
The Essence of Liturgical Singing

The differences in the structure of Orthodox services, as compared to the services of the Roman Catholic Church and, even more so, to those of various Protestant denominations, both determine and reflect divergent viewpoints concerning the significance of the musical element in worship, and hence, concerning the essence, forms and liturgical function of church music. Unless these differences are clearly identified from the start, one risks falling into various misconceptions which would ultimately lead to erroneous conclusions.

The first question that must be answered is: What is Orthodox liturgical singing in essence, and what role does it play in Orthodox worship?

Such a question may appear, at first glance, to be superfluous; the answer seems to be obvious without any further discussion necessary: Orthodox liturgical singing is vocal music—music produced by human voices alone—, which, in conjunction with words, accompanies worship services. This answer is understandable if one considers exclusively the choral singing found in the Russian Orthodox Church during approximately the last three centuries. Thus, one often hears mention, especially in non-Orthodox circles, of “Orthodox church music,” to which all of the concepts concerning music in general can be applied. Even present-day Orthodox tend to view their liturgical singing simply as a category of vocal music (and a rather insignificant one even in that capacity), in which one can observe the same musical-aesthetic relationships found in secular music—the only such relationships recognized.

As a consequence of this viewpoint, singing at worship is often considered to be a *facultative* and non-essential element, instead of one that is *immanent* and inherent in worship. For this very same reason it remains unclear to many people why the Orthodox Church so categorically rejects any type of instrumental music in its services, even for the support of singing, to the extent that no instrument should even be permitted into the church, much less heard.

Ordinarily explanations for the ban on instrumental music are sought on the basis of ascetical tendencies, which are prominent in

the Orthodox Church and in the Eastern churches in general. Indeed, such reasons are given by some Russian historians and theoreticians in the field of liturgical singing, who cite the views of certain Church Fathers upon this subject. These views are well-known: instrumental music was widely used by pagans at their religious ceremonies; Christians, on the other hand, should praise God not with inanimate artificial instruments, but with the most noble and natural instrument—the human voice.¹

At this point it is not necessary to investigate further the justification for this point of view. The Slavic Orthodox churches merely adopted the principles of church singing, and therefore the non-acceptance of instrumental music in any form, from the Graeco-Byzantine Church, in which this viewpoint had already become firmly established. It is appropriate, however, to examine some other reasons for the non-admission of instrumental music into Orthodox services—reasons that lie in the very nature and form of Orthodox worship.

Orthodox worship consists almost exclusively of verbal expression in its many forms: prayer, glorification, instruction, exegesis, homily, etc. Only the word is capable of precisely expressing concrete, logically formulated ideas. Instrumental music, on the other hand, by its nature is incapable of such unambiguous expression; it can only express and evoke the emotional element, which is received subjectively by each individual listener, thus giving rise to a variety of interpretations. But it is impossible to give such an emotional reaction a precise, logical definition. Concepts such as sadness, majesty, joyfulness, happiness, etc. are merely general and vague characterizations of emotional qualities and do not represent any unequivocal ideas that can be precisely expressed in words. The same musical form, whether a simple tune played on a fife, a complex piece of instrumental polyphony, or even a melody hummed without words by the human voice, can be supplied with texts of different content and character that will enable the same music to convey completely diverse ideas. Only the word can give musical sounds a definite, unambiguous meaning. And in worship only the word can clearly express the ideas contained in prayer, instruction, contemplation, etc. Thus, wordless instrumental music by itself is not suited for conveying the concrete verbal content of worship. It can only entertain and please the ear, evoke various emotions, and, to a certain extent, reflect the emotional content of ideas expressed by words. On the other

¹ Dmitrii Razumovskii, *Церковное пение в России* [Church singing in Russia], Vol. 1 (Moscow: 1867), pp. 25-27; Vasilii Metallov, *Очерк истории церковного пения в России* [Essay on the history of church singing in Russia] (Moscow: n.p., 1900) pp. 37-38.

hand, the word taken in conjunction with musical sounds can combine logical clarity and precision of meaning with the emotional response to verbal ideas.

Herein, it seems, lies the reason why the musical element is admitted into the Orthodox liturgy only in conjunction with the word. Either the musical sounds give emotional coloration to the logically concrete contents of the liturgical texts, or the musical expression arises as an emotional reaction to the ideas expressed by the words.*

The emotional aspect of the musical element certainly has a good deal of significance in Orthodox worship, but in a manner different from churches that employ purely instrumental music in their services. If one takes the music by itself, devoid of words, one realizes that instrumental music can create only a certain mood or atmosphere, which can be characterized by the general terms mentioned above: sadness, majesty, joyfulness, etc. But these terms have no concrete ideas connected with them. Why is a piece of music sad or majestic? Only when the musical element becomes linked with the verbal is it possible to say why a given emotion arose as a result of the music and to explain by what concrete verbal ideas it was evoked.

In the case of unaccompanied singing the situation is entirely different. Here the emotional reaction is not brought about by a mood created by the music; rather, the mood first is created by reaction to the concrete ideas expressed in the text, and only then is it reflected by the character of the music, which is inseparably linked with the text. Despite the fact that canonical melodies (see Chapter III) remain constant in certain respects for a variety of texts, their emotional character coincides with the specific manner in which the nationality that originated those melodies perceives the ideas expressed by the corresponding texts.

Since Orthodox worship does not allow instrumental music in any form, but only musical sounds in conjunction with words, before

* Similar thoughts are expressed by the Benedictine scholar, Paolo Feretti, in his book, *Esthétique grégorienne*, (Paris: Desclée, 1938) p. 195: "Or la prière de l'Église n'est pas individuelle, j'allais dire égoïste, mais objective, collective, sociale; et de son côté, la musique qui l'accompagne, n'emprunte pas son expression à l'ordre purement émotif et sensuel, mais à un ordre supérieur, celui de l'intelligence. Sa subordination même la porte en quelque sorte à se cacher, et à prendre une expression, non point passionnée, mais modérée et recueillie, objective et transcendente." Furthermore, on p. 126 Feretti quotes Augusto Conti, *Il bello nel vero, o Estetica*, (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1891), cap. 59, Musica 5, 6, 7: "La musique a une relation indéfinie avec les sentiments, dans ce sens que les sons suscitant des sentiments discernables quant au genre et à l'espèce, mais non pas les particularités affectives, comme la parole peut faire."

and to speak about the concrete forms of liturgical singing it is necessary to discuss in general terms the musical element as it exists in the liturgy. In considering the most simple manifestations of the musical element one must include all aspects of the liturgy that are in any way connected with musical sounds: psalmody or recitation upon a single pitch, often described by the Latin term *recto tono*, as well as more elaborate styles of reading and exclamation, known as ekphonesis. Strictly speaking, these gradations of the musical element are not singing, but neither do they fall into the category of ordinary speech.

In fact, the ordinary conversational manner of speaking, as well as declamation, are not used in the Orthodox liturgy except in sermons.³ Thus, every instance of congregational worship appears as a series of gradations of the musical phenomenon in intimate connection with the word. As the word is presented to the listener, there are no strict boundaries between these gradations: it is barely possible at times to distinguish singing from ekphonesis, ekphonesis from psalmody, etc. For this same reason it is hardly possible to consider singing proper merely as vocal music, apart from the liturgy.

Simple recitation *recto tono* on the one hand, and the luxuriant polyphonic singing of one or several large choirs on the other, are the two poles between which there exist many gradations, which are, nevertheless, quite closely connected with one another. One kind of musical setting flows out of another, determined by the content of the text and its position in the service. All of the different types and gradations of musical setting combine in the service to form an integrated musical whole in which the musical element serves to direct attention to the ideas expressed in the text and bring about an emotional reaction on the part of the listener.

There is not a single service, either public or private, in the Orthodox Church that does not contain singing either in the form of simple recitation or of a more complex nature. Moreover, in principle it makes no difference whether the singing is performed by a single singer, antiphonally by two highly-trained choirs, or by the entire congregation. In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church has in its practice no such thing as a "low Mass," i.e. a service without singing. While there are parts of certain services, e.g. Compline or weekday Matins, that are not sung in the full sense of the word, they are still recited or "read" on a single note in the manner described above. Even private services, such as a Prayer Service

³ In Greek and Serbian practice certain psalms and Old Testament readings are sometimes read in plain conversational speech.

(молебен) held in a private home, contain singing, often performed out of necessity by the officiating priest. The principle remains the same in all instances: the word is presented in an appropriate musical setting, in accordance with the character of the service and the logical content of the verbal text.

It becomes clear, then, that the liturgical singing of the Orthodox Church is one of the forms of worship itself. The Russians of past centuries referred to worship as "singing." "To go to sing" meant the same as "to go to worship." "It's time for singing, it's the hour for prayer! Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy on us!"⁴ With these words the monk on wake-up duty would rouse the brethren to Nocturn and Matins. The Stoglav Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1551 decreed that "... [the faithful] should come to the holy churches with [their] wives and children, and with faith and love should stand at all divine singing."⁵ In the Typikon⁶ all public worship services are designated as "singing": "It must be known that, as we have said earlier about singing, according to the tradition there is to be no other ordo in the cenobitic life than the one which requires the singing of particular psalms or some other service."⁷

It is apparent that if liturgical singing is indeed an aspect of worship, its forms should be determined by the forms of worship itself; in order to study the development of liturgico-musical forms, one must view them in conjunction with the evolution of the order of worship and in relation to the content of the liturgical texts.

Hymnography

The services of the Orthodox Church are extraordinarily rich in hymns⁸ of varied content, which display a variety of textual and musical (i.e. liturgico-musical) forms. These hymns are inserted between prayers and readings, accompany processions of the clergy,

⁴ "Пѣнію время, молитвѣ часъ. Господи Іисусе Христе Боже нашъ, помилуй насъ"

⁵ Стоглав (Moscow: 1890) chap. 38, p. 160. See also pp. 161-162.

⁶ *Translator's note:* In present usage, the word *typikon* (τὸ τυπικόν; типиконъ, уставъ) refers to that book which specifies how elements from the various cycles underlying Orthodox worship—annual, weekly, etc.—are to be combined in a given service.

⁷ Типиконъ, свѣсть уставъ (Moscow: Синодальная типографія, 1906) chap. 37, p. 45v.

⁸ *Translator's note:* The term "hymn," an imperfect translation of the Russian term "песнопѣние," lit. "sung song," is used here to refer to any piece of liturgical song.

Liturgical texts play an important role in the fundamental theological education of the worshipper, especially when the entire congregation participates in singing them.

Two extremely important factors that shape liturgical singing are the order of services and the various sacred rites and ceremonial actions that take place during worship. Many hymns, particularly those of the Divine Liturgy, are sung during "quiet" or "secret" prayers—prayers that are read softly by the celebrant and are then interrupted by audible exclamations, forming an integrated whole with the hymns. Other hymns are performed during processions of the clergy around the church or during the censuring of the church's interior by the deacon or priest. Parts of certain services are performed either in the middle of the church or in the narthex (e.g. the Litiia). Thus, the hymns that are specified to be sung during these actions or that serve to fill the time between actions must correspond in duration to the actions or prayers that they accompany. This, in turn, affects the musical organization of the service, since the Orthodox Church does not permit gaps in the ritual to be filled with instrumental music.

In the system of Orthodox services, the greatest didactic significance is found in Vespers and Matins. (In the Russian Orthodox Church it is common practice to combine these two services on certain occasions into one liturgical unit known as the All-Night Vigil [всенощное бдение].) The Vespers and Matins services are particularly rich in changing hymnographical material. Into the unchanging framework of these two services, which consists to a great extent of psalms, is inserted a wealth of didactic and devotional material in the form of hymns of varying content. This material, which is constantly changing depending on the day of the week, the number of the week in the year, the day of the month, and the prevailing tone, conveys the central liturgical theme of the given day, and guides the mind of the listener in the appropriate direction. In this central theme is contained the ideological content of the given day and the given service. By contrast, the Divine Liturgy contains little such didactic material, and then only in the first part, the "Liturgy of the Catechumens." The main part, the "Liturgy of the Faithful," is quite constant in its makeup and consists almost entirely of devotional hymns. Thus the richest variety of the musical element in Orthodox worship is displayed primarily in the musical organization of Vespers and Matins, in the form of varying tones, different types of melodies belonging to a given tone and varying styles of performance.

Styles of Performance

The structure of the service and the liturgical functions of the musically presented texts determine the manner in which these texts are performed. The styles of performance are in principle identical in all the national branches of the Orthodox Church, and some of them are found also in the Western Church, which points to their ancient origin. The musical forms that arise out of the different styles of performance determine the musical format of the service, each having a specific place in the service prescribed and regulated by the Typikon. While there may be some deviations from the norm in different regions or periods of history, the principle remains unchanged.

The styles of musical performance of liturgical texts can be divided into two categories:

1. Performance by a soloist—a celebrant, reader or cantor. This category includes psalmody (or recitation) and ekphonesis, which by definition cannot be executed by more than one performer. (Not included in this category is execution by a single performer out of necessity, when performance by a choir is specified.)
2. Performance by a choir—a group of singers of an unspecified number—in unison or polyphonically.

Ekphonesis and psalmody may, in turn, be divided into three distinct styles:

1. The exclamation of short prayers or petitions, consisting usually of one or a very few short phrases or sentences. Included in this category are petitions of litanies and closing doxologies pronounced by the priest at the end of litanies.
2. A more chant-like recitation of certain prayers that borders between psalmody and ekphonesis.
3. Solemn reading employed in the delivery of the Holy Scripture, known in the Western Church as *lectio solemnis*.

The choral mode of performance may also be divided into five distinct styles, each of which is prescribed in specific instances by the Typikon:

1. *Antiphonal style*. In principle, this style involves two choirs

stationed at the right and left of the Icon Screen (*ikonostasis*). Both choirs, the right and the left, sing in alternation: first, the right choir sings a hymn or verse in its entirety, then the left choir sings the next hymn, also in its entirety. This style is employed primarily for the performance of stichera and psalms that are performed verse by verse. Similarly, in the case of lengthy hymns, such as the Great Doxology, the hymn is divided into sections that are alternately performed by the right and left choirs.¹⁵

2. *Epiphonal and hypophonal style*. The first term refers to the procedure of prefacing each verse of a psalm with a certain unchanging verse. Thus, an epiphon is a refrain that precedes the verse. By contrast, a hypophon is an unchanging refrain that follows a psalm verse. This style can have two variations: (a) The choir sings the constant refrain to verses which are psalmodized by a single reader; this may be done by only the right or left choir or by both in alternation. (b) Both the refrain and the verse are sung chorally, either by a single choir or by both choirs in alternation.

3. *Responsorial style*. This style also includes two variations: (a) The choir responds by repeatedly singing a given text after each petition or exclamation of the celebrant. In such instances only one choir, the right or the left, or the entire congregation sings. A good example of this variety of responsorial singing can be found in litanies, where each petition intoned by the celebrant is followed by the sung response "Lord, have mercy" or "Grant it, O Lord." (b) The reader reads a series of verses from a given psalm, while the choir responds by singing the first verse intoned by the reader. This response is sung alternately by both choirs. In closing, the reader intones the first half of the initial verse, while the singers respond with the second half of the verse. An example of the second variety of responsorial style is found in the performance of prokeimena (see p. 49).

4. *Canonarchal style*. This style, particularly widespread in Russian monasteries, is almost a distinguishing feature of monastic singing. In many respects it resembles responsorial style and can easily be confused with the latter. In essence, however, canonarchal style is quite different. It can be best described as "singing with a prompter," since the function of the canonarch is similar to that of

¹⁵ The principle of double-choir singing (antiphonal singing) has all but disappeared from contemporary liturgical practice. As a rule the singing is now performed by a single choir. But prior to 1917 many parishes in Moscow and other Russian cities still practiced antiphonal singing. In Greek practice even today, however, if there are only two singers present, one will take his place on the right of the church and the other on the left in order to sing antiphonally.

the prompter in the theater.¹⁶ The canonarch intones the text of a hymn, phrase after phrase, on a single pitch, while the choir repeats each phrase in a more elaborate musical setting. This procedure allows a large number of singers to sing without a book in front of them; only the canonarch needs the book, which he uses to prompt the rest of the singers. This style of singing is used primarily for constantly changing hymns (propers), such as stichera.

With very few exceptions, canonarchal style is not used in cathedrals and parish churches, since all of the singing there is performed by trained choirs. But in situations where congregational singing is practiced, singing with a canonarch acquires great practical significance.

5. *Hymn style*. In this style the choir sings a given hymn from beginning to end without interruption. In this manner are performed, for example, the Cherubic Hymn of the Divine Liturgy, and the greater part of the hymns from the Liturgy of the Faithful, unchanging (ordinary) hymns from Vespers and Matins, such as "O Gladsome Light," and occasionally, certain propers of major feasts. Also performed in this manner are hymns that are sung during certain ceremonial actions; examples of such hymns are the theotokia-dogmatika, during which the clergy moves in procession into the sanctuary through the Royal Doors, or the hymns sung during the vesting of the bishop in the middle of the church before the beginning of Divine Liturgy.

All the different modes and styles of performance discussed above have been precisely regulated by various liturgical books from the earliest times to this day. It should be noted, however, that over the centuries certain rules cited in the most ancient typika underwent changes as liturgico-musical traditions changed. Certain styles of performance changed their position in the liturgy or became applicable to different cycles or types of hymns. Certain hymns with time lost their initial significance, either as a result of specific liturgical reforms or in the course of centuries of evolution. This was the case, for example, with the gradual replacement of the "choral office" (ἀσματικὴ ἀκολουθία; песенное последование)¹⁷ and the *Typi-*

¹⁶Cf. the discussion of Jacobus Goar in his *Euchologion sive rituale Graecorum* (Venice, 1730; reprint ed., Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1960), p. 26.

¹⁷ See M. Lisitsyn, *Первоначальный славяно-русский типикон* [The first Slavic-Russian *Typikon*], (St. Petersburg: 1911) p. 24 et passim; Vasilii Metallov, *Богослужбное пение русской церкви в период домонгольский* [The liturgical singing of the Russian Church in the pre-Mongol period], (Moscow: 1912).