

TONE VS. MODE

by Stan Takis

More than once I have been corrected when I refer to the *tones* of the Octoechos. I am gently reminded that they are more properly called *modes*. As a music student at Michigan State University, in my history and theory classes, the term mode referred to a scale with a specific base note. We learned about the “Greek modes” and “Church modes,” but never about any Byzantine modes. So anyone in America, I believe, who has formally studied this topic would have the same understanding of the term mode that I have.

However, in Byzantine music, this is not what modes are. Yes, you will find modes in Byzantine music, but the Octoechos is a system of modal genres. Each genre is a family of several modes. So wouldn't it be confusing to call the genres “modes” themselves? By using the word tone, we can differentiate between the families of modes and modes in those families.

It all boils down to the translation of the Greek word ήχος (echos.) It really is an issue of PREFERENCE, not of right or wrong. I prefer to translate it as tone. As we can see by the language dictionary entries below, there are Greek words for mode and tone, but the translation of echos is *sound*.

ENGLISH-GREEK DICTIONARY

mode	=	τρόπος, συρμός, μόδα tropos, syrmos, moda
tone	=	τόνος, χροία, τονίζω, τονίζομαι tonos, chroia, tonizo, tonizomai
sound	=	ήχος, στενό, πορθμός, σώος, υγιής, γερός, βαθύς, ηχώ, διαδίδω ichos, steno, porthmos, soos, ygiis, geros, bathys, icho, diadido

GREEK-ENGLISH DICTIONARY

ήχος ichos	=	sound, tune
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So unless we change all references to the Octoechos as the eight-sound system, we have to analyze a little further. Which of the two words, tone or mode, can be a synonym for the word sound? Clearly, it is tone.

I do not buy the argument that the fact that tone means sound shows that it should not be used to describe families of modes. Almost ALL words have a variety of meanings. Let's look up the words tone and mode in a dictionary, an encyclopedia, and a music dictionary. I have included only the definitions germane to this discussion:

TONE – from dictionary, encyclopedia, and music dictionary

c. any of the nine melodies or tunes to which Gregorian plainsong psalms are sung.

In music rubrics: Tone, one of eight musical scores used in Eastern Orthodox services.

a recitational melody in Gregorian chant

MODE – from dictionary, encyclopedia, and music dictionary

6. Music. any of various arrangements of the diatonic tones of an octave, differing from one another in the order of the whole steps and half steps; scale.

1. Any of certain fixed arrangements of the diatonic tones of an octave, as the major and minor scales of Western music.

2. A patterned arrangement, as the one characteristic of the music of classical Greece or the medieval Christian Church.

In music, a scale is an ordered series of musical intervals, which, along with the key or tonic, define the pitches. However, mode is usually used in the sense of scale applied only to the specific diatonic scales found below. The use of more than one mode is polymodal, such as with polymodal chromaticism. While all tonal music may technically be described as modal, music that is called modal often has less diatonic functionality and changes key less often than other music.

a system of rhythmic notation (modal rhythm) used in the 13th-century

a particular arrangement, or hierarchy, of related pitches (called notes), as, for example, in major and minor scales, ecclesiastical modes, and so on. The same term can be applied to scalar patterns of intervals from other cultures, for example, those from India, Japan, China, etc. The Greeks thought of a mode as a series of gaps, or holes, between the notes and not the notes themselves

a term used to describe 'scale families' that are related by the fact that they use a common group of notes but have different roots. These modes are named for the root (for example, E) and a descriptor that describes its interval sequence (for example, 'Phrygian'). So, for the group of notes C, D, E, F, G, A and B, the modes are C Ionian, D Dorian, E Phrygian, F Lydian, G Mixolydian, A Aeolian and B Locrian. In a similar way, the notes that make up the melodic minor scale C, D, Eb, F, G, A and B, have an associated group of modes: C Hypoionian, D Dorian b2, E Lydian augmented, F Lydian b7, G Mixolydian b6, A Aeolian b5 and B Superlocrian

As we can see, the only reference to the Eastern Orthodox Church comes in the entry under TONE. As we can also plainly see, the definition of mode is far more technical, specific, and esoteric. I acknowledge that it is not necessarily erroneous to refer to the Octoechos as modes, my contention is that it is not an appropriate use in our service books.

Almost all of our Greek Orthodox service books use the word tone. All of the non-Greek jurisdictions in the Orthodox Church use the word tone. Most clergy and chanters use the word tone. Why suddenly inject a scholastic term such as “mode” for the accepted term tone and claim that all should change their usage?

To conclude, I am not wrong, nor am I alone, in my choice to use the term “tone” as a translation of the Greek word “echos.” Nor am I wrong to refer to the Octoechos as the eight-tone system. That may not be someone else’s preference, but it doesn’t make it wrong. I will continue to use the word tone in the service books that I format and produce. In my explanations and academic discussions, I will continue to cite the fact that both terms are used and are perceived by many as interchangeable.