life of Lükös* was renewed in Istanbul. He visited its début and died on the following day (1985).

### *Resit Rey's political attitude*<sup>10</sup>

Cemal Resit Rey was the member of the Ottoman emperor dynasty, his father, the governor of Jerusalem later became a diplomat. Resit Rey did not go home in the time of the First World War, he remained with his mother in Geneva. In 1920 he tried to live in Istanbul but soon he left for Paris. After Atatürk's coup Rey settled in Istanbul, but his ambiguous relationship with both the old and the new regimes is clearly recognizable.

His first remarkable opera was written for a French libretto about Sultan Cem, the strange and tragic hero of the Ottoman history. This poet sultan ruled the empire only for a few days till his brother Bayezid II expelled him from Turkey. The Ottoman composer's opera dedicated to the Ottoman poet ruler was not performed in Istanbul, only once in Paris (1924). Resit's next political step was to take part in the competition organised for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic. Resit composed a heroic, patriotic song, an anthem for Turkey, but the jury declared it too sad. Their problem was the minor chord in the finale – they found it similar to the Funeral march of the *Eroica Symphony*.

Finally, in 1953, in the year of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of Constantinople Resit composed a powerful symphonic poem (*Fatih Sultan Mehmet*) about the siege and the conqueror. Surprisingly there was no record of the composition, neither a performance. However it should be noted that in the piece Sultan Mehmet is struggling with doubts most of the time, and the fall of the wall is represented by glissando which gives irony to the elevation.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.forumturka.net/forum/biyografiler/374172-cemal-resid-rey.html>

Cemal Resit Rey, the composer number one of the new Turkish republic was deeply associated with the great Ottoman sultans. He lived almost his all life in Istanbul, and avoided Ankara. His apolitical behaviour represents partly the attitude of the artist intelligentsia, partly his inability to take part in the post-Ottoman politics. Rey's some works represent truly and very critically the Ottoman history – without any significant reception in his country.

### **Parallel compositions about the fall of Constantinople**

For both composers the music about Constantinople is pure “ars musica”. For Cemal Resit Rey the conqueror sultan was an idealised ancestor, a poet and warrior at the same time. For Kalomiris the fall of the City provided opportunity to confess his disillusionment in the “Great Idea” and his arrival to the contemporary Greek social reality. The two compositions are really brilliant, but they were not received as well as they merited. These could be too complicated, too critical or too sophisticated for the popular perceptions or political usage.

#### *Cemal Resit Rey's note about his symphonic poem*

It was in Madrid in 1953 that Cemal Resid Rey, hearing the church bells arrived to the conclusion that it would be a remembrance of the seizure of Constantinople. He sat down immediately and wrote what was to become the main theme of the symphonic poem.

“This piece, inspired by such an important event aims in its initial phases and by the use of two contrasting musical ideas, to express the twin aspect of the personality of the warrior-poet, to show his fears and doubts about the battle, his trust in his soldiers and to echo his fervent prayers. The poem continues with sudden imperious signal for the attack, the quick episode of the battle itself, the collapse of the walls through which the victorious army enters the conquered City, led by the music of the Janissaries.

Instead of the blood-thirsty monster living in the European imagination, the sultan emerges as a poet. His thoughts and feelings are projected by a violin solo, seeking to express the sublime words of peace, the respect for humankind and their beliefs, his hope in a universal understanding free of religious prejudice or sectarian divisions.

To this a Muslim hymn answers, the voice of victorious men grateful to God for his blessings timid at first but increasingly sonorous. The music of Christian bells echoes joy to glorify that day, bear witness to the superbly humanitarian gestures of the Conqueror.”<sup>11</sup>

#### *Rey's artistic interpretation of the fall*

In 1953 Rey decided to compose again after a long silence since 1942 (the year of the death of his beloved brother and librettist). In 1953 he composed a symphonic cycle: two dark symphonic poems and an ironic piano concerto. The first composition of that year was

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<sup>11</sup> Cemal Resid Rey: Preface to the Fatih Sultan Mehmet. In: Cemal Resid Rey: *Le Conquérant*. Hungaroton, Booklet, 1989. 3–4.

his gloomiest symphonic poem "Appeal to the Death" based on an old Turkish tale "Çağrılış". About Death, who is not looking for a country or a person, "he" is an indispensable part of life and wherever he goes people ask for him. The second piece from 1953 is a symphonic poem about Sultan Mehmet. Finally, his last composition from the same year, the piano concerto "*Katibim*" dedicated to the city of Istanbul is a variation on an old Turkish folk song. The original song (*Katibim*) tells the story of a clerk winning the beautiful Üsküdar's hand. However as Üsküdar loses her appeal as time goes by, the clerk's victory fades. Rey's "dark" trilogy depicts decadence, death and suffering as integral parts of human life.

If we add to these symbolic elements, that Rey usually stayed abroad most part of every year since 1949 as a guest conductor – we can suspect some desire to get out of the country. Personal, artistic and political troubles could worry him – and these concerns set the real background for his controversial portrayal of his idealised ancestor: Fatih Sultan Mehmet.

The plot of the symphonic poem – as mentioned by the author's words above – is a simple story: the sultan leads his army against the walls of Constantinople, suddenly he faces doubts because of the brutality of the combat, finally he re-enforces himself and the army. When the troops occupy the city, he is worried about the inhabitants; finally he enters the capital and ensures amnesty to everybody. In Rey's view this was the only solution for Sultan Mehmet to make peace with his conscience. In the reality the amnesty was declared only on the third night of the slaughter.

For a better understanding of this music we could compare it with Shostakovich's symphonies. The siege part of Rey's music can evoke Shostakovich's *Leningrad symphony*, while the anguish of the sultan in some way recalls the parody tunes of part 2 of Shostakovich's *LX<sup>th</sup> symphony*. The artistic enigmas (metaphors), the political overtones and the historical descriptions are similar. Considering these elements we can grasp the message of Rey's music.

The falsified historical story does not make the symphonic poem neither a triumph march, nor a heroic musical statue for the Conqueror. Above the personal association and the political surface the piece is written with the aim of conveying "hope in a universal understanding free of religious prejudice or sectarian divisions". That is why the chime of bells is so important both symbolically and melodically. The religious symbols echo the events of the secular world as the bells announce the victory of Mehmet II.

Rey's symphonic opus of 1953 discloses a stoic sense of *ars musica*. As it is mentioned, the symphonic poem of Sultan Mehmet is the second part of a triptych, thus it can be interpreted in view of the other two pieces. Sultan Mehmet the ruler needs victory, the spreading empire needs a new capital, so the poet-emperor has to be a warrior and a butcher in order to realise these aspirations. But as we know from the *Katibim*, every victory lasts three days.

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To understand the poor reception of this brilliant piece (or that of whole trilogy), it is enough to focus only on his above cited introduction stressing the merits of being secular and free of prejudice or divisions. The symphonic poem was to be performed in Paris in 1953, but Resit Rey and withdrew from the French National Orchestra. In 1958 he could



take the risk of the performance, and the same orchestra played it in Paris. There is no information about its reception in France and Turkey, but it has to be mentioned that its first recording was made in Budapest by the Hungarian State Orchestra in the studio of the Hungaroton in 1988. Cemal Resit Rey nowadays is very famous in Turkey, the national cultural palace bears his name, but this piece is missing from the repertoire of the symphonic orchestras founded by him...

It is nevertheless ironic that the chime of bell sounds throughout the Christian world at noon does not commemorate the siege of Constantinople but the victory of János Hunyadi against sultan Mehmet II in the battle for Nándorfehérvár (today: Beograd). Thus the work stresses one of the biggest failures of the Ottoman historiography. It is also ironical, that the Hungaroton did not add a note about the falsified historical data (of the bells and amnesty).

### *Kalomiris notes about his opera*

Kalomiris planned to compose the opera since 1953, but he started the work in 1957 and finished in 1961. He recalls his memories of this period in the following sentences: "In 1953 Kazantzakis gave me an issue of "Nea Estia" containing the text of the tragedy *Constantine Palaeologus*. As I had begun my lyrical work with an early passionate work by Kazantzakis, so should I finish it with his latest dramatic national masterpiece. I remember reading *Constantine Palaeologus*, it had pervaded by spirit. I couldn't hold back my tears. I felt I had to translate my emotions into sounds and rhythms, while on the other hand I felt daunted by the sheer greatness of the task.

Four years went by until some time in April 1957 I found myself lying in a hospital bed. As I was fighting for my life, the image of my granddaughter Charoula and the vision of Constantine Palaeologus strengthened my will to continue living.

And I lived. Right after convalescence I was able to concentrate and work again creatively, so I made up my mind. I would translate the emotion I had felt when reading Constantine Palaeologus into sounds and rhythms. I would devote whatever power had been left in me to singing it...

Today, inspecting the work of my hands, I believe I have the right to be proud... I do believe that with the work I invested in *Palaeologus*, more than in any other work of mine..., I opened a new page in the history of Greek art! And this not because of the way I treated Byzantine modes and psalms, but because I showed that here, in a musical Greece swept by different kinds of winds and doubts, I remain true to my artistic ideals, my spiritual gods, my Faith in the Greek Musical Idea."<sup>12</sup>

### *The Plot of the "Palaeologus"*

In the first act (*Byzantium. Square in front of the palace*) people are praying to God and to the Virgin, protectress of the Greeks, to relieve the city from the siege. Notaras, the Grand Duke claims that God has cursed the city because of the King's alliance with the Franks. The Firewalker, a nihilist is also prophesying disaster and the fall of the city. The act finishes in a mass, where Firewalker predicts the immanent death.

<sup>12</sup> Manolis Kalomiris: Preface to the first edition of the score of *Constantine Palaeologus*. 1961.

In the second act Constantine appears with his Frankish friends and other noblemen. They all say farewell to him and go to battle. The “mothers of the city” come and plead him to make peace saying: “The City will be lost. Make peace, your Excellency, so that our sons will not be lost as well.”

Constantine’s lover, Anna pleads him to run away together. He refuses, because his supreme duty forces him to stay. Anna declares that she will stay with him till the tragic end. Charkoutsis, a Cretan captain, and his men fight and give their lives “for the honour” of the city.

The Abbot of Hagia Sophia asks Constantine to hand over the crown claiming that this is the wish of the Virgin. Constantine, however, amidst sudden lightning which makes the people believe that the Virgin is present, convinces the abbot that their duty is to fight.

In the third act an interrupted mass takes place. Charkoutsis, wounded, comes in and announces the heroic death of Constantine. Finally, the voice of the abbot pervades the wailing of the crowd. He urges the people to raise their souls to God saying “Many years will pass but *in the end the city will be ours again.*” The gates of Hagia Sophia open up and the Turks rush into the church.

### *Kalomiris’ artistic interpretation of the fall*

Rey uses the victory of 1453 over the Byzantines as a symbol for that of the laic Turkey over the fundamentalism, while Kalomiris interprets the fall as the birth of the brand new Greece.

To catch the message of the Kalomiris-opera first we have to analyse its artistic devices. As it is proper to a national opera in its melody we can recognize all the elements of the “Greek National School”: the Wagnerian dramaturgy, the Rimsky-Korsakoffian melodicality, and some Byzantine chant as well. Kalomiris regarded *Palaeologus* as his topmost musical achievement and was fully conscious of his artistic goal: “To combine Western Music with Byzantine chants and modes into a unified artistic whole, which, I think, has never been attempted before to such an extent in Greek musical creation.”<sup>13</sup>

Allusions to Stravinsky, especially to the oratorio-opera *Rex Oedipus determine the sonority of Kalomiris’ piece*. Although he avoided any reference to the ancient Hellas, the sonority of *Rex Oedipus* may have been important for him because of the centrality of the fate-motif in both pieces. Furthermore we can consider some influence of D. Shostakovich, especially in the usage of the major triad for Constantine, Anna and the Holy Virgin. All the other characters are depicted by atonal music. In the world chaotic atonality prevails – only the real heroes can elevate themselves into the harmonic tonal registers.

Kalomiris’ opera is based on the mammoth-ensemble of the *Fall of the Gods (Die Götterdämmerung)* by Richard Wagner. The Wagnerian instrumentation represents Kalomiris’ aim: to tell the story of the fall of Constantinople, the earthly “Walhalla”. As he summarised in a letter: “The fall of the City, an unexpected loss, brings to the foreground the problem of the identity of the Greeks, who feel threatened by East and West [...]. As a

<sup>13</sup> Tsetsos, *Constantine Palaeologus*. Ibid.

cultural component, this double threat leads to an ideological sublimation and craving for cultural isolation as a source of power for facing destiny.”<sup>14</sup>

The symbolic gods of the late Byzantium were the two protagonists, the emperor Constantine and his lover, Anna whose leitmotif after her death is used for a chant to the Divine Protectress. Constantine and Anna are free as the gods since they know no fear, neither hope. They are manifestations of the Nietzschean “supermen” who freely and not through externally imposed values. The historical event of the fall of Byzantium becomes a symbol of the present “Nietzschean” decadence, from which new values and new ideals can emerge. The issue here is the renaissance of the Greek nation. As Kalomiris said, “even when you see your dreams in ruins, desperation itself becomes a regenerative power”.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the audience gets convinced that the new Greece can rise up from the martyrs of Constantinople. Exceeding himself Kalomiris – a spokesman for the idea of the Greek nation while ignoring the Greek “volkisch” culture – elevated the Greek people into the level of martyrdom in his *magnum opus*. In the first and second acts the protagonists of his composition are the civilians, the abandoned mob of Byzantine streets. They shout, cry, claim for bread, peace or fight, they are manipulated by all political leaders (the abbot, the grand duke, the military commanders) – and they obey everybody except their ruler. This plot was repeated in the contemporary Greek history in Kalomiris’ life: the list contains three dethronements, seven *coups d’État*, three dictatorships, two civil wars and one occupation. Thus the people of the Nietzschean decadence deserved Kalomiris’ strong criticism.

Thus in the third act Kalomiris transforms the people of the new Greece into heroes, martyrs or proper victims. When the “superhuman” (Constantine and Anna) sacrificed themselves, the mob becomes a nation as they gather in the Hagia Sophia. This newborn nation attends the last mass, the requiem for Byzantium, and elevated into the height of the Walhalla. Sitting silently in the rows they become similar to the *Götterdämmerung*’s divine council waiting for the end of their world.

Kalomiris buries the “Great Idea”, the imagined but not existing idealistic nation. He decided to create the real society of the modern Greece by artistic means – as much as they are ready to face their destiny. In Kalomiris’ opera they dared – consequently they could be martyrs for the honour of the later nation.

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In 1962 the full opera was performed by the Greek National Opera on the Athens Festival. A year later the finale of the third act was presented in Munich by the Orchestra and Choir of the Bavarian Radio conducted by Milan Horvard. In 1971, the Greek National Opera repeated the performance in Thessaloniki. Then the work vanished from the modern repertoire until it was resurfaced in as late as 1997, in Thessaloniki on a festival. That time the music was recorded by the Robert Schumann German Philharmonic Orchestra, the Choir of Thessaloniki, the children’s choir of the Thessaloniki College and various soloists.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

In 2001, *Palaeologus* was presented in Athens by the Athens Festival with almost the same casting.<sup>16</sup>

Did the *Palaeologus* arrive to the Greeks? Are they the nation Kalomiris dreamt of? The opera is available on CD's, but it is not on repertoire. As the abbot in Constantinople waits for the liberation of the city, Kalomiris's opera is still waiting for the time when its story will have been only history.

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<sup>16</sup> Svolos, Yannis: "Stage Productions of Constantine Palaeologus." In: Booklet of the CD "Constantine Palaeolgus", Ibid.

## Summary

The fall of Constantinople became inherent part of the Greek and Turkish national mythologies. The Turkish Cemal Resit Rey's composition from 1953 by a symphonic poem *Fatih Sultan Mehmet*, that stresses – on the one hand – the victory of a secular European state which – on the other hand – has still doubts of its national identity.

The Greek Manolis Kalomiris' opera *Constantine Palaeologus*, composed between 1958 and 1961 demonstrates the birth of the Greek nation.

The list containing all the works that deal with the fall of Constantinople can be very long. I am picking up only a Hungarian piece: Emil Ábrányi's *Byzantium* composed from a play by Ferenc Herczegh. Herczegh's drama – written in 1904 on the eve of the World War I – was interpreted in Hungary – even by the contemporary prime minister – as a prophecy of the coming fall of Hungary. Ábrányi composed his opera in 1942, when the next tragedy has already started. The plot of the opera is similar to Kalomiris' – the only important difference is that except for the emperor and his love the people of Byzantium deserved the fall: "Everything is for sale" – sings a friend of the emperor cynically. Shall we be surprised that this opera has not been performed so far?