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An Introduction to Byzantine Ecclesiastical Music  
in the Context of the Greek Orthodox Christian Practice

Born from the rudiments of the ancient Greek language, Byzantine Ecclesiastical music has survived for over two thousand years to become the longest known form of music with a uniform written notation in the world (Savas 10). Preserved over time by the institution of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the oral practice of chanting as well as its notation has been passed down from generation to generation, playing a defining role in the identity of the Orthodox Christian tradition. The understanding of the oral practice is crucial to the understanding of the musical notation, as the notation is designed specifically to cater to the abilities of the human voice—at a level incomparable to that of Western musical notation. This didactic monophonic vocal music—featuring a melody sung in unison, although usually above a drone—is designed to supplement religious texts of the church in a way that makes the text more accessible to the individual as well as the religious community.

Over the centuries, the religious institution of the Greek Orthodox Church has been meticulously formed, organized, and maintained so that every aspect of the tradition and practice has its proper place and purpose within the church. Orthodoxy became deeply intertwined in the cultural heart of the Hellenes and to this day remains the prevailing religion of Greece. As such, churches became cultural centers for the Greek community, not only in Greece, but also worldwide, and maybe especially so in the U.S. However, the Greek Orthodox Church is not just restricted to the Greek community—it is ecumenical and inclusive, and has expanded globally. Regardless of race, culture, or location the Greek Orthodox Church has preserved the same liturgy and music worldwide. This is because, through a hierarchy of spiritual leaders, maintained by a head archbishop of the Eastern Orthodox Communion—the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople and New Rome—the tradition remains long-standing and organized. The current New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch is Archbishop Bartholomew and, according to the official website of The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, he “occupies the First

Throne of the Orthodox Christian Church and presides in a fraternal spirit among all the Orthodox Primates” (“Bartholomew”). The site emphasizes that, “The Ecumenical Patriarch has the historical and theological responsibility to initiate and coordinate actions among the Churches of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, The Czech Land and Slovakia, Finland, Estonia, and numerous archdioceses in the old and new worlds” (“Bartholomew”). Therefore, with the help of an organized patriarchy, the liturgy of the Greek Orthodox Church, inclusive of its music, has been able to itself remain a transcultural bond among followers for thousands of years. The liturgical practices of the church provide its followers with a path to achieving the same spirituality in both communal and individual ways.

Byzantine Ecclesiastical chant is therefore both communal and individual by nature. It generates a flow, or tempo, in the liturgical services—as liturgical services in the Orthodox Church are entirely sung from beginning to end. The music is didactic, and designed to fit liturgical texts in a way that makes the texts and teachings more accessible to the congregation. But the music itself is not sacred. The words are sacred. Chanting is generally performed by a group of cantors that at times serve as chant leaders to the congregation. Although church members are free to chant along if they would like—as members often easily memorize parts of the liturgy since it remains unchanging—oftentimes the cantors alone will act as the “voice” of the community. Nonetheless, the beauty of this music remains that, whether sung by one or many, it maintains the same function. Cantors remain usually male—as Greek Orthodoxy to this day remains a very patriarchal practice—but female cantors, called chantresses or vespers, are becoming more prominent across the American Greek Orthodox scene and are slowly beginning to penetrate the music of the Orthodox churches in Greece as well. In female monastic communities, although less common than male monastic communities, women perform the chanted elements of liturgical services, albeit alongside a visiting male priest who is the only one permitted to perform the Eucharist, as females are still not allowed. One prime example of a female monastic community with an excellent female Byzantine choir can be found at the Monastery of Saint John the Forerunner outside the city of Serres in Northern Greece.

My visits to this monastery informed me further about the communal and individual purposes of Byzantine Ecclesiastical music within the Orthodox Church. There I learned that Byzantine chant helps create a meditative atmosphere in the Church that intends to facilitate

spiritual effect and growth in individuals in a personal way, within the comforts of a communal setting. The music, as it supplements meaningful words and is chanted by a group, has the ability to move the spirit of individuals in different and personal ways. For example, a hymn may cause someone to cry, while that same hymn inclines another to chant along, or another to fall into deep and silent reflection. The freedom to be affected in personal ways is largely facilitated by the ensemble of the church structure as a whole, but is especially so through the music. This is because the Orthodox structure is designed to create a spiritual experience that is primarily triggered by the senses. Just as Jesus came to earth as a physical earthly being, the church takes on the form of an embodied and lived physical experience. Just as the music is designed to penetrate the spirit primarily through the auditory senses, the art, iconography, and dim lighting is designed to affect the spirit via the visual sense, the candles and incense burned the olfactory sense, communion and anathora [the sacramental bread distributed to congregation members after communion or at the end of the service] the gustatory sense, the tradition of kissing icons, crossing oneself, and reading texts the tactile sense, and the architecture the visual and spatial sense. The artistic elements interact with one another within the whole of the church similarly to how congregation members interact with the church's spiritual leaders and surroundings. Yet ultimately, all these interactions are transitively representative of one's personal interaction with God.

Active member participation in Orthodox Ecclesiastical services is crucial, as Orthodox Christian liturgy requires laity, or the presence of a non-ordained congregation. For this reason, the Orthodox Christian church is communal by nature. This is in contrast to some other Christian denominations and sects, which do not necessarily require an active audience to function. Since the beginnings of the early Christian church, during the extensive spread of the Christian message aided by the missions of Apostle Paul of Greece and Cyprus, communal participation was encouraged. Paul advocated for a large Christian community, even making himself a symbol of universality in order to reach diverse audiences. Paul's contributions to the formation of the early Christian Church was the earliest foundation of Orthodox Christianity in which community and tradition became two fundamental elements of the organization, just as the sensory elements became fundamental components of the church as well.

Two sensory elements that are deeply involved with each other are the music and architecture of the Orthodox Church. The architecture of the building provides the space for

which the music is housed, and in many ways, the sonic properties of Byzantine chant are dependent on the space in which it is performed. Over time, the architecture of most Greek Orthodox churches has been transformed into having an internal or external cruciform shape—i.e. shaped like a cross—capped with a round dome. Its architectural evolution from the form of a long, rectangular Basilica in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, to the “domed basilica” of Hagia Sofia in Constantinople (now modern day Turkey) of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, to the domed-cruciform variations of the late 9<sup>th</sup> century and on, has developed alongside the music of the Orthodox Church (Yiannias). It might be difficult to determine which influenced which first, but it is evident that they both had extensive spurts in development around the same time.

The 6<sup>th</sup> century and the reign of Justinian seemed to be critical points in the history of both Byzantine music and architecture. The construction of Hagia Sofia established the dome as a hallmark of Byzantine architecture (Yiannias). Similarly, this was the time during which Byzantine Ecclesiastical Music acquired its greatest brilliance—the time during which it reached its apex, which Savas explains was “... [in] the era of the famous hymnographer Romanos the Melode until the epoch of the father of ecclesiastical music and the Orthodox dogmatical teachings, St. John Damascene, i.e. from the 6<sup>th</sup> until the 8<sup>th</sup> century” (Savas 10). What the revolutionary physical construct of the dome allowed for acoustically was the natural amplification of sound, which in turn enriched some of the sonic properties of Byzantine chant, including the resonance of inherent overtones in the chanted drone. Because it was the choirs of Hagia Sofia and of the Holy Apostles during the 6<sup>th</sup> century that richly developed Byzantine Ecclesiastical music, it is evident that advancements in the music were closely linked to the advancements in the architecture (Savas 9). Although it was not until the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century that Byzantine neumatic (symbolic) musical notation was developed in more precise detail, there did exist an “ecphonetic” notation based on the accent marks of Greek grammarians from Alexandria, Egypt which gave a vague direction of upward or downward voice movement (“Byzantine Chant”). This primitive kind of notation was able to document at least some of the chanted tradition between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, although much of the tradition was passed down orally, before a more comprehensive notation arose. But just as many of the religious architectural structures of the Byzantines have been preserved over time—many of which are still used today—so has the music of the Byzantines survived over time and been carefully preserved by the long-living Orthodox faith.

There is a bond to tradition and an ancient past that is fundamental to the Greek Orthodox Christian religion and that is important to many members of this faith even today. This is not just because the Orthodox Church has been deeply tied into Greek culture in general, but because members believe that it is the existing line of truth that closest reaches Jesus himself. In other words, it is because the Greek Orthodox Church's origins stem from the early church established in the apostolic era that many believe Greek Orthodoxy must be the most authentic form of the Christian faith. Through the divine inspiration of composers throughout the century, Byzantine Ecclesiastical music grew to inherently reflect the authenticity of the Greek Orthodox Church and the personal and communal nature of the Greek Orthodox faith through its authentic musical properties. Some of these properties include the freedom to move one's voice in praise, whether laity, cantors, or clergy, the emphasis on text *meaning* over sonic quality, and the freedom of vocal interpretation within the guidelines of the notated music. This is why understanding the practice of chant is very different from understanding the theory behind the notation—the vocal execution and notational theory are dependent on one another. However, that holds true moreso for the cantors, church leaders, and other musicians who concern themselves more actively with the preservation and deeper understanding of the art form. The preservation of the music is also in great part dependent on the general church community, as they are the majority that contributes to the overall faith through participation in the liturgy. Thus the liturgical music remains everlasting in the individual and communal spirit of the Greek Orthodox Christian tradition.

*I pledge my honor that this paper was written in accordance with Princeton University regulations.*

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