

THE SACRED MUSIC OF THE CHURCH: CHANT OR HARMONY?

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In recent years, a good number of clergymen and laymen in our Church in this country have expressed the wish to do away with choirs that sing harmony in our services. They want to return entirely to Byzantine Chant. They regard the chant sung in our Church today as pure Byzantine chant which has remained unchanged through the centuries as the only legitimate kind of singing in our services. It is the only form that reflects the true character of our worship. By preserving it, we preserve the mystical, prayerful experience of that worship.

This view has been supported also by the commonly held belief that, through the centuries, the Byzantine Greek Orthodox Church has looked down on harmony and polyphony as much less spiritual than the chanting of one single chant melody. This conviction has led the Church to officially ban harmony and polyphony from its sacred services. What has strengthened to some extent the desire to return entirely to traditional Byzantine chant is the negative reaction toward the work of some church composers who have brought into their choral arrangements melodies and harmonies outside the Byzantine musical tradition, mostly from Western music. These innovations alter the character of the Church's sacred music to something alien and distractingly fanciful to which the worshiper cannot easily relate or pray with.

It is important, nevertheless, to put these assumptions into some historical perspective. Though deeply attached to it as a pathway to our worship, we cannot claim that the chant sung in our Church today is the pure Byzantine chant that has remained unchanged as the only appropriate form of liturgical singing. The reason is that, since its inception in the 5th century, Byzantine chant has undergone five to six stylistic changes. The theoretical framework of the 8 modes remained fairly constant, but the melodies (as well as the notation) changed considerably. The chant sung today comes from a Byzantine musical tradition deeply influenced by Turkish and Arabic music. The Byzantine chant melodies lost much of their diatonic purity to sensual chromaticism, with an appeal of its own. They became increasingly florid and elaborate

to the point of formlessness, accompanied by certain nasal affectations. This alteration in melodic style is largely the inheritance of four centuries of Ottoman occupation and subjugation (1453-1821). By the way, music historians point to the melodic style of the “Middle Byzantine Period” (12th-13th century) as the purest Byzantine chant, musically and spiritually.

The claim, furthermore, that the Greek Orthodox Church always regarded harmony as less spiritual than chanting and, therefore, banned it from its sacred services is also historically inaccurate. Substantial evidence shows that Byzantine church musicians since the late Middle Ages (14th-15th century) mixed their chanting with harmony and polyphony without any hesitation. Their polyphonic singing was more improvisatory and spontaneous than that of the Western (Latin) Church. A chanter would sing the main melody of a hymn, while his colleagues would improvise on the spot related melodies which they would weave around the main melody. Their object was apparently to emphasize the meaning of the text and the beauty of the chant through the repetition of phrases - which is part of the polyphonic technique. Only a few examples of this free, improvisatory technique have been written down on manuscript (quite often in Byzantine notation) such as the polyphonic Communion Hymn Enite ton Kyrion by Manuel Gazis, 15th century (Manuscript Codex 2401, Athens National Library).

Dr. Alexander Lingas, an eminent Byzantine musicologist of Oxford University, along with other scholars, such as the prominent Athenian musicologist Markos Dragoumis, has examined rigorously the views and actual musical practice of the Eastern (Byzantine) Church during this period. To reflect the general attitude of the Greek Orthodox Church toward harmony and polyphony at the time, Lingas cites one highly prominent clergyman of the late 16th century, Meletios Pegas, Patriarch of Alexandria (d. 1601). In one of his letters concerning church music, Meletios writes that “one can praise divine things not only through monophonic chanting, but also through polyphonic harmony, which is not discordant.” The choice is up to the custom and taste of each locality, Meletios adds. Lingas with his Cappella Romana chorus has recorded

parts of the harmonic liturgy of Parthenios Sgoutas, another example of polyphonic practice of the time, (circa 17th century).

It was not until the middle 19th century that the Greek Orthodox Church began to view harmony and polyphony in an unfavorable light. The reason was that the prominent churches of the Diaspora - in Vienna, Paris, Trieste, London - in order to beautify their services, began to set the traditional Byzantine chants to increasingly sophisticated Western harmony. Similarly, the church musicians of Greece began to overburden the simple, traditional chant melodies with intricate Western harmonies and melodic ornamentations that defaced the Byzantine character of the music of the Church and disfigured the mystic, prayerful character of its liturgical services. Congregations began to rebel against such a change, the Holy Patriarchate and the hierarchy forbade the singing of harmony and polyphony.

It appears that, as I intimated earlier, a similar negative reaction to the work of some of our choral composers has set off in some of our fellow worshipers the desire to return entirely to chanting and thus preserve authentic, familiar tradition.

It is my indelible conviction that we must preserve and cultivate further Byzantine chant. It is the heart and essence of our Church's musical tradition. Our choirs should do more chant to add authenticity to their singing and to add contrast and variety to their harmonic choral work. Several composers - John Vellon, Frank Desby and Theodore Bogdanos, to name some - have transcribed and published a good amount of Byzantine chant for both our choirs and chanters.

To institute, on the other hand, chanting as the only form of singing and to banish harmony and polyphony from the sacred services would be a form of impoverishment. It would go against the Church's philosophy and practice through the centuries. Confident in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church has cultivated and further refined almost every liturgical art form or expression brought for use in its worship, rather than reject it outright.

It was in this open, progressive spirit that church composers since the Middle Ages set Byzantine chant to polyphonic harmony, not to alter it or replace it but to enrich and expand its beauty and significance. In Byzantine polyphony, for instance, instead of one we have three or four chanters singing simultaneously, each weaving his melody into the melodies of the other chanters. These melodies repeat the hymn's main chant melody, increasing its beauty by re-singing it in a variety of forms. At the same time, this repetition emphasizes the meaning of the sacred text, restating it in a variety of expressions. If, on the other hand, the hymn's main melody is sung by one voice part (usually the soprano), the other voice parts that harmonize it can be cast in the form of chant melodies themselves thus reinforcing the Byzantine modal character of the entire hymn.

To be sung together with chant in the Church's liturgical services, harmony and polyphony must follow the same musical and spiritual criteria established initially by the chant. The sum of these criteria has been referred to as the "Byzantine musical ethos," a pervasive quality that has guided and shaped over time the liturgical music of the Church. (For a more detailed discussion of this concept, see the Foreword to my Divine Liturgy, II, 2017.) To create a choral work in the Byzantine musical ethos, a composer needs to be intimately acquainted with it and be able to follow its stylistic guidelines.

The sacred text, of course, is the ultimate guide here to all musical expression. The uppermost aim of the composer is to express the meaning of this hallowed text rather than his own idiosyncratic religious sentiments. This is why he needs to write in a musical style and ethos that evokes and communicates a particular kind of spirituality and mysticism that every Greek Orthodox worshiper can recognize as his own and is able to pray in it.

As is well known, in the last century, our Church in this country has created a musical tradition of its own. This musical effort was driven by the indomitable desire to preserve the inherited traditional music of the Church. And, indeed, most of our church composers have kept the traditional Byzantine melodies unchanged in their choral, harmonic arrangements. Some composers were unable to maintain a Byzantine

musical ethos in their work. Others decided to incorporate melodic and harmonic material outside this traditional ethos, intending to create equally inspirational music for our services. Several composers, however, since the 1950's, combined their musical skill with a good knowledge of the Byzantine tradition. They transcribed and introduced more chant into their liturgical compositions. At the same time, they transmitted the Byzantine modal ethos, or character, of the chant into their choral harmonic and polyphonic work. Incidentally, this achievement has earned the recognition of the Greek Orthodox Church and the international context of sacred music here and abroad.

Thus, in a broad sense, our Church has adopted the combination of chant and harmony, especially when these are united and interwoven by the same traditional, Byzantine ethos. The resulting variety of musical form and expression makes our liturgical worship more meaningful and engaging.

It is my belief, supported by experience, that most of our faithful prefer to worship in a refined, well-integrated combination of chanting and choral singing, of monophonic Byzantine chant and modal polyphonic harmony. Some communities, however, have only a chanter and a chant group or just congregational singing. Inspirational variety can, of course, be created here as well. The singers try to express more intently the multitude of meaning and moods of the text. The chanter as soloist can alternate with the chant group, or the men with the women. Further, a small choral group can sing an harmonic arrangement even if the group lacks some of the voice parts, which the organ will always supply. Provided that the hymn's basic melody can be clearly heard, the harmonic background of the organ will offer some welcome variety in contrast with the plain chanting.

I pray that our Church will cultivate further the remarkable, age-long symbiosis of chant and harmony and constantly seek excellence in all the forms of its musical expression to the exaltation of God and the inspiration of His congregation.

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