Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Church Music

Ed. Ivan Moody & Maria Takala-Roszczenko
Vol. 2, Section II: Conference Papers, pp. 72-82 ISSN 2342-1258
https://journal.fi/jisocm

Byzantine Chant for Congregational Singing

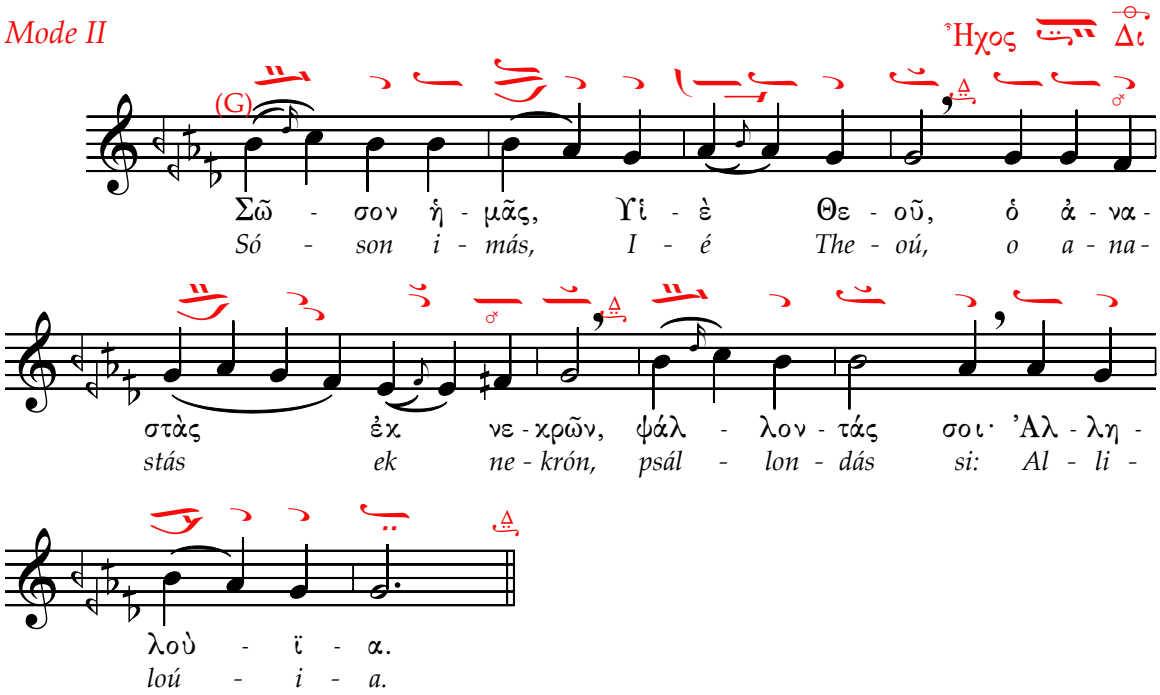
John Michael Boyer

Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Portland, Oregon, USA

protopsaltissf@gmail.com

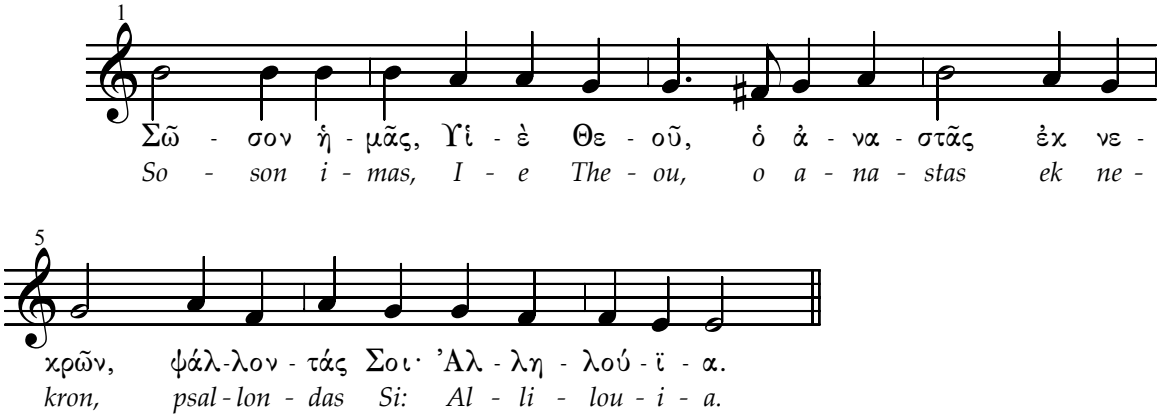
In these Pan-Orthodox events, it would seem that many people's idea of what Byzantine music is falls into one of two extreme categories: either it the most virtuosic, sophisticated, florid, (and frankly, wonderful) compositions of what we in Byzantine Music refer to as the Classical Period (18th-19th centuries), which, given their virtuosic nature are simply out of reach for someone just coming into the art form; or it is the other extreme: the most watered-down, westernized versions of hymns either directly taken from or based on the compositions of a man named John Sakellarides (d. 1938), melodies far removed from the central received tradition of Byzantine Chant.

One example of the latter category is Sakellarides's setting of the refrain for the Second Antiphon from the Divine Liturgy. The melody from the received tradition is as follows:



A quick glance at the key signature shows that this piece is not sung in a scale that could possibly be played on a piano, with B and E being just slightly low (by 1/6 of a major tone, or two tuning units according to the Byzantine system), and A and D being quite low (but not quite as low as an A♭: a third of a major tone low, or four Byzantine tuning units). The piece's rhythmic structure is made up of irregular metric groups: 3, 4, and 5, a scheme determined by text accent but also evocative of the dance traditions of Greece, Asia Minor, and throughout the Balkans. These elements of tuning and rhythm are part of Byzantine music's expressive and nuanced sound.

In contrast, Sakellarides took this melody and adapted it into this:



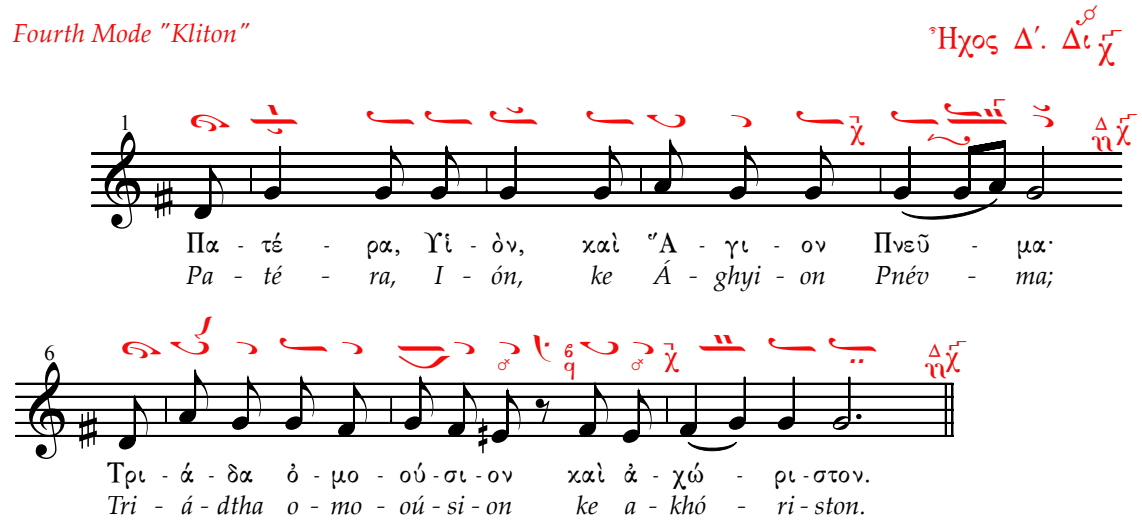
Without the rhythmic variety or nuanced tuning found in the traditional example, the melody becomes wholly uninteresting, unless harmonized in multiple parts (which is exactly what Sakellarides ended up doing), in which case it has become something else entirely, and ceases to be what we call Byzantine music.[1]

It is this kind of melody, adapted (often poorly) to English, that we usually find presented in workshops for congregational singing when coming from the Greek side of a pan-Orthodox conference. As an alternative, I would like to offer some examples more from the middle of the Byzantine musical spectrum: there are traditional melodies designed for congregational singing that are a) not insipid, and b) simple enough to be accessible to those who have not had the opportunity to study and train in Byzantine music for many years – as long as one keeps an open mind and an open ear.

We begin with the central liturgical moment of the Divine Liturgy, that of the Ἀναφορά, or Holy Oblation. The oldest and most traditional setting of its sung responses is extremely simple, in what we call the Κλιτόν, or "Reader's Mode," the musical mode used in traditional *ekphonesis* by the clergy[2]:

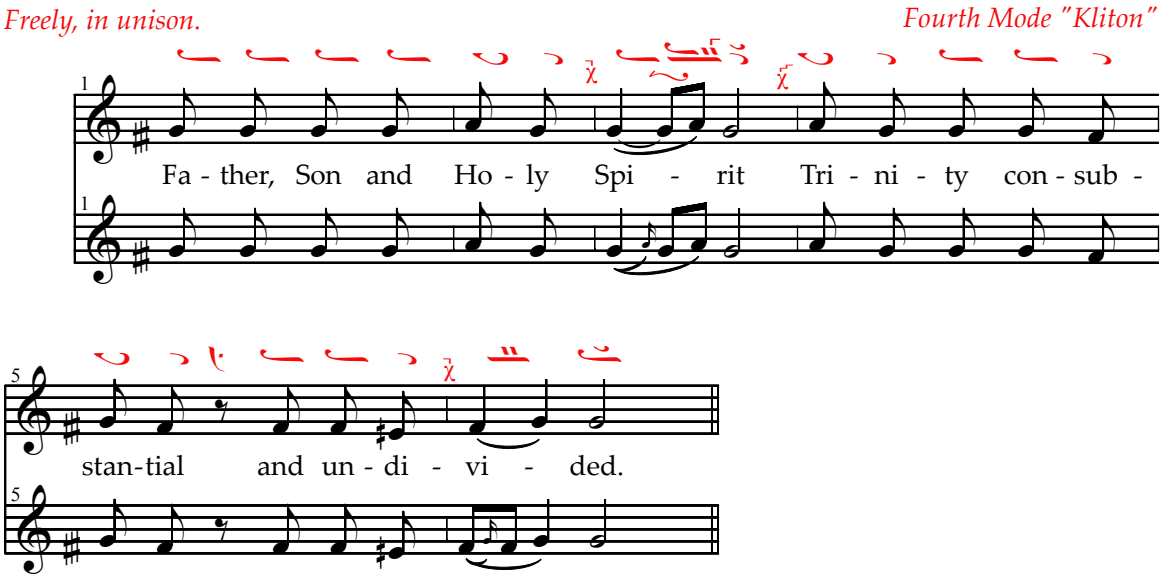
1 I have spoken at length elsewhere, as have others, as to why the melodies of Sakellarides became popular in the early to mid-20th century in Greece. Briefly, it has much to do with the cultural identity of Greece at the time: having only won its independence from Turkish rule a few decades before, anything that sounded particularly "eastern" was associated with the shackles of that oppressive regime, and as the modern Greek state sought to associated itself as much as possible with Western Europe, its music, both sacred and secular – for a few decades, at least – was deliberately "westernized." This phenomenon has now all but disappeared in churches in Greece, and traditional Byzantine music has once again become the standard musical medium for Greek Orthodox worship.

2 Sacred Music of Byzantium Music Texts: Score 5b, Axion Estin Foundation, Inc: New York, 2008



The key signature includes a sharp on the F that is stronger than a standard semitone sharp: in this case, it approximates the sonority of the Reader's Mode, which is based on G, and has a leading-tone F that is one-sixth of a tone (one-third of a semitone) higher than a standard F#. This is easier to execute than it may seem at first glance. The general feel of this mode is that, being based on G, the melody is "reluctant" to move very far away from G, and so the F is strongly "attracted" to the G. When the melody touches the E, it is also attracted upward towards the F#, making it one-third of a tone higher than a standard E. This reflects what one hears in standard *ekphonesis* from clergy in the Greek tradition, and the congregational responses simply follow suit.

Here is the same response adapted to English, from Cappella Romana's 2007 recording of the Divine Liturgy in English[3]:



Here we find three musical lines: the top line is the melody represented by traditional Byzantine notation, the medium in which it was composed; the second line is a simple transcription only of structural notes and rhythm, and the third line, below the text, includes some simple ornamental embellishments such as one might hear from a traditional cantor. In this line, we find grace notes both on "Spi-" of "Spirit" and in "vi-" of "undivided." This

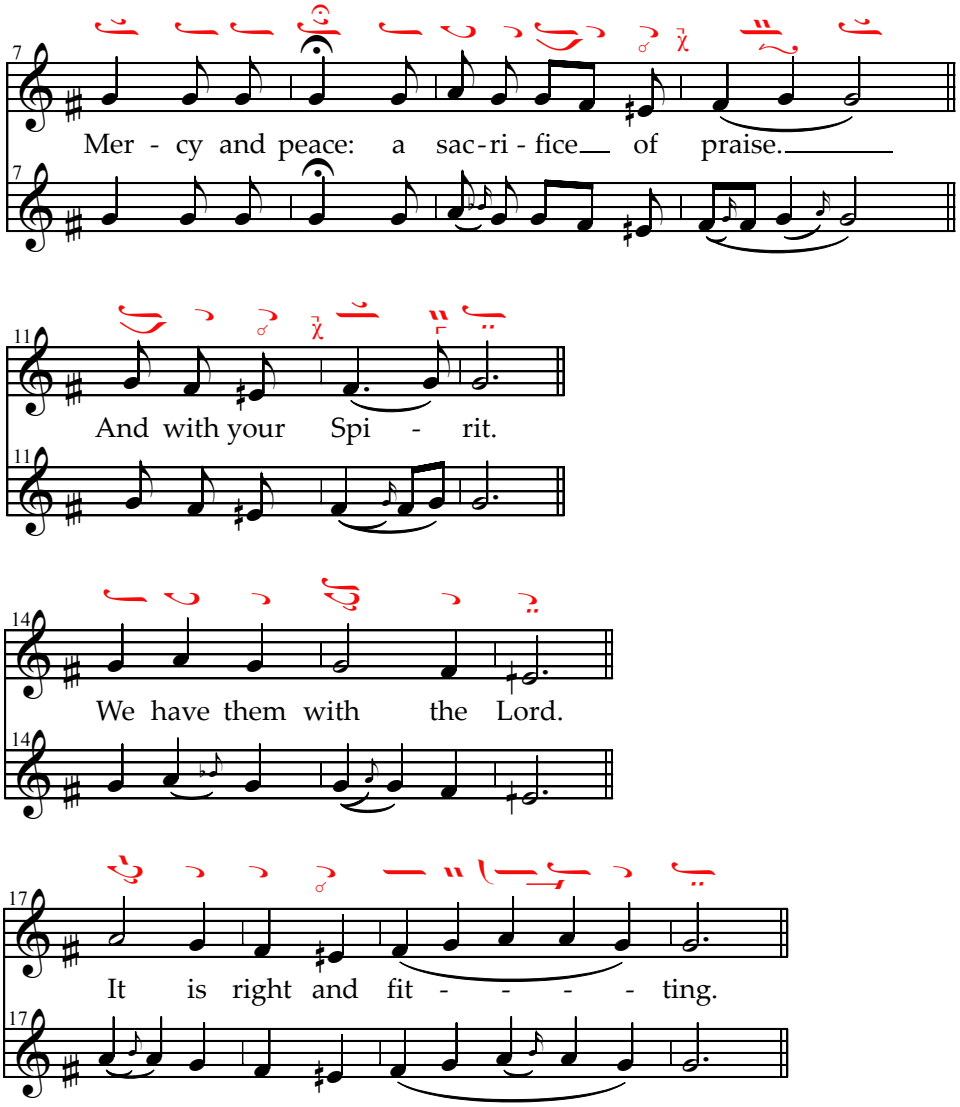
3 Cappella Romana: The Divine Liturgy in English, Portland, 2007, http://www.cappellaromana.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Anaphora-Western-print_Divine-Liturgy-Music_Cappella-Romana.pdf

represents a common practice among Byzantine cantors when faced with repeated notes on the same syllable: rather than articulating the repeated note with a diaphragmatic pulse of breath or stopping the tone at all, a traditional cantor will re-articulate the note by singing a quick and smooth ornament or "lilt" on its upper neighbour tone. This practice is ubiquitous in traditional Byzantine chant, and is one technique that contributes to the music's overall sonority.

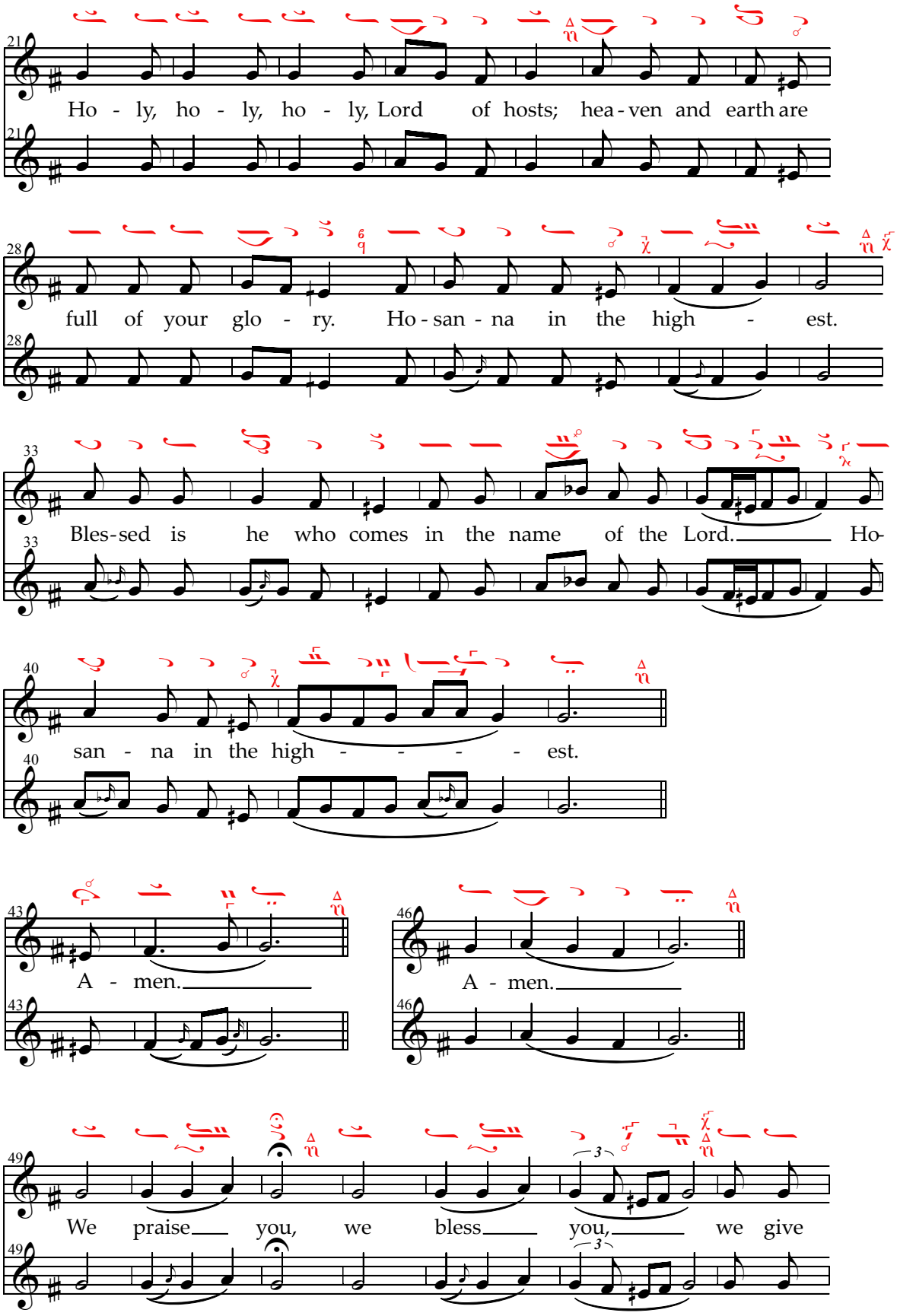
The instruction that the piece be sung "freely, in unison," reflects the fact that, just as the clergy intone their *ekphonesis* in a recitative style, the response is similarly rhythmically free. It also is traditional for these responses to be sung without the usual "*ison*" or "ἰσοκράτημα," the characteristic sung drone on the base of the musical mode, but rather for the melody to be sung unison in octaves.

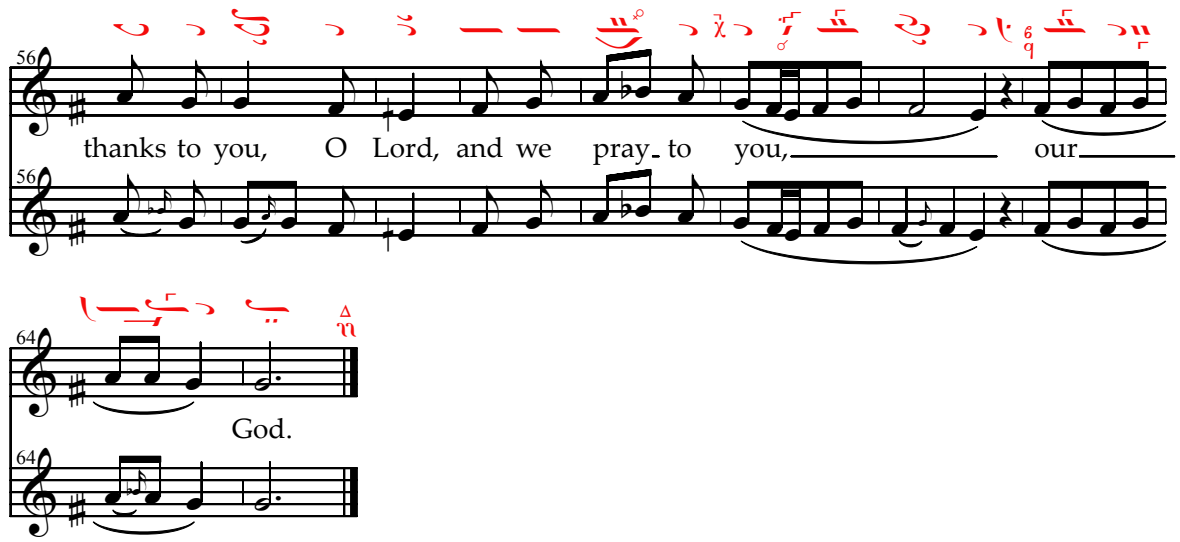
Not a particularly interesting melody, the purpose of this piece is to involve the entire congregation in the liturgical moment, whose task at hand is not actually to sing hymns, but to engage in liturgical dialogue. Singing this in multiple octaves, all in unison, flowing seamlessly from the *ekphonesis* of the clergy, makes for a simultaneously simple and powerful liturgical experience unlike what we find in most churches here in the United States.[4]

The rest of the *Anaphora* responses:



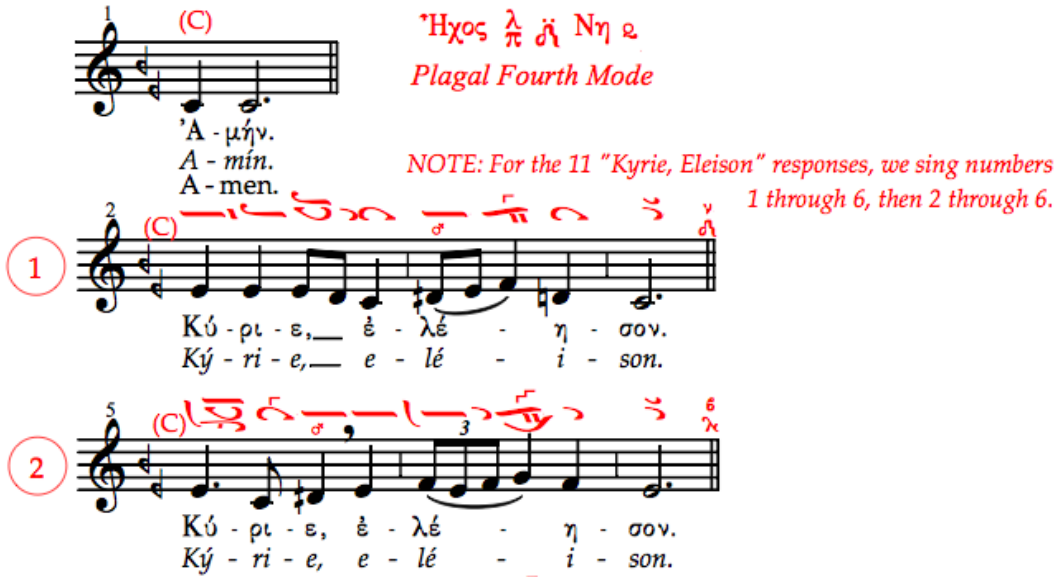
4 Beginning in the late 19th century, more melodic settings of the Anaphora began finding their way into Greek churches; even today, most parishes in Greece will sing these responses in a much more melodically and musically involved style, sometimes yielding a result that seems much more about sentimental musical expression than about liturgical dialogue. This results in an unbalanced musical-liturgical landscape: if everything is sung elaborately, elaborate singing can lose its particular meaning, there being nothing simple to which it might serve as a contrast.


21
Ho - ly, ho - ly, ho - ly, Lord of hosts; hea - ven and earth are
28
full of your glo - ry. Ho - san - na in the high - est.
33
Bles - sed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Ho-
40
san - na in the high - - - - est.
43
A - men.
46
A - men.
49
We praise you, we bless you, we give



In addition to the embellishments included here in the lower staff of Western notation, there are other techniques traditional cantors will employ to help shape the melody and to highlight the sung text. A common technique is to use voiced sustained consonants (W, R, L, Y, M, N, Z, V, etc.) to slide or scoop into the accented syllable of a word. This kind of shaping and phrasing can make what seems to be a simplistic melody into a profound sung moment.

Moving now to the very beginning of the Divine Liturgy, the Great Litany (or Litany of Peace) in the Byzantine tradition is most often sung in a mode known as the Plagal Fourth Mode, employing a scale called the Soft Diatonic Genus:



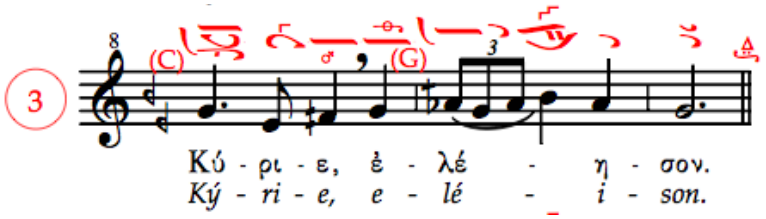
The mode is based on C. The key signature indicates not full flats on E and B, but that these two notes, the third and seventh degrees respectively, should be sung *slightly* lower than how they normally are in equal-tempered tuning, more precisely, one-sixth of a tone (~33 cents) lower.[5] It only takes some practice singing these tuning relationships before they start to sound "correct," and lock into place. In my experience of teaching – especially teaching adult, trained musicians – the most difficult obstacle to overcome in getting singers to reproduce this tuning is simply getting them to try. Once people get past the "I can't do that" stage, and allow

5 Many choir directors will attest to the fact that the scale degrees most difficult for a choir to sing "in tune" (according to equal or just temperament) are the third and the seventh; this is due to the fact that, whether or not we are aware of them, we do hear and process overtones, and it happens that when these scale degrees appear in the overtone series, they are slightly lower than they would be on a piano, and so if we are to sing them "in tune" we actually have to "correct" the natural tendency to sing a harmonic third.

themselves to try, the rest of the process is simply making adjustments.

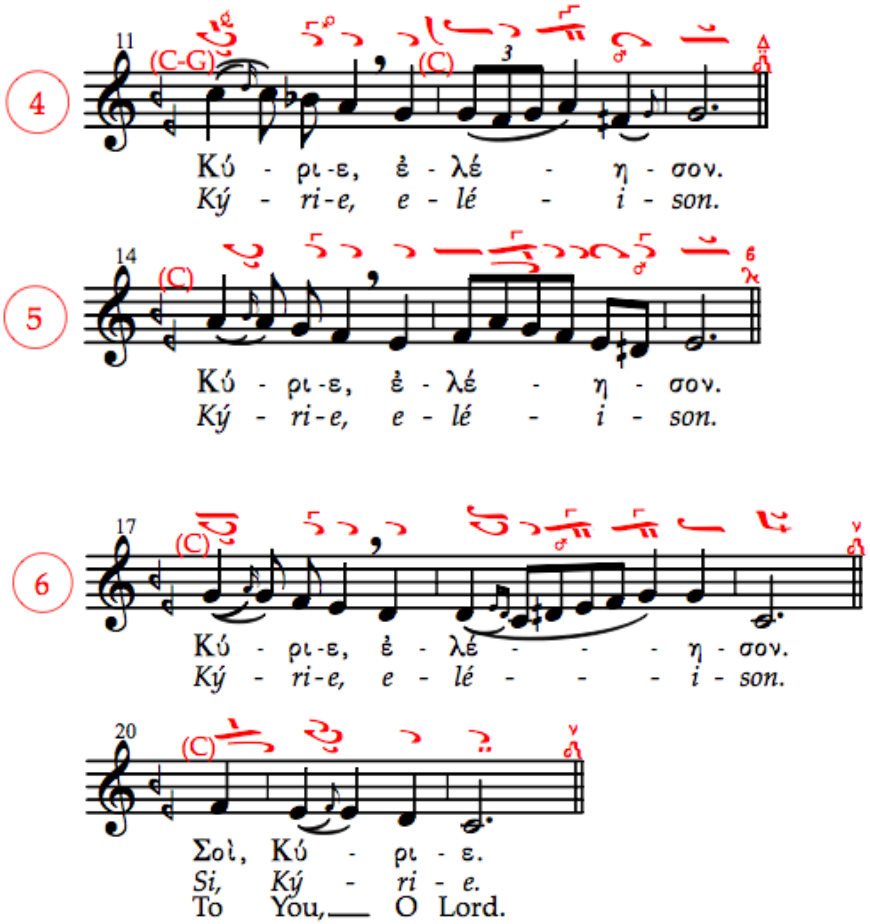
In addition to the lowered E and B, D is sharpened on the way up, not quite a semitone, but a third of a whole tone, or roughly 66 cents. This occurs because of a melodic tendency called "attraction," wherein certain fixed scale degrees "attract" their neighbours, making them sharper or flatter. In this case, the raised ascending D is exactly a semitone below the fixed (slightly low) E. The combination of the temperament of the fixed scale and the mode's employment of melodic attraction is what gives the mode its particular sonority, creating a sound world that is something akin to C major, but also very much not C major.

The third response in the series deviates from the established mode briefly, exploring what is called the Soft Chromatic Genus:



This scale maintains the use of the low E and B, but also includes a very low (but not totally flat) A, both when ascending and descending, positioned one-third of a tone (~66 cents) lower than an equal-tempered A natural. Combining this with the slightly (~33 cents) low B yields a trichord G – A(-66) – B(-33), creating an ambiguous sonority and a completely different sound world.

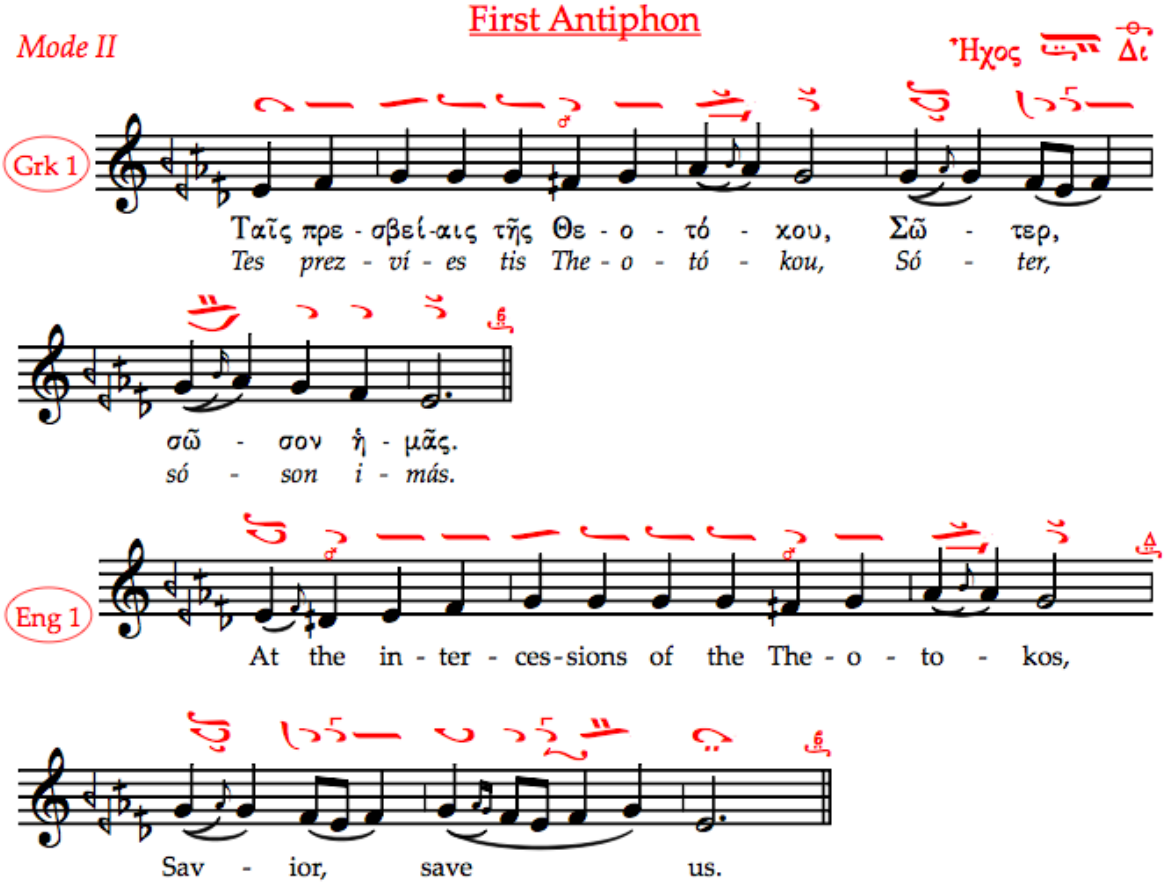
The rest of the responses are as follows:



Although these melodies are both rhythmically and melodically more complex than the examples from the *Anaphora*, their sequential structure and generally step-wise melodic contour make them still quite practical for congregational singing. A congregation of 300 faithful singing these responses in unison is a powerful and truly moving experience.

Incidentally, singing these responses does not necessitate that clergy make their *ekphonesis* in any particularly florid or Byzantine way. As long as they are able to intone their petitions on a note close enough to G to be "in the ball park," the choir can tune from the clergy's note as G, and sing the rest of the scale accordingly. If the clergy have lower voices and are not able to sustain something close to a G for extended periods, then they may make their *ekphonesis* on something closer to a C, and the choir can tune to that note as C, the base of the mode. Thus, these melodic lines can be a significantly more flexible idiom than a polyphonic setting that assumes a choir will be singing in a specific key.[6]

Moving on to the next liturgical moment, the Antiphons (as they are sung in Greek parishes: psalm verse – refrain) are expressly intended for congregational singing:



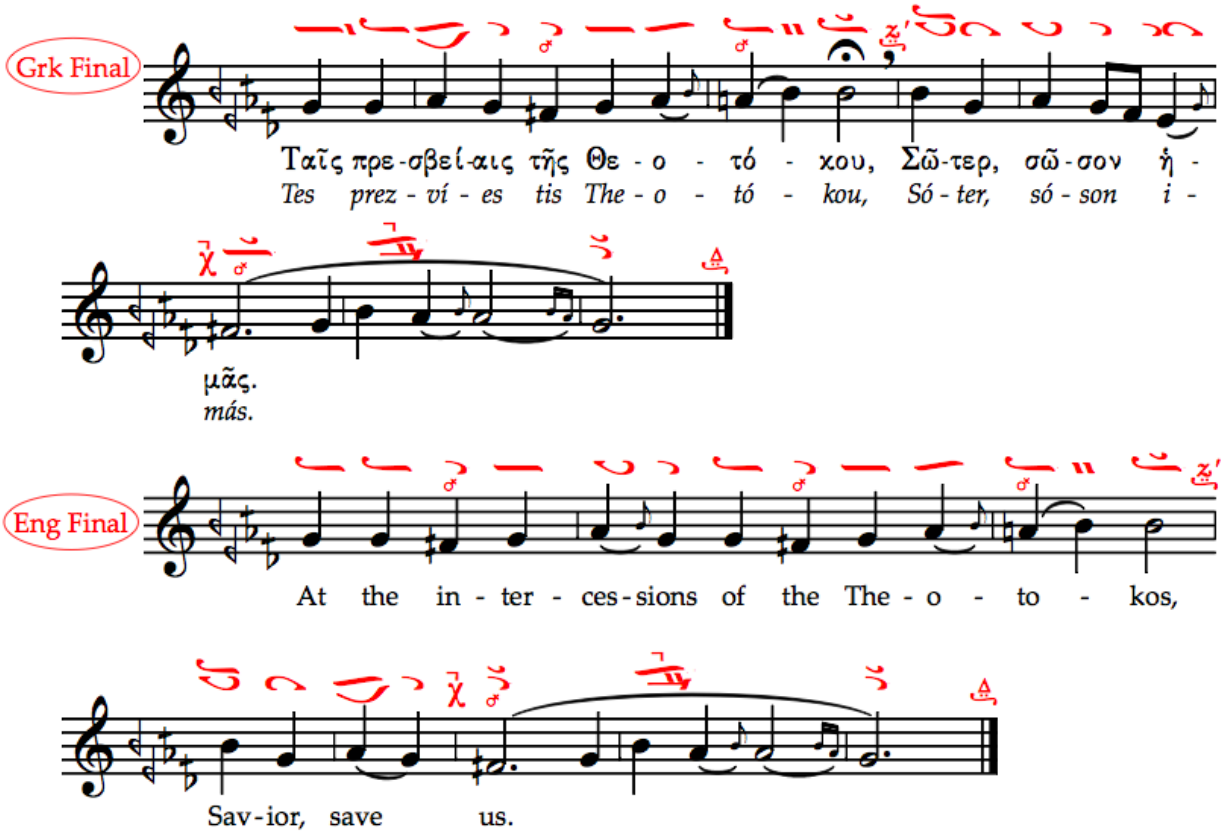
This time, the whole piece is set in the Second Mode, which employs that ambiguous scale the Soft Chromatic Genus.[7] The melodies are once again step-wise in contour, making them easily accessible (once the tuning is mastered).[8] In addition to the low E and B, the very low

6 A participant at the symposium raised the point that there are some parishes in the Greek Archdiocese who will sing melodies similar to these, accompanied by an organ. This effectively constricts the choir and congregation into singing only in equal temperament, which causes the music to lose the very nuances we have been addressing. It is in these nuances that so much of the artistry and expression of Byzantine Music – even in the simple responses we have explored – are found. Unless a parish is able to program an electronic organ to play the proper intervals, singing these melodies with organ accompaniment would be to their detriment. (Furthermore, choirs generally learn to sing better in tune without organ accompaniment.)

7 One trick to learning this scale is to keep in mind that the E(-33) and B(-33) are perfect fifths from each other, and also that the distance between the G and the A(-66) is precisely the same distance between the E(-33) and the F natural.

8 When teaching congregations to sing these melodies, I rarely make any reference to the tuning nuances of the scales, but I rather rely on demonstration and imitation. It is remarkable how often large groups of people can sing in these micro-

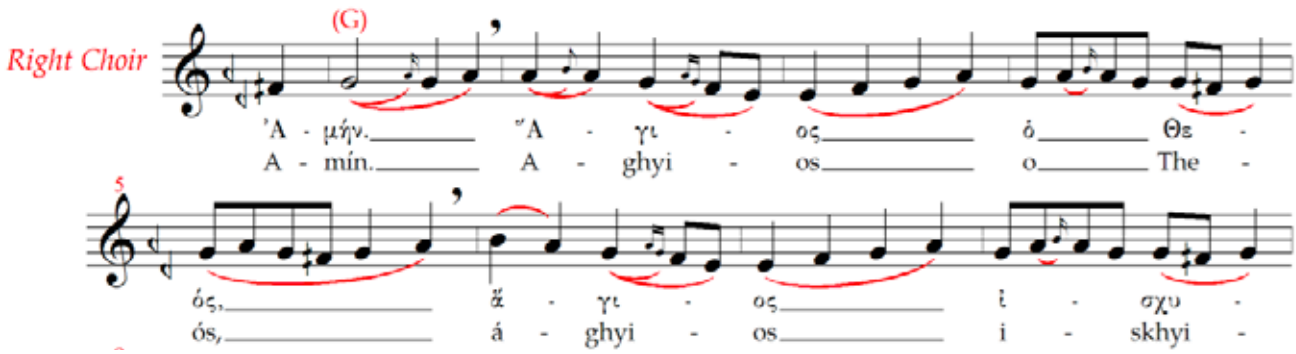
A (and technically D, if the melody ever were to descend below it), the F is often attracted to G, the base of the mode, by one-third of a tone (~66 cents). What makes these refrains slightly more challenging is their irregular meter, which, as it was the very first example we examined, is determined by the accentuation of the sung text. The final refrain, sung after "Glory to the Father… Both now and forever," are as follows:



The *fermata* on the B in the middle of the refrain provides a melodic climax to the whole antiphon, and also indicates, along with the final ending, that the liturgical moment is coming to a close, after which it is the Deacon's turn to begin the Little Litany.

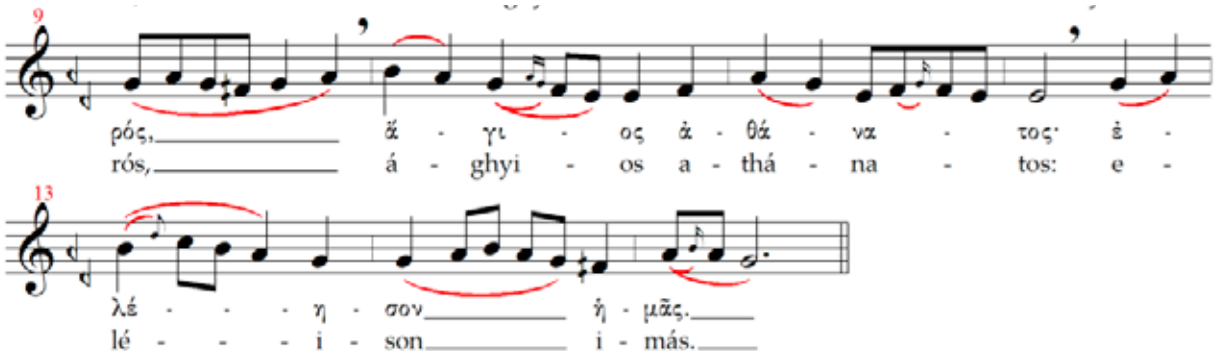
Our final example (although there are many others that could have been included), is the *Trisagion*, or Thrice-Holy: "Holy God, Holy Mighty (or Strong), Holy Immortal, have mercy on us." This piece can be sung congregationally while still giving the liturgical moment its due gravity and solemnity.

The standard Greek melody for Sundays is as follows:[9]



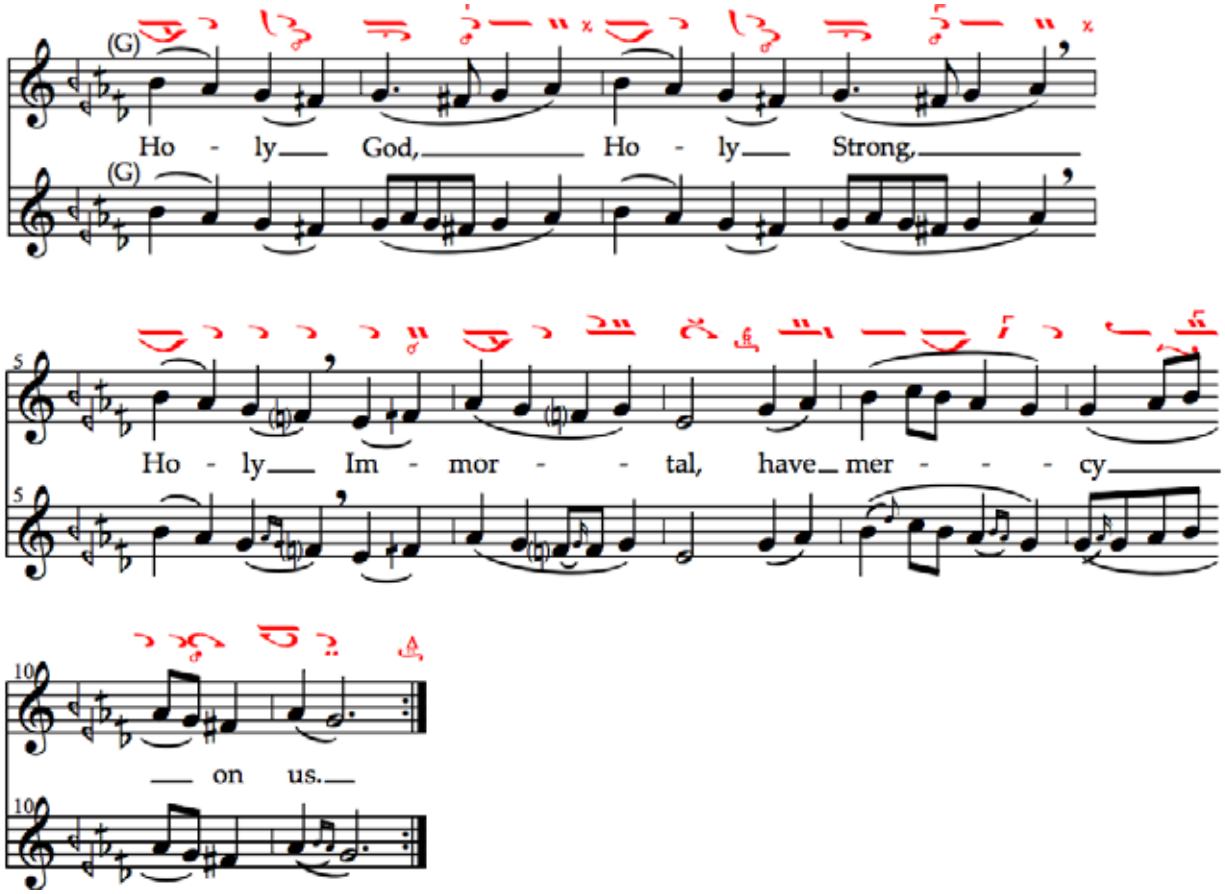
tuned scales – when no one has told them how "difficult" they are.

9 Although the key signature is different than our previous example, this is simply a less accurate way to represent the Soft-Chromatic Genus, which I used before I was able to notate more complex key signatures.



The melodic contour is once again mostly step-wise, allowing for easy congregational participation. Sung at around 86 beats per minute, however, it is also slow enough to provide the appropriate grandeur. The melody employs a standard A-A-B format, giving "Ἅγιος ὁ Θεός" ("Holy God") and "Ἅγιος Ἰσχυρός" (Holy Strong) the same musical content, while "Ἅγιος Ἀθάνατος, ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς" ("Holy Immortal, have mercy on us") provides a logical conclusion.

Here it is in English, from Cappella Romana's Divine Liturgy Project:



Unlike the practice in many parishes where the *Trisagion* is more or less intoned very quickly in simple harmony (and so it is over almost before it begins), singing the *Trisagion* in the above manner allows this liturgical moment to breathe, and to function as it was meant to: as the climax of the Antiphons of the Divine Liturgy.

The above examples from the Divine Liturgy provide just a taste of the wide variety of melodic styles and modal sonorities one finds in Byzantine chant. Each of them is different from the others, but all of them are nuanced and beautiful in their own right, while simple enough to allow for congregational singing. This is not to say that every piece of the Divine Liturgy should

be sung congregationally: moments like the *Dynamis* of the *Trisagion*, the Cherubic Hymn, the Communion Verse, are complex and virtuosic, designed to be sung by trained singers; but not only *can* the rest of the Divine Liturgy – responses, Antiphons, the *Trisagion*, the liturgical dialogue of the *Anaphora*, – be sung congregationally, but they are *meant* to be, and this is reflected in how they are composed. Melodic, nuanced, intricate yet still simple: Byzantine chant can be the perfect musical language for congregational singing.