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# Soundboard

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## *The Guitar and Southeast Europe*



## OCTOECHOS CHANT TRADITION AS AN INSPIRATION FOR NEW MUSIC

By Momčilo Moma Aleksandrić

Since high school I have been professionally involved with Balkan musical heritage, primarily as a choir singer. While living in Serbia, my appreciation for the unique features of the Serbian Octoechos Chant was not at its highest, despite the importance of this musical tradition. It is rooted in the centuries-old Byzantine (Eastern Roman Empire) singing tradition. I began to admire such influences around 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic began. This period coincided with my longest stay in the United States, so feelings of nostalgia may have also played a role. This nostalgia was not only for the musical works but also for the visual aspects found in the Orthodox Christian monasteries of the Balkan region and the religious texts written by monks. That year marked the beginning of my journey into compositional and artistic exploration.

The Octoechos Chant tradition has influenced the works of notable composers from Serbia and beyond. For example, Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac (1856–1914) incorporated late Romantic, Western functional harmony into his Octoechos-inspired compositions. Ljubica Marić (1909–2003) applied the twelve-tone system in works like her *Byzantine Concerto* (1959) for symphonic orchestra and piano. Other composers such as Đuro Živković (b.1975) drew from a broader Byzantine conceptual space, where direct melodic influences are less prominent compared to Mokranjac and Marić. In classical guitar music, Dušan Bogdanović (b.1955) stands out for his use of  $\textcircled{6}$  = F tuning in Byzantine-inspired works like *Levantine Suite*.

In this article, I will explore how the Byzantine Octoechos chant tradition has informed my compositions for classical guitar and various ensembles. I will discuss its influence on the melodic, harmonic, formal, and overall conceptual aspects of my work. Included will be a performance example for readers to sight-read on guitar. Additionally, I will discuss how my classical guitar performance experience has shaped

my writing for piano and how software solutions such as Max MSP can expand compositional horizons.

### Octoechos-inspired hexachord melody: Horizontal hexachords

At the beginning of 2021, I began my exploration of the Serbian Octoechos Chant as collected and notated by Mokranjac.<sup>1</sup> This collection is divided into eight groups of chants, or eight voices. For the works I will discuss here, I drew inspiration from the first voice. In the introduction to his collection Mokranjac states, “the range of these melodies spans over six pitches, from scale degree one to scale degree six.” He also notes that “the final movement of these melodies always ends on scale degree two.”<sup>2</sup> As given by Mokranjac, the melodies move within the range of six notes in F ionian: F–G–A–Bb–C–D (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1: Diatonic hexachord in F.

When I started exploring Mokranjac’s collection—the tonality of which is entirely in F—I was simultaneously working on my DMA dissertation related to those works of Fernando Sor where the sixth string is tuned to F.<sup>3</sup> It felt intuitive and logical to keep my sixth string tuned to that pitch while playing these melodies on guitar. During this process, I composed my first guitar suite, *Ikonoglasja* (Prayers). For my first guitar duet suite, *Krug Duo*,<sup>4</sup> I composed a melodic line within the above-mentioned range of F to D. The melody was inspired by the Octoechos Chant collection notated by Mokranjac (**Figure 2**, next page).

### Octoechos-inspired hexachord harmony: Vertical hexachords

As previously stated, Serbian composers inspired by the Octoechos tradition used various methods to

<sup>1</sup> Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, *Osmoglasnik*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Belgrade: Serbian Orthodox Church Publications, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Momčilo Aleksandrić, “Fernando Sor’s Works in F: Hierarchy of Genres and Significance of Special Sonic Effects” (DMA diss, Univ. of Minnesota, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> In Serbian *krug* means “circle.” The work was conceptually inspired by Lazar Vozarević’s Byzantine-inspired painting *Krug* (1967), which I saw at an exhibition in Belgrade in July 2022.

## OCTOECHOS CHANT TRADITION (cont.)



Figure 2: Melody based on the F–D hexachord from *Krug Duo*, III, m. 107.



Figure 3: *Krug Duo*, III, F–D hexachords.



Figure 4: *Krug Duo*, III, mm. 109–11, diatonic hexachords in F.



Figure 5: *Krug Study no. 1*, mm. 35–36.

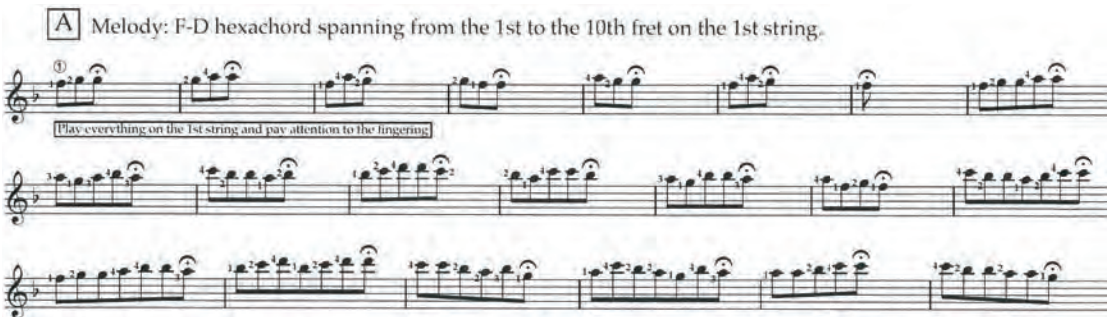


Figure 6: Hexachordal exercise, melody.

harmonize their pieces, including Western classical harmony, modal harmony, the dodecapronic system, or a more flexible modal/atonal approach. Given that the melodies are based on diatonic hexachords, I decided to harmonize them in a similar fashion—by using diatonic hexachords in F. In other words, any sequence of six notes from the F ionian mode can form the basis of a chord. The notes can either be arranged sequentially to create a diatonic cluster, or any number of notes can be transposed to different octaves.

The number of possible voicings is quite large, so to limit myself I only used voicings playable on guitar with the sixth string tuned to F. For example, considering the F ionian hexachord (F–G–A–B $\flat$ –C–D), the voicings I implemented are as shown in Figure 3.

In the third movement of *Krug Duo*, I exclusively used hexachords playable on a solo classical guitar (Figure 4). The two guitarists play hexachords sequentially, drawing inspiration from the medieval *hoketus*

technique as well as its notable twentieth-century adaptation in Louis Andriessen’s work *Hoketus* (1977).<sup>5</sup>

In my *Krug Study no. 1* (2023) for guitar, hexachords in F are arpeggiated, with the right-hand thumb continuously engaged while the left hand navigates the challenging chord transitions.

### Hexachordal exercise on guitar with sixth string tuned to F

We can explore this melodic and harmonic conception through a simple exercise I created. Figure 6 draws from the hexachordal melody I composed for *Krug Duo* as inspired by the Octoechos tradition. For pedagogical purposes, the entire melody is played on the first string to better visualize the hexachord.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Andriessen, *Hoketus* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1976).



## OCTOECHOS CHANT TRADITION (cont.)

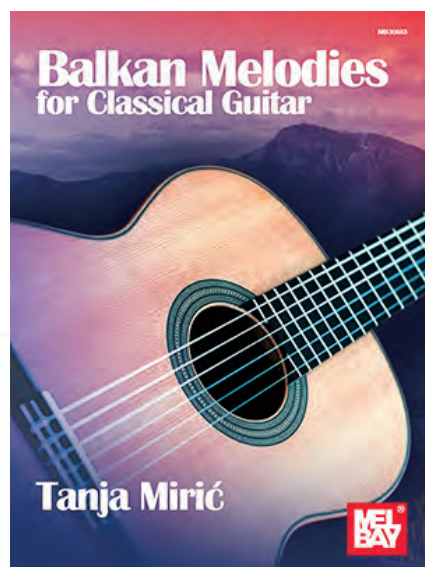
free use of specified diatonic hexachords. The patch was programmed to generate a series of six randomized frequencies sounding simultaneously, creating an intriguing and abstract electronic hexachord. With each performance, the pitches vary completely, and their timing differs as well.

### Conclusion

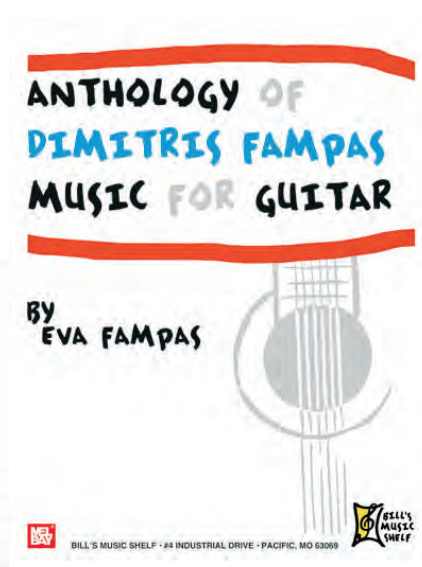
The Octoechos Chant tradition can serve as a rich conceptual foundation for creating new works for classical guitar and other instruments or ensembles, shaping how we approach melodies and apply harmonic tools. Our experimentation on guitar can act as a basis for composing music for other instruments, influencing their performance techniques as well. This can be taken a step further by incorporating modern software solutions like Max MSP. In doing so, we contribute to the continuing evolution and growth of the classical guitar as a potent, far-reaching voice in the art music world.



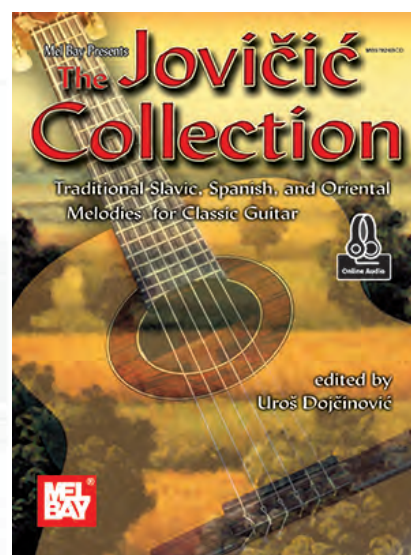
Momčilo "Moma" Aleksandrić (b.1991) is a Serbian guitarist, composer, and educator. Winning 1<sup>st</sup> prize at the 2018 Hong Kong Altamira International Guitar Competition, he toured extensively as a performer and lecturer in Australia, China, Thailand, Europe, and North and Latin America. Since 2021, he has focused on composing music for guitar and chamber ensembles, drawing inspiration from his Serbian heritage. Since 2023/24, his *Comprehensive Guitar Method: College Edition* has been adopted by the University of Minnesota (Twin Cities) and Duke University. He is also a co-founder of the Belgrade Guitar District.



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