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LITURGICALLY-INFORMED AESTHETICS: A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CHANT PEDAGOGY AND PERFORMANCE

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The preferred techniques and practical aesthetics of good church singing differ among traditions, cultures, communities, and individuals. While it is nevertheless useful to discuss practical matters of musical pedagogy – vocal production, diction, language, and the like – a theological approach is essential and even encompasses the aforementioned aspects. In any given context, educators and singers should be aware of the context, iconography, significance, reasons for existence, and purpose – in patristic terms, the *logoi* – of repertoire, its texts, and its sounds. Patristic texts contain a great deal of information that can help us acquire this knowledge, and Psalter prefaces, three of which we will consider, are particularly good sources of commentary on music. Contemporary ethnomusicological fieldwork in academic, parish, and monastic settings shows that, even if there are practical musical or linguistic deficiencies, the result from such a theological approach is still useful, and also that this approach can lead to well-retained, well-executed chant in the first place. Furthermore, it may inform aesthetic decisions and cause us to question, revise, and improve the same. This paper will provide material from both of these source types in order to demonstrate such an approach and to exemplify it in practice in different contexts.

We begin with examples from Georgian chant, which generate helpful illustrations and relate to general and English-language material, or to that in any tongue. Georgian chant is also a useful example of translation and inculturation and may provide insight into what is currently happening, or may happen, in English-language hymnography.¹

1 On Georgian liturgical translations and inculturation, see Nino Doborjginidze, "Religious Inculturation and Problems of Social History of the Georgian Language," in *Georgian Christian Thought and Its Cultural Context*, Tamar Nutsubidze et al, eds. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2014, 327-343. The musical side of this topic requires further study, but at the outset it is important to note that some early translations of canons and other compositions preserve the Greek metre while others, including those in contemporary use, do not. Georgian chant, with its model phrases for all troparia and heirmoi in each mode, does not have prosomia, automela, and idiomela, and in manuscripts that give the Greek titles for these with associated chants, the texts do not match the metre; in some cases, the correct prosomia, according to Greek use, are not indicated. See Ekaterine Oniani, "Georgian Neumatic System in the context of Orthodox Chant Tradition," *Musicology Today* 20 (2013), <<http://www.musicologytoday.ro/BackIssues/Nr.20/studies.php>>. This situation is similar to that found in various English translations, especially from Slavonic, in which names of melodies are mentioned, though the texts cannot be sung to them, whether prosomia or podobni, and, if common Russian chant styles are in use, are set to formulas, such as those for stichera. A relevant example of such English translations can be found in *The Life of St Nina, Equal to the Apostles and Enlightener of Georgia*. Jordanville, NY: Print Shop of St Job of Pochaev, Holy Trinity Monastery 1999.

The three-part polyphonic structure of all Georgian chant (and most folk song) is understood, from the contemplations of the twelfth-century theologian Ioane Petritsi in his preface to a new translation of the Psalter (no longer extant), to symbolise the Trinity. He provides a mystagogy of the liberal arts, how they are reflected in the Psalter and how they afford theological interpretation, and the passage concerning music reads as follows:

Now, what about music? Is not, actually, our beloved book [the Psalter] altogether a music embellished by the Holy Spirit?! And any music requires three tunes or phthongs from which any wholeness is composed. They are called *mzakhr* [strained, high pitch], *jir* [middle], and *bam* [lower tension, bass], and, verily, all attunements of strings and voices make a pleasant melody through those three—because the beauty of any ornament derives from the irregularity of its adornments. The same is perceived in the number of the transcendently Holy Trinity, for we say the ‘birthlessness’ of the Father, the birth of the Son, the [procession] of the transcendent Holy Spirit, and the unity of the Nature with differentiation of the Hypostases. Similarly, in the musical differentiation of *mzakr*, *jir*, and *bam* you will perceive a unity of composition. In fact, through the paradigmatic images, posited in His First Intellect, God has adorned and musically composed the order of the whole creation and has imposed ideas even on the prime matter looking to [introduce] a diversity even in the oneness of matter. Eventually, during wars and battles the best strategists used to arrange their armies in the shape of a triangle, deeming this shape invincible. In fact, wherever the power of seven is the third corresponding image (or: icon) of the first three. Why? Because, the first odd number is three, the second five and the third the renowned seven, which neither gives birth nor is born—for which reason, according to the teaching of the Italians, it was considered as the virgin [number] and was worshiped as such by them.²

This passage employs geometric and numerical illustrations to expound the same theology and to clarify the nature of the musical description, geometry and arithmetic having been already discussed in previous sections. The musical icon is not, however, a simple interpretation of the number three but rather is an involved explication, bound up with the nature of the counterpoint, the equality yet distinctness of each voice, and the unity of a composition. The triangle has to do with polyphonic structure, as opposed to a linear range,³ and the discussion of the number seven may relate to the scale and to the distance between voices. In chant repertoire, considering the musical structure alongside Petritsi’s order of voices and corresponding references to each person of the Trinity, we see that the first (top) voice is the Father, the second voice, the Son, and *bani* (the bottom voice), the Holy Spirit. Petritsi precedes his discussion of triangular structure in this passage on music with a Trinitarian mystagogy of geometry, of the principles of point, line, and plane. Thinking of the relationships among parts according to all these images can help singers to orient themselves in a practical way as well as to relate to each other well. Malkhaz Erkvanidze, a contemporary choir director and chant scholar, has discussed what this theology entails for the dispositions of singers: their sharing of will and intention, and mutual trust, love, and giving of self to the others,⁴ that is, kenosis. Such applies to any singing or cooperative activity, whatever its language or structure may be. Furthermore, kenotic theology can directly apply to vocal production. Especially when singing in the traditional manner, with soloists on the upper two voices, each voice, more conscious of the sound than of itself, provides a place for the others by a firm and energetic presence at a shared, steady dynamic,

² For the entire work, with the Old Georgian text on facing pages, see Levan Gaginashvili, “Ioane Petritsi’s Preface to His Annotated Translation of the Book of Psalms,” in Tamar Nutsubidze et al., eds, *Georgian Christian Thought and Its Cultural Context*, Leiden: Brill 2014, 194-235. Another translation, also by Gaginashvili, of the first part of the passage on music, with several different renderings, one of which I have used above (“procession” instead of “issue”), appears in Levan Gaginashvili, *The Platonic Theology of Ioane Petritsi*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press 2007, 100.

³ On this point, see Nino Pirtskhelava, “Interpretation of Proclus Diadochos’ and Plato’s Philosophy from the Viewpoint of Research into the History of Georgian Polyphony,” in Tsurtsumia Rusudan and Joseph Jordania, Joseph, eds, *The Seventh International Symposium on Georgian Polyphony*, Tbilisi: International Research Centre for Traditional Polyphony of Tbilisi State Conservatoire 2015, 481-487 [in Georgian and English]. Note that the author, following the earlier edition of Petritsi’s works, writes that the Psalter preface is instead an epilogue to the commentary on Proclus’s *Elements of Theology*. There may also be some confusion between Petritsi’s separate annotated translation and commentary on Proclus and their related translations into other languages, which may explain the variations that she finds in the quoted Russian and English translations. Petritsi’s writings on music call for further research, and as Pirtskhelava’s work exemplifies, passages from various works should be examined together. Close contextual readings within each work are also of paramount importance regarding both musical information and Petritsi’s own philosophical views. On this latter subject, see Gaginashvili.

⁴ Malkhaz Erkvanidze, Lecture, 27 November 2011.

rather than making room by singing at a lower dynamic level.⁵ Such requires keen attention and awareness of the other singers and their sound, as the ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino notes regarding similar participatory contexts.⁶ As a nun at the Monastery of St Nina describes it, “You sing at the top of your lungs but listen even more.”⁷ This attentive awareness is coupled with knowledge of one’s own part and a firm sureness of sound, which the ensemble director Frank Kane describes as “tone,” as in the tone in muscles and blood vessels.⁸ The cultivation of this awareness and focused vocal participation and effort in turn leads to singers’ increased learning and fuller understanding of the musical structure. Upon experiencing these things through the successful learning and singing of several chants without scores, usually while simultaneously doing work or travelling (ex. 1), another sister asked, “How is this possible?”⁹ Thus, theologically informed aural acquisition guides and informs, perhaps not always at a conscious level, one’s inner disposition, vocal sound, knowledge of repertoire, and sense of one’s work in conjunction with that of others, in both a practical and a spiritual sense. Similarly, discussions of paleographic and iconographic inscriptions, shape, ornamentation, and of prayer of the heart, can also have useful applications, as later examples will show.

Offering and discussing these kinds of theological and related practical ideas to singers in a small ensemble at the University of Limerick produced marked results, as observed and freely commented upon by singers and listeners of various backgrounds. Let us listen to examples of the same phrase of a Western Georgian ‘Lord, I Have Cried,’ one sung at a concert and one at a vespers service, with about a year between them (ex. 2-3). Leaving aside factors such as acoustics and chosen pitch, note the differences, such as those in timbre and balance. I draw your attention to the different execution of the final unison note and to how the cadence is approached. The latter type of execution is documented in the earliest recordings of Georgian chant, and it was not through much practice but during a particular rehearsal that the ensemble managed it, through one oral demonstration and a brief discussion, with images and objects where necessary, of three as one; ceaseless prayer; patterns in chant structure, carvings, and textiles; folk ritual practices involving the winding of a single thread three times around a church while chanting; and the prayer rope. No amount of reminders, exercises, and technical explanations was so efficient; as one member put it, “complicated” things were presented in an “uncomplicated way,” which was “surprisingly efficacious.”¹⁰ It was theological and physical imagery that facilitated this process by providing material for vocal pedagogy, fulfilling good practice as described by James Stark,¹¹ and by giving a foundation to otherwise abstract concepts of chant structure, polyphonic interaction, and cadences.

A similar phenomenon occurred regarding blending and tuning of a cherubic hymn in the choir at St Nina’s Monastery. Georgian chant is traditionally not equal-tempered, and we often sing with two or three singers rather than soloists on the upper parts (ex. 4-5). During one rehearsal, discussion of the aforementioned Trinitarian theology and geometric illustrations, especially focusing on the triangle and the plane, followed by rehearsing of different combinations of parts with such in mind, was effective in finding greater balance and more stable intervals. Later, we will see what the Middle Byzantine St Euthymius Zigabenus (d. after 1118) says about the significance of well-tuned intervals, but let us first look at the comments of a 4th-century Father, St Athanasius the Great, on the phenomenon of singing and on unison sound.

Though patristic sources give us little information concerning the sonic content of music

5 The earliest recorded examples of chant have been digitized from phonograph records and can be heard at <http://www.georgiancha/t.org>.

6 Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2008, 43.

7 Field notes, December 2015; Field notes, April 2016.

8 Field notes, August 2013.

9 Field notes, May 2016.

10 Personal correspondence, 2 May 2014.

11 See James Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2003.

from their respective times, their interpretations of musical expression and attitudes towards it in a more general sense are widely applicable. In his Letter to Marcellinus on the Psalms, St Athanasius dedicates considerable space to an explanation of the reasons for chanting the psalms with well-tuned, unison melodies instead of speaking them. Among other things, he writes,

It is important not to pass over the question of why words of this kind are chanted with melodies and strains. For some of the simple among us, although they believe indeed that the phrases are divinely inspired, imagine, however, on account of the sweetness of sound, that also the psalms are rendered musically for the sake of the ear's delight. But this is not so. For Scripture did not seek out that which is pleasant and winning, but this also has been fashioned for the benefit of the soul, and for all number of reasons, but especially on account of two. First, because it is fitting for the Divine Scripture to praise God not in compressed speech alone, but also in the voice that is richly broadened. Things are said, then, in close sequence; such are all the contents of the Law and the Prophets and the histories, along with the New Testament. On the other hand, things are expressed more broadly; of this kind are the phrases of the psalms, odes, and songs. For thus will it be preserved that men love God with their whole strength and power. The second reason is that, just as harmony that unites flutes effects a single sound, so also, seeing that different movements appear in the soul-and in it is the power of reasoning, and eager appetite, and high-spirited passion, from the motion of which comes also the activity of the parts of the body-the reason intends man neither to be discordant in himself, nor to be at variance with himself. So the most excellent things derive from reasoning, while the most worthless derive from acting on the basis of desire, as is the case with Pilate when he says, I find no crime in him, and yet concurs in the purpose of the Jews.

... In order that some such confusion not occur in us, the reason intends the soul that possesses the mind of Christ, as the Apostle said, to use this as a leader, and by it both to be a master of its passions and to govern the body's members, so as to comply with reason. Thus, as in music there is a plectrum, so the man becoming himself a stringed instrument and devoting himself completely to the Spirit may obey in all his members and emotions, and serve the will of God. The harmonious reading of the Psalms is a figure and type of such undisturbed and calm equanimity of our thoughts. For just as we discover the ideas of the soul and communicate them through the words we put forth, so also the Lord, wishing the melody of the words to be a symbol of the spiritual harmony in a soul, has ordered that the odes be chanted tunefully, and the Psalms recited with song. The desire of the soul is this-to be beautifully disposed, as it is written: Is anyone among you cheerful? Let him sing praise. In this way that which is disturbing and rough and disorderly in it is smoothed away, and that which causes grief is healed when we sing psalms.

... Those who do not recite the divine songs in this manner do not sing them wisely. They bring delight to themselves, but they incur blame, because a hymn of praise is not suitable on the lips of a sinner. But when they chant in the way mentioned earlier, so that the melody of the phrases is brought forth from the soul's good order and from the concord with the Spirit, such people sing with the tongue, but singing also with the mind they greatly benefit not only themselves but even those willing to hear them.

... Therefore the Psalms are not recited with melodies because of a desire for pleasant sounds. Rather, this is a sure sign of the harmony of the soul's reflections. Indeed, the melodic reading is a symbol of the mind's well-ordered and undisturbed condition. Moreover, the praising of God in well-tuned cymbals and harp and ten-stringed instrument was again a figure and sign of the parts of the body coming into natural concord like harp strings, and of the thoughts of the soul becoming like cymbals, and then all of these being moved and living through the grand sound and through the command of the Spirit so that, as it is written, the man lives in the Spirit and mortifies the deeds of the body. For thus beautifully singing praises, he brings rhythm to his soul and leads it, so to speak, from disproportion to proportion, with the result that, due to its steadfast nature, it is not frightened by something, but rather imagines positive things, even possessing a full desire for the future goods. And gaining its composure by the singing of the phrases, it becomes forgetful of the passions and, while rejoicing, sees in accordance with the mind of Christ, conceiving the most excellent thoughts.¹²

This rich passage shows that chant, when sung in the Spirit with the proper understanding and intention (cf. I Cor. 14:15), glorifies God while both rendering and reflecting the required order in soul and body. His reference to the concord of strings foreshadows the insightful and specific analogy in our next patristic passage. St Euthymius of Zigabenus writes similar things in the preface to his commentary on the psalms but also includes, drawing upon the work of St Basil the Great, a discussion of the fact that melody is indeed a pleasurable delivery of scriptural

12 Robert C. Gregg, trans., *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and Letter to Marcellinus*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1980, 123-125.

text, employing the common metaphor of honey making medicine palatable. Interestingly, he adds an interpretation not only of the Greek musical concept of harmony, which refers to well-blended unison and to the well-ordered horizontal relationship of pitches in a melody, but also of concord, which is the vertical relationship of simultaneously-sounded different pitches, that is, harmony in the modern sense. Though he is discussing sounding strings rather than voices, his description of intervals is nevertheless fascinating, giving us two complementary spiritual ways, based on two orientations of intervals, of thinking about tuning in parts as well as in unison. Curiously, many Georgian chants begin with the middle voice a fourth below the top and the bottom voice an octave below the top (a fifth below the middle), rendering a combination that St Euthymius describes. His description and interpretation are as follows:

Concord is the harmony of things that are different but yet agree. This can be seen when the finest interval ratios apply to the parts within the soul. The first (string), namely the reasoning part of the soul, occupies the first place and governs only; the middle (string), namely the spirited part of the soul, is governed by the first but governs the last; while the last (string), like the appetitive part of the soul, is governed only.

Concord of the soul would then be for the reasoning part to be to the spirited part as the lowest note is to the middle note, representing the interval of a fourth, and for the spirited part to be to the appetitive part as the middle note is to the highest note, representing the interval of a fifth, and for the reasoning part to be to the appetitive part as the lowest note is to the highest note, representing the interval of an octave.

If we have regard not to the positions and the names, but to the powers and the activities, then the middle note would rather be the reasoning part relating to the spirited part as to the highest note, because this is the most high-pitched and impulsive part of the soul, representing the interval of a fifth. The reasoning part would relate to the appetitive part as to the lowest note, because this is the slackest and loosest part of the soul, representing the interval of a fourth. The reasoning part, by adjusting and tempering the intensity of the one and the relaxation of the other, will then produce the finest harmony.¹³

From St Athanasius's words and from other passages in St Eusebius's commentary, we see that singing is primarily understood as a physical, ascetic, and liturgical practice rather than a source of pleasure or artistic value. Yet, it nevertheless fulfills these aspects of human existence, providing "chaste pleasure," as St Euthymius says, meeting psychological needs, and reflecting intellectual and aesthetic values, making use of whatever language and musical style may be relevant, by putting the whole person in order. This way of understanding the role of music mirrors the spiritual order described by St Euthymius; that is, if, according to reason, the theological, ascetic, and spiritual aspects rule, the rest will be accordingly attuned. Such thinking becomes very useful regarding problematic questions concerning poorly-executed singing and appropriate types of musical expression. In this vein, I will now present a story from the early Desert Fathers:

A certain simple believer in our own times told the following: "I once went to a beautiful church with some friends. The music was melodious. The priest was pious and learned. The faithful were orderly, very pious in their behaviour, and quiet. My friends were very moved and spoke continuously of their experience that day.

Yet another time, I was in a small, humble church. The priest of the church was negligent in his spirituality. The psalmody was not pleasing. The faithful constantly talked and moved about. They seemed uninterested, if not distracted. The friends I had with me were disgusted by these circumstances.

At the first service I felt a warmth and happiness in seeing my friends happy with the church. I felt proud. At the second service, I felt shame. I was embarrassed by the behaviour of the faithful and I was deeply shaken by the disappointment of my friends.

Asking that God forgive me for this revelation, there were other differences between these two services. At the first, beautiful service, I had tears in my eyes, as did many others. I looked up and imagined that I could see angels above me. At the second service, my eyes were almost completely dry. I thought of nothing above me. Yet, at the second service, my heart was burning with tears and I felt the souls of those who worshipped with me. Truly on every side, in our midst, were beings so gentle and full of peace that I was lost in wonderment at God's beauty. I did not see the external irregularities.

Such is the strange chasm which separates the beauty of men from the beauty of God.¹⁴

13 John Raffan, trans, "Zigabenus Psalter Commentary English Text," <<https://independent.academia.edu/JohnRaffan>> [draft translation].

14 Chrysostomos, trans., "The Ancient Fathers of the Desert: Section 6," <<http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/>>

This story is important to keep in mind for various reasons. It provides an example of the discernment between psychological and spiritual perceptions and levels of experience¹⁵ and guards against both pride and despair, no matter how a given chant may turn out in practice according to one's evaluation. The passage concerns music in the liturgical context, but today, church music occurs in a growing number of settings and is sung not only by Church members. In some instances, e.g. concerts by non-Orthodox ensembles, notes, text, timbre, dynamics, and other musical details may be well executed by singers, yet the efficacy of the result may be almost entirely up to the spiritual work and understanding of composing, directing, or listening worshipers. Theological and liturgical consciousness, perception, and attention thus allow singers and listeners to become materials and tools for, and perceivers of, divine energies. We sing and "see in accordance with the mind of Christ," as St Athanasius stated. Regarding the grace of the Holy Spirit, St Maximus the confessor writes that it is always present, especially during the Divine Liturgy, transforming each person who is present. In Chapter 24 of his *Mystagogy*, he says that "This grace transforms and changes each person who is found there and in fact remolds him in proportion to what is more divine in him and leads him to what is revealed through the mysteries which are celebrated, even if he does not himself feel this."¹⁶ Various kinds of knowledge and work co-operate with grace, and the liturgical experience, which overflows, also embodies and transmits grace into other contexts, such as the home and the concert setting. It also directs the balance and types of effort and information in the classroom and rehearsal space. Oral tradition and fieldwork provide material that can guide and demonstrate this process in practice, and good order (especially within oneself, which leads to concord with one's neighbours), constant learning, and prayer are the primary human contributions. Keeping in mind what the above Georgian, Alexandrian, and Byzantine Fathers have said about the Psalms, illustrated by relevant music from their own experiences, we can engage with church music in a way that renders it capable of helping us to produce these three essential elements.

Fathers across centuries and geographical boundaries discuss the aforementioned overflow of grace by describing the role of melody in the spreading of the Gospel. In the third century, in his *Symposium on chastity*, St Methodius of Olympus describes the Gospel not primarily as being preached but as being sung.¹⁷ St Symeon of Thessalonike, in his 14th-century liturgical commentary, explains that, while the doxology, in which the Church theologizes the Incarnation and the Trinity, is sometimes "read penitentially by one person," "it is sung by all more fully and with melody, for the mystery was revealed to the whole world and not to the shepherds only, but to all the nations as well."¹⁸ Like all effective symbolism and allegory, this explanation is rooted in human experience. Music has consciously been a tool for teaching, preaching, and combating heresy, as demonstrated, for example, by St Ambrose's hymns and St Ephraim the Syrian's choirs of virgins.¹⁹ Whatever qualities our chant may have and however we may judge it, it is given that singers' sound will always go forth (cf. Ps. 19:4). Once it goes forth, we do not control it and cannot foresee its effects and how people will perceive it. Yet, as the grace of the Holy Spirit changes the gifts for the Eucharist, it transfigures and distributes every utterance, filling the mouths, ears, and hearts of all. Let us do everything possible, then, to be practiced, perceptive, and prayerful bread-bakers and singers, and both at once if necessary (ex. 6).

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15 On the physical, psychological, and spiritual levels of experience, see Zacharias Zacharou, *The Hidden Man of the Heart*, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist 2007, 253-254.

16 George C. Berthold, trans., *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings*, New York: Paulist Press 1985, 206.

17 Herbert Musurillo, S.J., trans. *St Methodius, Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, London: The Newman Press 1958, 79.

18 Harry L. Simmons, trans. *Treatise on Prayer by Symeon of Thessalonike*, Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press 1984, 43.

19 For brief biographies of these and other Fathers, along with examples of their works, see James W. McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993.

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