

SUGGESTIONS FOR TRANSLATING GREEK ORTHODOX HYMNS INTO ENGLISH AND SETTING THEM TO MELODIES WITHIN THE BYZANTINE MUSICAL SYSTEM

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General Considerations

1. The translations should accurately convey the literal and theological meaning of the text without adding any new concepts or ideas. If there is any doubt, consult appropriate clergy.
2. The text should flow when spoken and be easily understood, without any arcane or puzzling words or any awkward phrasing. Chanted texts are basically musically enhanced speech.
3. Hymns are poems and prayers which use music to highlight and beautify their texts. Therefore, a profound understanding of poetry, poetic meter, and poetic devices is necessary to endow the translated texts with the power, depth, eloquence, and memorability of the original Greek hymns. Poetry is not necessarily flowery language. It is basically simple with an economy of words, so words must be chosen carefully. English has many one-syllable and two-syllable words, whereas Greek has mostly polysyllable words. It is said, “The Greeks have a word for it,” but English has a *phrase* for it.
4. When using Western staff notation to depict the melodies of the hymns, there should be a minimum of ornaments. Only the basic melodic formulas of the Octoechos for specific metric patterns should be rendered. This, in Byzantine parlance, is called “metrophonia.” It is up to a knowledgeable chanter or choir to add the traditional ornaments to create a “melos” or a melody that further enhances the text.
5. The Greek hymns alter tetrasyllable (4-syllable phrases with accent on first syllable) with hexasyllable (6-syllable) phrases with occasional disyllable (2), trisyllable (3), and pentasyllable (5) phrases. Therefore, in staff notation, bar lines should be placed between the various meters to absolutely indicate where the accented syllables occur. Optionally, time signatures can be added when applicable. The hymns at newbyz.org use time signatures for the benefit of choir conductors.
6. In general, if the English words do not match the meter of the Greek words, the melody must be adjusted to fit the text. Not the other way around.
7. If the hymn text is from Scripture, it should come from an accepted English translation. If there is a question, a hierarch or priest should be consulted. At newbyz.org, we generally use the Orthodox Study Bible, which is the New King James Version.

For Prosomia (melodies that are based upon a model, or automelon)

1. The goal is to follow the model melody as closely possible, therefore the effort must be made to use English wording which follows the metric pattern of the Greek text while maintaining the meaning and poetry. This is the most difficult part of the translation process, but since English is a diverse and prolific language, it can be done with much thought and re-writing. Access to an ancient Greek dictionary (like Diogenes) and an English thesaurus are essential in the process.
2. Since English grammar has a different system than Greek, it is not always wise to try and match the Greek order of words. However, an effort must be made to place musical emphasis on a word that the Greek hymn emphasizes. Therefore, words have to be moved around until they fit perfectly into the phrase.
3. The literary phrases of the text have to match the musical phrases of the melody. Therefore, prosomia must be translated and metered phrase by phrase, not hymn by hymn. Making the effort to do this will result in English language hymns that flow better and are more easily understood.