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A BYZANTINIST OF SERBIAN ORIGIN
A Conversation With Musicologist Miloš Velimirović



Among the musicologists of Serbian descent living in the diaspora, Miloš Velimirović is definitely the best known, and his work is equally respected everywhere, from America to the Slavic world. During his long scholarly career in the United States he was involved

with a variety of projects concerning the study of both western and eastern music history, but also the control of music resources and documentation. However, central to his interests was the study of medieval Byzantine and Slavonic chants, the field which he strongly kept on the map of the American scholarship for almost half a century. After attending the University in Belgrade, Velimirović studied at Harvard, receiving his master's degree in 1953 and doctorate in 1957 with the dissertation *Byzantine Elements in Early Slavic Chant*. From 1955 to 1957 he was a researcher at the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies in Washington. After periods of teaching at Yale (1957-69) and the University of Wisconsin (1969-73), he gained a professorship at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville (1973-1993).

Velimirović's prolific studies on Byzantine and Slavic music are a significant contribution to our knowledge about medieval music in East European cultures. He was in charge of *Collegium musicum*, a music edition published by Yale University between 1958 and 1973; and general editor of the series *Studies in Eastern Chant* published by Oxford University Press between 1966 and 1979. From 1964 to 1969 he presided over the international committee for cataloguing medieval Slavonic manuscripts with music, and for many years

he was the area editor for Byzantine music in the Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale. In 1968/69 he was president of the New England Chapter of the American Musicological Society.

In recognition of the significance of his research, the National and Capodistrian University of Athens awarded Miloš Velimirović an honorary doctorate on 18 October 2004. The award ceremony took place at the old university building under the Acropolis in the Plaka area. After a reading of the citation and the presentation of the degree, Velimirović spoke “On the Byzantine Influence on Early Slavonic Chant”. Velimirović was also honored by a Festschrift *Vizantija i Evropa: Liturgičeskie i muzykal'nye svjazi – Sbornik statej k 80-letiju doktora Miloša Velimirovića*, edited by Nina Gerasimova-Persidskaja and Irina Lozovaja and published by the department for Russian church music of the Moscow Conservatory (Moscow, 2003).

Might we start this interview with your recollections of your youth and family in Belgrade?

I was born in Belgrade on 10 December 1922; my father was a physician and my mother a piano teacher. Jokingly I used to say that my father was the only dissonant note in an artistic family, as my sister was a professional painter and my parents expected that I would be a professional violinist. Only recently I learned that in his early teens my father started learning to play the violin, but stopped after the neighborhood kids in Pirot teased him that he wanted to take the job away from local Gypsies. In my early youth, my mother often played the piano and used to bring home some of her pupils for lessons. Many of them played Beethoven's sonatas that became among my favorite for life.

By the age of six I was taken for a musicality test to Jovan Zorko, the director of the Belgrade Music School, who declared that I was ready to start taking lessons. Soon I received my first violin, and Zorko was my teacher for the next twelve years. Later on I was also enrolled in Dara Nestorović's piano class. I made good progress during the first few years but when I reached my teens I started developing new interests. I was seduced by jazz and dance music, neglecting the violin, although at some point I did practice six and more hours a day. I studied basic music theory with Josip Slavenski, whom we all liked not only as a teacher but also because he was very funny and an excellent raconteur. With Miloje Milojević I studied counterpoint and with Kosta Manojlović the history of music. At that time I also played in the second violin section of the school's orchestra, which was conducted by Jovan Bandur. When the Music Academy was founded in 1937 things started to look somewhat different since Belgrade now offered a higher level of music education where more talented students could continue studying music.

A few concerts from before the 1941 tragedy left a deep impression on me: one was by Jacques Thibaud whose tone was enchanting and I realized then that the violin could actually sing. The other was by Zlatko Baloković who, among other pieces, played Bloch's *Nigun*. Hearing it was magic and I understood

then that music can transcend reality. Another unforgettable concert was by the Polish composer and pianist, Karol Szymanowski, in which he played with violinist Marija Mihajlović his *La fontaine d'Arethuse*. I find it curious that before my departure to the U.S. in 1952 I seldom attended choral concerts and no concerts of singers that I can remember. As for the theater, before 1941 I was more familiar with ballets than with operas.

In 1941 – the year when I finished the gymnasium and the country was broken up and occupied by Nazi forces – it was impossible to continue with studies since the Germans had closed the university. At the insistence of my mother I was admitted to the pedagogical division of the Music Academy, since the quality of my playing did not qualify me for the artistic division. I now had new teachers, Petar Stojanović taught violin, Jelica Krstić piano, Jelka Nikolić the obligatory voice lessons, Stanojlo Rajičić, who was probably the best organized and most efficient teacher, taught a course on musical instruments, Kosta Manojlović taught music history, and Petar Bingulac musical forms. When I resumed studies at the Music Academy for a year in 1947, I studied composition with Mihovil Logar, in the same class with Darko Obradović and Slobodan Habić. This time I did not practice the violin anymore, but did continue taking piano lessons with Vera Veljkov-Medaković. Among the other professors were Nikola Hercigonja for history of music, Marko Tajčević for score reading, and Petar Konjović for musical folklore. It seems that I have studied with all who make up the history of Serbian music of that period.

Your professional life and your interests were always at a crossroads, affected by different influences. First you studied art history and then turned to music history; besides studies of Eastern Orthodox music you have also done research on the history of 17th-century Italian opera and music terminology; in the research of Eastern Orthodox music, a significant part of your research concerned the crossroads between Byzantine and Slavic traditions. Let's try to unravel these crossovers starting with your studies in Belgrade. Why art history and not music history? What was the decisive moment that turned your interest from art to music history?

Even before any formal course on the history of mankind and before my first course on antiquity in the second grade of gymnasium, I had curiosity about the past. I remember that in art classes, when I learned about perspective I chose to draw a picture of a Greek soldier running after the battle at Marathon, and arriving in Athens to shout “Victory” as he fell dead! It was a crude drawing but the choice of subject matter was indicative of my slowly growing inclination. In the sixth grade of gymnasium I had a history teacher that my whole class disliked because of his speech impediment. Yet his lectures hit the mark and made me decide that history was going to be my lifelong field of concentration. In our final grade – as we were getting ready for graduation – the class decided that we should prepare a volume that would show what we have learned and what we plan to do in the future. Everyone selected a topic and wrote an essay for this volume. I selected

to write about nineteenth-century Serbia in the eyes of foreigners. However, the beginning of the German occupation in 1941 terminated all activities and the essay remained unfinished.

In subsequent years, especially when my sister began studying painting at the Art Academy, I started learning more about the fine arts. This interest of mine was also prompted by the fact that my father's sister Vuka was a sculptor, quite active in Paris between 1920 and the late 1930s. At that time I still preferred music, which I declared to be my first occupation and involvement with historical studies was to be my passion. In the mid-1940s I learned that Curt Sachs had studied history of the fine arts before becoming a historian of musical instruments. Thus, after I returned to Belgrade from military service in 1947, I embarked on two sets of studies: the Music Academy and – since there was no department of music history at the time – the history of fine arts at the university. There I wanted to learn the research methodology, which I could then apply to the study of the history of music. I was fortunate to have studied at a time when a superb group of teachers at Belgrade University was guiding the younger generations into the world of learning. My principal guide into art history was Svetozar Radojčić who was a very fine lecturer and made me decide that my life goals would have been fulfilled if I were to become as good a lecturer as he was. National history was taught by Mihailo Dinić, Vasa Čubrilović, and Ivan Božić; Byzantine history by George Ostrogorsky; classical archeology by Miloje Vasić, diplomatics by Viktor Novak, and museology by George Manozisi. There was also a compulsory short survey of art history taught by the well-known historian of architecture Djurdje Bošković who sounded like a loudspeaker for the Soviet interpretation of the arts. It almost seems that I could not help it but become at least “historically minded”. My specialization at the University was the history of Serbian medieval art that was developing as an offshoot of Byzantine art and its culture. Having already attained certain fluency in that area it seemed natural that I would be interested in learning something about Byzantine music.

You had also witnessed the beginnings of the department for music history at the Belgrade Music Academy?

During my first year of studies at the Belgrade University and while still enrolled in the composition class of Mihovil Logar, I decided to ask Miloje Vasić, professor of archeology, for advice about writing a seminar paper. At that time it was unheard of that a first year student would write a paper and present it in a seminar setting. When I spoke to him in his rooms, the then 78-year old founder of archeology in Serbia asked whether I knew any foreign language. I replied that I knew French, German and to a lesser extent English and Russian, and added that I was a musician and might be interested in learning about ancient Greek musical instruments. He instructed me to look up the *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* by Charles Daremberg and Edmond Saglio at the University Library and tell him when I was ready.

Concurrently with studying at the two higher education institutions (which was against the rules at the time) I was earning my living as a violinist in Radio Belgrade's Orkestar za Obrade Narodnih Pesama, then conducted by Djordje Karaklajić and later on by Bogdan Cvejić, and for a while also by Lazar Buta. The job required that I never miss a rehearsal or broadcast of the orchestra, but I also almost never missed a lecture at the university in spite of my complicated timetable. After some three months of research about ancient instruments, perhaps in February or March of 1948, I made my notes presentable and informed Professor Vasić that I was ready to schedule my lecture.

The presentation was a morning meeting in a tiny classroom, attended by some of my closest friends. Professor Vasić sat at a desk while I stood at an improvised lectern with my paper ready to read. As I started with the presentation, Professor Vasić interrupted me when I mentioned that the earliest representation of the kithara was in a scene of *taurobolium*, on a sarcophagus from Hagia Triada: "Sir, do not use words that you do not know the meaning of! What is a *taurobolium*?" I was prepared for such a question and explain that the *taurobolium* was a sacrificial offering of a bull. The class was stunned that someone answered Professor Vasić and showed his teeth as it were! Since my paper was long and I could not finish the presentation in the allotted time, its continuation was scheduled for the following week. By then the word had spread about my performance and the classroom was filled to the last seat. Its culminating point was when Professor Vasić thanked me for my presentation adding: "I am pleased to say that I have learned something from your paper!" That kind of complimentary statement was unexpected, to say the least!

A number of people heard about this presentation and the news reached the Music Academy as well. It appears that both the president of the Music Academy, Mihailo Vukdragović, and the director of the newly founded Musicological Institute at the Serbian Academy of Sciences, Petar Konjović, recognized that since both Zagreb and Ljubljana already had studies in the history of music, the Belgrade Music Academy too should have a department for the study of the history of music. By fall 1948, what was called the sixth department of the Music Academy was founded and I was its first student. The senior teacher of music history was a Marxist historian and composer of some repute, Nikola Hercigonja. Later came Milo Asić for Croatian music and Stana Djurić-Klajn for the history of Serbian music. I then tried to recruit a few of my fellow students from the art history department to join me at the Music Academy, and one of them was Roksanda Pavlović (married Pejović), known to us as Aja. A significant addition was Dimitrije Stefanović, whom I had known as a piano student of my mother's and also from the University where he had been enrolled in the English department.

I was invited also to make use of resources at the Musicological Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts where I was informally treated as an acting librarian. After resigning my position in the Radio Orchestra in 1949, I obtained a stipend and together with Dragan Papadopolos started preparing for employment at the Institute.

Who were for you the most influential figures in Belgrade during your student days?

Among my music teachers were Logar and Rajičić; for history Radojčić and Ostrogorsky; way back in the gymnasium, the history professor, Nikola Popović. Among my fellow students, Duško Skovran, who was an erudite and generous in loaning books and scores.

What was the decisive moment for turning to Eastern Orthodox music as the main area of your research? Did you know before coming to Harvard that Byzantine chant was going to be your life-long calling?

I did not know that. I suppose that having specialized at the university in medieval Byzantine art among the Serbs, I wished to round up all arts fostered in Byzantium and after deciding that musicology was going to be my calling, it was a natural step to move into an area that offered possibilities for research.

The year 1952 was the start of your graduate studies at Harvard. What were your experiences of working with Otto Gombosi there?

I had known of the name Gombosi from articles I had read in Belgrade. When I met him he was quite warm and at gatherings he would put an arm around my shoulder, usually introducing me as “his neighbor”, since Serbs live next to Hungarians. He was a very knowledgeable person and an excellent communicator. When asked about something he was unfamiliar with, he would publicly declare “I don’t know”, which at first made me wonder how can a university professor not know everything in his own field. This for me was a lesson in scholarly honesty. However, the best teacher at Harvard and overall in all years of my music studies, was Walter Piston. I learned from him and by his example more than from anyone else about the art of music.

After Harvard followed specialization with Egon Wellesz.

Wellesz was unquestionably an inspiring teacher, relying more on inspiration of the subject and its attraction than on a methodical coverage and analysis of the technical details. He often urged me to try more than one approach to understanding the neumatic notation and then to compare my results with his already published examples. I often learned by first making mistakes and then finding the best solution by correcting the mistakes in transcriptions of neumatic notation.

Unlike the Eastern Orthodox chant which is still a vital part of religious ceremony, Gregorian chant has been largely eliminated from the Roman Catholic liturgy since Vatican II. Still, Gregorian chant today has a wide audience; it is performed by many ensembles, and has become a standard segment of early music repertoire. Not long ago some recordings of Gregorian chant became best sellers around the world. Eastern Orthodox music, on the other hand, is less frequently present in the concert repertoire and recorded by mainstream record labels. Is audience today in the West insufficiently sensitive to the aesthetics of Eastern Orthodox Church music?

At least part of Western music audiences is exposed to Gregorian chants in their churches and by going to a concert performance they are rejoicing in the “fulfillment of expectations” recognizing something familiar. They are also having fewer problems with following the Latin language than they seem to have following the text and its message in the Slavic and/or Greek languages. However, those who have taken the time and trouble to expose themselves to the sound of Orthodox hymns and church music, often become enamored of it and listen to it with enthusiasm. Yet it should be spelled out that there is rather a great deal of musical variety in the repertoires of Eastern Orthodox churches so that some types of pieces and musical sections may become more acceptable to Western ears.

Do you feel that the Western world has placed research of Eastern Orthodox music in a reservation where too few scholars are concentrated on it?

The essence of the problem here lies again in the fact that far too few Western scholars are familiar with East European languages which are required to read and understand the liturgical texts and hymnody both in Greek and in Slavic languages. Just as even a superficial acquaintance with Latin helps in following Roman Mass, some basic terms in either Greek or Slavic languages might assist in grasping what is taking place in the Orthodox services. As for the rather small number of scholars who are involved in such study the problem again revolves around the knowledge of languages, because the basic liturgical texts and even scholarly studies are often written in languages less well known in the West.

During the 1960s you were concerned with cataloguing medieval Eastern Orthodox music manuscripts. What did your commission attempt to achieve? It seems that so far sources for Eastern Orthodox music have been catalogued collection by collection and as a result of national rather than international efforts. After all, the RISM project still has not included Eastern Orthodox sources among its catalogues.

There can be no doubt that catalogues of manuscripts of chants can help a great deal for any approach to analysis melodies and theoretical treatises. RISM has catalogued manuscripts from areas in which scholars have already pursued the examination and study of a sizable number of sources. Not to mention that most sources of Western traditions are easily accessible in libraries and collections, while the most significant collections of Byzantine sources are located in less accessible areas, although there are a few important libraries in Western Europe containing sources which are usually already known to experts in this field. I did expect, about forty years ago, that we could embark at least on a preliminary cataloguing of Byzantine musical manuscripts and I still do not understand why those expectations were not fulfilled. At least we can watch with admiration the efforts of Grigorios Stathis in Athens who has prepared a seven-volume catalog of all musical manuscripts in monastic libraries on Mount Athos. Due to financial constraints he has so far been able to publish only the first three volumes and I understand that the fourth volume may appear relatively soon. But a similar catalog of Slavic music manuscripts in Russia and a few other Eastern European collections and of those in Israel and Egypt still remain untouched.

Your 1965 essay about Giovanni Sebenico was so thoroughly researched, that forty years later very little can be added to it. Where does your interest in 17th-century Italian opera stem from?

My interest in Sebenico was aroused by reading Westrup's little book on Purcell and finding in a footnote the name of Gio. Sebenico. It does not take long for a Yugoslav to recognize that Sebenico is the Italian form of the name of the town of Šibenik in Dalmatia. That was sufficient to get me going and investigate everything that I could find about this singer and composer. It was my fortune that no one studied references to him and therefore I just had to put together whatever I was able to locate. Similar is the case of my study about Cristoforo (Krstó) Ivanovich. All I had to do was to put together studies by Italian scholars who were unaware of non-Italian publications, and those writings of Yugoslavs and an American who were unaware of Italian research. So it was more or less a matter of splicing together various pieces to get a somewhat better, if not a well rounded, picture of this man's activities. Ivanovich was an opener to operatic history in Venice and having had a long-standing curiosity as well as love for operatic works I immersed myself in the study of the history of libretti as well as of works by Monteverdi's successors.

Has your art history training influenced your research of musicology? Have you ever done any research concerning art history?

Way back while I was a student at the University of Belgrade, after having written my seminar paper on representations of ancient Greek musical instruments in 1947/48, in the next year I assembled data on the

representations of musical instruments in Serbian medieval art, frescoes and miniature paintings in manuscripts. That article was published in a student journal *Naša reč* in 1951. While I did follow in later years studies of colleagues as well as of my students on related topics, I have not written another study, though I was tempted on more than one occasion to pursue that aspect again.

With your reviews of musicological editions from Yugoslavia published in American periodicals, you created at some point significant awareness about musicological efforts in Serbia (and also in other parts of Yugoslavia). Today we rarely see reviews of Serbian books included in American publications. Do you think that the world is insufficiently interested in musicological research coming from the Slavic South, or is it Serbian scholars that do not promote their studies abroad sufficiently well?

I cannot agree more that the Western scholarship has turned a blind eye on anything that is not rooted in a local and/or current Western framework and that for better or worse anything originating in the Balkans is viewed as “odd” or “uninteresting” even if it follows the basic precepts that had been accepted in the West for decades if not centuries. Every now and then a single Balkan composer or a single composition does make a breakthrough and is viewed as “acceptable”, as for example Gotovac’s *Simfonijsko kolo*. Yet it seems that we cannot and should not think of the West as a single entity as it consists of a multiplicity of individual cities and centers. Some of these may become truly enamored of a specific work or composer from the Eastern European area; and yet the next-door Western neighbor may totally ignore a slew of works and composers and stick to a different taste. Why, for example, do opera houses in their majority keep performing operas by three or four composers (Verdi, Puccini, Mozart and Wagner) and seldom venture into a different repertory? It is said that concert-going audiences like to listen to familiar works and that is why they are attending performances dedicated to “warhorses”. Young composers even in the U.S. have to fight for recognition and it seems to me Serbian composers need do the same – fight for recognition and to find ways and means of making their works accepted. On the basis of more or less contemporary Belgrade press reports it appears that Vuk Kulenović has at present been accepted in Boston, and yet I am unaware of any mention of him and his works outside of Boston! Let us face the fact that cultural life in the U.S. is truly very provincial and that each large city tends to view itself as the “center of the universe”, ignoring novelties that did not originate within its walls. If you examine the bulk of Serbian musicological publications you will notice that, with the exception of recent issues of *New Sound* and of *Muzikologija*, their main emphasis is on indigenous creativity and musical phenomena. And while the West ought to keep at least an eye if not an ear open to these bits of information, they are, unfortunately, treated as “peripheral” and of no immediate importance for the “present state of music” in the Western world. This is a pity since Serbian writers on music make solid efforts to be informed about the new trends and contemporary musical events in Europe as well as in the U.S.

How do you see the current situation in Serbian music research and in Serbian musicology? In the 2001 edition of The New Grove you pointed out in an entry on musicology in Eastern Europe that “the most significant recent achievements in historical musicology [in Serbia] have been Dimitrije Stefanović and Danica Petrović’s studies of ecclesiastical chant” (xvii/521), but did not mention research on Serbian secular music. Did you want to indicate here that research of secular music history in Serbia is lagging behind and that no author involved with 19th or 20th-century music deserves our attention?

Let me first clear up the reference in *The New Grove* second edition of 2001! At the time of the preparation of the “updated” *New Grove*, I was contacted with questions about some but not all articles I had originally written. Remember that most of the original articles were written in the early 1970s and appeared in the first edition of *The New Grove* of 1980. In it, as you can see, neither of the two names appeared. And they were added later but I have no recollections that I was the one who made that entry. All entries in *The New Grove* were constricted due to a lack of sufficient space – unless the topic dealt with England in the first place (for which it seems there were no limits to the amount of allotted space) and then with Western European countries which were treated with more respect than Eastern Europe. It goes without saying that I would have included in the revised *Grove* references at least Stana Djurić-Klajn, Vlastimir Peričić, and Roksanda Pejović.

In the same article, concerning Croatian scholars, you mentioned that “a number of scholars around Stanislav Tuksar have produced studies of distinctly Croatian musical tradition”, choosing not to mention Koraljka Kos, who between 1970 and 1994 trained an entire generation of musicologists at the Zagreb Academy of Music, or Lovro Županović, who uncovered, edited, and published a large segment of Croatian Renaissance, Baroque, and Classic music repertoire. Which aspects of Stanislav Tuksar’s work do you consider significant?

To the best of my recollections I cannot remember being consulted on either that point or on entering Tuksar’s name in the Croatian segment. I do know that certainly at some point in time Jim Conomos was in England and may have been consulted on Byzantine and related topics, and remember also that Bojan Bujčić at Oxford might have been used as a resource person, but I have no direct knowledge of either man’s input. I am fully cognizant of Koraljka Kos and Lovro Županović’s contributions to the study of the history of Croatian music. If – and I say if – I had been instrumental in placing Tuksar’s name it might have been due to my impression that he was in a position as leader of a younger generation of scholars.

Let's return to the crossroads of your musicological interests. What was the element that determined your interest in Byzantine, Bulgarian, and Russian chants being above interest in Serbian chant? Do you see yourself in any way belonging to the Serbian scholarly musicological context?

Remember that I started and developed my interests in history as a medievalist. I felt much more “at home” in studying the Middle Ages than subsequent periods. That was valid not only for national history but for general European history as well. Eventually I started with getting into the area of Byzantine chant and its notation. Being of Slavic descent, the next step was the relationship of Byzantium and Slavs, and manuscripts with music notation. From there, it was a direct step into Old Russian and a comparative study of Byzantine-Slavic contacts and transmissions and notation for the chant. It also turned out that there were specific references to Bulgarian “pieces” in Byzantine music manuscripts that led me to examine these works. As far as Serbian documents are concerned, I kept my eyes open to tracing any document with mention of Serbia. I rediscovered the Athenian MS 928 – a bilingual source with specific references to Isaiah the Serb as well as Nikola the Serb – and sent its microfilm to Dimitrije Stefanović and his students in Belgrade to examine it and pursue research on these musicians. There are a few other examples in which Serbia was mentioned and I passed that information on or included it in my articles about Joakeim Harsianites as well as about a stay by Manuel Chrysaphes in Serbia. I was also fortunate to be asked to examine what came to be known as the “Yale Fragment” with an inscription referring not only to the probably most famous 18th-century Greek musician Peter of Peloponnesus but also to Bishop Serafim of Bosnia who commissioned Peter to write chants to be sung in the “Slavonic” language. It is of interest that our Bulgarian colleague Svetlana Kujumdžieva was able to identify that bishop as a man of Bulgarian origin showing that there was a fairly close relationship and contact between Orthodox Christians in the Balkans without ethnic conflicts.

In other words I did not forget to keep an eye open to references to Serbian musicians and potential contributions of Serbs and I viewed them as a part of the larger picture of a Balkan community who may not have left as many documents of their creativity as other ethnic groups did. Since most of their significant steps in the musical domain took place after the medieval period, I decided to ask others to complement some of my work and tried to assist them as far as I could.

I also wrote a study about my hometown, *Belgrade in musical compositions*, which I consider rather significant, published in the Festschrift for Dragotin Cvetko in Ljubljana. The stimulus for that was the acquaintance with Stephen Storace’s opera *The Siege of Belgrade* of 1791 in which he (a former friend of Mozart) unashamedly borrowed Mozart’s “Rondo alla Turca” for the overture and also heavily “borrowed” music from the opera *Una cosa rara* by Martín y Soler. I was able here to locate a few more references to some other similarly titled works.

I do view myself as a Byzantinist of Serbian origin. Whether this places me in the context of Serbian musicology is for others to decide. I certainly am not an expert on the melodies of Serbian chants or for that matter of Byzantine or Russian chants. But I do believe to have acquired some knowledge of the neumatic notation of Byzantine origin as it was transmitted to Eastern Slavs and I have been trying to research the process of evolution of that notation into later Russian notation of the 16th and 17th centuries.