

Chant and Polyphony in the Orthodox Church

by Stan Takis

Some American Greek Orthodox choir members may be questioning why there is a renewed interest in more chant music in the Divine Liturgy, as opposed to the four-part music that has been used in the past sixty years. There are many reasons for it, but one reason that should be explained is the historical and theological position of chant in the Greek Orthodox Church, and why it is important. Chant is the predominant music in all of the Church's services aside from the Divine Liturgy. Especially in America, the Divine Liturgy has become in many instances a single "opus" from a composer writing in four-part polyphony with organ accompaniment. Usually one or more of these liturgies comprises the musical program from week to week with little variation. While this works out fine for many churches, it leaves little room for the use of the diverse modes of Byzantine chant, which are rotated on an eight-week cycle, during the liturgy on Sundays. This article is not an argument against through-composed liturgies, several of which do incorporate chant along with the polyphony, but merely a positive expression about why it might be a good thing to expand the use of chant in the service.

Chant, by *definition*, is a form of purely vocal music using limited scales and rhythms to convey a pre-written text. Chant by *function* is meant to serve the text, highlighting certain words and phrases, so that the text is elevated in a way that commands the attention of the listeners. It is meant to clear away all distractions from the meanings that the text is attempting to convey. Because of this, chant has always been an important tool in religious worship: almost all religions use a form of musical chant for various prayers and services. The Greek Orthodox Church uses a specific system of chant often referred to as "Byzantine Chant."

Historically, the musical parameters of Byzantine Chant were developed over a period of time, but it has been delivered to the present day with a very specific set of rules. We owe this mostly to the work of three chanters of the Church from the 19th Century, Chrysanthos, Gregory, and Chourmouziou, also known as the Three Teachers, who standardized the musical theory and notation of Byzantine chant with the intent of preserving the true chant of the Orthodox Church. This was important because the tradition of the Church holds that our music is the music that the angels sing in heaven, and that this music is delivered to us "by the hand of" the hymnographer, much as holy icons are considered to be "written" by iconographers. Since the origins were from heaven, the idea was to discourage inappropriate human innovations in the music.

Since the time of the Three Teachers, other styles of music, mostly from Western European musical traditions, have entered into the Greek Orthodox Church. While the correctness of this music for our worship has been and is still being thoroughly debated, it can be safely argued that the Westernized, polyphonic music used in American Greek Orthodox churches today is new compared to the *traditional* music of the Church. Some modern music that is referred to as Byzantine, or, perhaps, Byzantine-influenced, is not the same as traditional Byzantine chant.

In the late 1800's, the famous Athenian protopsaltis, John Sakellarides, diverged from the traditions set by the Three Teachers by simplifying melodic lines, advocating a more Western vocal style, and harmonizing some hymns in three and four parts using Western staff notation, scales, and triad chords. Although Sakellarides touched off a heated debate and was vilified by traditionalists and lionized by modernists, it cannot be said that Sakellarides' music was not chant. It may not have been *pure* Byzantine chant any longer, but it still qualified, by definition and function as chant, that is, his music was always subordinate to the liturgical texts and did not distract from the words by use of elaborate musical devices. What it did do was open the door for the expansion of polyphony into American Greek Orthodox church music.

Polyphony is a topic that causes much controversy in the Church. Strictly speaking, polyphony means "many voices," and thus, any style of music that contains more parts than just a single melodic line (monophony) is polyphonic. Even Byzantine chant is polyphonic because it consists of a melodic line and a sustained pedal tone, known to most people as an "ison." However, there are different types of polyphony, and although it is possible for some forms of chant to be polyphonic, there are some forms of polyphony that cannot qualify as chant. Chant can have multiple voices if each of the different voices is speaking the same words of the text in the same rhythm. This form of polyphony is known as *homophony*. The harmonized chant of Sakellarides is homophonic, as is most of the multi-voiced chant of the Russian Orthodox and other Slavonic churches.

In Renaissance Western Europe, a new form of polyphony emerged which has greatly affected the musical art since. In this kind of polyphony, each different voice, or part, of the music takes on its own rhythm and melody in contrast to the other voices of the music, which are being simultaneously performed. In fact, the word polyphony itself has in modern times come to imply that each voice has complete independence from the other voices. In music such as this, the text being sung is often placed in a subordinate position to the music, which would remove it from the category of chant. The human voice thus becomes an instrument in a vocal orchestra. In fact, it was this kind of polyphony that eventually led to the purely instrumental music we hear in concert halls. Texts, no longer being the focal point, are reduced in importance. Many a great opera is founded upon a story with a trivial or ridiculous text and plot: it is the great *music* for which the opera is appreciated. The question is, could the importance of liturgical texts be reduced if this music were applied to them? Is appreciation of the music itself distracting to the worship service? These are questions that must be answered with care when one composes new music for use in the Divine Liturgy.

In opera, in appropriate places, the recitative form is used, which means the music is basically chanted. In these parts of the opera the text of the dialogue is important because it moves the plot along. The other parts of the opera are arias and choruses where elaborate harmony and polyphony is employed. These are the “meat” of the opera where the music takes center stage and justifies the artistry of the composer. Similarly, in the Divine Liturgy, the parts that are a dialogue between the priest and the people, such as the litanies, and the parts that teach lessons and tell stories, such as the antiphons, apolytikia, and kontakia, must be chanted, because the words often change from service to service and the clarity of meaning is of utmost importance. But there are a few places in the Divine Liturgy where modern polyphony might be appropriate. When the priest has many tasks and silent prayers to perform, and there is no dialogue with the people, an elongated, more elaborate and ornamented form of Byzantine chant developed, in order to create more time for the priests to carry out their duties, and therefore became known as the “papadic” style. This music elevates the chant to a level where the text may be somewhat subordinate, but this drawback is ameliorated by the fact that papadic hymns occur during parts of the liturgy, i.e. the Cherubic Hymn and the Communion Hymn, that are mostly the same from service to service, and thus the texts are very, very familiar.

It can be argued that the papadic hymns could also be appropriately served by modern polyphony, as long as it is not too theatrical and worldly. An Orthodox liturgy ideally contains a combination of chant and more elaborate music. Even in the Roman Catholic Church, where the **Ordinary** of the Mass (that is, the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Sanctus*, *Credo*, and *Agnus Dei*—the parts of the mass that are the same for every service) were often given elaborate polyphonic treatments. But the **Proper** of the Mass—the parts that changed from week to week—were chanted in the monophonic Gregorian style. The Proper hymns are usually omitted when you hear a mass, such as those of Palestrina or Mozart, at a concert or on a recording.

Chant is essential to religious worship, particularly in the Greek Orthodox Church. Our modern composers have written much beautiful music for the Church, and this should not be discouraged. However, more traditional Byzantine chant, or chant based on Byzantine musical theory, needs to be used in the liturgy during the appropriate times, lest we lose the tradition of many centuries that has brought our Church through the ages. Some traditionalists argue that polyphonic liturgies are too sensual and reduce the Divine Liturgy to an artistic performance. I do not think that any modern composer or choir that favors such liturgies believes this at all. I think their approach is always reverent and respectful. However, the advocacy of more chant in the liturgy should not be perceived as a criticism of polyphonic music, but rather an affirmation of the importance and effectiveness of our traditional music.