

SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT ORTHODOX HYMNS

By Nancy Takis

QUESTION: WHAT ARE THE HYMNS OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH?

This is not a simple question to answer. Our church calendar is set up that we may daily remember and honor saints and events in the life of the Church. We can look at the calendar and see at a glance which persons or events are celebrated for every day of the year. Some days have many people or events that we commemorate, and other days have only one major person or event to be celebrated. But the fact is that every day of the year has designated people or events to commemorate, and a liturgy celebrated on any day has a whole set of hymns relating to those people or events, as well as a Vesper service and an Orthros service. In addition, there are the hymns sung at special services such as complines, baptisms, weddings, and memorials. During the Divine Liturgy itself, hymns are integral from beginning to end. There is not a lot of “down time” for Orthodox musicians during our services.

While Protestant churches may have three or four congregational sing-alongs and perhaps an anthem somewhere in the service, their choirs generally do not have the amount of singing that our choirs do. On the other hand, unlike the Divine Liturgy, a Protestant service is often set up at the discretion of the pastor and the choir director or organist, and while they do not follow a liturgical text, they often must learn all new hymns and anthems for each Sunday.

Our liturgy, however, is very structured, and while we may use different melodic lines, the text of the service and the hymns we sing are the same in every Orthodox church in the world on any given Sunday. We cannot arbitrarily decide which hymns we want to include in a service, or which Scripture readings to follow. It is all set out for us. Some Sundays are fairly ordinary and not much is added. Other Sundays seem to have all sorts of extra hymns at the Small Entrance, and on major feast days we may have several substitutions. We rarely have omissions.

The Orthodox Church has many categories of hymns and this article cannot even begin to list all of them. Most of us are familiar with the main hymns and responses of the Divine Liturgy. Some of these are the same every Sunday, starting with the *antiphons* “Tes Presvies” and “Soson Imas.” These hymns are antiphonic because the verses are alternated with psalm verses sung by a chanter. (Many churches dispense with these interpolated verses.) There are other hymns of the liturgy that usually do not change, such as “Se Imnumen,” “Ayios, Ayios, Ayios,” “Is Ayios, Is Kyrios,” “Eidhomen to Fos,” and “Ii To Onoma.” *Cherubic* hymns are sung at the Great Entrance.

Other hymns of the liturgy may change depending on the season or particular feast. For example, the regular *Trisagion* hymn is “Ayios O Theos,” but sometimes “Ton Stavron Su” or “Osis Is Christon” are substituted. *Megalinaria* are hymns to the Theotokos. The regular Sunday megalinarian is “Axion Estin.” Other megalinaria include “Epi Si Cheri” and “O Angelos Evoa.” *Koinonika*, or Communion hymns, are taken from the Psalms except on a few occasions. The regular Sunday Communion hymn “Enite ton Kyrion,” is from Psalm 148. The usual Communion Psalm for weekday liturgies is “Eis mnimosinon,” from Psalm 112. The Christmas Communion hymn “Litrosin” is from Psalm 111. The Communion for Pascha is “Soma Christou,” which is not from a Psalm, nor is “Tou Dhipnou Su.”

The hymns at the Small Entrance are the hymns that change from week to week. At the Small Entrance, when the Priest comes out with the Gospel, we sing specific hymns for specific Sundays.

These hymns include the *troparia*, and the *kontakia*. The troparion is like a theme song for a particular saint or event. It is the signature hymn of the day. Every person and every event associated with the church calendar has a Troparion. Some are very well known, such as the Troparia of St. Demetrios, or St. George, or Sts. Constantine and Helen. Others are more obscure, such as the Troparion of the Prophet Elijah. Most people know the Troparia of the major feasts such as Pentecost (“Evloghitos I Christe”), the Annunciation (“Simeron tis Sotirias”), or the Elevation of the Holy Cross (“Soson Kyrie.”) These hymns are usually sung at the Small Entrance on Sundays in addition to the rotated Resurrection Troparia, discussed below, although on very major feast days, the rotated hymns would not normally be chanted.

The *kontakion* is a hymn containing a small sermon about the event or person being recognized on a particular day. If a Sunday is not a major feast day, the kontakion is “Prostasia Ton Christianon.”

In addition to these hymns sung during the Liturgy, there are whole sets of hymns sung during the Vespers and Orthros services. There are series of hymns after “Kyrie Ekekraxa” during Vespers. There are series of hymns following the Praises during Orthros. There are hymns associated with the Psalm readings, and hymns associated with the Scripture readings. Sometimes there are 50 hymns sung just for a specific day, sometimes more and sometimes less.

QUESTION: WHAT DETERMINES WHICH HYMNS ARE SUNG AT THE SMALL ENTRANCE?

We use three different books to tell us which hymns to sing on which days.

1. The MENAION: (From the Greek word for MONTH) A complete Menaion has 12 volumes, one for each month. Each day is listed in the Menaion, telling us all the people or events to be commemorated for that day, as well as all the special hymns associated with the services for that day. There may be more than 50 different hymns listed. Usually during the liturgy, we sing only a few of them. The rest of the hymns are sung at Vespers and Matins.
2. The TRIODION: This includes all the hymns sung during the Sundays and services of Great Lent. These are usually sung in addition to the hymns of the MENAION.
3. The PENTECOSTARION: This includes all the hymns sung for Sundays and services from Easter to Pentecost. These are also sung in addition to the hymns of the MENAION.

In addition to this, our Church has eight special hymns that we rotate on Sundays. These are commonly called the Resurrection Troparia, and there is one for each of the eight Byzantine modes. We start soon after Easter with the Troparion of the first mode, and proceed in order week after week until we reach the Troparion of the eighth mode; then the cycle repeats. These hymns are called the *Resurrection Troparia*, because each Sunday in the Orthodox Church is considered a Resurrection service, and every Sunday we celebrate the Resurrection anew. The text of each Troparion celebrates an aspect of the Resurrection.

During a Vesper service, the troparion of the saint or event that is being commemorated is sung just before the end of the service. For this reason, these troparia are also referred to as *apolytikia*, or *dismissal hymns*. Many people use the terms troparion and apolytikion interchangeably, because most troparia, at one Vesper service or another, are used as apolytikia. The troparion is the only hymn which is chanted in all three of the services associated with any given day: in addition to the end of Vespers,

it also appears after the Psalms during *Matins* (Orthros), and at the Small Entrance during the Divine Liturgy. On major feasts it may also be chanted after Communion.

What all this means for the typical Sunday church musician is this:

1. We need to know where we are on the rotation in order to know which of the eight Resurrection Troparia to sing.
2. We also need to know the date of the Sunday liturgy, and whom or what we are commemorating that day.
3. If a Sunday falls during Great Lent or between Easter and Pentecost, we also need to add the Triodion or Pentecostarion hymns from that particular Sunday.

Every year the Church prints thick books telling us which hymns to sing for each day of that particular year. These books are very large, and once the ecclesiastical year ends, we need to make a new book for the next year. These books can be used for reference, but they cannot be followed twice, because the dates of the Sundays will change every year, and therefore the commemorated saints or events for those Sundays will change. Furthermore, the dates dependent on major feasts such as, Pascha or the Nativity of Christ, will also vary from year to year.

QUESTION: WHY CAN'T THE CHURCH JUST CREATE ONE BIG BOOK WHICH WE CAN USE EVERY SUNDAY OF EVERY YEAR? IT TAKES A LOT OF TIME AND PAPER TO CREATE A NEW BOOK EVERY YEAR. ISN'T THAT WASTEFUL?

First of all, we have 52 Sundays each year, and the dates of those Sundays are different every year. In 2003, the January Sundays are the fifth, twelfth, nineteenth, and the twenty-sixth. In 2002, the January Sundays were the sixth, the thirteenth, the twentieth, and the twenty-seventh. And so it goes. This varies even more when we add Leap Years. It may be many years before a certain date falls on a Sunday. Secondly, since we begin singing the Resurrection Troparia after Easter, and the date of Easter could be anywhere between March and May, we would begin our rotation cycle at a different time every year. Finally, since Lent starts at different times, the various Sundays of Lent will be on different dates every year, as would the Sundays during the Pentecostarion period. The Sunday before Christmas commemorates the lineage of Christ. In 2002, the date for this commemoration was December 22, however, it could fall anywhere between the eighteenth and the twenty-fourth. When we consider all these variables, it becomes obvious that one book will not do for more than one year.

QUESTION: HOW DOES THE CHANTER LEARN SO MANY HYMNS?

There are over 8,000 hymns in the Orthodox Church. A parish or chanter may not have the music for all of the hymns. Many are learned by rote. Many are improvised or composed for an occasion. Most of the music for Greek texts can be found in Byzantine notation if a parish has a music library. Often a chanter may not have access to the music, in which case knowledge of Byzantine music theory and improvisational skills are essential. Many hymns are based on model melodies, or *Prosomia*: there are countless hymns, for instance, which can be sung to the melodic line of "Tin Oreotita" or "Ton Synanarchon Logon." Once a chanter knows the model melody, alternate texts can be easily substituted with very little variation. This is much like singing additional verses to Christmas carols.

Other hymns, known as *Idiomela*, have original melodic lines and must be learned. Knowledge and understanding of Byzantine chant is a chanter's most important tool. There may be several versions of a particular hymn by different composers, or the chanter can compose a new melodic line. Most of the common *Idiomela* are available in Western Notation (especially hymns that are chanted during the Divine Liturgy.) However, many are only available at this date in Byzantine notation. Chanters who read the Byzantine music and understand the various techniques, structures, and theories of Byzantine chant, can chant the hymns or improvise melodic lines with little effort.

QUESTION: HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND THE WHYS AND WHEREFORES OF THE MODES?

Very early in our Church history, the church fathers chose eight melodic systems that they felt were spiritual in nature. These are modes of Byzantine Chant. Each mode was associated with a particular spiritual quality that the church fathers considered important. Other modes were considered too earthly, too physical, too sensual, or too irreverent. The point was not to make the body dance, but to make the soul dance with joy and the glory of God. It was not merely beautiful music to the ears, but prayerful music for the spirit. The music should inspire us to lay aside all the cares of this life, as we sing every Sunday during the Cherubic hymn.

All the music of the early church, therefore, followed certain guidelines on how the music of our church should sound. The early church fathers wanted the ecclesiastical music to express glory, thanksgiving, repentance, faith and hope, etc. They did not want the music to inspire lust or greed or sinfulness or sensory pleasure. Centuries later, most Orthodox churches still use this music in worship services. In modern times and in modern cultures, the music is often harmonized and Westernized, but in the earlier days, the music was sung simply with a melodic line and a drone note, or *ison*; this eliminates any unnecessary sound and distraction, and concentrates on the essential spiritual text.

While the text of our Liturgy stays basically the same from week to week, year to year, and throughout the centuries, our musical settings give a richness and variety of spiritual qualities to the text. The different modes may shade a single word, such as Amen, or a simple phrase, such as Kyrie eleison, to express praise, repentance, humility, or thanksgiving. The phrasing of the different melodic lines can also emphasize different words or ideas, allowing the text to take on new dimensions. Rather than rewrite a text, we sing it differently. Think of the differences between the Bach *Ave Maria* and the Schubert version. Think of the differences between the Desby "Enite Ton Kyrion" in the Mode Six, and the Gallos "Enite ton Kyrion" in Mode Eight.

In Greek Orthodox churches in this country, the choir often sings harmonized versions of the chant melodies, usually accompanied by an organ playing the voice parts. The early church fathers might have thought this was a bit excessive, especially since the organ and voice parts distort or eliminate the tension and resolution between the melody and the *ison* and obscure the defining qualities of each mode. However, we must remember that the ancient modes were familiar to the people in the early church. Today, our ears are trained to hear major and minor melodies and harmonies. Modern church music speaks to modern ears, but it is still worth the effort to learn and preserve the ancient music of the Orthodox Church. After all, our hymnographers did not claim to have composed this music. It is the music that is sung by the angels in heaven and is transferred to the hymnographers by the Holy Spirit.