

The History of Romaic or Byzantine Music

Greco-Roman or Byzantine chant is the traditional music of the Eastern Orthodox Church. It started in the first ancient Christian communities of the Roman Empire. The earliest version of Byzantine chant during the apostolic years was directly inherited from the music tradition of the ancient Greek world. This music was used to chant the first hymns such as Kyrie Eleison, Alleluia, Holy Holy Holy Lord Sabaoth and others.

Over the centuries, the holy fathers, hymnographers and composers of the church such as St Polycarp of Smyrna, St Ignatios of Antioch, St Clemens of Alexandria, St Romanos the Melodist, St John of Damascus inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote hymns rich in theological meanings about the incarnation of Christ, the salvation of man, the sacrifice and resurrection of the Lord in order to fight heretical teachings and protect the people of God. Additionally, they composed the byzantine music texts to dress these hymns and make them easy and desirable to learn by the faithful.

Most Americans are not familiar with Byzantine chant. Byzantine music has certain unique features as compared to Western music:

1. Byzantine chant has unique music scales that cannot be approximated by the corresponding Western scales. In addition, there are further tonal attractions that result in pitches and intervals that create beautiful melodies which are generally unknown in Western music.
2. Byzantine chant is monophonic based on melody alone rather than polyphonic or harmonized like Western music. It has eight basic modes. Byzantine chant is accompanied only by the 'ison' or bass drone. Modern musicologists claim that: "The single line of melody of byzantine chant makes it easy for the congregation to follow the meaning of the text of the hymns chanted. It is easy to sing, learn and remember. Simple chant melodies can be tailored to follow text, amplify its meaning and give it an appropriate musical dress. Byzantine chant did not develop polyphonic music which being more complex, denser and more difficult could risk causing distraction from the theological meanings of the hymns.
3. Byzantine chant is entirely vocal. The Greco-Roman and Byzantine church fathers ruled out the use of musical instruments in the execution of church music in order to keep a distance from emotionalism and maintain spirituality. According to the 20th century Staretz Samson: "In church you should never lose the feeling that you are standing before the Lord. This feeling can be only noetic, prayerful, without the participation of emotionality which is foreign to Orthodoxy. This is why our polyphonic music often hinders our prayer because it brings into our life the element of emotionality".
4. Byzantine chant has a rhythm that is steady but free and not restricted as it can frequently change during a musical piece.

The mission of Byzantine chant and Byzantine art in general is to raise the thoughts and emotions of Christians from the realm of the mundane to that of the spiritual. It does not aim to evoke romantic, sentimental or idealistic emotions or to entertain but rather to ignite a state of devoutness, inner attention, contrition and humility and express supplication, gratitude and doxology.

- To that end, Byzantine chant places emphasis on the hymnal words that are a poetic expression of Orthodox theology. The church chose and developed Byzantine chant to dress the words and not detract from them.
- The music is simple, delightful in rhythm, modest in clear articulate melodies executed with humility, contrition and peace. It is characterized by freedom from undue complexity, theatrical movements, ostentatious trends or sensual emotions.

This was the music that the emissaries of Prince Vladimir heard in Constantinople that made them exclaim: "we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. we cannot forget that beauty". This led to the conversion of Russia to Orthodoxy.