

Sonic and Auditory Cognition in the Byzantine Chant: Historical and Ontological Perceptions of an Intercivilizational “Language of Worship”

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ABSTRACT | The sonic and auditory cognitions associated with the sounds and language of the Byzantine Chant are a consequence of the Eastern Orthodox Church's world construction (externalization and objectivation) created through a complex filter of time, place, and identity. Considering varied influences from the European continent, Russia, and the Near East, this paper will explore how geography, culture, cosmogony, and empire conditioned the sonic and auditory developments and perceptions of this sacred chant.

Using a cross-disciplinary platform of geo-historical analysis, musical theory, and linguistic philosophy, this paper will consider the following questions: Why does the Eastern Church perceive the monophonic character of this eight-tone (octoechos) chant as the most authentic *modus operandi* for expressing the language or liturgy of worship? Where does it come from? How was it created? What are its metaphysical, historical, and linguistic roots? How is one called to listen to its sounds? In what ways are the melodic formula, rhythms, and tonality of this chant inextricably linked to specific liturgical texts, human geography, and metaphysical context?

The Byzantine Chant illustrates well the connections of sound, tone, and language to Eastern Orthodoxy's inter-civilizational conceptualization and cognition of worship and identity.

Keywords: multicultural music, language and liturgy of worship, Orthodox Church history, theology and music, sonic cognition.

1. INTRODUCTION

As the story goes, at the end of the tenth century the princes of Kiev sought agreement on the future faith of Russia. For political as much as theological reasons, they could not decide whether they should adopt the Christianity of Rome or of Constantinople. Emissaries were dispersed to the realms of both traditions to investigate. After attending and experiencing the mystical liturgy at Hagia Sophia, the Russian emissaries returned from Byzantium inspired, claiming they had “witnessed heaven on

earth.” Whether legend or fact, this story captures a phenomena often associated with the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. From an outsider peering in, Orthodoxy radiates a sense of ancient anachronism and creative changelessness. Its members often point to its “*living continuity* with the Church of ancient times” as one of its distinguishing features.¹ This living continuity is preserved in the sights and sounds of its ancient liturgy and its ability to aesthetically and spiritually transform the language of worship.

This is most clearly evinced in the sonic and textual character of its sacred chant, which is the principle carrier of the Church’s liturgy. Showing remarkable stability over the centuries, the Byzantine chant has been the Orthodox Church’s “language of the Angels,” seeking through tightly coordinated visual, textual, and sonic expressiveness to unite the congregational voices of the church with the angelic voices of heaven.²

The sonic and auditory cognitions associated with the sounds and language of the Byzantine Chant are a consequence of the Eastern Orthodox Church’s world construction (externalization and objectivation) created through a complex filter of story, place, and identity. Considering varied influences from the European continent and the Near East, this paper will explore how geography, culture, theology, and empire conditioned the sonic and auditory developments, perceptions, and resilience of this sacred chant.

Using a cross-disciplinary platform of geo-historical analysis, musical theory, and linguistic philosophy, this paper will consider the following questions: Why does the Eastern Church perceive the monophonic character of this eight-tone (*octoechos*) chant as the most authentic *modus operandi* for expressing the language or liturgy of worship? Where does it come from? How was it created? What are its metaphysical, historical, and linguistic roots? How is one called to listen to its sounds? In what ways are the melodic formula, rhythms, and tonality of this chant inextricably linked to specific liturgical texts, human geography, and metaphysical context?

2. GEO-HISTORICAL ORIGINS

The Byzantine Chant illustrates well the connections of sound, tone, and language to Eastern Orthodoxy’s inter-civilizational conceptualization and cognition of worship and identity.

Much like the Byzantine Empire, this chant was all at once Roman, Greek, and Semitic. Constantinople (formerly the Greek town of Byzantium) was the capital of Rome’s Empire in the East. Its juridical and political apparatus was Roman, and the language of governance was Latin. Its architecture was transformed in the third-century wake of empire, with its public spaces, palaces, imperial ceremonies and houses of worship echoing that of Rome. Yet, its culture was decidedly Greek. Its “Hellenic inheritance” was clear in the Attic Greek used in the public square, the reliance on Greek classical works in education, and the proliferation and prominence of Greek art and literature throughout the region.³ The beliefs, rituals, and practices of Byzantium or Eastern Christianity were challenged and enriched from the traditions of the Near East and Rome; yet, it would take on a

¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 195-96.

³ Egon Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 20-23.

decidedly unique formation. Beginning with its emperor Constantine and solidified in the dictates of Theodosius several decades later, Christianity had secured its place of imperial influence by the end of the fourth century.

Not only a product of multiple civilizations and empires, the Byzantine chant was also formed and refined in the contexts of desert monasticism and city bureaucracy. As Byzantine musicologist Dimitri Conomos explains it, Orthodoxy’s sacred chant found identity and sustenance “in the primitive psalmody of the early Egyptian and Palestinian desert communities that arose in the 4th to 6th centuries, and in urban centres with their cathedral liturgies full of music and ceremony.”⁴ Indeed, the solo, choral, and melodic characteristics of this chant were shaped through the theological and cultural demographics of both human solitude and urbanization.

From within the externalization and internalization processes of a unique world construction⁵, the Byzantine chant took shape. The thoughts and actions of Christians as they developed through Jewish Christianity, desert monasticism, the apostolic and post-apostolic ages, and the age of empire converged to influence the creation of a religious ritual in Eastern Orthodox Christianity that would epitomize the purest mode of *koinonia*. Finding its fullest development in Byzantium—under the auspices of the Roman Empire—from the fourth century forward, the Byzantine chant lay at the center of Orthodoxy’s liminal apex of worship, proffering a unique audio-visual ritual of mediated communication to God.

This curated act of worship is steeped in a complex world construction and a sophisticated liturgical phonology. The sound of language is the focus, and the contextual and sensory cues of sight and smell influence an auditory cognition whereby the melodies of heaven and earth and angels and humans endeavor to intersect.

3. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

For when the Holy Spirit saw that mankind was ill-inclined toward virtue and that we were heedless of the righteous life because of our inclination to pleasure, what did he do? He blended the delight of melody with doctrine in order that through the pleasantness and softness of the sound we might unawares receive what was useful in the words, according to the practice of the physicians, who, when they give the more bitter draughts to the sick, often smear the rim of the cup with honey.”⁶

So states St. Basil the Great in a homily on chanting the Psalms. The liturgical forms of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, from the fourth century forward, “gradually came to be viewed as a system

⁴ Dimitri E. Conomos, “A Brief Survey of the History of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Chant,” *The Divine Music Project* (October 16, 2012), available at <http://www.asbm.goarch.org/category/articles/> (accessed January 24, 2014).

⁵ For a detailed description of religion and world construction, see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

⁶ St. Basil of Caesarea, “Homily on the First Psalm,” in Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: W.W. Norton & CO., 1998), 121; quoted also in *Byzantine Music Theory and Practice*, Aristidis Garinis and Demetrios Kehagias, eds. (New York: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2011): iii-v.

of symbols manifesting heavenly realities to a reverently watching assembly . . .”⁷ Heaven on earth: this is the aspiration of the Orthodox worship experience. As a salvo against the senses, an attempt is made in Orthodox worship to transform a temporal house of worship into a sanctuary for the divine. In participation in an Orthodox service, one is surrounded by religious icons—intended to inspire reflection on and veneration toward what is imaged—and the smells of fragrant smoke burning from the incense of a priest’s censer—rising heavenward with the prayers of the congregation. Surrounded by these elements of worship, the language of liturgy merges with a unique range of tones and melodies to produce the sounds of the Byzantine chant.

Critical to its creation and maintenance is a theological understanding and appreciation of chant’s intention. Its principle end is not to elicit an emotive response, provide an aesthetically attractive experience, or impress with refined voices. These are common outcomes but not objectives of Byzantine sacred chanting. Its primary purpose is to be Orthodox tradition’s vehicle of worship and a medium for realizing self-perfection.⁸

*“This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.”*⁹ For the Orthodox Church, these prophetic words of Jesus give texture to its intonation hymnography. The scripture or word is central to the melodic and sonic design of the chant. Spiritual and auditory cognition of the word, the tradition contends, is best translated through the medium of vocal song. The word and its expression are sacrosanct, often challenging one’s perception of melodic consonance. After only a short period of listening, one notices quickly how cadence and rhythmic speed of a chant are not dictated by the music but are determined by the cadence of the words.¹⁰

The liturgy, expressed throughout the daily offices, is sung; sometimes the chant is carried by alternating choirs (*antiphonic*), other times through highly-trained chanters, and almost always through congregational responses. Adoration, reverence, and petition to God percolate the language and sounds of the chant. Its connection with worship is inextricable. Its “other-worldly” sound is deeply purposeful. Intoning voices rise with the language of heaven and salvation and descend with the language of hell and sin. Educator and Orthodox choir director Stanley J. Takis describes the Byzantine chant as a “musical word painting,” whereby melodic formulas help deepen and even reveal meaning of language. Ascribing a “higher pitch, an extra beat or more, extra notes, or a heavier stress” to certain syllables accentuates the role of a word or series of words in a text. For instance, “the name of Christ or a saint being celebrated is often elongated and ornamented, making it a musical highlight of the hymn.”¹¹

The intention is to integrate cognitively and sonically the language of liturgy and music. The tonal system of the chant is not constructed for symbiosis with the liturgy alone; the relationship between

⁷ John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989), 75.

⁸ Constantine Cavarnos, *Byzantine Sacred Music: The Traditional Music of the Orthodox Church, Its Nature, Purpose, and Execution* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Inc, 1974), 9-10.

⁹ Jesus, quoted in the Gospel of Luke (4:16-22), after reading from Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue of Nazareth.

¹⁰ See *Orthodoxia Radio*, available at <http://www.kelfar.net/orthodoxiaradio/byzantine.html> (accessed February 11, 2014).

¹¹ Stanley J. Takis, “Beginning to Learn the Byzantine Musical System Using Western Notation and Theory,” available at http://www.newbyz.org/byzantine_music_for_western_musicians.pdf (accessed December 30, 2013).

tone and language is more than coexisting for the same purpose of worship. Rather, in the context of Orthodox worship, the language of liturgy is embodied fully and holistically in the sounds of the Byzantine chant. Sound is at the service of the written text. Yet, at the same time, the written text, according to the Orthodox tradition, cannot find its fullest meaning apart from the melody in which it is manifest. It is a language that finds wholeness only in its expression through this relational construct of intonation. The melody is shaped as a function of the text.¹² Each is ascribed a divine origin not fully understood apart from one another. From this perspective, appreciation of the sounds of the chant as natural cannot fully occur apart from an awareness of the meaning of the liturgical language or text that accompanies each tone. Consequently, the autocephalous leadership of the Orthodox Church has encouraged setting the musical forms of its many chants in the vernacular, highly responsive to maintaining an unusual level of uniformity in its liturgical forms while equally receptive (for both altruistic and nationalistic reasons) to inculturating local linguistic forms and cultural idiosyncrasies.

In addition to veneration and worship, self-perfection is an enduring intention of this sonic ritual. This idea of self-perfection is rooted in the Orthodox theology of *theosis*, whereby a mystical union between God and humankind is sought through the Orthodox understanding of creation in the *imago dei* and one's salvific and deifying encounter with the Holy Spirit.¹³ St. Athanasius of Alexandria, a fourth-century Archbishop of Alexandria and "father" of the Church, is now venerated within the Catholic, Coptic, and Eastern Orthodox traditions. His writings are referenced often within the Eastern Orthodox canons to describe this transformative process of *theosis*. "The Son of God became man, that we might become god," states Athanasius. He explains further that this process of deification is all about becoming by grace (a child of God) what Jesus is by nature.¹⁴ From this vantage point, to become more like God is to love what and whom God loves. For Orthodoxy, this is a collective task of the individual Christian and the corporate Church.

The character and reverence of the liturgy are designed to encourage a collective search for inner purity and participation in the divine nature. The objective behind chanting the liturgy is to increase the expressive intensity and precision of each word, even of each syllable, in order to refine the individual and collective focus on partaking of the divine nature. As St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) explains in his exegesis of Psalm 41, "Nothing, nothing uplifts the soul so much, and gives it wings, and liberates it from the earth, and releases it from the fetters of the body, and makes it aspire after wisdom and deride all the cares of this life, as the melody of unison and rhythm-possessing sacred songs."¹⁵

4. SONIC AND AUDITORY CONSISTENCIES

The Byzantine chant is both natural and foreign to the ear. One contemporary *protopsaltis*, John Boyer¹⁶, describes its phonetic characteristics:

¹² Oliver Strunk, "The Tonal System of Byzantine Music," *The Musical Quarterly*, vo. 28, no. 2 (1942):196.

¹³ Ware, 231-38.

¹⁴ In *De Synod*, Athanasius articulates our identity as children of God as a consequence of grace and does not equate deification to taking on the essence of Jesus, but as participation in his "sonship." See Athanasius's *De Synod 53*.

¹⁵ Quoted in Cavarnos, 14.

¹⁶ Protopsaltis for the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of San Francisco.

It involves moving the larynx in a way that is not customary for Western singers.

This style of singing produces a slightly nasal tone, somewhat like a drone, with a full, round vibrato. It shouldn't be a thin nasal voice, but a richer tone with a lot of space behind it. It's a vocal technique that allows for flexibility to sing in the cracks, microtonal intervals or ornaments that you can achieve by moving the larynx. It also allows you to sing for long periods of time without tiring, and that helps with Greek Orthodox services, which often last a long time.¹⁷

An auditory embrace of the sound is not automatic. Rather, it seems the intention is for one to grow accustomed to the sound, to transition from an initial focus on its sonic dissonance to a gradual appreciation of its purity, precision, and integration with the text.

The language of Orthodox ecclesial liturgy—its scriptural pericopes and poetry—is translated through a unique musical system. The melodic formulas that embody its liturgy use a limited scale, are vocal only, and—in its purest form—are monophonic. These characteristics should not imply a lack of sophistication in development. On the contrary, the sonic creativity permeating Byzantine hymnography over the centuries is quite remarkable. As musicologist Oliver Strunk explains it, the melodies of the Byzantine chant(s) are “a sort of mosaic in which conventional melodic formulas are combined, now in one order, now in another, producing design which, despite their general similarity, are never twice the same.”¹⁸

The medieval Byzantine chant, which provides an enduring foundation for contemporary compositions, is diatonic and the chant's starting point parallels the octave scale of d to d.¹⁹ The *oktoechos*, or eight ecclesiastical echoes or modes, represent an important characteristic of the chant's liturgical and functional arrangement. Systematized by St. John of Damascus in the eighth century, these eight modes constitute the tonal parameters of the Byzantine musical system. Each echo provides the “compositional framework,” whereby “[e]ach mode is characterized by a deployment of a restricted set of melodic formulas peculiar to that mode,” and uniquely crafted for the psalmody and hymnody intoned.²⁰ The *Oktoechos* is also used within the Eastern Orthodox tradition to describe the formal collection and cataloging of these tones into the church's eight-week liturgical cycle. In the *Oktoechos*, or “Book of Eight Tones,” each mode is assigned a particular week as part of the Paschal cycle and associated with daily and thematic liturgical texts. First published in 1491 by the Franconian, Schweipolt Fiol, the *Oktoechos* was the first book using the Cyrillic typeface found in print.²¹

The eight modes of the Byzantine chant are described as First Tone, Second Tone, Third Tone, Fourth Tone, Plagal First Tone, Plagal Second Tone, Grave Tone, and Plagal Fourth Tone. These eight

¹⁷ *San Francisco Chronicle* (July 26, 2006), available at <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/John-Boyer-sang-before-he-spoke-Not-much-has-2515389.php> (accessed February 27, 2014).

¹⁸ Oliver Strunk, “The Tonal System of Byzantine Music,” *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1942): 196.

¹⁹ Strunk, 190, 201. The names of the scale steps are pa, vou, gha, dhe, ke, zo, and ni and correspond with the musical notes of D, E, F, G, A, B, and C.

²⁰ Conomos, 33.

²¹ Found in the Apostoliki Diakonia of Greece's, “OCTOECHOS - HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT - USE – THEMES, available at http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/byzantine_music/en/ymnografoi/ymnografoi.asp?main=octahxos.htm (accessed on February 19, 2014).

modes contain within them "a lexicon of melodic formulas," with each formula inextricably linked to the written and sonic configuration of a specific liturgical text's syllabic meters and rhythms.²²

Byzantine hymnody consists of three rhythmic categories. Hiermologic hymns are the most common and refer to those chants consisting of syllabic melodies or one musical note per syllable. Stichera hymns are those using two or more musical notes for each syllable. Doxastikon is part of the stichera hymn genre. Its refrain, "Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit," is sung using a musical formula where most syllables are elongated with two or more musical notes. The purpose of this approach is to celebrate and highlight important words and phrases of a hymn through a more ornamented (and often slower tempo) melody line.

The modal characteristics of the *papadikon* style of hymns are its much slower tempo and melismatic and enhanced style of melody. The *papadika*, meaning "the priestly or fatherly ones," are those hymns with prolonged, melismatic musical lines often used, not only to celebrate or emphasize important phrases of the text, but to provide "musical cover" as the priest prepares and carries out liturgical rituals.²³ Orthodox priest and church historian Gerasimos Koutsouras offers the *Koinonikon* or Communion chant and its intimate connection with the pinnacle Eucharist liturgy as an example of the *papadika* style chant. Rightly conceived, the *Koinonikon* is intoned by a soloist who is capable of extending no more than a verse from the Psalter through an ornamented, elongated and melismatic melody line lasting up to ten minutes.²⁴ The sophistication of the chant—and maintaining its integrity with the sacred rite of the Eucharist—requires a soloist who is highly trained and knowledgeable in this ancient practice.²⁵

Over the centuries, the *oktoechos* of the Byzantine chant developed and evolved around three poetical forms. The earliest form is the Troparion, which is a monostrophic hymn consisting of short prayers or a compilation of short prayers interposed between verses from the Psalter. From a musical perspective, the metrically simple Troparia are often considered most significant, "because their texture is richer than that of the melodies which are sung" to the longer, more complex poetical forms of the later Kanons.²⁶ Prior to the most recent poetic form of the Kanons was the Kontakion. Emerging in the early sixth century, this form of ecclesiastical poetry rose in prominence alongside the growing Orthodox piety of the Justinian period.²⁷ The Kontakion, which means "scroll," is a chanted poetic homily drawing from Biblical narrative. It is much more extensive than the Troparia, consisting of up to thirty stanzas or *oikoi*. "Rhetorical embellishment" is an important characteristic of these intricate metric sermons.²⁸ Many scholars argue that this poetic form is of Syrian origin, with the sixth century Syrian Jewish convert to Christianity, St. Romanos the Melodist, also known as the "Pindar of Rhythmic Poetry,"

²² Takis, "Beginning to Learn the Byzantine Musical System Using Western Notation and Theory," 2.

²³ Gerasimos Koutsouras, "Koinonikon: The Hymnological Context of Holy Communion," *Phironema*, Vol. XXI (2006): 62; See also, Stanley Takis, 2.

²⁴ Koutsouras, 62.

²⁵ Ibid., 61-82.

²⁶ Wellesz, 144.

²⁷ Ibid., 152.

²⁸ Conomos, 15; see also, http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/byzantine_music/en/ymnografoi/ymnografoi.asp?main=hxoi.htm, sponsored by the Apostoliki Diakonia of Greece, (accessed on February 19, 2014).

recognized as perhaps its earliest progenitor. The Kontakion, as a poetic homily, was the centerpiece of the liturgy for over three centuries.

The Kanon represents the youngest typology of Byzantine hymnography. This poetic form was introduced toward the end of the seventh century, eventually displacing the Kontakion as the primary poetical form of the Byzantine chant. Consisting of nine odes, which are closely associated with the Nine Canticles of Scripture²⁹, the rhythm and melody of each ode within a Kanon is different, determined by the meter of the *Irmos* (*Heirmos*) or opening troparion. The subsequent toparia of each ode are "exact metrical reproductions of the heirmos."³⁰ Meaning to "tie or link," the *Irmos* provides the metrical pattern the remaining triparion in the ode will follow. Unlike, the Kontakion, which used only one *Irmos* to establish the melody of all stanzas, the Kanon utilizes nine "metrically dissimilar" *Irmo*, and thus, nine unique melodies constitute an entire Kanon.³¹ Wellesz suggests the multiple melodic pattern of Kanon hymnography corresponded with the ritual enlargement of Orthodox liturgy over time and a gradual shift of emphasis from the word to the music. Wellesz elaborates on this evolving sonic-textual relationship:

The tendency of the Orthodox Church to transfer the emphasis from the words to the music, which had its origin in the increasing splendor of the service, may explain why the study of the Kanon is less attractive from the literary point of view than that of the Kontakia. From the liturgical point of view, however, words and music form an indissoluble whole, and the examination of the music will show that the melodies cannot be studied and appreciated without the texts from which they receive their expression and rhythmical nuances.³²

Though maintaining the integrity of this ancient relationship between word and music, Wellesz describes the inauguration of the Kanon formula for chanting as a direct consequence of the Church's liturgical shift from the poetic homily to the compulsory spoken sermon of the priest or celebrant. Justinian II's Quinisext Council of 696³³, held in Constantinople, redacted the importance of daily preaching and teaching in liturgy to reinforce orthodox piety and the Church's orthodox perspective on "right religion."³⁴ This renewed emphasis on the daily sermon replaced the poetic homily of the Kontakion. Still requiring the adornment of chanted hymns in the liturgy, however, the Orthodox

²⁹ The nine canticles of the Bible are 1) First Song of Moses (Exodus 15:1-9; 2) Second Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32: 1-43); 3) Prayer of Hannah (1 Kings 2:1-10); 4) Prayer of Habakkuk (Habakkuk 3:1-19); 5) Prayer of Isaiah (Isaiah 26:9-20); 6) Prayer of Jonah (Jonah 2:3-10); 7) Prayer of the Three Children (Daniel 3:26-56); 8) Song of the Three Children (Daniel 3:57-88); 9) The Magnificat and Benedictus (Luke 1:46-55, 68-79).

³⁰ Dimitri Conomos, "Orthodox Byzantine Music" (November 15, 2012), available at the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

³¹ Ibid.; See also, Wellesz, 168-73.

³² Wellesz, 173; See also Dimitri Conomos, *Byzantine Hymnography and Byzantine Chant* (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1984), 22-24.

³³ Not recognized as authoritative by the Catholic Church.

³⁴ Quinisext Council (Council of Trullo) of 692, Canon 19. It reads, in part: "It behooves those who preside over the churches, every day but especially on Lord's days, to teach all the clergy and people words of piety and of right religion, gathering out of holy Scripture meditations and determinations of the truth, and not going beyond the limits now fixed, nor varying from the tradition of the God-bearing fathers."

tradition developed the Kanons to play that key role in the daily liturgy and the Church calendar.³⁵ The Kanon remains a primary catalyst of worship in the contemporary Orthodox Church.

5. VOCAL / MELODIC / NOTATIONAL TRADITIONS OF BYZANTINE HYMNOGRAPHY

All of the hymn typologies and poetical forms discussed above constitute the singular art of Byzantine chanting. Though diverse in poetic style and melodic variety, the Byzantine chant maintains a clear physiognomy. Its limitation to only the human voice, its insistence on a monophonic or homophonic melodic framework, and its idiosyncratic form of musical notation illustrate three enduring characteristics worth mention.

The Byzantine chant relies exclusively on the human voice. Considered the purest of instruments, only the voice of a well-trained acapella chanter or choir is countenanced to lead the liturgy. Reflecting on interpretation of the Orthodox Church Fathers’ position on a strictly vocal nature of Byzantine music, G. I. Papadopoulos wrote in 1904 that the

[E]xecution of Byzantine church music by instruments, or even the accompaniment of sacred chanting by instruments, was ruled out by the Eastern Fathers as being incompatible with the pure, solemn, spiritual character of the religion of Christ. The Fathers of the church in accordance with the example of the psalmodizing of our Savior and the holy Apostles, established that only vocal music be used in the churches and severely forbade instrumental music as being secular and hedonic, and in general as evoking pleasure without spiritual value.³⁶

Centuries earlier, in reference to the Psalmist’s declaration of thanks to God through musical instruments³⁷, St. John Chrysostom remarks: “That is, I shall give thanks to Thee. But then there were musical instruments through which they executed their sacred songs; but now, instead of instruments we employ the body.”³⁸ The sweet singer of Israel, David, “had a lyre with lifeless strings, the church has a lyre with living strings. Our tongues are the strings of the lyre with a different tone indeed but much more in accordance with piety.”³⁹ From the late fourth century forward, for Byzantine hymnography, instrumental accompaniment was considered a distraction from the prayerful atmosphere the vocal chant is designed to inspire and help create.

Byzantine chant is monophonic, relying on a single unaccompanied melodic line. Whether from one chanter or an antiphonic (two choir) arrangement, one melody is followed. According to the tradition, to integrate a polyphonic arrangement, where harmony is used, would contradict the mystical character and spiritually transformative rhythm associated with the ancient practice of the monodic chant.⁴⁰ The pedal note or drone, known as the *ison*, is the one exception to this monophonic rule.

³⁵ Wellesz, 174.

³⁶ G.I. Papadopoulos, *A Historical Survey of Byzantine Ecclesiastical Music* (Athens, 1904), 10-11; translated and quoted in Cavaros, 18.

³⁷ St. John Chrysostom referenced Psalm 143 and Psalm 150.

³⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *Exposition on Psalms 143*; quoted in Cavaros, 18.

³⁹ Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1950), 70.

⁴⁰ Cavaros, 20.

Written as , the Byzantine notation of the *ison* indicates a repetitive tone, representing the consistent droning underlying the hymn's melodic line.⁴¹ Professor of Byzantine Music, Grammenos Karanos, defines this drone note as "a constant humming of a single note (the root note of the main tetrachord in which the melody is moving)."⁴² Accompanying the chanter or *psaltai* (practitioner of the *psaltic art*) is the *isokratis* or "holder of the *ison*."⁴³ While the *psaltai* chants the melody, the *isokratis* holds the horizontal pitch of the keynote or tonic of the mode. The musical notation of a hymn's melody ascends and descends across the tones of the *oktoechos* and the syllables of the text. Yet the *ison* retains a notational and melodic character of equality, providing, as one *psaltai* imagined it, "a floor upon which the melody dances."⁴⁴ The melody of the final phrase or mode will usually conclude on pitch with the *ison*.⁴⁵ While some musicologists may consider the *ison* polyphonic or homophonic, purists of the tradition see it primarily as a facilitator of tonal stability, providing a hymn's modal color. Though its usage increased significantly from the sixteenth century forward, the *ison* is not necessarily integral to retaining the ancient character of the chant.⁴⁶

While the modal tones may correspond to notes on a Western five-line scale, the Byzantine chant relies on a notational system capable of capturing unique tonal embellishments, micro-intervals, and melodic patterns.⁴⁷ The earliest system of notation is labeled *ecphonic*. The structure of the *ecphonic* system indicates significant symbiotic influences from and continuity with the Hellenistic system of prosodic signs or accents and the Hellenized Jewish tradition of cantillation of scripture and psalmody in the synagogues.⁴⁸ This system consists of a few rudimentary signs or symbols. One of these symbols was posted at the beginning of a phrase in the liturgy and a second stationed at the end of that phrase. These bookending signs served as an indicator of musical punctuation, accent, and emphasis for those voices chanting the text. It is believed the *ecphonic* and earliest *neumatic* forms of notation were largely mnemonic, offering the chanter or choir only notational indicators and reminders. According to Conomos, because it was a system of limited notational intrusion, the *ecphonic* notation was useful "for the singer who used it only as a memory aid."⁴⁹

It was an intonation system that relied heavily on a storied tradition and the oral transmission of performance guidelines.⁵⁰ In place by the fifth century, *ecphonic* notation would acme in the eight

⁴¹ Savas I. Savas, *Byzantine Music: Theory and Practice*, Translated by N. Dufault (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1975), 3.

⁴² Grammenos Karanos, "A Brief Overview of the Psaltic Art," in *Byzantine Music Theory and Practice*, Aristidis Garinis and Demetrios Kehagias, eds. (New York: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2011): iii-v.

⁴³ Cavarinos, 21. Also referred to as the *Vastaktai*, which means holder or supporter.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *ibid*.

⁴⁵ Takis, 4.

⁴⁶ Karanos, iii-v.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/byzantine_music/en/ymnografoi/ymnografoi.asp?main=hxoi.htm, sponsored by the Apostoliki Diakonia of Greece, (accessed on February 13, 2014).

⁴⁸ Maria Alexandru, "The Palaeography of Byzantine Music: A Brief Introduction with some Preliminary Remarks on Musical Palimpsests," *El palimpsesto grecolatino como fenómeno librario y textual*, Angel Escobar, ed. (Zaragoza: Institución Fernando el Católico, 2006): 119

⁴⁹ Conomos, *Byzantine Hymnography*, 32.

⁵⁰ Wellesz, 216.

century and complete its gradual decline (and eventual disappearance) in the fourteenth century. As a consequence of its minimal notational intrusion and eventual cultural and ritual obscurity, the complete melodic formulas for these earlier Byzantine hymns remain elusive.⁵¹ As Oliver Strunk writes, “throughout the early Christian world an impenetrable barrier of oral tradition lies between all but the latest melodies and the earliest attempts to reduce them to writing.”⁵²

Neumatic notation, which overlapped and eventually superseded the *ecphonic* system, can be divided into four cultural-historic stages: 1) Palaeobyzantine notation (10th-12th century); 2) Hagiopolite notation (11th-15th century); 3) Koukouzelean (15th-19th century); and 4) the “New Method” (1814 to present). Each period traces its lineage to the prosodic pitch accents of ancient Greece. However, comingled with its deep Hellenistic roots, each period is also an expressive part of the ecclesial, cultural, historic, and geographical nuances of its age. Palaeobyzantine or Early Byzantine notation began in Constantinople, where Greek, Roman, and Near Eastern cultures and rituals intersected. A clear relationship between Greek, Syriac, and Hebrew poetry and liturgical ritual is evident in this early period of Byzantine hymnody. Considering the cultural and geographic context of this earlier system, Conomos is right, “Jewish psalmody was bound to become the model fundamental to Christian ecclesiastical chanting in which ethnic forces shaped local modifications over a rather wide range.”⁵³ But not only Jewish cantillation should be considered; indeed, Latin and Arab cantillation would contribute much to the evolving style and intonations of this Byzantine ritual.⁵⁴ Scholars acknowledge a limited understanding of Early Byzantine notation. Similar to the *ecphonic* system, manuscripts from this earliest neumatic period reveal the use of qualitative musical symbols to indicate certain inflections and tones, and to connect familiar melodic lines and rhythmic modes to the words of different texts, but without exacting links to each syllable or word of the text.

It is the Hagiopolite (Middle Byzantine), Koukouzeles (Late Byzantine), and “New Method” periods of musical notation that offer musicologists and ethnomusicologists the most definitive manuscript clarity on the evolving notational system of Byzantine hymnody. Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of these three later periods is the connection of notational symbols to the syllables of the written liturgy. The signs were given interval value, indicating a note’s tonal quality and its ascending, descending, repetitive, and rhythmical characteristics. The transformation of signs and symbols during these periods is attributable largely to the numerical growth and embellishment of melodic typologies within Byzantine hymnography.⁵⁵ For over a thousand years, neumatic notation evolved and developed alongside the melodic and textual floridity of the liturgy, gradually transitioning “from simple forms, consisting of strokes, hooks, and dots, to elaborate and compound signs” that closely mimic “the movement of the melody produced by the human voice.”⁵⁶

The musical significance of the Byzantine chant is found not only in its vocal, melodic, notational, and phonetic characteristics noted above, but also in its physical and visual contribution to ecclesial

⁵¹ Ibid.; Wellesz, 217.

⁵² Oliver Strunk, *Essays on Music in the Byzantine World* (New York, 1977), 61; quoted in Conomos, *Byzantine Hymnography*, 35.

⁵³ Conomos, *Byzantine Hymnography*, 37.

⁵⁴ Alexandru, 120.

⁵⁵ Wellesz, 216, 226; Savas 1-5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 217, 234.

worship in the Orthodox tradition. *Cheironomia*, which some date back to the age of John Damascene (d. 749), is a technique whereby *precentors* guide antiphonal choirs through the intonations of the liturgy using deliberate corporeal gestures. A combination of two classical Greek words meaning “hand” (*cheir*) and “name” (*onoma*)⁵⁷, *Cheironomia* is a gestic technique using flexions of the fingers and hands imitating the shape of the written script and the inflections and movement of the vocal melody.⁵⁸ In this experience of sight and sound, the liturgy is given a sonic, auditory, and visual depth and cognition unique to Byzantine chant.

Contradicting the argument of simplicity and limitation in Byzantine hymnography, because the tradition’s notational heritage is largely descriptive (versus prescriptive) in character and highly reliant on the oral traditions, Byzantine notation allows well-trained *precentors* and *protopsalis* to ornament and adorn a melody according to his or her cultural and musical training. Indeed, “the same score may also be executed slightly differently by another experienced chanter who hails from a different ‘school’ of Byzantine music.”⁵⁹

6. INTERCIVILIZATIONAL INFLUENCES

The Byzantine chant maintains a sonic and poetic value, remarkably consistent in terms of vocal and melodic range, but it is highly diverse—as a consequence of the historical and geographic expansion of Orthodox liturgy—in its litany of feasts and vernacular and national varieties. The historiography of the historical, cultural, and tonal roots of the Byzantine chant reveals a complex debate over “Orientalizing” and “Westernizing” influences and the actual constancy of its sonic character.⁶⁰ One can easily locate within the Byzantine chant melismatic, rhythmic, improvisational, and chromatic contributions from Syro-Palestinian, Ottoman, Serbian and Romanian influences.⁶¹ The effects of Ottoman conquest over Constantinople and Anatolia are clear in the sounds of certain hymns. The impact of Westphalian nationalism as the Orthodox denomination accompanied the movement of peoples and the politics of identity, is also notable, as the liturgical language was vernacularized and the chant influenced by the sounds and rhythms of local culture. The Byzantine chant has developed into, not only an Orthodox icon, but a national icon, where the search for origins, authenticity, and identity is intensely navigated.⁶² From Russia and Romania to Lebanon and Egypt, “its use and context range well beyond whatever historical circumstances may have brought the repertoire to those places.”⁶³

⁵⁷ *Oxford Reference*, available at

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195173697.001.0001/acref-9780195173697-e-0366> (accessed February 25, 2014).

⁵⁸ See Dimitri Conomos, *Byzantine Trisagia and Cheroubika of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: A Study of Late Byzantine Liturgical Chant* (Thessaloniki: Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, 1974): 326-67; and Wellesz, 234-35.

⁵⁹ St. Anthony’s Monastery, *The Divine Music Project*, available at

<http://www.stanthonymonastery.org/music/NotationBM.htm> (accessed January 30, 2014).

⁶⁰ See Richard Barrett, “Byzantine Chant, Authenticity, and Identity: Musicological Historiography through the Eyes of Folklore,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* Vol. 55, no. 1-4 (2010): 181-98.

⁶¹ Wellesz, “Words and Music in Byzantine Liturgy,” 306-307; Barrett, 181-85.

⁶² Barrett, 187.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 187-89.

In addition to cultural externalization, objectivation is another key ingredient to a community or tradition’s world construction. Objectivation, according to sociologist Lester Kurtz, “means that after we project our creations onto the world, they confront us, their original creators, as facts external to and separate from us.” Consequently, projected institutional rituals experience indigenization, whereby they experience independence and develop idiosyncrasies unintended by its progenitors from another region or time.⁶⁴ Arguably, such objectivation processes did not dilute the character of the Byzantine chant, but served to enrich it through the varied intersections of the human experience and the timeless human search for spiritual transcendence. Over the centuries, pivotal cantors and composers, like Romanos the Melode, St. John Damascene, Xenos Korones, St. John Kukulzelis, Thrasyvoulos Stanitsas, and Ivan Moody, have brought different vocations, cultures, cities, geographies, and histories to bear on the chant’s pursuit of veneration and self-perfection.

7. CONCLUSION

This non-exhaustive investigation into the nature and purpose of the Byzantine chant was not intended to encapsulate the tradition in its entirety. A complete historiographic study of its cultural, theological, and musical origins and evolution is well beyond the scope of this paper and left in the good hands of musicologists and ethnomusicologists who’s vocations are deeply rooted in the field of Byzantine hymnography. Its intention was to introduce and examine the fascinating character of the Byzantine chant and its complex intercivilizational roots.

From within the world construction of the Orthodox Church, the Byzantine Chant emerged as the most authentic human *modus operandi* for attaining purity in worship. According to Wellesz, “Byzantine hymnography is the poetical expression of Orthodox theology,” mirroring the evolution of the dogmatic ideas and doctrines of the Orthodox Church from the early days of the Eastern Empire to the full splendor of the service at the height of its development.”⁶⁵ Considering the evolution of its world construction, the Byzantine chant is not simply a Greek chant. Its depth and breadth of origin and influence should not be underestimated. The intimate relationship between the Orthodox tradition and the cultures and histories in which it has found root complicate and enrich its identity. Its world construction was not immune from the powers of place and politics. From the fourth century to the present, the Orthodox tradition resisted and succumbed to the pressures of empire and nationalism. Its tonal and liturgical origins may lie in Near Eastern Jewish ritual, Hellenistic language, and Roman Empire, but its roots are now global, nurtured through many languages, cultures, and histories. Much like the Orthodox position on the patriarch of Rome, Byzantium is the “first among equals” in terms of this sacred chant’s influence and identity. Its melodic and textual continuity are remarkable, as are its vernacular and national varieties and influences.

⁶⁴ Lester Kurtz, *Gods in the Global Village: The World’s Religions in Sociological Perspective*, 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012), 15.

⁶⁵ Wellesz, 130-31.

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