

ENGLISH TEXT AND BYZANTINE CHANT: SOME PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

By Nancy Takis

It may come as a surprise to some that after centuries of liturgical use in the Orthodox Church, there is today some controversy among chanters regarding what exactly *is* Byzantine chant. In general, all agree on the classical understanding of the term: a system of tones, or modes. Well-defined melodic patterns adapt the form of the music to the cadence of the Greek language, so that accents and syllables shape the melodic lines. For example, there are prescribed ending patterns for musical phrases based on final accents. Other important qualities of traditional Byzantine chant include unique scale tunings and musical notation. These are irrefutable facts of history.

So why does controversy arise? Because the formal definition of Byzantine chant is predicated on two factors: Greek as the sole language of the Church, and musicians immersed and trained in the Eastern “yphos”. As the Church in America evolves, however, we cannot take these preconditions for granted. Indeed, in most of our parishes, where English is used alongside or in place of Greek, and where musicians come from a predominantly Western background, they have long since ceased to apply. There is, as of yet, no definitive agreement on how best to reconcile Byzantine chant, in all its glorious intricacy, to this new world of English and Western Music. Given the complex factors involved, many people question not *how* an English text should be set to Byzantine chant, but *if* it should be done at all! For some, the answer is a definite, “No!” Their main arguments are as follows:

1. Some chanters and Byzantine scholars adamantly maintain that Byzantine chant should *not* be used with the English language because the “sound” of the music is not compatible with this language; in other words, there is a cultural, traditional, and historical gap that can not and *should* not be bridged. When we attempt to combine the two, the sound of English text being sung in a way very foreign to the English language somehow destroys the perfect marriage between the text and the music. Some of these proponents would argue that the English language should develop its own system of chant that would be consistent with the “Western” sound (as opposed to the “Eastern” style of music). The Russians managed to do it, and so should other nationalities.
2. There are a large number of Byzantine chanters who are firm in their conviction that if melodic lines are not rendered in the microtones of true Byzantine chant, then the resulting music is *not* Byzantine chant, and should not be referred to as such. The micro-tunings are essential to preserving the chant, and if we lose or disregard this defining quality of Byzantine chant, we are destroying part of its very nature—a part which should be preserved.
3. Western musical notation cannot accurately express the nuances and rendition of the chant, and therefore should not be used if we are to call the music Byzantine chant.

These three “hot topics” are very much discussed and disputed among Byzantine purists, who seek to preserve and perpetuate the ancient and holy system intact. By ignoring elements deemed integral to the very nature of Byzantine chant, they maintain we are destroying it. To what degree “change” constitutes “destruction” is up for debate, but we can at least acknowledge that were an English translation of a Byzantine hymn, rendered in Western transcription, handed off to be performed by Pavarotti, or the Three Tenors, or the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the resulting sound would probably not be very Byzantine. Nonetheless, from a practical point-of-view, the facts in the United States today are these:

1. English *is* being used, in some cases more often than Greek.
2. The majority of choirs and many of the chanters singing English do not read Byzantine notation, nor do they have the time or inclination to learn to do so.
3. Singers in the U.S. have been brought up in Western music traditions; not only is it difficult for them to hear (let alone learn and reproduce) the micro-tunings and distinctive yphos of the Byzantine system, they quite frankly often do not want to.

What many, if not most, Greek Orthodox parishes in the U.S. have is, at best, a *modified* Byzantine chant, and this is not likely to give way to either a reactionary return to the “old ways”, or a completely new system with no connection to the Byzantine. I am coming to the realization that Greek-Americans (or American Greeks!) are in the middle of a perhaps unintentional process of developing our own chant style, based on the melodic lines of Byzantine theory, but using tempered scales, Western notation, and a “Western yphos”, or sound. In the meantime, given that our Western-trained choirs and chanters *will* be singing in English using tempered scales, those of us who work with Byzantine chant in its traditional form have our own problems to deal with.

I can best articulate these problems by relating them to my own experience, helping parish priests, choir directors, and chanters meet the need for trained psaltis and good translations/settings of Orthodox hymns. My primary concern is trying to teach untrained chanters to chant. Unfortunately, I do not have the luxury of doing this in a structured academic setting. Instead, I find myself in the less-than-ideal business of providing “quick fixes”. I get calls on Friday night because a choir member has to chant at a funeral or wedding or baptism on Monday, and needs music. I get calls from people who find themselves having to sing the Orthros on Sunday morning, and they are not even familiar with the service. If it were not for the Kezios book, they would be completely lost. I get calls from choir directors who will be singing at services other than the Divine Liturgy, and they have no materials. All in all, here are the most common problematic scenarios that I encounter:

1. Many churches have no trained chanters, and often tap a choir member to perform this function. In the event there is no choir member or parish member willing to step in, the presbytera often becomes the chanter.
2. The result is that many men and women find themselves in the position of chanter with no background, training, or resources. Some of them cannot read Greek. Some are unfamiliar with Western musical notation, let alone Byzantine.
3. Even presuming they can read music, many of these chanters have limited access to hymns set into chant, in either Western *or* Byzantine notation.

4. Without adequate knowledge of Byzantine chant – the ochtoechos, the tones, nuances, and melodic patterns, etc. – chanters without good music and/or the ability to sing it accurately will improvise melodies based on whatever “sounds right” to them. Often the congregation has so little exposure to authentic chant that they can’t tell the difference!
5. Some of these chanters may be converts, and their relative unfamiliarity with the model melodies, or common hymns of the Church, exacerbates the problem.
6. Many chanters who lack the necessary training are asked (or take it upon themselves) to render English texts into chant, without a clear conception of how the text gives form to the melodic lines. They either improvise changes to the melody to fit the new text, or cram the text into the Greek melody however they can. Either way, the perfect unity of text and music that is present in the original hymn is damaged.
7. Most formal chant education involves learning the major hymns in Greek, distinguishing between the tones (and knowing when to use them), and learning how to read Byzantine notation. But this is different from having comprehensive knowledge of Byzantine theory as it relates the shape of the text to the music. Thus, many priests are very capable when dealing with the hymns in the original Greek, but do not have the ability to accurately and correctly set an English text.

The practical results of these situations are:

1. We find many people with very limited knowledge of Byzantine chant serving at the psalterion with no training or resources.
2. Their musical material tends to come from whatever music the choir uses, or whatever they are given, or can find.
3. People tend to download or borrow anything they can find that is available on the internet or from other sources, often not being able to discriminate between good music/translations and bad.
4. When, for a long enough period of time, we hear things sung or said wrong, our ear starts to expect the errors, and eventually hears them as correct – just as, over time, bad grammar becomes acceptable and eventually the norm.
5. When we sing an English hymn set to an existing Greek melodic line, we often find the phrases and word order turned around, which sometimes results in the high note on Hades and the low note on Heaven. On one hand it can be difficult for those who speak Greek fluently to find words and phrases moved around in the sentences of the English translations. On the other hand, sometimes English word order and semantics require it in order to make sense in terms of grammar and syntax.

In light of this, some of my biggest challenges are:

1. Helping new chanters unlearn badly set English, where accents and syllables actually work against the shape of the melodic line in ways that contradict Byzantine principles and are offensive to the ear. This results in people having no idea how a melody is structured around a text, especially when the person chanting does not speak Greek and only has an English setting to learn from. In addition, it has the effect of diminishing the elegant and harmonious beauty of our Divine Services.

2. Persuading people that it is easier to learn a new melodic line that actually fits the text, rather than try to use an existing melodic line which generally results in lots of unwarranted melismas and strange or awkward phrase endings. This is of special importance when we are studying hiermologic hymns, which are based on the principle of one musical note per syllable.
3. Devising or finding English translations which accurately fit the prosodia so that the new chanters can learn these important hymns.
4. Teaching people basic Byzantine theory so that, if they must, they can improvise a melodic line based on the formulae for each mode. I try to teach them at least basic melodic patterns, as well as starting and ending notes for phrases and hymns. At the very least, they have to be aware that those formulae exist.

Basic differences between the English language and the Greek language make the process of setting the text to music even more difficult. There are several issues which hamper rendering a Greek text into English, and then setting that English translation into chant.

1. English is a simple language, relatively speaking. The Germanic and Anglo-Saxon English words are much different from the Latin and Greek-based English words. Some of our translations sound like tech manuals rather than poetry if our English word choices become too technical.
2. There is a discrepancy between the length of the Greek text and the length of the translated English text. *Kyrie eleison* is a good example: seven syllables. The English equivalent, *Lord have mercy*, has only four. In addition to more syllables, the text often has few words: again, use the example *Kyrie eleison* and *Lord have mercy*. We frequently hear that “the Greeks have a word for it.” The corollary is that “English has a *phrase* for it.”
3. Common English, on the whole, has fewer syllables than the Latin and Greek-based words. That means that we can have entire paragraphs consisting of one-syllable words in English ... a phenomenon that would be very rare if not impossible in Greek. Therefore, the hymnographer often has to choose which *words* to emphasize, rather than which *syllables*, as is the case of Greek. One of my favorite examples is “Αιτείτε τον Κύριον,” which in Greek consists of seven syllables. But the English equivalent, “Praise the Lord,” has only three.
4. Many English translations are awkward both in the phrasing and in the word choices, making understanding the text in English difficult (if not rendering it downright ridiculous). For example, I found one translation of the Creed which reads, “and He shall come again to judge the living and the dead; whose Kingdom shall have no end.” When read aloud, it sounds like we are saying, “...and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.” In an English translation of the 4th Doxastikon I found a translation which reads, “Why do you seek Him Who lives among the dead?” It would be much clearer if phrased, “Why do you seek among the dead for Him Who lives?”

It is my fervent hope that all of us – clergy, choirs, and chanters, from the parish level to the Archdiocese – can work together to repair any damage or diminishment of our rich liturgical tradition, and to help produce the materials and training which are so necessary to securing a vibrant future for Orthodoxy in America. I have tried here to outline some of the challenges

and situations which I personally face in my day-to-day life. I do not propose to offer all the solutions, but I feel that the topic is one of vital interest to us all, and so I submit my conclusions for consideration:

1. There is a difference between being able to *read* Byzantine notation and being able to *compose* in Byzantine Chant, just as there is a difference between being able to play the piano and being able to compose like Beethoven.
2. We must start with a good English text from native English-speakers educated in English literature, who also have a gift of elegant use of language. They must be assisted by Orthodox theologians who are knowledgeable of Classical Greek liturgical texts. The English texts must be free from bad grammar, incorrect antecedents and declensions, strange words, and awkward phrases. They need to be accurate but linguistically poetic and clearly understandable, and in some cases, such as *prosonia* or other well-known melodies, of a definite metrical pattern.
3. We need hymnographers who are trained in Byzantine theory *and* composition creating the music for our hymns in English. They need to understand the Byzantine formulae which allow a text *in any language* to form a complementary melodic line.
4. A Western style of Byzantine chant is evolving, whether or not we are aware of it, and whether or not we want it to happen. Even if we are not going to use micro-tunings, Byzantine notation, and the Byzantine yphos, we can still follow the melodic formulae for each mode. We may give it a new name, but it will be grounded firmly in that tradition of Holy Music which the Fathers teach was delivered by the Angels.
5. Finally, we must develop training for chanters in this country so they can learn not only the services and hymns, but the deep liturgical theology that undergirds them and gives them meaning. In addition, choir directors, as musical leaders in our American parishes, should also have training in Byzantine music. We presently have choir directors with more than fifty years of service in a Greek Orthodox choir, who still cannot tell one mode from another.

The scope of this education poses serious challenges – most of our choir directors do not have the time or resources to devote to four years at Holy Cross, or a long-term stay on Mt. Athos. Nevertheless, our new chanters, often converts and often women, need more tools than their willingness to do the job, and our hymns and services deserve more than “quick fixes.” We cannot rely on trained chanters from Greece to serve all the American parishes. We need to find practical ways of training and developing chanters, who perform such vital and noble service to the Church, and who have always formed such an integral part of its life. It must begin today.