SACRED MUSIC FROM AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: In recent years, a considerable number of books and articles in English dealing with art and the sacred from a Christian perspective. These publications have proposed many useful and stimulating perspectives to the discussion of the ways in which the sacred can be represented and have contributed to achieving a crucial goal in raising the level of this discussion in both artistic and theological terms. Thus, the work of plastic artists over the centuries on the icon was discussed and a complex analysis of the philosophical context of approaching the sacred in art was carried out, which required hard work in the direction of establishing an artistic mystagogical creation. There is, however, no real attempt to discover how, for example, Byzantine and Gregorian chant, Christian polyphony, Palestinian Masses, Georgian polyphonic music, or the countless compositions of the Divine Liturgy in Russia, to name just a few examples, could embody or transmit the sacred in their respective liturgical contexts. Despite some remarkable contributions and the fact that many of the recent studies in Western European languages concerning the relationship between art and the sacred have been quite prolific, they have generally avoided discussions of liturgical music, a special dimension when discussing the sacred music of the Orthodox Church. The present work aims to establish some themes for the continuation of this discussion, drawing not only on recent commentators, but especially on the comments of the Fathers of the Church on liturgical hymns.

Keywords: liturgical music, sacred music, Orthodox Church, Church Fathers

In recent years, a considerable number of books and articles have been published in English that deal with art and the sacred from a Christian perspective. These studies have given rise to numerous, useful and stimulating discussions regarding the ways in which the arts can manifest the sacred and have contributed in a defining way to the treatment of these themes both in artistic and theological terms. One such author points out in this regard that: "If music is an integral part of what it means to be human, then it should reflect something of the image of God from which we are made. If part of the *imago Dei* is the relationship of love that lies at the heart of the Holy Trinity, then it can be said that music can open a way of thinking about how we relate to the world and to God in a way in which love, rather than reason, dominates. After all, music is inherently relational, both internally in the way its notes are put together and externally in the way it is used to communicate in everyday life."[1]

This type of observation offers the possibility of a fascinating and profound theological analysis of music and its purpose in the Christian life. However, the authors, none of the authors who have dealt with these themes, have fully deepened the problem of the huge musical bodies intended for liturgical use. Although there has been a long talk about the work of plastic artists over the centuries, where the icon that is analyzed in the philosophical context of the relationship between the sacred and art is frequently mentioned, one cannot speak of a true work in the direction of establishing a mystagogy of artistic creation, nor of a real attempt to discover how, for example, Byzantine or Gregorian chant, Quitainian polyphony, Georgian polyphonic music or the countless composed decorations of the Divine Liturgy in Russia, could embody or transmit the sacred in the respective liturgical contexts. So it becomes quite clear that in order to discuss "music as a spokesperson for theology," it is

[1] Chua Daniel, Music as the mouthpiece of Theology, In *Resonant Witness. Conversations between Music and Theology*, Edited by Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2011, pp. 137–160, 101.

necessary for theology to "articulate the temporal space that defines the modern and postmodern world."[2] Similarly, if one wants to do this thing of interweaving liturgical chant in the modern and postmodern world, one must first understand the theological message that the music conveys, for which it was conceived.

This lack of research may lead to the view that musical works created outside the liturgical context could provide more material for examination, in the sense that they somehow "go beyond" the category of music simply by being concerned with theological issues, whereas a corpus of chants written for liturgical use is only functional. However, the researchers point out that, as far as church painting is concerned, "the canonization of images is a way to kill them. When the feeling of familiarity becomes too great, history, popularity, association, all crowd between the viewer and the image and block it. Not only icons suffer in this way, but all the arts also suffer to the same extent."[3]

The correctness of this observation can be seen from the fact that, if we are talking about categories of art that, although they refer to the sacred, in fact include many other elements outside of it, then the public's perception of art in terms of its quality goes beyond "functional" art, as is the case of icons or liturgical hymn. Such a vision may be correct, if it were necessary to consider that concert music could render the sacred more profoundly than music specially conceived to convey the ideas and words of the liturgical, performed in liturgical time and space.

If this had been the case, liturgical music would have been considered long ago as lacking in spiritual utility, and the Church certainly would not have taken so much care of what this music should be and transmitted. The choir of church chants constitutes an unparalleled expression and variety in the life of the Churches, and the discussions about liturgical music are so vigorous that it is evident that sacred music occupies an essential area that requires in-depth analysis and discussion.

A contemporary course in the theology of church music begins as follows: "Liturgical music, like the icon, is found only in the liturgy itself and in the Christian home, that is, the manifestation of the Kingdom in the Church. Its impact on believers is immediate. It does not seem to be a mediator between the sung word and its reception by the listener. Music that resonates can thus be compared to a stained-glass window that filters and colors, but does not stop, daylight. Its emotional impact is sometimes considerable.

However, he must not be mistaken. Music is the work of mankind, and as such, it can also be subjected to falling, it can be made opaque, ugly, and it can become a screen. We will discuss the conditions of its transparency later. But, a priori, at its birth and in the completion of its creation by an almighty God, music is pure, even if perfectible in the use to which it is given by man."[4]

Here we have a potential definition of what liturgical music is, and therefore how it differs from any other genre of music, whether any other genre of music can interact with theology or not. "Music as a physical phenomenon," Father Mihai continues, "unlike the icon, disappears after it rings. Written scores, recordings, concerts, are just mirrors that we use for his study. In the analysis, the researcher depends on this physical witness, and especially on tradition, that is, in the memory he keeps of the services as a certain parallel in ethnomusicology for this, the sense in which the term "tradition" is understood here is, in fact, in terms other than strictly musical, very different and, at the same time, remarkably inspiring and remarkably dangerous - exhilarating because it allows the eternal renewal of the

[2] Hilkka Seppälä, *The Song of Fire and Clay*, University of Joensuu, Joensuu, 2005, p. 11.
[3] Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects*, Jonathan Mape, London, 1995, p. 12.
[4] Michel Fortounatto, *Cours de musicologie*, available at: http://www.musique-orthodoxe.fr/page-4theologie.html, (accessed 06.05.2023), p. 1.

possibility of creation and spiritual life and dangerous because the same possibility can lead to fossilization or spirituality, to death".[5]

The core of the problem lies in what Father Michael further says: "The theological study of chant in its organic union with the biblical and patristic word initially passes through an intuitive path with the aim of tracing the axes of theological examination, hypotheses that must later be confirmed by a more formal analysis with the help of precise musicological criteria established from the beginning. The theological character of liturgical chant derives, obviously, from its intimate association with the sung word, just as the word takes its theological character from the thought that expresses the Orthodox faith. Everything in creation can become a vehicle for theology, man and the universe is called to be transfigured."[6] It is, however, a matter of historical fact that the Church has not always agreed on what kind of music really has a "theological character."[7] The Holy Fathers make it clear what music should not be and what music is capable of, but there always remains the dilemma of discerning between what kind of music requires patristic approval. In this case, it is natural to ask how we could build a theology of liturgical chant? What could constitute such a theology, and why, indeed, would it be necessary?

To answer the last question first, Christian believers know that such a theology is necessary because the Mass is a place, a time of encounter with Christ. We also believe that the Liturgy is the Kingdom of God on earth where believers participate fully, as "kings, priests, and prophets in the new creation."[8] Such a liturgy clearly cannot be a simple collection of personal impressions, of personal interpretations. For this reason, the Council of Laodicea in the fourth century, in canon 59, had to establish that particular hymns should no longer be composed, and if they are nevertheless composed, that they should respect the wisdom of the Church, Holy Tradition, as expressed in the Old and New Testaments, and as interpreted, explained and established in the canons of the Ecumenical Councils.

This decision necessarily reveals the regulation of church music. However, another question arises. If the psalms and hymns recognized by the Church as organs of transmission of the teaching of faith, what revelation of the work of Christ and of the history of salvation must be sung, what is the melodic line according to which they should be performed. How can that music be regulated so that the theological weight of the words it establishes is adequate, N. Lossky tells us, "If one takes seriously the consequences of the Incarnation, 'real and not imaginary, of the Word of God,' as it says in the definition of Nicaea II, then all liturgical art must reflect the reality of this new creation – or, at least, they must not contradict it. Indeed, the definition of Nicaea II speaks of art 'which is consistent with the narrative of the Gospel' ... liturgical art must necessarily participate in this preaching (of the Gospel), be in service, be one with it, be in harmony with it".[9]

No one can accurately describe today what the melodic lines of the early church chants were, or what were its guiding principles beyond those mentioned in the New Testament. The oldest documentation we have is that of the Fathers of the Church and the prescriptions of the Ecumenical Councils.

Secondly, returning to the two previous questions, but also continuing to answer the third, the first sources necessary for the realization of a theology of church chant are,

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[5] *Ibid.*
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] Cf. Ivan Moody, The Idea of canonicity in orthodox liturgical art, In *Composing and Chanting in the Orthodox Church: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Orthodox Liturgical Music*. Edited by Ivan Moody and Maria Takala-Roszczenko, ISOCM, University of Joensuu, Joensuu, 2005, pp. 337–342.
[8] Nicholas Lossky, *Liturgy and liturgical art from an Ecumenical Perspective*, in *Sourozh* 36 (1989), pp. 36–41, 38.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

obviously, the oldest. If we leave aside the references in the Psalms, the Book of Revelation, the Acts of the Apostles and those in the Gospels, such as the exhortation of the Holy Apostle Paul to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, we must start from the writings of the first Fathers of the Church.

However, it must be said *ab initio* that the patristic writings concerning music rarely offer truly musical clues, because they always return to the Psalms to the nature of the liturgical instruments in the Temple that are no longer there, as well as the moral value of church music. St. Basil's homily on Psalm I, for example, has nothing to do with what we might call liturgical music today, but rather gives the impression of a discussion of some kind of para-liturgical music, accompanied by a psalter—the discussion is, in the end, more about the text than about any potentially musical realization of it. St. John Chrysostom speaks more specifically about music and its spiritual effects – positive or negative – but his musical discussion is entirely of the classical Greek type, and the references to the singing of the psalms have more to do with the churches at home, not being concerned with anything like what we would now describe as church music in the Christian Liturgy.

However, while patristic commentaries would seem to say little about the sound of music heard in ecclesiological space, the image, the presence of chant is so widespread and so often used in connection with moral and spiritual commentaries that any attempt to construct a theology of church chant must begin with these writings. The observation of Father M. Fortounatto is relevant in this context: "... the song has its existence only in the prayer addressed to God in all the places of His dominion; by blessing God, man aspires to holiness and draws near to his Creator in this sense, the song that accompanies the prayer can be qualified as holy".[10]

Regarding the theological approaches to the problem of the theology of sacred music today, they reveal the double difficulty that must be developed. On the one hand, there are language barriers, and on the other hand, the recent ideology of communism. The disappearance of this ideology in the Christian Church and the alleviation of language barriers represented a wave of spiritual revival for the Church of Christ, including the rediscovery of the artistic styles of the Byzantine icon and the repertoire of monophonic chants, evident in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in Russia, which did not have the opportunity to make themselves known in the West. In addition, the radical reforms adopted in the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council built even fewer bridges between Orthodox and Western liturgical aesthetics.

At the end of the twentieth century, as part of a broader revival of theological writing by Orthodox authors from various countries, such as: Greece, Romania, Russia, France, Great Britain and the USA, and aided by serious systematic translations in the West, especially into: French, English, German and Finnish, it became evident, in an ecumenical horizon as never before, the fact that it is not only through a good understanding of Orthodox theology and how it is transmitted through the liturgical arts that the history of church music can be correctly mapped and how it has been permanently rooted in the depth of the Christian tradition can be seen in its entirety, while remaining able to adapt to new circumstances. To return to the words of Father M. Fortounatto for the last time: "liturgical chant is the creation of the Church in every local historical tradition. And since the church is made up of a body around its bishop in each place of his incarnation, it can thus be said that the chant is catholic/catholic in its constituent elements, in the image of the Church".[11]

However, as we write about icons and the theology of icons, following the contributions of authors such as Vladimir Lossky, Leonid Ouspensky, and Paul Evdokimov,

[10] Michel Fortounatto, *Curs de musicologie*, available at: http://www.musique-orthodoxe.fr/page-4theologie.html, (accessed 06.05.2023), p. 2.
[11] *Ibid.*

commentaries on the theology of Orthodox chant are continually flourishing in the space of Christian thought in general. It is significant, for example, that *the Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*[12] does not mention a single musical style of the Church. Theology was, so to speak, left to the practitioners of church music, whose objective is to sing with the "seraphim from above". However, the fact that music is an embodied expression of theology justifies the Church's attitude towards this field of religious expression. It is, in fact, an essential thing, in the sense that understanding the theology of church music should be a prerequisite for any composer working in this field. At the same time, the growing openness to Orthodox church music throughout the world, the constant and continuous discussions about the most appropriate styles of music for worship within the Orthodox Church itself, and the vigorous outpouring of new liturgical music, make the acquisition of such an understanding a matter of urgency.

The works of modern scholars and the vast treasury of church music inherited from the Church Fathers give Orthodoxy the opportunity to reflect even more on the theological richness of its diverse and diverse traditions of sacred music.

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[12] Cf. *Cambridge Companions to Religion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008.