

# Church Music of Byzantine Tradition – Support and Garment for the Liturgical-Dogmatic Word. A Theological Point of View

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**Abstract.** Apart from the two dimensions of the church music, a theoretical one and a practical-aesthetical one, there is a third dimension, the theological one. But, it seems that lately, the theological dimension is neglected because the other two are favoured. To this respect, our paper wishes to be a call to theological reflection and reconsideration of the place taken by the church music within the Orthodox cult.

**Περίληψη.** Πέραν των δύο διαστάσεων της εκκλησιαστικής μουσικής, της θεωρητικής και της πρακτικής, υπάρχει μια τρίτη διάσταση, η Θεολογική. Φαίνεται πως τελευταία, η Θεολογική διάσταση έχει παραμεληθεί, καθώς οι άλλες δύο ευνοούνται. Σ' αυτό το ζήτημα η εισήγησή μας επιχειρεί να αποτελέσει έναυσμα για την μελέτη της Θεολογικής αντανάκλασης και την αναθεώρηση της θέσης που κατέχει η Εκκλησιαστική μουσική μέσα στην Ορθόδοξη κοινότητα.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a divine gift, music has always been amongst the spiritual manifestations of man. It accompanies man during his life from birth to death. But the field in which music is most present, within man's life, is the religious one. The participation to the divine service puts man into direct relationship with God, transferring the love for God and the communion with Him upon his fellows. That is why within the divine service, music becomes a support for the word. Of these two, the most important is, of course, the word. Every text of the services, no matter the hymnographic category to which it belongs, means orthodox teaching, means dogma. When "put" to melody, the text penetrates easier the man's mind and soul, it renders him more sensitive, elevates him spiritually, detaches him from "all earthly cares" and brings him closer to divinity. Thus, engaging in singing, the faithful, as a member of the Church, participates plenary to the communion with God and with his fellows.

Let us remember, in just a few words, that in the first centuries, Christians used two means of transmitting the teachings of faith, means which, in our opinion, could be considered as "modern" for those times: audio-visual. We refer to music and icons. Most of the people were not educated and thus they received the teaching listening to the chants and looking at the icons, both carrying a profound theological message. Most of the heretics instilled the venom of their wrong teachings through popular/common melodies which were easy to memorize. The Church answered/counter-balanced in the same way.

But today, in a secularized and secularizing world, in a lonely, overly technical, multicultural and globalizing world it seems that some people forgot that besides the two dimensions of the church music (a theoretical and a practical one) there is also a third one, which is the most important: the theological dimension. Some of us have pushed the religious chanting to the other side, and consider it to be art, pure art. but, our question is: how much of the religious music is art and how much theology? That is why, paraphrasing a great theologian of our times, we may say that a rediscovery, within some of the Occidental environment but not only, of the significance and importance of the religious music of Byzantine tradition within the spirituality of the Church, must be perceived not only as a mere ecumenical curiosity or as a novelty which is "in trend" nowadays, but rather as a quest for the renewal of the spiritual life of the Churches and as a missionary effort to communicate our faith in Christ. On the other hand, the interest for both the religious music and the orthodox icon within the mentioned

environments is a challenge for the Orthodox and an occasion to reflect more carefully on the profound meaning and on the importance of the religious music for the communication of the message comprised by the Gospel of Christ [1].

## 2. THE PURPOSE OF THE RELIGIOUS MUSIC

Nowadays, the use of image and sound by the mass-media has reached surprising levels, and this has also contributed to a certain extent to the rediscovery of the religious music as a support for the transmission of the Orthodox teaching. Suddenly, the old religious music of Byzantine tradition has become "modern and actual". However, this "advantage" for the religious music, as a means to convey a message, is not unequivocal. The church music of Byzantine tradition, as well as the Orthodox icon, is sometimes at risk, in certain environments, especially the Occidental ones, to become a "trend", as an artistic exotic element, brought from the Orient, or to be reduced to the state of an aesthetic and didactic object. On the other hand, not all the church music, as well as not all the icons transmit the authentic message of the Gospel [2].

With this being said, we come now to the logic question: Then, which one is the real church music and how is it supposed to be like? Our answer is that the real church music is the one which is in agreement with the Orthodox liturgy. The real church music is the one that predisposes and calls for prayer and nothing of the type of an aesthetical study and admiration. The church music is not opera, nor military music or means of displaying vocal qualities. Within the Orthodox cult, the word is the most important. The church music is only a support and garment for the liturgical word. Support for it facilitates the penetration of the message into the faithfuls' mind and soul, garment for it offers the word versatility and brightness.

When performed within a concert hall, church music calls for study and aesthetical admiration. There it reminds us of the composer that created it, of a certain period in time etc. Performed *in front of* and *by* all the faithful (at least the answers to the Holy Liturgy), within church, meaning within the liturgical celebration and confession of the faith that generated it, the religious music calls for prayer. Here it reminds us of the spiritual presence of the One to Whom we address, of God. No elements of the chant and nobody of those who sing must disturb us and draw our attention away from our dialogue with our Creator. The minute our attention is driven away by any exaggerated element, we can no longer speak of prayer. Or, as we all know, we come to church to pray, to "lay aside all earthly care", and not to enjoy a show.

That is why Augustine of Hippo considers to be a sin the fact that melody can draw his attention inasmuch that he misses the true meaning of the words. "*Yet when it happens that I am more moved by the singing than by what is sung, I confess myself to have sinned wickedly, and then I would rather not have heard the singing*" [3].

Motivated by what we stated previously, we will underline moreover some important aspects of the religious chant supported by patristic texts and we will emphasize the spiritual, theological character of it.

Saint Ambrose of Milan advanced three precise purposes of the use of chanted hymns within the Church:

- **Latreutic**, to bring the faithful closer to God.
- **Didactic**, to instruct the Christian, through learning with pleasure a religious text accompanied by melody.
- **Missionary**, to give an answer to the Arians, who convinced their followers through heretic chants.

The religious chant is a powerful bond between people, it brings people together, closer to God at first, and then to each other, it is a *means of pacification*, of twinning between people. That is why, within Orthodoxy, it must be practised in common, especially during the Holy Liturgy. Because the main feature of Orthodoxy is **communion**. Is characteristic of the church music is also confirmed by Saint Basil the Great: "*Who, indeed, can still consider as an enemy him with whom he has uttered the same prayer to God? So that psalmody, bringing about choral singing, a bond, as it were, toward unity, and joining the people into a harmonious union of one choir, produces also the greatest of blessings, charity*" [4].

As we have already mentioned, the use of music has the power to ease the perception of the text because *"the teachings given fastidiously do not last, but what is taught with pleasure, once entered into our soul, never disappears"* [5]. Man, yet a child in his spiritual age, needs something pleasant so that he can accept into his heart the "roughness" of the dogmatic teachings: *"When, indeed, the Holy Spirit saw that the human race was guided only with difficulty toward virtue, and that, because of our inclination toward pleasure, we were neglectful of an upright life, what did He do? The delight of melody He mingled with the doctrines so that by the pleasantness and softness of the sound heard we might receive without perceiving it the benefit of the words, just as wise physicians who, when giving the fastidious rather bitter drugs to drink, frequently smear the cup with honey. Therefore, He devised for us these harmonious melodies of the psalms, that they who are children in age, or even those who are youthful in disposition, might to all appearances chant, but in reality, become trained in soul. For, never has any one of the many indifferent persons gone away easily holding in mind either an apostolic or prophetic message, but they do chant the words of the psalms, even in the home, and they spread them around in the market place"* [6].

### 3. THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE RELIGIOUS MUSIC ACCORDING TO THE HOLY FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

The religious music has its own distinctive structure and features and has a different well defined purpose: to elevate the soul to God. Such a music is not and must not be complicated, it doesn't need artistic sophistication, and its main quality is lowliness: it must originate from the heart, from a heart filled with warmth and purified with the sacred fire of God. Saint John Chrysostom emphasizes the essential conditions necessary for the interpretation of the church music, which all those who want to elevate their souls through chanting; these are valid both for the priest and for the psalt or for the faithful: *He may be a an old man or a young one, he may have a rough voice or he may be ignoring the rhythm these will not be held upon him as defects. What is required is to have a modest soul, a conscious spirit: a lowliness of heart, a healthy judgement and a clear conscience. If you have these you will enter the sacred choir of God and you will stand by David* [7].

In the interpretation of a chant, the main role is taken by the meaning of the word and not by the melody, although the melody has a certain importance too. We are not underestimating the value of the melody in relationship with the text, but we need to put each of them in place.

Why is the attention to text and its meaning so important while singing? Because the word inspired by the Holy Spirit carries in itself a divine power and, even if we are not able to perceive it fully, it has its effect on those who interpret, who listen, and it also has an effect on the invisible spirits: *if you see that the devil conspires to raise war upon you through the very words of the psalm, you must not look for the exact meaning of what you say, but you must say it with awareness and without raveling. Because even if you only pronounce it, the enemies, knowing their meaning, cannot come against you and the singing of psalms replaces you request to God to destroy your enemies* [8].

On the other hand, we must not neglect - and we must admit this - the interpretative aspect. Let us not forget that even from ancient times the psalts who were co-officiants with the priest needed a special moral preparation. It seems that within the Church from Africa, the deployment of the psalts was done by the bishop with the following words: *"See that what you sing with your mouth you believe in your heart, and what you believe in your heart, you confirm with your deeds"* [9].

Thus, from a technical-interpretative point of view, a certain quality and execution of the chants according to precise rules was required. Canon 75 of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council indicates both the psalts conduct within Church and the manner of interpretation of the religious chants, indicating that *"those who attend church for the purpose of chanting are neither to employ disorderly cries and to force nature to cry out aloud"* [10]. The canon also refers to the adequate content of the chants which must not *"foist in anything that is not becoming and proper to a church"* [11]. The moral-spiritual dimension and the mystical dimension of the chant is also emphasized, when it is said that one must *"offer such psalmodes with much attentiveness and con-triteness to God, who sees directly into everything that is hidden from our sight"* [12]. That is why the writings of the Holy Fathers on the religious chant have always taken into account the manner in which the chanting was practised. Thus,

they militate for a devotional, calm chanting, free from all theatrical accents and elocution. In the same time, as we all know, the collections of canons of the Orthodox Church comprise several rules referring directly to the religious chant.

The severe circumstances in which the religious life of the Orthodox nations developed after their fall under the Turkish rule, inconvenience and restrict more and more the faithfuls' participation to the Holy Liturgy. For example in the Romanian Orthodox Church, the active participation of the faithful to the religious chant became troublesome, for they did not know Slavonic and Greek, which were the languages in which the service was officiated. The situation changed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza issues a decree which states that all throughout the Romanian Orthodox Church the service is to be celebrated only in Romanian. For when participating to a service in church the faithful does not understand what is being read or sung, he becomes a mere spectator and the service transforms into a spectacle. In this case the three purposes of the cult, which we have already mentioned, fail in having any relevance.

#### 4. ON THE THREATICAL EXAGGERATIONS IN INTERPRETATION

Of what was previously proved we must agree upon the fact that lowliness is a compulsory feature of the chanting within the Church. We may translate lowliness into the modern language of today with modesty, common sense, decency in interpretation – and, in general, in every gesture. The one whose duty is to sing in Church must be aware, above all, of the fact that he stands before God; he must be very careful and fearful, *he must examine himself rigorously, in order not to overrule the heavenly things, out of the wish to be appreciated by people, and thus to become the reason for the sin of those who listen to him, by introducing into the chanting a profane spirit, by imitating the manner of interpretation of the opera singers, of the fiddlers and, in general, of all the other types of chanting which is done for paradise and human recognition.* Here is how the spiritual state of the singer is illustrated by a nun full of musical talent and of the spirit of the Fathers, who has conducted for a while a choir in a monastery: *"You have begun to sing in the choir; therefore, you glorify the Lord in the image of the heavenly hosts, who ceaselessly sing praise to the glory of their Creator and Lord. How fortunate you are! But do you acknowledge the full sacredness and importance of this godly work, which incomparably more than any other work is worthy to be called godly work? If not, then it is not superfluous to remind you of the threatening and terrible words of the Prophet: Cursed is the man that doeth the work of the Lord carelessly (Jer. 48:10). You see to what a terrible accountability those are liable who negligently and carelessly perform the work of serving God. The chanter (or singer) is the mouth of the Church, i.e., of the society of believers who are praying in church; while singing prayers and hymns, he pronounces them not only for himself, but in the name of all who are present in church, and as all who are praying pronounce their prayers through the mouths of the singers, these last also are the mouth of the Church.*

*... The great labor of a chanter consists in this, that all the strengths which have been given to him from the Lord's talents he unremittingly applies to the glorification of God. Sing to the glory of the name of God, sing not only with lips and voice, but sing with heart, sing with mind, soul, will, desire, zeal—with all your being. This is what it means to chant with understanding. [...] Strive with all your strength to concentrate attentively on the words which you pronounce; pronounce them in such a manner that they come from the depth of your soul, which is singing together with your lips. Then the sounds of the vivifying current of your hymn will pour into the souls of those who hear them, and these souls, being raised from the earthly to the heavenly, having laid aside all earthly care, will receive the King of Glory Who is borne in triumph by the Angelic Hosts. [...] Indeed, how will we avoid the just judgment of God for our listlessness and laziness and negligence, on account of which we willfully turn even the greatest gifts of God into our own property, which we dispose of as we want, according to our evil will and sinful habits. What a wonderful and great gift—the gift of a voice and the ability to sing! They were given to us for this, that with them we might both glorify the Lord ourselves, and incite others to do the same. And how often we turn these talents to our harm: becoming proud of them, we abase our neighbors who don't have them, we are idle in using them properly to the glory of*

*God, and when we do, we do not use them in a fitting manner, nor as is required by the majesty of these gifts.*

*Having arrived at the cliros and stood in your place, first of all cross yourself and bring to remembrance that you have come before the invisible face of the King of Glory, Whom at this very moment, as always and ceaselessly, all the heavenly hosts glorify, and that presently your feeble and insignificant voice must join this celestial praise. Impress this upon your consciousness, turn mentally to yourself and say to your self, i.e., to all the powers of your soul: mind, thoughts, heart, will, zeal, and the rest: Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ, and let us weep before the Lord Who made us! (Ps. 94:6). The Lord will protect the good free-will actions of your heart, will give you His grace, will renew your powers, and, as the perfume of sweet-smelling incense, your singing will ascend before the Altar of the Most High. For strengthening and consolation remember more frequently the most sweet words of the Mother of God to her wonderful singer John (Koukouzel n.n.): Sing and do not cease singing, and for this I will not forsake you!" [13].*

This firm attitude of Abbess Thaisia against all kind of stiltedness and arrogance in interpretation must be considered in the cultural context of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when, under the bad influence of the Occident, the polyphonic music of profane inspiration started to replace, almost entirely in Russia, the pious traditional music of the Slavonic Christians. What Abbess Thaisia does is to update, in a time much closer to us, the ideas of the Holy Fathers of the first centuries referring to the manner of interpretation of the religious chants.

Saint Nicetas of Remesiana, in one of his works dedicated especially to the interpretation of the religious chants says about those who perform during the Liturgy as the tragedians (actors) on stage: "... the sound or the melody must be sung in agreement with the holy religion, it must not produce heavy effects such as the tragedians', but present the true Christianity. It should not bring something theatrical, but elicit repentance for sins" [14]. The true or false Christian spirit can be observed from the very interpretative conduct of the singer. One who is truly pious does not look to emphasize his vocal qualities, but rather interpret in such a manner that induces into his soul and into the souls of those who listen to him, the characteristic feeling of that chant. The one who wishes to be praised and remarked by people, even if he shows a false modesty, he will be easily uncovered; with his vocal talent or efforts of the voice he struggles to "embellish" the song with grace-notes, with spectacular ups and downs of the voice, and thus the church becomes a concert hall, not a place of sober and intense prayer. May the young understand me, and all those whose duty is to sing psalms in the Church: *we must sing to God with our hearts not with our voices. Do not look to soften you voice with sweet potions like the tragedians, in order to perform within the Church songs and grace-notes like in the theatres, but let us praise the Lord with fear through our acts and the knowledge of the Scriptures* [15].

The oblivion of those who interpret the religious chant in a manner alien to the spirit of the Church is the result of an incomplete commitment to the service of God and His Church, in the most profound way. Not knowing what the real service is, which is full of responsibility before God and all people, they consider the duty of singer to be a job like any other, which is a source of financial gain in order to accomplish other needs and goals, which most often has nothing to do with redemption. That is why they dare to speak during the Liturgy, without paying any attention to the text of the melody, and they sometimes even disturb the others who pray. Most often they dare to walk through the altar and the rest of the church, drawing attention upon them, determining other participants to the service to act disorderly.

The manner of singing must be an extension of the behaviour, of the natural state of the true Christian – and the natural behaviour of a Christian is the spiritual manner of living, within the grace of the Holy Spirit: *We wish and request that, when offering the chant, you are impregnated with great fear and animated by piety and this is how you should offer it: For of all who are present there are some who, disrespecting God and considering the words of the Holy Spirit to be insignificant, produce inadequate sounds, act like those who are possessed by evil spirits, lurch and squirm with their bodies and move in a way that is dissonant with the spiritual singing. It is your duty to offer the angelic glorification with piety and fear, but you introduce here the customs of the dancers who, in an unproper manner raise their hands, tap their feet and move with their body. How can you not fear and*

tremble? Don't you know that here the invisible face of God is present, and He knows all our movements? [16].

We consider Saint John Chrysostom to be one of the most authorized persons in the matter of singing religious chants **within church**.

He then continues: will the prayers of your hands which you raise disorderly and the great mindlessly shout help you? Are you not ashamed of the words you pronounce today: *Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling. Maybe to serve with fear means to serve without a rule, with intension of the powers and without knowing those things we are talking about with the erratic sound of our voice? but you will tell me that the prophet urges us to shout when praising the Lord: "Shout" sais he "for joy to God, all the earth". We do not stop you from such a shout, but we stop you from shouting senselessly; we do not stop the songs of praise, but we stop the unpious songs, the shouts against the nature of one before another, the sudden and useless raise of the hands in the air, the tapping of the feet, unworthy and inadequate customs* [17]. We understand from these words that the spiritual shout is that of the heart.

If the main purpose of the church music is to open the hearts of the faithful and to prepare them for the real encounter with Christ in the Holy Mysteries, and this encounter is, or at least it should be, of the entire liturgical assembly, then we are all required to have an active, not a passive participation to the liturgical acts. That is why the Holy Fathers have decided that in the Church the singing should be done in common, for a better inner concentration and in order to involve everybody into the preparation necessary to receive the Holy Mysteries: *"for neither doth he (the priest) give thanks alone, but also all the people. For having first taken their voices, next when they assent that it is "meet and right so to do", then he begins the thanksgiving"* [18]. The faithfuls' attention to everything that is spoken in the church, and their inner state has a decisive role for what they experience as the working force of the grace during the services. They actually must co-serve with the priest.

## INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

We presented in only a few words what the religious music is supposed to be like. All these features manifested more during certain historical periods – at a broad scale, especially during the first centuries of Christianity. The distancing from the spirit of the Tradition and the progressive extinction of the true experience during the Liturgy, of the communion with God and the fellows, lead to a misunderstanding of the symbols through which God could be perceived. Each time, during historical periods more and more closer to nowadays, a spiritual perception upon the entire liturgical complex of the Church was linked to the existence of several innovators with an intense spiritual life and, most often, with genuine natural endowments. At a closer critical look on the Church today, one may observe that everything is reduced to the exterior form of the cult. We no longer live for real Christ's mystery. We have become "Sunday Christians", we go to church each Sunday or feast, we say our prayers mechanically, we interpret the chants concerned only with the artistic aspects etc. The sign that this is the manner in which we relate to God and His things is visible from the moment we step out of the church, we become profane. Let's not forget that we go to church to pray and meet with God. We should not consider the church a concert hall.

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- [12] I. Floca, Canoanele..., p. 140.
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- [14] Master Ș. Alexe, Folioasele..., p. 174.
- [15] Master S. Alexe, Folioasele..., p. 175.
- [16] Saint John Chrysostom, Homilia in laudem eorum, qui comparuerunt in ecclesia, quaeque, moderatio sit servanda in divinis laudibus, Migne, P.G., t. LVI, col. 99.
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