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# Music and Orthodox Theology

*Ivan Moody*

The expression of theology by means of music in the Orthodox Church is something that has been discussed and regulated since the Patristic era, which itself takes as its basis the Psalms and the Gospels. The way in which this expression has been achieved practically, however, has varied considerably over the course of history, as the following survey shows; and questions of the relationship between personal creativity and dogmatic theology are still being asked today by hymnographers, composers, and other musicians whose work is orientated to a greater or lesser extent by the spirituality of the Orthodox Church.

This article begins with a brief consideration of the scriptural background (focused on the New Testament) before introducing music in the thought of the church fathers. The entry goes on to elaborate the style and practice of liturgical music in the Orthodox tradition before turning to questions of developing a theology of music, focusing on the Orthodox chant. Attention is then given to a theological consideration of the liturgical texts themselves. Subsequent sections delve into related concepts of hesychasm (quietude) and the icon, asking how they may shed light on a theological understanding of music and chant. The article closes by situating Orthodox liturgical music within the broader discussion of theology and the arts in Eastern Christianity.

**Keywords:** Orthodox Christianity, Music, Theology and the arts, Christian theology, Creation, Creativity, Liturgy, Psalmody, Chant, Hesychasm, Icons

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# 1 Music and scripture

Music is barely mentioned in the Christian scriptures of the New Testament. When it is, it relates to the textual aspect of, for example, the singing of psalmody. (The Old Testament contains its own references to music in the context of worship, e.g. Ps 92; see also 1 Chr 15; cf. 1 Sam 18:6–7.) One may thus conclude that liturgical music may be encountered within the *liturgy* itself or in the Christian home. Most importantly in the accounts of the Last Supper in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, there is reference to ‘singing a hymn’ (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26) which is implicitly one of thanksgiving, and the Apostle Paul enjoins the faithful to sing ‘psalms, hymns and spiritual songs’ (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16).

There are further references in the New Testament: the Book of Acts, where the word ‘praising’ is used (Acts 2:26–27), and the episode in which Paul and Silas, in prison at Thyatira, pray and sing before they are liberated by an earthquake (Acts 16:25–26); an ambiguous mention in Rom 15:5–6; and several references in Corinthians which give us a very limited insight into the liturgy of that time and place (Cor 13:1; 14:7–8; 14:15; 14:26–27; and 15:51–52). There is a highly ambiguous use of the word *psallontes* (a word that came to mean ‘singing’ but which originally referred to the playing of a stringed instrument): isolated references occur in Ephesians (Eph 5:18–20), the first Epistle of Paul to Timothy (1 Tim 3–16), Hebrews (Heb 13:15), and James (Jas 5:13), as well as highly symbolic mentions of singing in the Book of Revelation (Rev 4:8 and 5:8–9).

As James McKinnon has noted,

Of the New Testament material it may at least be said that it creates the impression of a positive attitude toward liturgical song. Moreover, one can console oneself with the thought that the difficulty in arriving at knowledge of specific musical practice might stem from the circumstance that musical practice, along with liturgical practice in general, was not yet fixed. (McKinnon 1987: 9)

Only the singing of a hymn mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark provides any kind of possible link with Jewish or later Christian practice (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26).

Sparse though the material may be, it has profound theological implications, not least the mere fact of singing at all. We do not know what was sung specifically, or, as noted above, whether it had a connection with any extant or future ritual practice; but what is certain, and clearly evident in the work of later writers, is the importance of sung theological material on occasions of intercession or thanksgiving.

## 2 Music and the church fathers

The first and second centuries are also reticent in the matter of discussing music, though Justin Martyr enjoins Christians to 'offer prayers and thanksgiving' (*Apology* 1, 13; *Patrologia Graeca [PG]* 6: 345 and *Apology* 1, 67; *PG* 6: 429) and, remarkably, speaks of Ps 21:23 as a vision of Christ singing together with the apostles at the Last Supper (*Dialogue with Trypho* 106; *PG* 6:724). The few words left on the subject by Tatian, Athenagoras, and Theophilus tend towards anti-Hellenic polemics. It should be noted that there is also extant a corpus of apocryphal texts and other writings (such as the Sybilline Oracles) containing musical references.

The situation changes in the third century, with substantial commentary from Clement of Alexandria (and others) developing the idea of spiritual allegory, whereby the instruments mentioned in the Psalms, for example, all had a theological or moral significance – though nothing is said about their use in actual ceremony or other practice. According to Clement:

He who is from David, [...] scorning the lyre and cithara as lifeless instruments, [...] he sings to God on his many voiced instrument and he sings to man, himself an instrument, 'You are my cithara, my aulos and my temple'. (*Protrepticus* 1.5, 3–7.3; *PG* 7: 60–61, McKinnon 1987)

The ambiguous figure of Origen, Clement's successor as head of the Catechetical School at Alexandria, also had words to say on the allegorical meaning of the instruments in the Old Testament, and there is an exhortation in the *Didascalia* to avoid pagan writings in favour of the Psalms (*Didascalia* 6: 3–5).

Later Patristic commentary, following the model of the Alexandrians, tends to deal with the Old Testament and its meaning in considerable detail, specifically by means of the psalm commentary, which naturally includes discussion of any musical terminology. Some commentaries of this kind, such as those of John Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrus, are of more interest to the music historian than others in that they are less concerned with poetic interpretations of music and musical instruments than with a more practical approach towards the use of instruments in the temple as a phenomenon acceptable to God, part of the history of salvation as a whole.

As McKinnon has noted, while the category of liturgical chant during this period may well be that in which scholars are most interested, it is also the one in which the smallest amount of progress has been made. This is because it is so difficult to find a way to discuss something that receives such little attention over a long period of time in anything but general terms. Shifting theological and cultural questions complicate matters further. Quasten observes that when Christ proclaimed 'adoration in spirit' in his teaching (John 4:23), the question of instrumental music as used in pagan ritual was of little relevance; but with the geographical expansion of Christianity, the implications of instrumental music

in non-Christian religious practice became a more complex issue for Christian theology (Quasten 1983: 59). There is, says Quasten, a warning in Paul's writings 'against a purely aesthetic pleasure in singing: such singing must take place "in your heart"' – a deeply spiritualized concept of divine worship resulting from the characteristics required of liturgical singing.

The early fourth century brought a flourishing of Christian literature on account of Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313, and though there are brief references to liturgical song by Athanasius, most of this has to do with Christology and defining the faith more precisely. We know more of early liturgical practice from the early Desert Fathers, who had abandoned the city in search of a purer way of practising the faith. Though there has been disagreement concerning precisely how interested in music the Fathers were, what is true is that the extensive use of psalmody provided the basis for the later sung offices (see Taft 1982). There were also some quite specific rules: Pachomius, the founder of coenobitic monasticism, for example, instructed the monks that on Sundays and when the Eucharist is offered, only the elders may chant the psalmody (McKinnon 1987: 57).

Later in the century, three important figures wrote extensively on the faith: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. Basil discussed the monastic hours and psalmody, and wrote very specifically about the spiritual benefits of the latter. He was also very insistent that singers on earth should imitate the singing of the angels:

What is more blessed than to imitate the chorus of the angels here on earth; to arise for prayer at the very break of day and honour the Creator with hymns and songs [...]? (*Letter II: 2; PG 33: 225–228; McKinnon 1987: 68*)

Gregory of Nazianzus instructs us that '[t]he place before the great sanctuary, where you will stand after Baptism, is a sign of future glory; the psalmody with which you will be received is a foreshadowing of future hymnody' (McKinnon 1987: 72).

Amongst subsequent authors, John Chrysostom is undoubtedly the most important. His substantial body of writings includes much commentary on music. Many references appear in his Commentary on Psalm 41, in which he elaborates quite specifically on the rationale behind the singing of psalms:

When God saw that the majority of men were slothful, and that they approached spiritual reading with reluctance and submitted to the effort involved without pleasure [...] he mixed melody with prophecy, so that enriched by the rhythm and melody, all might raise sacred hymns to him with great eagerness. (McKinnon 1987: 80)

Ephrem the Syrian, though from outside the Graeco-Latin tradition, is also of great importance in this context, albeit in a very different way. He composed hymns of

tremendous and complex poetic elaboration and great beauty, but there is some disagreement about their function and whether they were sung liturgically or not.

The late fourth century saw the appearance (amongst other material) of two sources of great liturgical and musical significance: the *Apostolic Constitutions*, probably from about 380, and the *Itinerarium Egeriae* (Pilgrimage of Egeria) from the late fourth century or slightly later. The former contains an account of late fourth-century liturgy in Antioch, and makes much of the reflection on earth of the angelic liturgy above:

'The Cherubim and six-winged Seraphim, their feet covered with two, their heads with two, and flying with two', saying together with thousand times thousands of archangels and ten-thousand times ten-thousands of angels, without ceasing and in a loud voice, and let all the people say with them, 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of his glory; blessed be he forever; Amen'. (McKinnon 1987: 109)

Egeria's *Pilgrimage* recounts the journey of its author, probably a Spanish nun, to Jerusalem in the early fifth century to attend Holy Week services. Her description is remarkably thorough, and not lacking in detail about the effect that the services had upon the faithful:

And then as the bishop stands behind the railings, he takes the Gospel book and goes to the gate and the bishop himself reads the Resurrection of the Lord. When the reading of it has begun, there is such moaning and groaning among everybody and such crying, that even the hardest of hearts could be moved to tears because the Lord has suffered so much for us. (McKinnon 1987: 115)

Western authors naturally also wrote a great deal about music and liturgy; Niceta of Remesiana in particular is worth referencing here since, though he is considered a Western author, he was by today's geographical standards from the East, having been born in Dacia and becoming bishop of Remesiana (now Bela Palanka, Serbia) in around 370. He wrote a kind of genealogy of sacred song, beginning with Moses – 'If we ask who among men was the first to introduce this sort of singing, we will find no other than Moses [...]' (McKinnon 1987: 135) – and spent considerable time explaining the spiritual utility of liturgical singing.

### **3 Liturgical music: style and practice**

Despite the body of patristic commentary, whatever was sung in the very earliest years of the church is lost to us because of the lack of musical notation, and we have no means of knowing how exactly it might have corresponded with (for example) the injunctions of the church fathers to reflect the celestial harmony of the cherubim. The earliest transcribable, and fragmentary, Christian hymn is generally known as the Oxyrhynchus Hymn: ('[...] Let it be silent, let the luminous stars not shine'). It was written in the alphabetical notation used

by the ancient Greeks, the latest piece known of compositions written in such notation, dating from approximately the end of the third century (West 1992: 324–326).

It is possible, therefore, that the remote origins of what is now called Byzantine chant may lie in the classical Greek world, and in whatever was sung by the early Christians of Alexandria, Antioch, and Ephesus. The term ‘Byzantine chant’ (or *psaltiki*) refers, in the strictest sense, to the sacred chant of churches of the Greek-speaking world dating between the construction of Constantinople, the capital, in 330 and its fall after 1453. However, the continuation of this liturgical-musical tradition throughout the remains of the Byzantine Empire, as well as its spread to non Greek-speaking areas after 1453, means that that terms is frequently – and often inaccurately – used to describe such liturgical chant up to the present day.

Byzantine chant is organized according to the Octoechos, a series of eight *echoi* (modes) which change according to a weekly cycle. The precise origins of this system remain obscure, though tradition attributes it to John of Damascus. While his work may indeed have formed part of the move towards systematization in contemporary Palestine, it is now clear that the eight-mode system was firmly in place by the eighth century. Recent work by Stig Simeon Frøyshov (2007) has argued for dating its origins to Jerusalem in the sixth century. The theological and liturgical conception of an eight-week modal cycle nevertheless clearly originated in Jerusalem during the course of the fifth century as a ‘phenomenon of the public (“cathedral”) liturgy’, in which it is an expression of the theology of Sunday as the eighth day (Frøyshov 2007).

The Octoechos was not immediately adopted outside Palestine. At Constantinople, the Psaltikon of the sung office, or ‘Cathedral’ rite, shows different modal ascriptions for the solo chants from those which came from Jerusalem (Troelsgård 2011: 61). In addition, the modal ascriptions for the lengthy *kontakia* written by St Romanos for the Constantinopolitan rite were probably added retrospectively.

With the later appearance of other kinds of chant (notably in Kievan Rus’ after its acceptance of Christianity in 988), and the inevitable local modifications of the Byzantine repertoire, it becomes more difficult to conceive of the Octoechos as a universal spiritual symbol. Nevertheless, the eight-mode system continued to form the basis of Christian Orthodox chant of different styles.

It is important to note that all liturgical celebrations in the Orthodox Church are intoned, with greater or lesser elaboration. The essential building block of the musical structure of all services is the psalm verse, or sticheron. However, between these short texts and such elaborate liturgical moments as the Hymn of the Cherubim, sung during the Great Entrance (offertory procession), there is a very diverse range of liturgical forms. (A

convenient synthesis of the structure of the services of the Orthodox Church may be found in Mother Mary and Ware 1984: 68–97.)

## 4 Music, Orthodox theology, and creativity

Given the richness and variety of the various traditions of Orthodox chant, one may legitimately ask how one might begin to construct a theology for it, what might constitute such a theology, and indeed whether it is necessary at all.

To answer the third part of this question first, such a theology is necessary if one believes that the liturgy is a place, a time, of encounter with Christ, if one believes that it is in fact the Kingdom of God manifest upon earth in which the faithful participate fully, as ‘kings, priests and prophets in a new creation’ (Lossky 1989: 38). Such a liturgy clearly cannot be simply a collection of personal impressions, personal interpretations – this is precisely why the fourth-century Council of Laodicea, in its fifty-ninth canon, had to rule that ‘privately composed psalms’ (*idiotikoi psalmoi*) might no longer be written, but must instead be subject to the Church’s accumulated wisdom (‘Tradition’) as expressed in the Old and New Testaments, and their interpretation through the Church as explained and set down in the canons of ecumenical and other councils. And such a view necessarily implied the regulation of music. If the psalms and hymns officially approved by the Church as transmitting authentic dogma – as revealing Christ and the history of salvation to man – are to be sung, to what music should they be sung? How can that music be regulated so that it is appropriate to the theological weight of the words it is setting? As Lossky says,

[i]f one takes seriously the consequences of the Incarnation, ‘real and not imaginary, of the Word of God’, as stated in the definition of Nicaea II, then all liturgical art must reflect the reality of this new creation – or, at the very least, must not contradict it. Indeed, the definition of Nicaea II speaks of art ‘which is in accordance with the narrative of the Gospel’ [...] Liturgical art should of necessity participate in this preaching [of the Gospel], be at service, be one with it, be in harmony with it. (Lossky 1989: 39)

All this is exactly what the Fathers of the Church, as quoted above, were working to define. Nobody today can come to a conclusion as to how the music of the church first sounded or what its guiding principles were beyond the very little mentioned in the New Testament. Accordingly, the first two parts of this question may be answered by seeking for the earliest sources of a theology of chant, which include those gospel references, the injunctions of the Apostle Paul, and then the writings of the church fathers.

It is clear that early Christian writers would accept no compromise when it came to the execution of liturgical music. St Symeon the New Theologian, for example, offers the following practical advice:

The mind must not wander off, nor the thoughts be occupied with curiosity or interest in the more careless brethren as they talk or whisper to each other. On the contrary, the eye and the soul must be kept free from distraction and pay attention to nothing else but the psalmody and the reading and, as far as possible, to the meaning of the words of the divine scripture that are being sung or read [...]. (St Symeon the New Theologian 1980: 275)

This kind of instruction makes apparent the sort of attitude necessary for the prayerful rendition of psalmody, and given the clear importance of psalmody – the singing of hymns – in the understanding of the church fathers, it is obvious that its regulation and prescription would become a matter to be dealt with by the ecumenical councils of the Church. Here are the prescriptions from Canon 75 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, held in Constantinople during 680–681:

Those who chant in the churches should refrain from forcing their nature to yell, but also from saying anything else that is unsuitable for the church.

Those who chant should offer their psalmodies with great care to God, who looks into the hidden recesses of the heart, i.e., into the psalmody and prayer that are done mentally in the heart rather than uttered in external cries.

The chanting that is done in churches is an entreaty towards God to be appeased for our sins. Whoever begs and prayerfully supplicates must have a humble and contrite manner; but to cry out manifests a manner that is audacious and irreverent.

These make it evident that a correct spiritual disposition is necessary for the correct chanting of psalms and hymns. What is not so evident, however, is precisely what might have constituted at this period ‘audacious and irreverent’ ‘crying out’. And the entire question of style, of what might be considered liturgically appropriate in any given time and place, is one that greatly complicates the interpretation of such injunctions (see Moody 2009).

McKinnon, in speaking of early Egyptian monasticism, makes a relevant observation here. He notes that Palladius, in the *Lausiac History*,

gives us a hint of what the private weekday office might have been like at Nitria in Lower Egypt: ‘one who stands there at about the ninth hour can hear the psalmody issuing forth from each cell, so that he imagines himself to be high above, in paradise’. (McKinnon 1994: 507)

However, McKinnon goes on to say that:

Of course, what sounded heavenly to Palladius might by narrowly musical standards have been cacophonous, with each monk chanting in his own way and his own time. But even the most secularly inclined of moderns should be able to imagine themselves stirred by the religious resonance of such a scene; and, more to the point, the chanting of certain individual monks might itself have manifested a kind of unselfconscious beauty. (McKinnon 1994: 507)

This is remarkable on two counts: firstly because it recognizes the absolutely incarnate quality of the singing – a religious ‘cacophony’ could be nothing other than incarnate, an embodied physical experience; and secondly because it introduces the idea of ‘unselfconscious beauty’ – a formulation that summarizes magnificently the way in which any incarnate liturgical singing must surely be expected to sound.

Creation – in the sense of creativity and the act and significance of creating – is a contentious subject in the context of liturgical art, but at least some of the church fathers have surprisingly clear views on the matter. In discussing Gregory of Nyssa, for example, George Florovsky notes that,

Gregory sees language as a product of man’s creativity. The ‘invention’ of language by man was not arbitrary or capricious but was accomplished through the natural faculty of reason [...]. ‘Man’s faculty or potential for language is the work of our Creator’. Man can realize this potential in a free and creative way [...]. Language, sounds and the conceptions they express are all created by men through the Divinely bestowed faculty of ‘επίνοιας [...]. Invention is the creative power of thought, a ‘more exhaustive analysis of the object of thought’ [...]. In attempting to define the common element between the name and its object, Gregory proposes that this connection is established by the free and creative faculty of the intellect. Names are invented for things and united to them but they do not arise from things. (Florovsky 1987: 165–166)

John Chrysostom was no less forthright on the positive effects of liturgical singing:

[...] from the spiritual Psalms, however, proceeds much of value, much utility, much sanctity and every inducement to philosophy, for the words purify the soul and the Holy Spirit descends swiftly upon the soul of the singer. For those who sing with understanding invoke the grace of the Spirit. (McKinnon 1998: 14)

## 5 Hymnography

From descriptions and prescriptions of psalmody, we move to a consideration of the liturgical texts themselves, and what they reveal about the theology of chanting. The Sanctus, as sung at the Anaphora of the Liturgy, is one of the texts that attracted most commentary from the church fathers on account of its antiquity and ubiquity. The fifth-century treatise *The Celestial Hierarchy*, attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, says:

Hence, theology has transmitted to the men of earth those hymns sung by the first ranks of the angels whose gloriously transcendent enlightenment is thereby made manifest. Some of these hymns, if one may use perceptible images, are like the ‘sound of many waters’ as they proclaim: ‘Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place.’ Others thunder out that famous and venerable song, telling of God: ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory’. (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987: 165–166)

What is striking here is the power attributed to the proclamation of these words.

Related to the Sanctus is the Trisagion. The later liturgical commentator St Germanus of Constantinople, in his *On the Divine Liturgy*, writes very specifically about the theology of the Trisagion hymn, continuing the theme of the earthly reflection of angelic glory:

The Trisagion hymn is (sung) thus: there the angels say ‘Glory to God in the highest’; here, like the Magi, we bring gifts to Christ – faith, hope, and love like gold, frankincense, and myrrh – and like the bodiless hosts we cry in faith: ‘Holy God’, that is the Father; ‘Holy Mighty’, that is the Son and Word, for He has bound the mighty devil and made him who had dominion over death powerless through the cross and He has given us life by trampling on him; ‘Holy Immortal’, that is the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, through whom all creation is made alive and cries out ‘Have mercy on us’. (Germanus of Constantinople 1984: 75)

Such commentary, insisting on the earthly reflection of the heavenly, represents what the *doxastikon* from the verses at Vespers on the Sunday of the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council describes as ‘the harmonious hymn of theology’. However, while this is an unsurpassed definition of the role of hymnography, it is also necessary to consider that harmoniousness in its *musical* expression. Hymnography is full of quotations from the psalms referring to music – or, rather, referring to the human being as a living, breathing organism, praising God literally with breath.

The human, having had life breathed into them by God, becomes a doxological being. Human nature thus becomes one of praise: ‘Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the highest. To thee praise is due, O God’. This sequence of psalm verses (Ps 150; 148; 65) comprises the *pasapnoarion*, sung at Sunday and festal Matins; it calls on the whole of creation, everything that breathes, to join in the praise of the Creator (Seppälä 2005: 73). And at every Eucharistic Liturgy, at the small entrance, it is made apparent in how this praise is expressed physically: ‘Save us, O Son of God, who didst rise from the dead; we sing to thee: Alleluia’.

The fourteenth-century Nicholas Cabasilas, in his *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, had this to say of the first antiphon – warning of the necessity of understanding before singing, but also emphasizing the actual necessity of singing:

Then the priest intones the sacred psalms, and the chant is taken up by all present, who sing the inspired words of the holy prophets. 'It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto Thy name, O most High.' [Ps 92:1] From the beginning the words are most apt: they declare that this glorification of God is good. It is essential that we should be aware of this before singing any hymn. When the prophet speaks of giving praise to the Lord, he means giving thanks and singing hymns. (Cabasilas 1998: 51)

Indeed, the first and second antiphons (or the Typical psalms, from which the verses are taken) from the Divine Liturgy speak precisely of praise. In the first are words from Ps 103:1: 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name'. In the second, from Ps 146:1–2: 'Praise the Lord, O my soul. While I live will I praise the Lord: I will sing praises unto my God while I have my being'.

In turn, however, it is important to realize that singing is a divine gift. St Gregory of Nazianzus makes this explicit in one of his hymns:

Grant, immortal Monarch,  
that we may hymn Thee,  
grant that we may sing of Thee,  
our ruler and Lord,  
through whom is the hymn  
through whom is the praise,  
through whom the endless ages,  
through whom the light of the sun,  
through whom the course of the moon,  
through whom the great beauty of the stars,  
through whom noble man was made,  
that as a rational creature he could perceive the deity. (Hymn 1.1.30, PG 37: 508–510;  
Gregory of Nazianzus 2005: 8, slightly modified)

The lyre is also directly invoked in one of the stichera at Vespers for the Feast of St John the Theologian, celebrated on 26 September, *I theokinitos lyra* (The Divine Lyre):

Divinely inspired instrument for the songs of heaven,  
whose secrets he wrote down for us,  
singing wonderfully the song of songs,  
with words from his mouth as music from a lyre,  
he prays for us to be saved.

Vocalized praise of the Creator is thus clearly placed on a very high level, together with the silent praise of the natural universe: human beings are viewed as having been created to sing with the angels.

In the first discourse of the Symposium by St Methodius, in Chapter 6, the character Thaleia says that humanity 'was also created without corruption, that [they] might honour

the king and maker of all things, responding to the shouts of the melodious angels which came from heaven' (1958: 91). This idea is further explored by Gregory of Nazianzus. This is how he expresses it in his poem on virginity:

[...] and He [God] said this:  
'My servants, pure and ever-living, the worthy angels,  
Occupy already the wide heaven: blessed minds,  
Hymners chanting my praise unceasingly;  
But the earth still vaunts in mindless animals.  
So it pleases me to form a mixed species out of both,  
Between mortals and immortals, thinking man,  
Who should rejoice in my works, and be a level-headed initiate  
In heavenly mysteries, and a great power upon earth, another angel  
Sprung from the soil, the chanter of my mind and  
Dispositions.' (Gregory of Nazianzus 1991: 92)

The idea that human beings are intended to be the 'chanters of [God's] mind and disposition' implies communication between human beings and God, and the transmission of divine knowledge to the world. The circumstances *par excellence* for this to occur are during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. St Basil admonishes the singer to be attentive to what he sings:

You have a psalm, you have a prophecy, you have the Gospel precepts and the pronouncements of the Apostles. While your tongue sings, let your mind search out the meaning of the words, so that you might sing in spirit and also in understanding. (St Basil, *Homily 7*, PG 29: 304; McKinnon 1987: 66)

If we turn to liturgical texts outside the Eucharistic Liturgy, one of the richest sources of reference to the spiritual qualities of song is the corpus of hymnody for Holy Week and Pascha (Easter). The first three days of Holy Week include the chanting of the following troparion:

Behold, the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night, and blessed is the servant whom he shall find watching; again, unworthy is the servant whom he shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, lest thou be overcome by sleep and lest thou be given over to death and shut out from the kingdom. Therefore, rouse thyself crying: 'Holy, holy holy are Thou, O our God; through the Mother of God, have mercy on us'.

Here we see not only a clear admonition to be vigilant, but a specific reference to singing as an act of vigilance. This theme may also be found in the kontakion of the Great Canon of St Andrew of Crete:

My soul, my soul, arise! Why art thou sleeping? The end is drawing near, and thou wilt be confounded. Awake then, and be watchful, that Christ our God may spare thee, He who is everywhere present and fills all things.

The singing of hymns as an expression of paschal joy, on the other hand, is exemplified in the heirmos of Ode 5 of the Paschal Canon by St John of Damascus:

Let us arise at deep dawn and, instead of myrrh, offer a hymn to the Master; and we shall behold Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, Who causes life to dawn for all.

Thus, not only is the hymn of spiritual benefit to humankind, but an offering to the Risen Lord.

## 6 Hesychasm

Hesychasm, or quietude (from the Greek *hesychia*), may seem at first sight to have little to do with the theology of music, and may indeed seem to contradict the very idea of such a theology. However, the hesychastic movement reached its peak in the fourteenth century in parallel with the creation of a highly ornate new repertory of ecclesiastical chant, described as *kalophonic* (beautified) and best exemplified in the music composed by St John Koukouzelis.

Briefly, hesychasm is a mystical system which holds that by means of certain ascetic practices – chief among them being absolute quietude of body and mind – a human being may experience the Uncreated Light of God. It was defended by St Gregory Palamas against the monk Barlaam, schooled in Western theology and Aristotelian philosophy. Barlaam claimed that these practices were superstitious, but the polemics engendered by these arguments were only resolved when John VI Kantakouzenos became emperor in 1347. In 1351, the Synod at Blachernae excommunicated the opponents of hesychasm, and anathemata were added to the Liturgy for the First Sunday in Lent together with acclamations of Palamas who was later canonized.

‘A hesychast’, writes St John of the Ladder,

is one who strives to enshrine what is bodiless within the temple of the body, paradoxical though this may sound. A hesychast is one who says, ‘I sleep but my heart is watchful (Song of Songs 5:2). (*The Ladder* Steps 27 and 26, PG 88: 1008, 1029B, 1088A; Klimakos 1982)

Research by Alexander Lingas has shown beyond reasonable doubt that the two phenomena (hesychastic asceticism and highly ornate psalmody) – rather than mutually contradictory – are almost certainly interrelated. He writes that:

In the absence of a fourteenth-century text explicitly establishing a causal relationship between monastic spirituality and contemporary musical developments, it is possible only to present an admittedly circumstantial case linking Koukouzeles' revolutionary style of chanting to hesychasm. Yet it is difficult to dismiss these developments as merely coincidental, for it seems highly unlikely that hesychast fathers would have checked in their spirituality at the gate as they entered the monastery each weekend so that they might spend countless hours following the latest Constantinopolitan (or Thessalonian) musical fad. (Lingas 1996: 167)

It is also not without relevance that Fr John Meyendorff, in discussing the theological integration of hesychasm, includes a section entitled 'The body takes part in prayer [...]', in which he notes that

[...] it is above all against a dualistic conception of man that Palamas raises his voice. 'What pain or joy or movement is there, which is not shared by soul and body? [...] There are blessed passions, activities common to soul and body, which do not attach the spirit to the flesh, but which draw up the flesh to a dignity near to that of the spirit, and make it turn towards the height'. (Meyendorff 1974: 143)

Specific and unusually direct application of such thinking may be seen rather earlier in the writings of Niceta of Remesia (see [section 2](#)). In his 'On the Benefit of Psalmody', described by its translator James McKinnon as summarizing 'the early Christian doctrine on ecclesiastical song' (McKinnon 1994: 21), Niceta directs the reader's attention to the Canticle of the Three Youths in the Furnace as found in the Book of Daniel, and notes that:

You have it here on biblical authority that the three praised the Lord together 'as if from one voice', just as all of us must exhibit the same intention and the same sounding melody as if from a single voice. Those, however, who are not able to blend and adapt themselves to the others, ought better to sing in a subdued voice than to create a great clamour; and thus will they fulfill their liturgical obligation and avoid disrupting the singing community. For it is not given to all to possess a supple and pleasant voice. (McKinnon 1994: 21)

Therefore, through apophatic (or 'negative') theology, the inadequacy of the human intellect and human language to express the fullness of truth never ceases to be proclaimed.

And it is 'human language' that is transcended in the lengthy and melodically highly ornamental chants written by St John Koukouzeles for the all-night vigils at the Great Lavra on Mount Athos. These employ not only a wide vocal range, but large intervallic leaps, roulades of sequential melodic writing, and, in particular, the textless vocalization known as the *kratema*, called by Lingas 'institutionalized pentecostalism' (Lingas 1996: 163). The term *kratema* comes from *kratein* (to hold) and refers to the holding, or prolongation, of a liturgical chant melody. The term *terirem* is also found, referring to the nonsense syllables

‘ter-ri-rem’ that were the text of the *kratemata*, whether as independent compositions or sections of other chants. Though the texts employed are authoritative in their theological content, here they effectively surrender to internal silence, the product of awe before the mystery.

## 7 The theology of chant and the theology of the icon

It has become reasonably common in recent years to compare the composition of sacred chant to the painting of an icon. The late composer Sir John Tavener was particularly drawn to this comparison. While such a parallel is superficially appealing and even an obvious one to make, the idea merits further consideration. Paul Evdokimov, in his *The Art of the Icon* (1990), says the following:

It is certainly true that the icon has no reality of its own. In itself it is only a wooden board. The icon gets all its theophanic value from its *participation* in the Wholly Other; the icon is the mirror of the Wholly Other. It can therefore contain nothing in itself but becomes rather a grid, a structure through which the Other shines forth. The absence of three-dimensional volume in two-dimensional icons excludes all materialization. The icon thus expresses an energetic presence which is not localized or enclosed but which shines out from a point of condensation.

In this liturgical theology of presence, affirmed in the rite of consecration, we have the element that clearly distinguishes, and draws the lines of demarcation between, an icon and a painting with a religious subject. [...] A work of art is to be seen; it is supposed to ravish the soul. [...] Now the sacred art of the icon transcends the emotional plane which only acts through the senses. (Evdokimov 1990: 179, original emphasis)

Can it be said that sacred music similarly manifests a ‘liturgical theology of presence’? It might be said to do this to the extent that the text it conveys does; the hymnography of the Church, as a vehicle for dogmatic theology (see [section 4](#)), must, like the icon, be theophanic and also ‘transcend the emotional plane’. The question of whether the chant itself, without the text, is also theophanic and transcendent is far more difficult to answer, and also suggests a further question: does it in fact need to be an equivalent of the icon in these ways, or is this a false analogy?

It is also necessary here to discuss the question of beauty. As Patrick Sherry has written, ‘[i]t is perhaps easier to express the relationship between God’s glory and earthly beauty poetically and metaphorically than to attain any philosophical or theological exactitude’ (Sherry 2002: 122–123) – before going on to discuss philosophers and theologians who have attempted to do precisely that. The question of beauty is relevant if we are to consider that the Divine Liturgy is the presence of the Kingdom of God and therefore the place in which God’s beauty is most fully realized on earth – for such a

conception logically requires that every element of that Liturgy participate in that beauty in order to be theophanic.

The idea that there is a hierarchy of beauty – that of earth reflecting that of heaven – is straightforward enough. Pseudo-Dionysius expounded it in great detail in his *The Divine Names* and elsewhere. He says that the Super-Essential beautiful (God) is the source of all created beauty and the goal towards which all things strive (Pseudo-Dionysius, *apud* Sherry 2002: 123), and this is a *locus classicus* of Christian neoplatonism.

But is this hierarchy repeated, as it were, further down the chain? Can human, as creator, imitate God as the Creator of what is good, what is beautiful? Again, Patrick Sherry has discussed this problem at length. He says, '[...] in the doctrine of the Incarnation Christianity offers a bold answer to our question of how the visible can represent the invisible or the divine' (Sherry 2002: 133), and this is in perfect accord with the Orthodox understanding of the icon. As St John of Damascus wrote:

When the Invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw a likeness of His form. When He who is a pure spirit, without form or limit, immeasurable in the boundlessness of His own nature, existing as God, takes upon Himself the form of a servant in substance and in stature, and a body of flesh, then you may draw His likeness, and show it to anyone willing to contemplate it. (*Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images*; John of Damascus [n.d.]

Sherry says, further,

[b]ut in the case of divine beauty we do not seem to have anything comparable to actions which we can try to discern, apart from the moral and spiritual beauty of Christ. Thus God's incorporeality is more of a difficulty here than it is in the case of qualities like love and justice, both for our understanding what the divine beauty is and for our seeing how there might be a likeness between it and created beauty. (Sherry 2002: 133)

After discussing various approaches to this problem, Sherry comes to what he calls a 'minimal solution', which in fact resonates profoundly with the hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius:

If God's being is of surpassing splendour, then it will be refracted and reflected in His creation in a countless variety of ways. His wisdom is believed to be reflected in human intelligence and wisdom though perhaps we should follow Prov 6:6 and look also to the ant (and maybe the fox and the bee, too). In the case of His beauty we have a vastly wider range of possible reflections to consider, because of the manifoldness of divine and human imagination. (Sherry 2002: 140)

In other words, the beauty of God may indeed be reflected, and therefore transmitted, by human creation. Without this 'minimal solution to the problem', Sherry says, 'we

cannot make sense of, or justify, the deep religious conviction that worldly beauty has a sacramental character because it reflects God's glory' (Sherry 2002: 141). Richard Harries amplifies this latter point when he says:

For a Christian the world is good both because God, who is supreme good, has created it and because, in the person of his Son, he has embraced it in a human life. Even more than that, in his Resurrection he has raised earthly beauty to everlasting life. (Harries 1993: 37)

But precisely because of its manifoldness, we should beware of seeking exact equivalents in various kinds of human creation. In the case of church music, however, which must obligatorily strive to have a sacramental character, there is yet no reason why it should not be exactly comparable to an icon. It may be theophanic simply by functioning synergistically with the hymnography it carries, one of many refractions of the beauty of God.

## 8 Later discussion of art and theology

The twin difficulties of linguistic barriers and the advent of communism meant that the wave of spiritual revival evident in Eastern Christianity at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly in Russia – including the rediscovery of Byzantine icon styles and earlier repertoires of monophonic chant – never had the opportunity to make an impact in the West. The radical reforms enacted in the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) meant that, in any case, there would have been few points of contact with Orthodox liturgical aesthetics.

Nevertheless, the subject of liturgical music, its aesthetics and its theology, was one of lively debate in nineteenth-century Russia. Quite apart from the discussions held between composers and musicologists about the kind of music suitable for worship, there was also serious consideration of the theological function of the church singer. This is evident, for example, in the *Letters to a Beginner* by Abbess Thaisia of Leushino. After exhorting the singer to enter the church prayerfully and with compunction, the Abbess says to the singer:

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. Will you believe my words if I tell you from the narratives of the Holy Fathers that not only the human soul can be softened and moved by good spiritual singing, but even animals, those speechless creatures, somehow instinctively bow before it? [...] Behold, deeply spiritual singing, coming forth from the depths of the soul and conscious mind! It is able not only to inspire the rational soul and lift it towards its

Creator, but to touch even speechless and irrational animals. (Thaisia of Leoshino 2005: 57)

Church music by Kastalsky was described by the critic Ivan Lipaev as 'permeated with incorporeity and asceticism' (Lipaev 1898 cited in Morosan 1986: 221). But this is an aspect of the understanding of church music as part of the expression of the Russian soul, of Russian culture understood more broadly. The Russian tradition was in any case brutally interrupted by the Revolution of 1917, and the tradition of Orthodox theology was perforce continued and developed by Russians abroad, and in countries such as Greece, Romania, and Serbia. Discussion of music as a manifestation of theology came later, though there are parallels made with icon painting in the writings of Fr Stamatis Skliris (b. 1946) and Philip Sherrard (1922–1995), for example; and the Russian martyr Fr Alexander Men (1935–1990) noted provocatively that,

To deprive man of creativity means to take away that attribute which makes him like God. [...] So we come to the following, Christ said that each person brings what he has to offer from his own treasure. And you, painters and masters of other genres, express the treasures of your heart, your perceptions of the world. (Men [n.d.] )

Men's words are confronting because they place a challenge before the creative person; but responding to this challenge to 'express the treasures of your heart, your perceptions of the world' cannot be done selfishly. It cannot be understood or undertaken without acknowledging that through the creative act one is lifting up one's gift and giving it back to God, and thus the creative person may be placed squarely in the tradition of the Fathers of the Church.

Orthodox theology understood through music came to wider public attention with the compositional work of Sir John Tavener (1944–2013) in particular, and especially through his collaborations with Mother Thekla (1911–2011). Tavener was particularly insistent on the similarities between music and icon, both in concert and liturgical works (Tavener, Thekla and Moody 1994; Tavener 1999). Of his aims, Tavener wrote,

[...] it is not my wish to compose liturgical music. Rather to show what I have learned from it; that things present and things to come are made clear in musical terms. Not discursively, obviously, but by their being made manifest – a theophany, a revelation of man and God. (Tavener 1999: 37)

The fact that he did in fact write liturgical music does not invalidate this statement: a work such as the Vigil Service (1984) can be viewed through both lenses. Arvo Pärt (b. 1934), also Orthodox, has preferred to discuss theology in broader terms and has not worked principally as a liturgical composer, though many of his works employ liturgical texts (Moody 2020).

Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931), Ljubica Marić (1909–2003), and Ivan Spassov (1934–1996) lived and worked in countries in which any acknowledgement of a Christian theophany was very complicated indeed: Gubaidulina in Soviet Russia, before she was able to move to Hamburg; Marić in Serbia; and Spassov in Bulgaria. This fact makes their achievements the more impressive. Gubaidulina, in particular, has engaged with the central tenets of the Orthodox faith in detail (her *St John Passion* and *St John Easter* being perhaps the most outstanding examples: see Moody 2013), but avoided writing liturgical music, or even making reference to Orthodox chant, completely. Like the Greek composer Michael Adamis (1929–2013), she uses symbolism and metaphor as the basis of her understanding of Orthodox spirituality. Of the two works dealing with the Passion and the Resurrection, Gubaidulina says: ‘It’s like an unattainable object at the end of the path [...] but it is metaphor too. The metaphor of the Cross, the most important symbol and always present’ (Moody 2012b).

Younger Orthodox composers, such as Calliope Tsoupaki (b. 1963), Milorad Marinković (b. 1976), and Djuro Živković (b. 1975), have had no problem in discussing the theological underpinnings of their concert work (Marinković 2017; Živković 2017; see also Moody 2012a; 2014b). Consideration of liturgical music has been scarcer in their work, though Marinković is an exception to this. Indeed, he has been quite specific in delineating the roles of liturgical and concert music with their spiritual and musical functions in mind:

Liturgy represents an action consisting of prayer and ritualistic elements. A concert is an event in which we listen to the musical performance and primarily obtain joy from a musical work. [...] Liturgy is Theophany and Annunciation, containing the prophetic dimension, Passion and Resurrection, a foretaste of the Eschaton. This is why I consider that we (as Orthodox artists) must bring concert music nearer to the Liturgy in our work. (Marinković 2017: 363)

Such attitudes make it clear that for Orthodox composers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, theology may be clearly expressed in music written for the concert hall – historically a rather recent phenomenon – whether or not the composer also writes for the liturgical context. In this sense, one might argue that the human reflection of the angelic liturgy so emphasized by the church fathers has gone beyond the church and out into the world in a way that is both enriching and unexpected.

## **Attributions**

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