

## About Vespers

by Stan Takis

The Divine Liturgy is the supreme service of the Orthodox Church, because it is where we receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. But our church is not a church of Sunday morning and holidays only. Our church is a 24/7, 365-days-of-the-year church. The Orthodox Church has a daily cycle of prayer services that are apart from the sacramental services. These daily services consist of Sunset (Vespers), After-Supper or *Apodhipnon* (Compline), Midnight (*Mesonyktikon*), Sunrise (Orthros), and the First Hour, Third Hour, Sixth Hour, and Ninth Hour services. Some people think these are only monastic services, but that is not true. Yes, they are celebrated daily in monasteries and sometimes in public churches with priests and deacons. But these services are found in a book called the *Horologion*. In this book all of the services are written for just a Reader and a Chanter (the People). In other words, these are services that can be celebrated without clergy. They are services of the people and they are at our disposal, so we may pray appropriate prayers and chant appropriate hymns every day of the year and every hour of the day, if we want to or need to.

When these services are celebrated in a church or monastery with clergy present, the parts chanted by the priests and deacons can be found in a book called the *Euchologion*. There are certain parts of these services that are fixed, and there are other parts of these services that are dependent upon many things—the celebration of the events or saints of the day, cycles of scripture readings, a weekly cycle of eight musical tones, among other things. These changing texts can be found primarily in four books called the *Menaion*, the *Triodion*, the *Pentecostarion*, and the *Octoechos* (or *Paratikliti*), among other books. Therefore, no daily or hourly service throughout the year is exactly alike. It is the role of the clergy, the readers, and the chanters to know how to construct each service from the various books of Orthodox liturgical texts.

To the average Orthodox Christian today, Vespers is thought of as the first of a trinity of services (along with Orthros and the Liturgy) celebrated on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings in celebration of Christ's Resurrection, or on the eve of Great Feasts and the day of the feast. However, even in this context, the Vespers service still may contain the Menaion hymns of the more minor saints and events that are celebrated on each day of the year. Given the vast number of saints and events that are celebrated, the complete Menaion contains thousands of liturgical texts that may show up in any given Vespers service. Other texts that come from the Pentecostarion, Triodion, and Octoechos are repeated on more predictable cycles, but the timing of the cycles are each dependent on variable factors. Therefore, as is the case with Orthros and the Divine Liturgy, the special hymns of the day and the music that is designated for them or for the week, make it extremely rare that any two Vespers services would be exactly the same.

## The Order of Vespers

Vespers (*Hesperinos*) is the first service of the daily cycle of Orthodox services. Since traditionally the day begins at sundown, Vespers is celebrated in the early evening after the ninth hour service, which is the last service of the day. All Vespers services follow basically the same pattern, but there are variations. Great Vespers is chanted to celebrate an important feast or saint; Resurrectional Vespers on Saturday evenings before the regular Sunday Resurrectional Orthros and Divine Liturgy. Daily Vespers is a shortened service for weekdays that have no great feast. Small (or Little) Vespers is celebrated before an All-Night Vigil. The purpose of the Vespers service is to pray and contemplate the celebrations of the day, be it the Resurrection of Christ (on Sundays), a feast of the Church, or the commemoration of saints on their feast days. Therefore, the Vespers service differs on every day of the year.

As mentioned earlier, Vespers is a service of the people, and a priest need not be present to celebrate it. When a priest is present, the service begins with his intoning, "Blessed is our God..." followed by the reading of Psalm 103 (104 in the King James Bible). During the reading, the priest prays inaudibly of the Lighting of the Lamps. At the end of the reading follows the Great Litany. Normally, there follows a collection of psalms called the *kathisma*. After that, the hymn "Lord, I have cried out," (*Kyrie ekekraxa*)

from Psalm 140 (141) is chanted, followed by the *Kyrieekraxaria*, which are the rest of Psalm 140, Psalm 141, and Psalm verses (*stichoi*), interspersed with refrains (*stichera*) in praise of the events, saints, or prophets of the day, or on Saturday evenings, the Resurrection. Stichera are *prosomia*, which means they are hymns based upon many model melodies that the chanter has memorized. The last refrain is a *doxastikon* (a hymn beginning with “Glory to the Father...etc.”) followed by a *Theotokion*, a hymn so named because it speaks of the Virgin Mary. Some Theotokia are referred to as “dogmatic,” because their content is theological in nature. On Wednesdays and Fridays, (Tuesday and Thursday evenings), there is what is referred to as a *Stavrotheotokion*, or a Theotokion that combines themes of the Mother of God with Christ’s passion on the Cross.

Next follows the hymn “O Joyful Light,” (*Fos Ilaron*), which is chanted or read at all Vespers services, and then the daily *prokeimenon*, or prelude to a reading, is announced. On major feasts, an entrance and a prophecy reading follow. At Great and Resurrectional Vespers, the Litany of Fervent Supplication is given here, (but in a daily Vespers it is moved to near the end of the service). After this, the prayer, “Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this evening without sin...” is read, followed by another litany. On major feast days, a *Liti* may be given here. A *Liti* is a long service of praise. An *artoklasia* service (breaking of bread) may also be celebrated at Vespers.

The service ends with the *aposticha* and the dismissal. The *aposticha* are more Psalm verses and *stichera* about the feast of the day, however the characteristic that gives them their name is that the first *stichos* (verse) is chanted *after* the first *sticheron*, not before as in the *Kyrieekraxaria*. The last verses of the *aposticha* are also a *doxastikon* and *Theotokion*. The dismissal begins with the hymn of St. Simeon, “Now let your servants depart in peace...” followed by the *Trisagion* prayers and the Lord’s Prayer. Next are the *apolytikion* (dismissal hymn) and *Theotokion* of the *apolytikion*, and the dismissal prayers. The Vespers dismissal hymn becomes the troparion of the day, and is the only hymn repeated at Orthros and in the Divine Liturgy. On days where there is more than one celebration, more *apolytikia* may be added.

### About the Music of Vespers

The weekly cycle of the *Octoechos*, the eight-tone system of Orthodox music, turns over each Saturday evening. Each of these “tones,” which are also referred to as “modes,” is a family of scales and melodic formulas that gives its own different musical flavor to the texts. Thus, over an eight-week cycle, the same hymn can be chanted eight different ways, while other hymns are designated especially for a specific tone or mode. These chants feature a melodic line harmonized only by a droning base note (*isokratima*, popularly referred to as the *ison*). This gives a great variety and means of expression to the traditional chanted music of the Church. Unless otherwise indicated, the hymns of the Vespers and Orthros services are chanted in the tone, or *echos*, of the week.

“O Joyful Light” (*Fos Ilaron*), when chanted, is assigned the Second Tone, but the setting most frequently used for this hymn, even at the Ecumenical Patriarchate, is the one by John Sakellarides, who was an innovative chanter of the 19th and 20th Centuries. He frequently harmonized his melodies in a Western European style, and thus, his music is a controversial departure from the older tradition of the Church, but it remains very popular in America. The melody Sakellarides employed for this Vespers hymn, is not strictly in Second Tone, and may have been derived from a folk melody.

Controversies about harmony and the singing of polyphonic choirs are usually limited to the music of the Divine Liturgy. The music of Vespers, Orthros, and other services of the daily cycle are usually chanted in a simple fashion by a cantor or by the people. It would be a near impossible task to arrange choir music for every daily service for the whole year, every year. This is why the Church has provided us texts, rubrics, and an eight-tone system of chanting which contains formulas and model melodies to be memorized and applied to the texts.

For more details of the typikon of Vespers, visit: <http://users.forthnet.gr/ath/frc/psprotheoria1.html#9thhour>  
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