

On Monotonic and Polyphonic Chant

by Bishop Chrysostomos, Former Archbishop and Metropolitan Emeritus of Etna

It is well known that in 1846, Patriarch Anthimos VI, who between 1845 and 1873 served three non-consecutive terms on the Ecumenical Throne, issued an encyclical, together with his Bishops, in November of that year, decrying and disallowing the introduction of polyphonic singing in four parts (tetrachord) into the Greek Orthodox Church. A document purported to be the text of this official encyclical has been in circulation for some time and has been variously translated into English. The most common and widespread English translation of it appears under the title, "An Official Condemnation of Four-Part Harmony: An Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate." It is fairly adequately translated, though with a few imprecise and awkward exceptions. The document vigorously maintains that Byzantine chant, or monotonic singing, was handed down by the Fathers of the Church and that the introduction of secular music, and specifically tetrachordal singing, into the solemnity of Orthodox worship violates canonical prescriptions against innovations in what is established ecclesiastical tradition. It concludes with an appeal *propter fidem* to guard the traditions of the Church and to accept, by way of abolishing the innovation of tetrachord, the counsel of the Patriarch and his Synod, so as to enjoy continuing ecclesiastical praise and accolades.

In fact, the document in question is not an official synodal condemnation of four-part harmony; nor is it an official synodal encyclical. It is, rather, simply a letter of exhortation. The misleading title appended to both the Greek and English texts of the document, identifying it as a "condemnation of four-part harmony" and calling it a "Patriarchal encyclical," is taken from the title of an article (dubbed a chronicle) in the famous monthly Orthodox publication, *Κιβωτός*, or *The Ark* (defunct since 1955), in which the celebrated defender of Byzantine music and Iconography, Photios Kontoglou, often published. The article, written by Alexander Papademetriou, is entitled, "Over a Hundred Years Ago: An Official Condemnation of Tetrachord," and features a reprint of, and comments on, the exhortatory letter. The reproduction of this untitled letter (as Papademetriou correctly identifies it), is directed to "the Most devout Priests, most holy Hieromonks, most noble dignitaries, most valued merchants, and all other blessed Christians constituting the Orthodox community of Capella in Vienna" [translation mine], and is dated November 5, 1846 (Old Style). It was prompted by a decision of the Orthodox Greeks in Vienna to ban traditional monophonic singing and replace it with western polyphonic music. Constantine Cavarnos sums up this innovation as follows:

"Four-part harmony, which the Russians took from the Western Church, was introduced in certain Greek churches in the nineteenth century. The first to introduce it in a Greek church were the Greeks of Vienna. In 1844, these people officially abolished Byzantine chanting and introduced four-part harmony into the two Greek Orthodox churches of Vienna. Afterwards, four-part harmony was introduced in Pest, Baden, Alexandria, Athens, and elsewhere".

The aforementioned letter of exhortation was not, again, an official condemnation of tetrachord as such. While certainly judging four-part singing to be inappropriate for Church use, it was an admonition (note the phrase "we paternally advise you") to reverse or rescind the decision of the Greek community in Vienna to cease using traditional Greek Orthodox chant. This becomes quite clear when one expertly examines the complex history of Byzantine chant... The Vienna Greek community's innovation did not spread to other Greek communities in Europe because it had suddenly given voice to a new idea. Deviations from the strictest canons of Byzantine music were already known elsewhere in the Greek diaspora, and polyphony made its debut in Vienna as early as 1808, with the introduction of instruction in tetrachordal singing. This corresponded to an equally strong, if less studied, movement towards polyphony among the influential Greeks of Trieste. It was the precipitous proscription of the use of

traditional Byzantine chant on the part of the Greek community in Vienna—and this in manifestly disrespectful and supercilious written exchanges with the Patriarchate, expressing patently anserine arguments against Byzantine music in favor of the putatively more sophisticated music of the West—that so roused the attention of Constantinople and triggered the letter in question.

The notion that, in reaction to some hitherto unknown assault against the monolithic use of ancient Byzantine chant, the Patriarchate suddenly issued an encyclical, on November 5, 1846, universally condemning, *urbi et orbi*, the use of four-part harmony throughout the Orthodox Church is simply not the case. This is a myth created by the confusion of the letter of November 5, as we shall see, with an actual Patriarchal proclamation on tetraphony in the same month. This is an important point, since the Patriarch's exhortatory letter must be understood in the context of the specific events and exchanges that led to its promulgation. Constantinople's official comments on four-part harmony, while related to the exchanges with the Greek community in Vienna, have a different and broader etiology, rationale, and aim, and thus they must be separately evaluated. Once again, the letter directed specifically to the Viennese Greeks had an undeniable pastoral tone and implored the two Orthodox communities there to return to and preserve the traditions of the Greek Church, thus maintaining the unity of Greeks beyond its borders with a nation that had only sixteen years earlier been recognized by the London Protocol as a sovereign state, after a long and bloody war of independence against the Ottoman Empire. The official proclamation on tetraphony, while certainly a reaction to ecclesiastical innovation among the Greeks in Europe, was a more nuanced statement than it may seem; it also addressed other concerns of the Œcumenical Patriarchate by way of the issue of innovation in Church singing.

The official proclamation on tetraphony by the Patriarchate in Constantinople—and I have a copy of the original before me— is entitled: 'Εγκύκλιος Πατριαρχική καὶ Συνοδική Ἐπιστολή: Κα- ταργούσα καὶ ἀπαγορεύουσα τὴν καινοτόμον εἴσαξιν καὶ χρῆσιν τῆς καινοφανοῦς τετραφώνου μουσικῆς ἐν ταῖς ἱεραῖς ἀκολου- θίαις τῶν ἀπανταχοῦ ὀρθοδόξων [sic] Ἐκκλησιῶν (A patriarchal and synodal encyclical letter: Rescinding and forbidding the innovative introduction and usage of the newly appeared tetraphonic music in the sacred services of orthodox churches everywhere"). The title page indicates that it is produced under the "care and supervision" (προνοία καὶ φροντίδι) of "His All-Holiness, Œc- umenical Patriarch Lord Lord Anthimos and the Holy and Sacred Synod." The title page on the ten-page pamphlet indicates that it is "From the Press of the Nation at the Patriarchate in Constantinople," and the publication is dated November (Κατὰ Νοέμβριον) 1846. I have translated the word "καταργούσα" as "rescinding"— one of its uses—instead of "abolishing," thereby emphasizing that it, like the letter of November 5, 1846, is in part a direct nullification of the egregious proscription, by the Greeks in Vienna, of the use of Byzantine music in their two Churches. At the same time, it effectively underscores the fact that this official encyclical from the Patriarchate is not some Taliban-like condemnation in vacuo of polyphony, as various individuals, not a few overly zealous, have made it out to be, and particularly by associating it with the letter of exhortation issued to the Viennese Greek communities.

...[H]aving looked, now, at the more immediate and primary historical context of the 1846 letter to the Greek community in Vienna and the Patriarchal Encyclical on Byzantine chanting and Orthodox Church singing, allow me to make some more gen- eral remarks about chanting and psalmody. In the first three centuries of Christian monasticism, which came to influence much of our Orthodox worship, chanting was, if not discouraged, at least thought to be a distraction in spiritual life. The desert Fathers, for instance, who were more given to reading the Psalms than to singing them, were especially suspicious of ornate hymns or complex chants. In stark form, their admonitions against psalmody can be seen in the following excerpt from the Evergetinos, directed by Abba Pambo, a fourth-century Saint, to one of his disciples, who had heard what may well have been some primitive psalmodic counterpart of future asmatic Church services. His words are striking:

“The days are coming upon us when monks will abandon the strong food given to them by the Holy Spirit and chase after songs and melodies. . . . [M]onks have not come into this desert in order to inflate their minds, while standing in the presence of God, with the singing of Psalms...”

This trend was not a dominant one, obviously. However, it lingers in the Orthodox understanding of hymnography. St. John Chrysostomos, for example, calls our tongues the strings of a spiritual lyre, calling us to mortify the flesh and create a harmony of mind and soul, in order to create a spiritual melody. In so doing he calls us to “spiritualize” our Church music and to connect it to the inner life and what the Hesychasts would call the harmony of the body with the noetic quality and of bodily speech and song with the inner voice of mystical knowing. It is thus only natural that there lingers in the Orthodox world a suspicion of the secularized music of what it sees as the humanistic West. A fair-minded observer must live with this fact, factoring it into any consideration of proclamations like that of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on tetraphony in 1846, neither understating nor overstating it.

Let me conclude by saying that I am unapologetic about my strong preference for Byzantine music, when properly, piously, and skillfully chanted by a humble Cantor with a good voice and the self-effacing demeanor famously attributed to St. John Koukouzeles. It subdues the emotions and enhances the spiritual faculties. I also immensely like traditional Slavic ecclesiastical music, including some that is sung polyphonically with worshipful piety, well, and without the flourish of the opera. The latter, I believe, appeals more greatly to the emotions, but the emotions, when cleansed and properly directed, can also bring us into basic spiritual intercourse with God. Nor do I argue that both kinds of music have no place in the concert hall, if respectfully presented. In the end, whatever music we sing, it must first adorn the Eucharistic celebration, which is central to all Church services, play an accessory rôle in its celebration, and complement the “otherly” that dominates the Church’s sacred space. If operatic performances in Church can thwart that divine aim, so can arrogant Cantors, thinking themselves anything more than servants to the Liturgy and its priestly celebrants.

Likewise, if intransigence in resisting a moderate, intelligent view of the primacy of certain traditions of Church music can prove harmful to Holy Tradition, so can insistence on such traditions, when spawned by phyletism, narrow-mindedness, and an abuse of the historical context in which the Church lives. I thus advocate a use of multiple traditions, covered by the light of what is spiritually fruitful and respectful of the enduring standard.

(A Few Remarks About Byzantine Chant as the Unique Standard of Orthodox Church Singing, Orthodox Tradition: Volume XXXIII, Number 1)