

# Music and Orthodoxy

by Father Michael Varlamos

Music is one of the most powerful forces known to man. It communicates in ways beyond our comprehension. The Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church recognized this and were very selective in what type of music was appropriate for our worship. The same can be said for our iconography, church architecture, rubrics of our worship service, vestments, etc. In the Orthodox Church, music was used to emphasize the meaning of the words of the hymn. It was not supposed to sound similar to secular music. Hymns were written and composed to be prayed to a simple melody that can either be done by a single individual or by a one hundred-voice choir. The words of the hymn were always more important than the music. The music was there to add color, support and amplify the meaning of the text. The Church music was meant to penetrate the depth of our heart and there to “prick it,” that is, to wound it into repentance, contrition, and humility, which is the only way to bring us to pray.

That is why our holy Orthodox Church for almost 2,000 years used the type of music known today as Byzantine chant. It is a music that may not always be appealing to our “secular ear,” but is the music of simplicity, purity and prayer. It is, in the opinion of the saints of our Church, “the music of the human soul,” “the music of prayer,” and the “sound of Orthodoxy.” It is the music used in all Orthodox spiritual centers—monasteries, convents, shrines, the Greek Patriarchates, etc.—throughout the world.

From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, history shows us that human beings were becoming more secular and materialistic. In the world of art, music, and even architecture, there was an emphasis on external beauty and less so on the inner, spiritual nature of things in general. In painting, canvasses became huge and depicted emotional and realistic events. Eventually, art effected bold colors and abstract figures. Music became loud, filled with emotion and complexity. Even church music in our Archdiocese was affected by this Romantic trend. We tried to copy what other denominations were doing. More emphasis was placed on the music and the text began to disappear into the background.

Music was becoming more complex and intricate. It tried to affect us emotionally, and we confused this with spirituality. There seemed to be an emphasis on “feelings” in the music that was being written by our Greek Orthodox composers—that certain feelings and emotions were trying to be evoked, almost with no regard to the text, or even oblivious to it. In America, more and more people did not understand the original Greek anyway, so it seems that attempts were made to bury it in complex melodies with four and six part harmonies. It didn’t really matter what the words of the prayer or hymn meant, as long as it sounded beautiful! *The music became more important than the prayer itself!*

This new type of music dominated the Greek Orthodox churches in our country during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, for the time being, continues to do so. Efforts are being made throughout the country to rediscover the ancient music of the Greek Orthodox Church—the music that was *supposed* to go with our hymns and prayers. More and more parishes are beginning to recognize why the Fathers of our Church selected this music instead of what we have had in the last 50 to 75 years. I’m pleased that our parish is one of these churches.

This music is not intended merely for singing, whether in the loft or from the pew, but it is to be prayed. To truly pray, we must live and approach this music the way our saints did: in a state of repentance. To repent means to change our ways, to initiate a new beginning to our relationship with God. It is living a life of faith, love, humility and obedience. It is placing our souls in the hands of our spiritual fathers who strive to guide us by the teachings of Jesus Christ and His saints.

Look at the Divine Liturgy in a different way: as a dialogue with God. Don't only worship with your ears (that is, by the sound of music); listen carefully to the text. Internalize and strive to understand the meaning of what is being chanted or intoned. Learn to speak to God within your hearts. He is there in the depth of our being. Converse with Him in meaningful words there, first. Then raise your voice in praise and supplication.

Some people say that they do not find this Byzantine music uplifting, perhaps because it is not as emotional as the music we have become used to. Please understand that before we can be truly uplifted, we must first humble ourselves from the depth of our hearts and initiate our prayer and worship there with: humility, simplicity, purity and peacefulness. Then our uplifting is not a feeling or an emotion, but a truly spiritual experience: it is nothing less than standing before God.

This is what the Fathers of our Church taught and this is why they did not choose the emotional, complex music which, as we know from Plato, did exist in ancient times, and would be analagous to the complex harmonies of today's church music in America; but rather they selected the simple spiritual music we know as Byzantine chant. And this is what more and more churches are discovering. As more people, Greeks and converts, are coming to appreciate the faith and traditions of Orthodoxy, many are seeing the connection between this traditional music and our iconography, spirituality and life as Orthodox Christians.

I pray on a daily basis that all our people, choir members and not, will come to see my preference for Byzantine chant not as me implementing my opinion and personal tastes on others. Quite the opposite! My personal tastes in music are quite broad, from classical to jazz to rock. But within liturgical services, I only wish to bring others closer to God in the way our Greek Orthodox Church has for almost two millennia. *This matter has more to do with the salvation of our souls than it does with music.* Again, I pray that people see the changes I advocate in this way and this way only. We should pray, fast, repent, live as Christ taught us with meekness and humility, read the Bible daily, be obedient to the Tradition of our Church, come to Confession for forgiveness and guidance, and praise God not only with our voices, but with our thoughts and deeds as well.