



GREEK ORTHODOX PSALTIC ART: PERFORMANCE AND/OR PRAYER?

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of the Conference, “From Manuscript to Performance,” gave me the inspiration for the subject of my announcement. This title in Greek has a variety of translations, but not in English. In Greek we can translate the word “performance” as *ἐπιτέλεση* – “epitelesi”, *ἐκτέλεση* – “ektelesi”, *ἀπόδοση* – “apodosi”, *ἐρμηνεία* – “hermeneia” or *παράσταση* – “parastasi”, but each of these words has its own subtle meaning. Thus, the Greek word “epitelesi” has the meaning of performing a religious ritual act. The word “apodosi” takes the meaning of rendering a music piece or a hymn while the interpreter (whatever he is; musician, actor, chanter, etc.) puts his personal stamp on it. The same applies to the term “hermeneia”, which is rendered by “interpretation”. The use of the word “ektelesi” is also very common in Greek and it means “execution”. It may come from “I execute an order”, probably by the fact that “one executes the instructions of the musical signs”. We say, “the musical execution of the piece was excellent”. In Greek, the word “ektelesi” also means “assassination” or “killing with execution”. However, the most common translation of the word “performance” in Greek is “parastasi”; We say: “I give/play a ‘parastasi’” (theatrical or musical performance). The word “parastasi” has other meanings, as well, but in this case, it has more to do with presenting or imitating something.

Since I do not have a good or experiential knowledge of English, I do not know what exactly the first thought of a native speaker is when he hears the word “performance”. Does he perceive “execution”, “rendering”, “religious ritual act”, “interpretation”, “show” or all these together?

A theatrical play, a musical concert, a musical-theatre performance, street music, a classical or modern ballet, popular dance, acrobatics, a magician’s show, or a spiritual action, and so on: these are definitely “performances”. The question, however, is whether the term “performance” in English is used as, includes, and means all the various aspects of everyday life. When, for example, a group of people gathers at a home for a celebration, and this gathering

eventually becomes a party feast with music, is this considered and called “performance”? And if so, by whom is it considered and called “performance”?

From various fact-finding discussions with good users of English, I understood that the word “performance” has two kinds of use: i) The wide, colloquial use, and ii) the narrow, artistic, or scientific one. Again, the artistic and scientific use has a double content: general, which is used by the representatives of art and a narrow sense, specially defined, which researchers and musicologists and musico-anthropologists have refined into a scientific term. Finally, I realized that the word “performance” may need to be accompanied by an adjective, to be clear at all times, what exactly it is referring to and what its particular meaning is.

I owe many thanks to my dear friend and brother Costis Drygianakis whom I have the great honour to have as a direct collaborator and adviser in the Department of Psaltic Art and Musicology of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies. Without exaggeration, it may be said that Mr Drygianakis is the first one in Greece to have officially introduced and applied anthropological research to the field of Byzantine musicology, and he who has turned the interest of the Greek Byzantine musicological community to this aspect. Kostis, besides the countless other things he very successfully deals with, has also a large number of musico-anthropological works (research and writing) on the modern Psaltic Art in Greece.

So, among all the possible interpretations that the term “performance” may have, and which I have described very briefly in the previous paragraphs, in the present paper I will remain with, and only deal with, the concept of “show”.

Initially, I must admit that the presence of the word “performance” in the title of the Conference, brought back to me a series of questions which have been worrying and concerning me for many years. These questions relate to issues that, on the one hand, touch on the Psaltic Art, and on the other, relate to serious issues of the Orthodox faith and spirituality, that is to say, of Orthodox life, but as yet I have not formulated them publicly, except for a small circle of friends and colleagues (chanters or Byzantine musicologists). The only open formulation of my concerns for the time being is towards my students at the Athens Ecclesiastical Academy (A.E.A.) during my lessons on Byzantine Ecclesiastical Music. Now, for a while, I have left aside my theoretical, notational and other musicological studies and come in Finland, and I am here in Joensuu with the aim of communicating my concerns first to all of you and then, through our Conference, to the whole Orthodox musicological world.

As you have already understood from the title of my announcement, I will refer to the issue specifically from the point of view of the Greek psaltic tradition, since of course I recognize that each local Orthodox Church proceeds on its course towards the end of human history, the Ἐσχάτα – “Eschata”, through its own specific circumstances and necessities.

THE PROBLEM

After the above formulation of my questioning on the Greek translation of the term “performance”, I move straight to my subject, which has two aspects: i) The use of the term “parastasis” in Greek Psaltic Art and ii) the transmutation of psalmody from prayer into “parastasis”.

I. THE USE OF THE TERM “PERFORMANCE” IN GREEK PSALTIC ART

First, let us look at the Greek term “parastasis” more thoroughly. According to online dictionaries I have consulted, the word “parastasis” has various meanings, but here we are interested in the following two:

“Parastasis” is:

- When someone displays (shows) anything in front of a person or the public.
- The presentation of a theatrical performance on stage.

The word “parastasis” is etymologically derived from the Greek verb “paristimi” (the preposition *παρά* - “para” + the verb *ἵστημι* - “istimi”) or more precisely, from the passive voice, *ἵσταμαι* - “istamai” (meaning I stand). So, *παρίσταμαι* - “paristamai”, meaning I stand side by the side or in front of someone. Therefore, “parastasis” (= “performance”) refers to someone who is present in front of others. From then on, he can represent or imitate something, he can play a musical piece, or he can interpret a musical or theatrical work with relative personal freedom.

In Greek Orthodox ecclesiastical worship and psaltic tradition, the word “parastasis” is not in use at all. Actually, “parastasis” was never used in the non-ecclesiastic Greek or folk and traditional music either. In Greek one almost never says, “I am going to a musical ‘parastasis’”, unless it is accompanied by theatrical events. We usually say, “I am going to a concert” or “I am attending a musical event” and so on. This word “parastasis” is exclusively associated with European music and the musical-theatrical genres produced therefrom. So, the habit of using the term in Greek prevailed in Greece through European music and through the various artistic genres to which the latter gave birth and distributed throughout the world. (I wonder if this is good or bad...)

II. THE TRANSMUTATION OF PSALMODY FROM PRAYER INTO “PARASTASIS”

It has been found by many specialists – if not all of them – that in its recent and modern history Psaltic Art has fallen into the trap of secularization, which is largely due to the efforts of its representatives to imitate western European musical standards. This fact also comes as a consequence of the ever-decreasing spirituality of the members of the body of the Church, in times when most people’s love for Jesus Christ has frozen, and now, even we – the believers – are lukewarm, not boiling or burning with a craving for the Kingdom of God.

Before I analyse these two phenomena, the imitation of western musical patterns and spiritual laxity, let us look at the historical evolution of the musical issue in the Church:

The Church of Christ, since the very early centuries, has adopted music in its worship as a means of reinforcing faith. With the help of music, dogma could be comprehended and absorbed by the faithful in an easier fashion.

Later, as dogma became clear and definite, music was placed on a secondary footing. Also, there were many ascetic Church Fathers who foresaw many spiritual dangers in psalmody.

Finally, Orthodox patristic theology recognizes holy psalmody as a means of prayer, especially for neophytes, spiritually incomplete faithful, but also makes it clear that the perfect prayer by which man can reach the vision of the Uncreated Light of God is the “monologistos” prayer of mind and heart “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me”.

Nevertheless, Byzantine, and post-Byzantine Psaltic Art reaches extreme heights, to serve the patriarchal, imperial, and monastic splendour of Greek Orthodox worship.

Nowadays, the compositions of the Byzantine, and post-Byzantine periods cannot be used in Greek Orthodox worship on account of their length, so they are treated more as artistic creations and less as intended for worship. The compositions of these periods are usually selected as repertoire for non-worship events, that is European-style performances, which have been adopted very recently by the Greek psaltai, only from the second half of the 19th century.

The 18th century was the beginning of the opening of Greek ecclesiastical music to secular musical genres, mainly from Western Europe and the Arab-Persian musical tradition. The 19th and 20th centuries are periods of intense external influences and of deep deterioration. Now, for the first time, Choirs of Chanters exclusively for non-worship events were created. These are set according to European standards, without traditional Psaltic dress (the “rassa”), but with shirts and ties or bow ties. They perform hymns with European-style harmonized isokratema. The leader of the choir, the “chorarchis”, becomes a Western-type conductor. He stands in front of the choir members, turning his back to the audience. The Choir no longer has the old shape of the semicircle but looks like a parade or a phalanx. And the most progressive element of all is that psalmody is performed outside the temple, in a hall, a cinema or a theatre, not for prayer and devotional purposes but to promote Byzantine music as a newly discovered artistic genre. So, chanting becomes a “show”, for an audience that can sit cross-legged, can be in a playful mood, can even smoke (at least in the past, when smoking was not banned indoors, but also today, if of course it is an outdoor “concert”).

But, also within the church, several novel changes have taken place, with the most important being that the chanters’ choir has given way to “protopsaltism” (the phenomenon of chanting by only one man). The single chanter, often facing his audience, performs oriental-type non-rhythmic “amanedes” and prides himself on his voice and craftsmanship. The faithful abandon prayer and enjoy only musical pleasure, often paying the chanter with money and sometimes applauding in the temple of Lord. In this way, chanting has also become a “show”.

Nowadays, some other more modernistic phenomena enrich the “spectacle”. The chanter chants by looking at the camera of his mobile phone or of his electronic tablet and if his hair is disordered, he combs himself, straightening his tie at the same time. He also writes messages thanking his audience watching him from home (from the dining room, maybe from the bedroom, or from elsewhere; dressed or naked); it does not make any difference. In an acrobatic way, the chanter *also* handles the music instrument of electronic ison machine, which is prominently placed on the “sacred” lectern. The well-tuned and well-videotaped performance (“parastasis”) will continue, of course, on... Facebook, where the war of “likes” will take place.

Something more: in the last few decades sometimes some “Byzantine oratorios” have been presented every now and then, with great deal of selfishness and an “arrogant” style on behalf of their creators. Every time I hear this expression, I want to cry out in pain to Our Lord. These are musical and musical-theatrical events, inspired by various events in the history of Byzantium or Hellenism, with lyrics of dubious poetic value, and, usually, with a musical dressing based on the psaltic tradition of the Octoechos of low inspiration. These are hybrid teratogenics. They are the results of a poorly-understood musical syncretism, which attempts to marry heterogeneous

objects that always give birth to monsters. Also in this way chanting becomes a “show”.

This is, very briefly, the historical background within which the problems of psalmody in Greek Orthodox Church were born, evolved and shaped. But I stop here. I say nothing more. This is the field of Costis Drygianakis, the Greek pioneer. He has registered many important facts and he has published many original conclusions. I urge you to look for his articles.

III. VARIOUS APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM

We all know well that the general issue of Psaltic Art has different approaches from person to person, from school to school and from science to science.

Amongst these persons, that is, amongst chanters, some will claim that Byzantine music is not only an art for worship, but also an artistic musical genre. Therefore, we can freely intervene in it to produce an ever-evolving and renewed art, and there is no need for inhibitions and taboos for this. Personally, I do not belong to this category of chanters and I oppose such claims openly. The most powerful argument, in my opinion, is that Psaltic Art could be an evolving musical genre if it were merely music without lyrics. But this is not the case. Since its birth psalmody has been based on the most significant Greek Orthodox hymnography, high theological poetry, and it is not used as a musical substratum of divine worship or to fill gaps during this. Greek hymnography is a source of Orthodox theology. It is the poetic literature on which Christian dogma and experience have been formulated. The music of holy psalmody is a means of teaching the Orthodox faith to the members of the worshipping Community. This hymnographical poetry through which the indescribable *Logos* of the Holy Triune God is described, cannot be a toy in the hands and the will of each “artist”, as if he had no other musical expression to deal with in order to feed his artistic appetites. After all, if someone wishes to be inspired by Byzantine and post-Byzantine Psaltic Art, let him do so without devaluing the sacred poems of the holy hymnographers of our Church.

Among Schools, (I mean individual psaltic traditions and local differentiations), approaches vary, in that some are more conservative and ecclesiastical, some are somehow liberal, and others are completely indifferent.

There is an even greater distance between their approaches to Psaltic Art among the three sciences related to it (theology, musicology and anthropology). This is because of the specific cognitive subject of each one. Thus, the musico-anthropologist will say that the Greek Orthodox psaltic tradition is one amongst the innumerable expressions of human civilization. He will argue that he simply follows and records this evolution.

The musico-anthropologist opposes openly anybody who is struggling to preserve and retain the Psaltic Art or to return it to primitive or older forms and stylistic approaches (ie, psaltic “hyphos”) approaches. My response in this direction will be the same as the one the Lord gave to the Sadducees, who did not believe there is resurrection of the dead: “You live in fallacy because you do not know the Scriptures.” Those who have this approach live in fallacy, because they have not understood that for over a thousand years the whole essence of Psaltic Art is based on one single principle: the principle of “imitation”. This “imitation” is not understood in human terms as replication (copy) and theft but is the bone marrow of the Orthodox Faith. “Imitation” in the Psaltic Art is based on St Paul’s apostolic exhortation, “You must become my imitators, as I am an imitator of

Christ". "Imitation" in the area of Orthodox faith goes a long way back, to the night of the Last Supper. Since then, for two thousand years and more, whatever the Church does, this "imitates" what our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the eternal and everlasting Tradition, has given to Church as a legacy on the night of Last Supper. This "imitation" is, in fact, an eternal repetition of the life, the Cross, the Resurrection and the Ascension of the Lord, within a universal human logical worship in a perpetual Pentecost in the Holy Spirit. Given that divine worship is the "imitation" of Christ, every component of this worship "imitates" Christ, and therefore the art of Psalmody as well. Everything else is unnecessary; for believers, everything is vain.

On the other hand, the musicologist's view is totally different. For him, the Psaltic Art is another art of sounds, it is a great creation of the world's cultural heritage and that is why we ought to study, investigate and, above all, promulgate the unique works of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine musical culture. Since however we can no longer chant them within divine worship, because of their length, they are necessarily performed outside the churches, in various non-worship events. Of course, I cannot object to this, but I must remind you that what happens outside divine worship is no longer a "living tradition". It automatically declines to become an object for the museum, a "folk" imitation. To take this further, why does the worship of God take place within the church building? Because the church has been inaugurated. With the triple litany of holy relics around it, the place is sanctified and entrenched against the devil's power in the world and everything within the world. The other places are not inaugurated. Whatever happens in them is exposed to the forces of the Antichrist and vulnerable to passions.

Finally, the theologian usually does not say anything about psalmody, because he considers it is a secondary issue in the Church, and thus he does not deal with it. If you wish for proof of what I claim: you can understand what status the Psaltic Art has in the studies programmes of the four Greek Theological Universities and the four Greek Ecclesiastical Academies. However, the theologians must constantly remind us that the Psaltic Art is primarily and exclusively an art of worship, whose single function is to serve the Holy Mystery for the salvation of the world. Psalmody offers its services through two tools: poetry and melody as a *συναμψότερον* - "synamphoteron" (meaning that these two are one thing inseparably united). Any breakdown of these two is a criminal act. Any partition of the balance between the two, either at the expense of poetry or at the expense of the "melody", is a disturbance of the ancient Greek "metron" (balance). I have also found the word equilibrium; I do not know which is the most appropriate. This balance exists as a royal route within the environment of Orthodox worship. Any attempt to replace Greek Orthodox psalmody with some other style of music is a rupture of the ecclesiastical "seamless robe", which dresses the liturgical arts. Every disruption of the above – strange as it might seem – affects both the Orthodox experience and Orthodox dogma itself. Let us not forget that the Lord Himself and His Apostles chanted at the end of the Last Supper. According to the Gospel testimony, "They chanted and then they went out to the Mount of Olives". In this way, Lord Himself established psalmody as the basic ingredient of Christian worship.

IV. CONCERNS AND QUESTIONS

I come now to the fourth and last unit of this main section of my paper, and I would like to ask you to allow me to point out just a few of the torturous questions that

concern me and many other people, questions which have mentioned at the very beginning, and which I will deal with in this last step. I formulate these questions from the point of view of a theologian, and they are relevant to two aspects of the more general problem: first; non-worship events with Psaltic Art, and second, the spiritual dimensions of psaltic “carelessness” during divine worship.

For non-worship events of Psaltic Art, whether they take place in a church or they are organized in non-ecclesiastical places (in theatres, cinemas, concert halls, outdoors, etc.), three are the key questions that torture and afflict me: *Do non-worship Psaltic performances serve the worship of the Holy Trinity or do they have an egocentric motivation?*

Dear Colleagues, I am not able to answer this question, because I can neither know the hearts of people, nor do I have the gift of reading their minds. However, I am judging myself. Personally, I have never put so much effort into preparing myself for Sunday chanting at the church where I am a Chanter as I have for the most insignificant and small non-worship event. I have never felt such anxiety about my preparing for chanting as I have for my psaltic concerts. I have never been afflicted, and I did not hurt so much because of a big mistake at the analogion, my chanting stand, as because of a small failure in the psaltic choir (elusive and unnoticed by the audience) in a performance. And by undertaking this self-criticism, now that I write these lines, I am thinking: Are my concerts more important than my moments of joining the great Mystery of the Divine Liturgy? Of course not. And then? Then, quite simply, once more my selfishness leads me to decimating the dill and the mint and skimping on the precious and the valuable. And again, I am never able to pray during a concert. In the cases in which I was the protagonist, I had the stress of conducting or a presentation, and when I was a listener, I made it my job to criticize the performance and the performers. So, where was I supposed to find the mental availability and the time for prayer? But it is tragic that neither at my analogion, during services, is it easy for me to pray. So, even if I do not look at the phone when I am chanting, and even if I do not send messages, even if I have no electronic ison machine to play, since I do not pray, I am no better than all those who make all these. Actually, I make a show, as well. I waste my mind and my time in performing the signs of the petaste, etc. I waste my mind and my time in order not to miss the analysis of any sign of the oxeia. I waste my mind and my time trying not to lose any triple tempo in the rhythm. I waste my mind and my time trying not to miss any of the modulations. Thus, by seeing to and making a fuss about many secondary things, I lose the only one essential and necessary: I lose the prayer to Christ, so I lose my salvation.

Next, the following question arises: *Is our Lord well pleased with non-worship activities, or does He dislike them?*

And while I was dealing with this concern, the terrible story came to my attention about what happened to those in the Old Testament (not insignificant persons, but the two sons of Aaron), who, neglecting the commands of God on the offering of incense, took their censers to offer the incense outside the Temple, elsewhere, beyond what the Lord had ordered. Then the fire of God fell and burnt them, leaving only the handles of their censers in order to remind us of God’s wrath when we remove worship from Him and offer it outside the Temple, but to whom? To our deified self, not to say to the devil himself, who directs and “sponsors” our choices.¹

1 See, Leviticus 10: 1. “The two sons of Aaron, and their brethren, said that this fire was come upon them, and they carried it in, and carried it upon them, and brought it before the Lord of hosts, that the Lord commanded it. 2 And it came to pass, even unto the Lord, and he hath rebelled against them, and reproveth the

This kind of reasoning leads to more: *Have the habits and the ethos of non-worship psaltic action influenced the psaltic ethos of the chanter during the act of worship?*

I really do not know. Let us see, what do non-worship performances offer to the chanter's performance? Lights, decent audience (not old ladies who go to the church and do not hear or understand anything), official audiences, complete attention, applause, perhaps money, flattering commentaries on the voice (this would have been even greater if the chanter had wanted to appear in a night club perhaps [and someone, guess who, whispers in his ear: "Oh, no, I'm not talking about a second class club! With such a voice? We are talking about first quality stuff and a lot of money... My poor chanter! You are paid with a few cents and you have an irrelevant boss to interfere with your job, too..."]). And, if you happen to be the choirmaster of the event, you have extra "bonuses": acquaintances, public relations for new concerts, even proposals to get into politics, or municipal elections, or even to become a Mayor.

These are not small baits. Is not that right? And who now gives a penny to hear the Syrian Deacon, the Holy Ephraim... [he is good and holy, let us have his prayers], but what he says cannot be valid in our time, or rather, it only concerns the monks. St Ephraim the Syrian writes:

Where there is psalmody with devoutness, there is God with the Angels. Where there are the songs of the enemy, there is the rage of God... Where there are guitars and dances and applause (clicks of the hands), there is darkness for men, loss for women, the sorrow of the Angels, and the feast of the devil.

Oh, how bad is the mind of the devil! How he puts traps to every man through art, and deceives, and convinces them to do bad things as if they were good ones! Today they chant as God has ordered, and tomorrow they dance zealously as Satan has taught them. Today, they get rid of Satan, and tomorrow they follow him...

My brothers do not live in fallacy... As the Lord Christ has said, no slave can work for two masters; no one can work for God and at the same time for the devil. We have been created by God according to His image, so let us not disgrace His Image... do not chant with angels today and dance with demons the next day. If today you hear the divine scriptures, as a listener who loves God, do not stand listening tomorrow carefully to the guitars as an offender and enemy of Christ. If today you repent of your sins, tomorrow do not start dancing, to be lost...

My brothers, let us not consume the time we have for repentance, the time that God has given us for repentance and salvation...²

As for the spiritual dimensions of psaltic "carelessness" during divine worship, the key questions are at least two:

- What impacts are there when Psaltiki instead of prayer becomes a performance for one person ("one-man show")?
- Does this situation draw the faithful away from the Church and common worship?
- What do the Fathers of the Church have to say on psalmody with a selfishness and secular ethos which does not give birth to prayer?

The dimensions of psaltic "carelessness" or "untidiness" are always personal, but they can often affect the whole, the Church community, the parish, sometimes with strong ecclesiological or soteriological impacts.

Lord."

² Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου, Ὅτι οὐ δεῖ παίζειν Χριστιανούς [Quod ludicris rebus abstinendum sit christianis], Migne P.C. 105. Φραντζολᾶς, Κων/νος, Γ., Ὁσίου Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου, Ἔργα, Τόμος Ε' (Θεσσαλονίκη: εκδόσεις «Τὸ Περιβόλι τῆς Παναγίας», 1988), 238-250.

On a personal level, “carelessness” and “untidiness” during the sacred Psalmody may be the fruits of the selfishness and of all the passions. They may, as well, be the consequences of the various levels of selfishness, from ridiculous vanity to the highest among the passions, *οἰσις* – “oiesis” (self-conceit).

This situation, whether it comes from the chanter or from the holy clergy, is evident amongst the people of God and is rapidly spread like an infectious disease. In these cases, the parish dissolves, the participation of the faithful is small and without substantial foundations. Only some conscious believers try to fight spiritually within the parish, but they must face scandalous behaviours that make their struggle difficult. These behaviours may become destructive for believers of low spirituality. The worst thing is that these epidemics are easily passed on from teacher to student, from priest to spiritual child, after that, throughout the whole community, from parish to parish, from city to city, from metropolis to metropolis, even from synod to synod ...

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

But you will say, perhaps, “all these just from Psalmody? Aren’t you exaggerating a little?”

I really do not know. But I am thinking... The work of the Angels in heaven is the glorious and eucharistic psalmody of the Holy Triune God. We know it very well from the visions of the Old Testament Righteous and Prophets and after that from the New Testament Apostles and Saints. Even today we hear this in descriptions from the lips of our modern major Saints. It seems that psalmody will be the only art that will be preserved after the renovation of everything in the Kingdom of the Holy Triune God. Why would it be an exaggeration to think that the role of psalmody is also determinant in Orthodox worship now? Did the Lord himself, in fact, not demand from the New Israel, the Church, to cease the sacrifices of goats and bulls and of the ashes of heifers, and to begin offering “sacrifices of praise”? What kind of “a mercy of peace, a sacrifice of prayer” do we offer to the Lord Jesus Christ when we turn our Psaltic Art into a “show”?

The Holy Spirit gave a dowry to the Church and this is psalmody; the Holy Spirit also gave and appointed to the Church hymnographers, melodists, poets and psaltic composers. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit gave to the Church the chanters. This is us. But we must clean the mind during the time of psalmody. We must make our minds like the minds of infants, in order to become free and send in pure fashion our Psaltic Art to the Lord. Otherwise, we will hear the angry Lord saying: “I hate your celebrations, I repulse them... take away from Me the sound of your odes...”³ “I will turn your feasts into mourning and all of your odes into laments...”⁴

3 Amos, 5: 21, 23.

4 Amos, 8: 10.