

What Does It Mean to be Musically Correct in the Orthodox Church?

by Nancy Takis

The most-asked question I received following the Vespers workshop at this year's MEFGOX Conference had less to do with actual Vespers and more to do with a comment I made regarding the "correctness" of the chant line. I mentioned that not all the melodies we would be singing during the Vespers service would be precisely correct according to the formulaic "rules" of Byzantine chant, since I did not have enough time to have everything proofed by an expert in Byzantine Theory. The experts I referred to are Dr. Jessica Suchy-Pilalis, my mentor and friend, and Hieromonk Father Ephraim of St. Anthony's Monastery in Arizona, who very generously proofread and corrected the original Vespers service we had planned to sing. Both are scholars in the field of Byzantine Chant theory, and both have spent years *categorizing* and *cataloging* the so-called "rules" of Byzantine Chant, using thousands of existing Byzantine melodies. What they have not done, however, is *invent* the rules. Traditionally, the Church holds that its melody comes from the angels in heaven, and that the Holy Spirit guides the hand of a writer of hymns, just as He guides the hand of an iconographer as he paints an icon. Thus the original invention of new melodic formulae has generally been discouraged in the Orthodox Church.

Through their painstaking studies of thousands of Byzantine Chant melodic lines, Dr. Suchy-Pilalis and "Papa" Ephraim discovered and defined the melodic patterns and formulae for each of the eight Church tones and the modes within each tone. This was a process of *discovery*, not of invention. Dr. Suchy-Pilalis stresses that this work uses the scientific method, starting with theories, followed by processes of testing, evaluation and analysis. Eventually conclusions are drawn based on the evidence and patterns revealed by the research. The process is similar to the way that early scientists classified all things into living and non-living things, then the living things were grouped into either plant or animal kingdoms, which were further broken down until we reached the levels of genus and species.

The efforts of both Dr. Suchy-Pilalis and Papa Ephraim clearly show the relationship between the number of syllables in the text, the location of the accents, and the melodic line(s) which can be created based on that text, in any tone accordingly. In the Byzantine melodic lines, nothing is left to chance. The hymnographer may have a choice of several melodic patterns to use for some of the accent-syllable

combinations, or there may be only one. The system is so ingeniously regulated that according to Papa Ephraim, a hymnographer need only learn these patterns, and the melodic line basically creates itself. For those of us trying to devise Byzantine melodies for our English texts, or create new Byzantine melodies for existing Greek texts, this is really a godsend, even though the cataloging of these "rules" takes up over 900 pages, in the case of Papa Ephraim's work, which is available on the Internet at:

www.stanthonysmonastery.org/music/Formula.html (*the capital F is necessary*), and it is only available in Byzantine notation. The soon-to-be-published work of Dr. Suchy-Pilalis takes basically the same approach to cataloging, but will be available in a hard copy version in Western staff notation. So until recently, we were left to our own devices to create our melodies without the necessary knowledge or tools.

As a brief example of their work, let us look at an ending phrase common to many Byzantine hymns. Consider the final phrase of the Resurrectional Apolytikion in the First Tone, *Tou Lithou Sfrayisthendos*. The words for the last ending phrase are "Kyrie, dhoxa si." The melody used for those words may only be used with a text that has the same number of syllables and accent placements. Here are three typical phrases that fit the same pattern:

KY	ri	e	DHO	xa	si
MO	ne	fi	LAN	thro	pe
GLO	ry	to	THEE	o	Lord

The Byzantine system is extremely precise and mathematical. Papa Ephraim has cataloged phrases by designating "1" for accented syllables, "0" for unaccented syllables, and "X" for either type. By his reckoning, the syllabic pattern for the phrases listed above is expressed as 10010X. In his compendium, one can look up all of the traditional melodic phrases designed to fit 10010X in any of the eight tones, and in either the one-note-per-syllable rhythmic style or the elongated, two-or-more-notes-per-syllable rhythmic style. (In Byzantine nomenclature, these two styles are called *heirmological* and *sticheraric*.) If a melody composed for any syllabic pattern is not in the book, one can assume it is an incorrect melody.

A particular melodic line for "Kyrie, dhoxa si," therefore, will not work for "O Lord, Glory to Thee," which would be expressed as: 01100X. Since it's a

different pattern, one would have to look up the correct melodic possibilities for that pattern. However, many people who put English to church music erroneously try to fit those words into the “Kyrie, dhoxa si” 10010X musical pattern. *But wait a minute*, you might be saying right now. *We sing it that way in English all the time. It’s no problem.* And that, oddly enough, *is* the problem. We get used to singing our English versions of the hymns any way we can, and our ears no longer hear the correct way, the system that has been handed down to us from ancient days is ignored, and we concentrate instead on preserving the *melodic lines created by the system*, rather than the *system that created those melodic lines*. We may have enough understanding to associate or identify a particular melody with a particular tone or mode, but we do not always have the background to know all the possibilities and *non*-possibilities of melodic lines that can be created by any particular text within that mode. Certainly, it may be a Byzantine melody, but that melody serves a specific Greek textual pattern. Change the pattern by translating it into English, and a different melody is needed.

While many people may be aware that the final cadence of any hymn is determined by the *last* accented syllable of the text, most of us are not aware that the melodic line of the entire phrase leading up to that final accented syllable is integral to forming the melodic line. Each Byzantine mode has at least three possible ending patterns based on whether the last accented syllable is last, second from the last, or third from the last. When we translate a hymn, we might end a phrase on the same words in translation (*ek ton ouranon* and *from the heavens*) but since the number of syllables is different (5 for the Greek text, and 4 for the English text) and the accents are in different places, it is Byzantine-ly impossible to use the same melodic line.

ek ton ou - ra - NON = 00001
 from the HEA - vens = 0010

On the other hand, *in i - PSI - stis* and *in the HIGH - est* do have the same configuration, and theoretically could use the same melodic line.

in i - PSI - stis = 0010
 in the HIGH - est = 0010

Thus, when we examine the hymns mathematically, it becomes very obvious how the system works. The fact is that *all* the hymns in Greek follow these rules, and *all* the melodic lines in our Greek hymns were created by this system, from the beginning notes of the melody

to the final cadences. Again, nothing is left to chance or invention.

The comment then most commonly made is: *So what? That was then and this is now.* Many people, from clergy to chanters to choir directors to parishioners, are of the opinion that the study and perpetuation of this system is no longer relevant to today’s Church music. Indeed, some priests or music directors are more concerned that the music draw people into the Church, or that it has a “worshipful sound” than be “correct.” I am not here to argue with them. I do not wish to enter the debates on harmonization, organ use, or vocal style. My concern is that the music we use should be based upon a legitimate melodic line appropriate to the text. Speaking personally, my opinion regarding my own work is this: While I have nothing against original melodies or harmonized music in general, I do believe that our Greek Orthodox musical heritage is the holy art of Byzantine chant, and we would do well to study it and try to understand it, and discover the unique discipline and spiritual beauty of our hymnology. Papa Ephraim puts it this way:

A treasure unique to the Greek Orthodox Church is her liturgical art, because it has been shaped and perfected over the centuries by holy men and women of the Church. Enlightened and guided by the Holy Spirit, they worked hard to develop styles of iconography, music, and architecture that would be in harmony with the services. These liturgical forms of art have specific guidelines or rules that distinguish them from other similar forms of art. One can certainly build a church, paint an icon, or compose a melody that does not follow the rules of traditional Orthodox liturgical art, but how *appropriate* such creations would be for Orthodox worship is questionable.

For Papa Ephraim and countless other Orthodox Christians over the centuries, this is a matter of obedience and faithfulness to the traditions of the saints, which is a defining characteristic of our religion. The word “Orthodox” itself literally means correct belief. Therefore it is part of our very name to seek correctness—and for Orthodox Church musicians, this should apply to every musical phrase that we sing.

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