

BYZANTINE MUSIC FOR AN ORTHODOX AMERICA

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Preliminary Considerations

Anyone who studies Church music, knows that it is a dry matter and that it is not easy to make it understandable. We write this not because it is an interesting subject to speak about, but because it is necessary.

We are often questioned by people unfamiliar with Church music: "Why do you sing this music in church?" or "This kind of melody sounds strange to me"; or if you go to St. Vladimir's Seminary, one seminarian or another will tell you how odd Byzantine music is, or some of the Greek priests will point out that the Russians sing secular music in church, and so on.

It is obvious that Jesus did not sing with His Apostles after the Holy Supper in a recitative Bahmetev style; nor did they exercise their voices in interminable trills with Turkish inflections. On the other hand, we will not put an end to these kinds of discussions; they will continue for many years. However, we as American Orthodox want to know which is the true Orthodox music and, if it is possible, to adapt it to the American language and spirit. There are certain conditions necessary for studying this subject:

- 1) To be at home with this subject, one must have musical, linguistic and theological preparation.
- 2) No one can fully understand liturgical music without profound appreciation of the Liturgy itself -- its structures, its ideas. The ceremonial acts of common worship have always evoked the use of expressive arts: painting, poetry, music. These three arts are tightly connected in the Orthodox Church. If you sing Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninov in a purely decorated Byzantine church, it might be beautiful, but not adequate. On the other hand, in St. Sophia Church in Los Angeles you can sing anything, even *Romeo and Juliet*. You may be impressed by the naturalistic paintings, electrical devices, but you forget to make the sign of the cross.
- 3) There is general agreement among musicologists, that words and music in the Orthodox Church are inseparably linked together because the composer and the poet were one and the same person -- a union frequently found in the Byzantine Church up until the tenth century. Composing both lyrics and melodies, these God-inspired artists were referred to as hymnographers. This fact is important in the Orthodox Church, even today, because the pattern formulae of the eight tones cannot be replaced with personal compositions. For instance, I cannot say I have a more beautiful melody for the Christmas Kontakion than the traditional one; this simply cannot be expressed in the Orthodox Church.

Changes in Church Music

Scholars consider what happened in Russia in the eighteenth century a lamentable fall. The Byzantine Znameny chant was banned from the Church and Western polyphony invaded Russian liturgical singing. It is as though one would cover the frescoes of a beautiful cathedral with cheap lithographic prints, Renaissance style.

All these misunderstandings occur because we are very much European in our image of beauty. *Beautiful* in the Bible does not have any connection with the aesthetically beautiful. Instead of our sharp distinction between beautiful and ugly, Christianity poses another antithesis: sacred or profane? Orthodox music, being part of the Divine Service, could not be a matter of aesthetic speculation subjectively because in other religions we may discover *good* and *beautiful*, but you cannot find holiness anywhere except in the Christian Church.

St. Dionysios the Aeropagite, through his book *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, became one of the main pillars upon which Byzantine art was built. Speaking of music, he asserts that any sacred music is transmitted from heaven. As a result, the musician is simply a humble hymn-writer, his faith making him an instrument of Divine Grace. He knows that he can compose and sing melodies which came into the world as an echo of the heavenly hymns sung by angels. That is why the artist in the service of the Orthodox Church is not permitted to treat his subjects freely but is limited by liturgical directions. The vast treasury of Byzantine melodies was developed from a limited number of archetypes transmitted by the angels to inspired persons, and the Church musician is bound to keep as closely as possible to these models. One would be mistaken to see here a lack of imagination on the part of the musician or the painter of icons. For example, the iconographer must give the idea of the saint, not a resemblance of the human being who was a saint.

Music in the Early Church

The oldest musical tradition is common to the synagogue and to the Church, of course. We know from the Acts of the Apostles that after the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the newly-baptized continued "daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house" (22:16). In a passage in his Epistle to the Ephesians (5:19), St. Paul tells the followers of Christ to speak to themselves "in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."

From a historical point, psalmody was the greatest legacy of the synagogue to Christianity. Generally speaking, the initial formulae and cadences of the Psalm-tunes changed very little. It is very close to the Russian method of reciting the Psalms in church.

We also inherited from the synagogue the litanies or the congregational prayers of supplication and intercession, the chanted prayer of the priest, acclamations and interjections like "Amen," "Hosanna," "Alleluia." Even the beginning of the liturgical workday with Saturday afternoon is a Jewish inheritance, and the liturgical calendar starting with September. Now you see where the roots are, where we should search for the roots of Church sacred art.

St. Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians makes mention not only of Psalms, but also of hymns and spiritual songs. But by hymns in the early Church we understand the fourteen canticles taken from the Bible, and which have remained parts of the Orthodox hymnography up until this day. In their musical form, the canticles are related to the Psalms. They are plainly chanted during Great Lent, without flowery melodies.

Immediately after the Apostolic period, the element of Psalmody is less often mentioned than that of the spontaneous hymn. The entire Eastern Church in particular was partial to hymns. Many heretics, like the Gnostics, tried their hands in the writing of hymns, and their disciples neglected the Psalms. Then the Church had to take radical measures. The ecclesiastical authorities complained that the lectors under the influence of heretical hymns, cared too much for singing and paid too little attention to reading or reciting. The Council of Laodicea (361) had to take radical measures, strictly prohibiting the singing of nonscriptural texts. Especially monks of strict rule -- the hermits -- rejected every kind of singing. Read this story from the *Patericon*:

Abba Pambo had sent his disciple from the monastery in the desert to Alexandria to sell some of the products of their manual labor. The disciple returned after sixteen days, having spent his nights in the vestibule of the church of St. Mark, where he saw the ceremonies and heard the singing of the troparia. The abbot, observing that the disciple was troubled by something, asked for the reason. The young monk answered that he felt that they wasted so many days in the desert, singing neither canons nor troparia such as he had heard at Alexandria. To these complaints the abbot answered in despair that he saw the time coming when the monks would abandon their rigid discipline pronounced by the Holy Spirit, and would give themselves over to songs and melodies. What kind of contrition, what kind of tears could result from the troparia..., when the monk stands in his church or his cell and raises his voice like the oxen?... The monks did not immigrate into this desert in order to perform before God, and to give themselves airs, and to sing songs, and to compose tunes, and to shake their hands, and move from one foot to another. We should offer our prayer to God in great fear and trembling, with tears, sighings, in reverence and in a spirit of contrition with moderate voice.

Now you can see what a struggle it was to introduce melodies into the Church.

Syrian Influence on Church Music

Ironically enough, the first Christian hymns were those of the heretics; they employed more literary and musical artistry to emphasize their wrong doctrine against the Orthodox Church. St. Ephraim the Syrian was the first hymnographer who composed troparia against the heretics. Through him Syrian poetry exerted a decisive influence upon Byzantine hymnography for many decades to come. So Byzantine hymnography shows unmistakable signs of Syrian, not Greek, influence. The simplest form of hymn at this time was the troparia. Gradually the Psalms lost their dominant position and were superseded by the insertion of the troparia, because troparia were sung between the verses of the Psalms.

Besides the troparia, another type of liturgical poetry is the kontakion. The rise of this new poetic form is associated with the name of St. Romanos the Melodist. To this day, no kontakia earlier than his have been found in Byzantine manuscripts. St. Romanos, too, was of Syrian origin. In vain the Greeks say that Byzantine music comes

from old Greek melodies of the ancient theater. To illustrate this point, I want to quote from the eighteenth stanza of St. Romanos' kontakion for Pentecost:

Why do the Greeks boast and puff themselves? Why do they dream of Arathos the thrice-accursed? Why do they err after Plato? Why do they love Demostenes the feeble? Why do they not see that Homer is a vain dream? Why do they speak of Pythagoros who rightly has been silenced? And why do they not listen to those so whom the All-Holy Spirit appeared? Let us praise, brothers, the voices of the Disciples, because they captured all men by divine power and not by fine words.

This passage clearly shows how much the holy hymnographers were against pagan culture.

The third type of liturgical poetry, the canon, was first fashioned by St. Andrew of Crete. This canon is read even today during Great Lent. Later hymnographers like St. Cosmas of Maiuma and his step-brother St. John of Damascus patterned their canons after this prototype. The first liturgical octoechos was composed not by St. John, but by Severus, the monophysite patriarch of Antioch in the fifth century. St. John only changed the content to eliminate the heresies. So, the entire modal system of the eight tones is also of ancient Syrian extraction.

The Decline of Byzantine Music

After St. John of Damascus until the fourteenth century, Byzantine music was in decline. The type of hymnography used during this time was sticheras, attributed to monks of Studion monastery: Theodore, Joseph, etc. John Kukuzel from Mt. Athos had so complicated the simple Orthodox chant with folkloric influences and trills that today we have to purify the Byzantine melodies from useless ornamentation, returning it to its primitive simplicity. Otherwise we cannot put English words to Byzantine melodies.

In Orthodoxy, we believe that melodies should never prevail over liturgical ideas. Music should emphasize the meaning of the sentence, not lose it in a maze of trills or melismatic formulae. Both the Holy Fathers and the heretics wanted to preach their doctrine through music, but, unfortunately, the heretics were more often successful in this respect because of the simplicity of their melodies.

Conclusion -- What is Needed to Develop Orthodox Church Music in America

In conclusion, considering that almost every nation today has an Orthodox Church of its own, one question must be posed: what kind of music can we adopt for the Orthodox Church in America? I think there is only one good answer to this question. We must adopt the Orthodox formulae of the eight tones, transmitted by the Holy Fathers because, as we mentioned before, the artist is not permitted to use personal melodies for the liturgical text. Congregational chant is very important. In the Orthodox conception people participate, not only attend. They are concelebrants, because structurally our liturgical services are dialogues between the people and the priest. The priest does not say, "Peace be to you, choir," or "Mr. Cantor," but he says, "Peace be to you all." And we all must reply, "and to you, Father." You cannot delegate the cantor of the choir to pray for you. The Church is not a stage where only the priest and the choir perform. Only by participation can you feel that you are a part of the liturgy. The voices of a congregation worshiping in unison is more impressive than a performance by a small choir.

The adaptation of Byzantine melodies for English words is no easy task. First of all, it is necessary to have the same liturgical language in all the Orthodox churches in America. Secondly, the spirit of the American language is simple, clear, synthetic; so is Byzantine music. You cannot adapt to English words Greek, Arabic or Romanian folkloric trills; they must be eliminated and melodies returned to the simplicity of Byzantine Church formulae.

Surely in the long run, the American Orthodox cantors will add their personal flowers to the Byzantine music in English. I am quite sure that the Church melodies will undergo the influence of American country music or even American Negro spirituals, but to make its entrance into America's art and mode of life and to be assimilated, Byzantine music must first be reduced to the essentials.