

THE TRANSCRIPTION, ADAPTATION AND COMPOSITION OF
TRADITIONAL BYZANTINE CHANT IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
An American's Brief Look at the United States

By John Michael Boyer

The relatively short history of Byzantine Chant in the English language has seen a wide range of specimens and varying degrees of success. As we in North America have begun making the transition from the mindset of an immigrant Church to that of a more firmly established cultural entity within the United States, there has been a recent revival of, or at least a recent demand for, traditional Byzantine Chant in both Greek and English. What I hope to address with this paper is a question of methodology of the transcription, adaptation and composition of Byzantine Chant in the English language. Rather than offering a survey of all such attempts in existence, I prefer to look in some length and detail at a few select projects, outlining their advantages and disadvantages. We will primarily be examining the work of two American hieromonks: Father Seraphim Dedes and Father Ephraim of St. Anthony's Monastery.

Before looking at the works of these clergymen, however, I thought it interesting to look at a very early attempt at Greek Orthodox English ecclesiastical chant. One of the first, if not the first attempt by the Greek Archdiocese at setting the music of the Divine Liturgy in English is a project called simply, "Divine Liturgy Hymnal," by Ernie Villis of blessed memory, and published by the Archdiocese of North and South America in the late 1970s. This became known as the "Green Book," or "τὸ Πρασινάκιον." I hesitate even to include this project in this discussion, as it consists exclusively of melodies by Sakellarides, which are clearly not traditional Byzantine Chant. I have discussed extensively in online fora as to how and why the melodies of Sakellarides

became the dubious standard for the Greek Archdiocese, as did Alexander Lingas touch on this issue at the First Axion Estin conference, and so I will not elaborate here. As unattractive as this publication is for those of us in the know, however, it nevertheless provides an interesting and perhaps earliest specimen of methodology that would be perpetuated by many who would later attempt to set Greek ecclesiastical melodies to English.

The approach is this: since the melody is “the Tradition,” it must therefore be preserved at all cost; any change of the melody is tantamount to musical heresy. Therefore, the English text must be adapted in any way possible in order to fit the melody. Apparently, the prospect of holding as gospel the melodies of Sakellarides – a man who apparently made it his mission in life to supplant the traditional repertoire with his own idiosyncratic compositions – presented no irony to the people involved. The book was a bi-lingual publication using the exact same melodies for both the Greek and the English texts. The result of this approach to the English was a collection of pieces so convoluted that it seemed to matter little what the English translation actually said, as long as it could be sung to the Greek melody. Here is one such example, the hymn of the Emperor Justinian:

Only begotten Son and Word of God, immortal one who for our salvation did so humble yourself by taking on flesh, taking flesh by by (sic) the Theotokos and ever Virgin Mary without change did you become man and were crucified Christ our God but conquered death by your death. As one of the Holy Trinity and being glorified together with the Father and the Holy Spirit Save us.

Apart from the obviously inappropriate text repeats in the second line, one could read this translation to imply that it was the Virgin Mary who became man without change; quite a feat in and of itself.

As extreme an example as this is, most of the attempts at setting Greek ecclesiastical melodies to English have on some level had the same methodological problem. Since the vast majority of settings in English published soon after the “Green Book” also used the melodies of Sakellarides almost exclusively, and also employ the same general methodology, we can safely fast-forward some years to more recent projects.

Father Seraphim Dedes, a Greek-American hieromonk who spent some years on Mount Athos, is one of the first people to set the majority of texts from the *Ἀναστασιματάριον* in English, in both Byzantine and Western notations. Working with George Duvall, a translator and cantor in Phoenix, Arizona, Fr. Seraphim was able to begin from scratch in creating both texts and music to parallel the Greek *Ἀναστασιματάριον*.

In this project, Fr. Seraphim uses a similar approach as above, although working from the *Ἀναστασιματάριον* of Πέτρος Πελλοπονήσιος as edited by Ἰωάννης Πρωτοψάλτης provided him with vastly more traditional and appropriate source material. The approach remains virtually the same, however. That is, where possible, he uses exactly the same melodic material as that in this centrally traditional book of melodies. This is especially true when setting *αὐτόμελα* and *προσόμοια*, as we can see here in his setting of the *αὐτόμελον* *Τὸν Τάφον σου Σωτῆρ*, and its *προσόμοια* in the first set of poetic *καθίσματα* during Sunday Matins of the First Mode:

Ⲛ
ⲑ

(K)

The sol - diers keep - ing watch at Your sep - ul - cher O Sav - ior
 be - came as dead for fear of the An - gel ap - pear - ing
 as light - ning and pro - claim - ing un - to the wo -
 men that You a - rose O Des - troy - er of cor - rup - tion
 we glo - ri - fy You and we wor - ship You who from the
 tomb res - ur - rect - ed for You are our on - ly God

The melody has been maintained almost completely the same, such that one could sing the English text to the Greek melody without any notation – the very point of having προσόμοια. However, this is at the cost, perhaps, of a decent translation. In examining the text alone, without the familiarity of the melody, we get the following:

The solders keeping watch at Your sepulcher, O Savior, became as dead for fear of the Angel appearing as lightning and proclaiming unto the women that you arose. O Destroyer of corruption, we glorify you and we worship You who from the tomb resurrected, for you are our only God.

Without the familiar melody, the text becomes much less comfortable, and indeed, does not read like English. This is in contrast to the translation by the Archimandrite Ephrem (Lash) from St. Andrew’s Monastery in Manchester,

England, who is the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s official translator for the English language:

The soldiers watching your grave became as dead men at the lightning flash of the Angel who appeared and proclaimed to the Women the Resurrection. We glorify you, the destroyer of corruption; we fall down before you, risen from the grave and alone our God.

Certainly this is a clearer and more natural translation, but it is impossible to sing it to the προσόμοιον without altering the melody drastically.

In developing singable translations, it is this challenge that presents itself, specifically when dealing with προσόμοια: since there is no point to having them unless they can be sung to their corresponding melodies, we must create metered translations. However, it is also pointless to have a metered translation if the text itself is so convoluted so as to render the hymn confusing, ambiguous, and in extreme cases, utter nonsense.

With ιδιόμελα and other through-composed texts, the task is perhaps a bit easier, although they too, present some problems. Fr. Seraphim’s approach has been to maintain the original melody where at all possible, but where impossible (which is much of the time), to provide what he calls “melodic reminders” of the original Greek musical text, the idea being that the listener will be able to recognize a given hymn by its including melodic phrases that evoke the original. A good example of this approach is his setting of the first Ήωθινὸν Δοξαστικόν:

The Dis - ci - - - ples__ has - tened to _____
 _____ the _____ moun - - - - - (n) -
 - - tain π for the Lord's as - cen - sion from the__ earth__ and



 there the Lord ap - peared to them They wor -



 - - shipped They wor - shipped Him and were in - struct -



 - - ed a - bout the u - - - ni - ver - sal au - thor -



 i - ty He was giv - - - en and they



 were sent out to the whole world to



 preach the res - ur - rec - tion from the dead and



 the res - to - ra - - - tion to heav - - - en



 And He who nev - er lies prom - - - ised



 to be with them for - ev - - - er He



 is Christ our God and the Sav - ior of



 our souls

In general, it is quite successful at preserving the original melody. Beyond providing melodic reminders, it is almost identical. To achieve this, he often adapts his translation to fit the syllabic pattern of the original Greek. However, as this piece was originally through-composed, the composition of the melody is

determined quite directly by what is going on in the text. In other words, the process that the original 18th century composer applied was, roughly:

Given Liturgical Text → Given Mode → Particular Style → Compose Melody.

Unlike the case of προσόμοια, where a hymnographer decides to write a liturgical text to an already extant melodic and syllabic pattern, these pieces have no predetermined melodic form, other than that dictated by the rules of composition in a given style and mode. This is one of the circumstances that, in my opinion, contributed to the elegance, profundity and overall beauty of the Ἑωθινὰ Δοξαστικά: that they were written in order to explicate texts that in and of themselves were elegant, profound and beautiful exegeses of the Morning Gospel readings, without needing to conform to a previous melodic model. So, the melodies themselves are illustrations and reflections on the texts.

Looking at the of Πέτρος Λαμπαδάριος, this is apparent from the very first phrase:

Ἦχος ᾠ Πα

E ij to o o o ro oj

This climbing line from Πα to Δι, an extremely rare cadential point for the opening phrase of a piece in the sticheraric First Mode, is clearly an illustration of the word ὄρος: mountain. This becomes even clearer if the oxeia is put in its proper place:

Ἦχος ᾠ Πα

E ij to o o o ro oj

One can almost see the mountain. Setting this phrase on any other text, e.g. “The Disciples,” although providing an easily recognizable “melodic reminder” at the beginning of the piece, in my opinion misses the point of the text-painting and general rhetoric of the phrase.

Continuing on in the piece:

toij ma qh tai aij e pei ei ei ei ei ro o me e
 hast - ten'd to _____ the _____ moun -

e e e e e e e [e e e e noij
 - - - [- tain

(Note: A red Greek letter π is positioned above the final 'e' in the second line of notation.)

This, of course, is a quote from the old sticheraric style. However, it is not a direct quote from Ἰάκωβος Πρωτοψάλτης, whose setting has a different phrase 0

at this point. This difference indicates to me the likelihood that it was placed in this context deliberately by Πέτρος/Ἰωάννης for expressive purposes. It seems to be used in this case to prolong the verb ἐπειρομένοις, perhaps illustrating the long act of ascending the mountain, although that is conjecture on my part. It is possible that the phrase was placed there simply and only to have a more kalophonic ending to the first full phrase of the piece, however, given the already established rhetoric of text painting by the previous phrase, this is questionable.

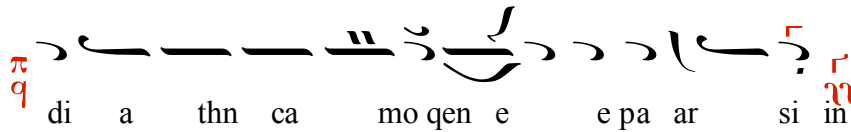
Setting this long phrase on the text “to the mountain,” however, as Father Seraphim does, does not work as well, in my opinion, for the following reasons:

- 1) It, like the phrase before it, misses the opportunity for text painting the image of “mountain;”
- 2) It places undue prolongation on the preposition “to;”⁴⁰¹ and
- 3)

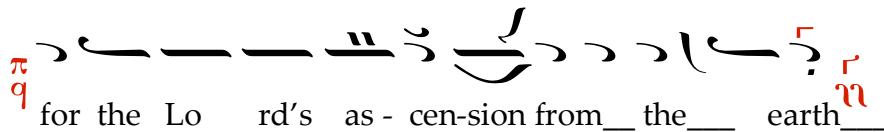
⁴⁰¹ It is true that the syllable in the analogous position in the Greek, πει of ἐπειρομένοις, is also not an important syllable, but it does get a secondary stress, which seems inappropriate on “to.” However, this may have to do with the fact that the word “to” is already finished in its first (and

Although I do not want to overstate this, there is a danger when placing the [syllable reiteration on such an extreme diphthong as the one in “mount” of “mountain.” In general I dislike making compositional decisions based on the assumed level of singers’ ineptitude (no self-respecting singer would close to the “oo” sound until the very end), but in this particular case it seems like it would be especially easy to make this mistake.

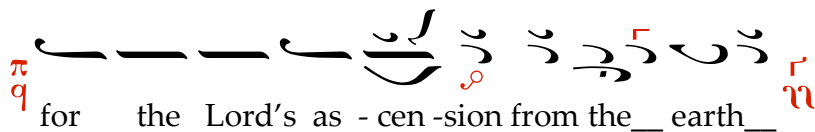
This brings us to “for the Lord’s ascension from the earth,” in the Greek:



Although Fr. Seraphim’s translation of this phrase happens to have the exact same syllabic content as the Greek, making for an opportunity for direct application of the same melodic phrase:

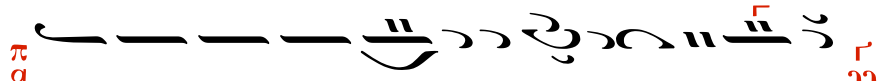


He did not opt for this particular rendering. We can assume that he changed the melody in order for it to be a more appropriate rendering of the English, whose syntax, having the ascension first and the earth second, is in reverse of the Greek:




This conforms well to the rules of melodic placement of syllables, and does certainly illustrate the ascension as high and the earth as lower. As perfectly acceptable as this rendering is, however, since this melodic formula has a certain ecstatic and almost final climactic quality to it, a different phrase might be more appropriate this early in the piece. I might suggest the following:

only) syllable, while in Greek the word continues through the melisma. This kind of analysis is




 for the Lord's as - cen - sion_ from the__ earth_

Moving on, we finally get to the ending of the first sentence in Father Seraphim's translation (the Greek, of course, is all one long sentence). In the Greek:




 e e pe Jh ho Ku u u u ri i i i

Given this in the original, and given that we have finally come to the end of the first sentence, it is curious that he would opt for the shorter setting of



 and there the Lord__ ap - pear'd__ to____ them.

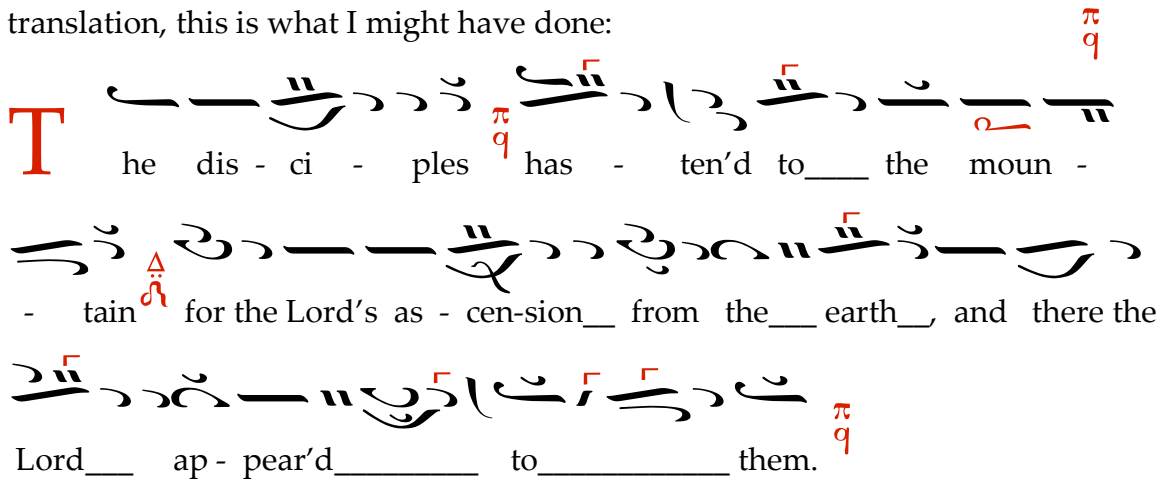
when, being at the end of the sentence, a slower, more final setting like that in the original Greek might be more appropriate:



 and there the Lord__ ap - pear'd____ to____ them.

Although this might be splitting hairs.

Having come to the end of the first sentence in Father Seraphim's translation, this is what I might have done:



T he dis - ci - ples has - ten'd to__ the moun -

 - tain for the Lord's as - cen - sion_ from the__ earth_ and there the

 Lord__ ap - pear'd__ to____ them.

something about which I am only beginning to form ideas, however.

This rendition does not contain nearly as many “melodic reminders” in the form of direct quotes from the original as Father Seraphim’s. However, I believe it is actually closer to the original in form, technique and spirit, in that the melody is written specifically for the given text, within the rules and tendencies of the melodic formulas of the sticheraric first mode, exactly as the original was written. I have borrowed the peculiar phrase from ὄρος, as he did, but I applied it to the word “mountain,” where I believe it is rhetorically appropriate. That and the last phrase of the sentence are really the only quotes from the original, but this rendition, in my opinion, sounds “more like the Greek” than one that is an attempt to reproduce the Greek melody verbatim.

We will leave Fr. Seraphim’s work for the moment, and move on to another very important hieromonk in the United States, Archimandrite Ephraim, affectionately known as Papa Ephraim, from the Monastery of St. Anthony in Arizona. Papa Ephraim’s first work to be made public was the *Divine Liturgies as Chanted on the Holy Mountain*, a snap-shot, if you will, of repertoire in use at Φιλοθέου monastery, set in English. The completed book is 688 pages long, and is available in both a Byzantine notation edition and a Western notation edition. It has become a staple in the liturgical music programs of a great many English-speaking parishes across the Orthodox world. That is, of course, if a given parish is in a position to employ Byzantine Music in its Sunday Divine Liturgy at all, an unfortunately rare occurrence in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

This first project of Papa Ephraim’s offered an incredible way for church musicians to incorporate traditional musical forms into the Divine Liturgy. However, in general, it employed a similar methodology as we saw from Fr. Seraphim Dedes, and even from the Green Book, although I hesitate to mention it in the same breath as the work of these two faithful hieromonks. Be that as it

reviewing one of the drafts of this next project, I noticed some of the text issues I alluded to earlier that I had found in the Liturgy book, the false accents, the out-of-place melismas, and some translation issues, and so I strongly suggested that he take some time to explore exactly how Byzantine melodies function within the ecclesiastical texts, specifically, how the melodic formulas are applied to the syllabic patterns of the text. Two days later, he replied with a catalogue of all of the melodic formulas and their corresponding text patterns for the sticheraric 1st mode. Such is his devotion and love of the psaltic art, and such his humility that he would be so open to the suggestions of a young cantor such as myself.

At any rate, Papa Ephraim went on to catalogue virtually all of the melodic formulae of the central tradition of Byzantine Music. Totalling 975 pages of melodic formulae and their corresponding syllabic patterns, this “Composition Guide,” as he calls it, has served as an important turning point in the adaptation of Byzantine Chant to the English Language. Certainly it changed Papa Ephraim’s own compositional style, most evident in his next publication, *Vespers as Chanted on the Holy Mountain*. In this work, the hieromonk has created English adaptations of the psalms and hymns from the Ἀναστασιματάριον, not precisely transcribing the melodies of this classical work as they appear in Greek, but applying the same process mentioned above, that is, with a given text, in a given mode, he composed the melodies according to the rules of Byzantine Music, in the same style as the Ἀναστασιματάριον.

The beginning of this volume includes an article, “Concerning Adaptation,” in which he outlines many of the issues addressed here. He makes comparison and analysis of many different settings of Κύριε Ἐκέκραξα, “Lord I have cried” in the first mode, from the Green Book, from his own book, from Fr. Seraphim, from the late David Melling, among many others. The article covers

adaptations not only in English, but in Romanian, Slavonic, Spanish, French and more.

The earliest and most successful adaptations from these are from the Romanian and Bulgarian Churches. These projects applied the same methodology that I have addressed, that is, the composition of new melodies, within the idiomatic rules of Byzantine Music, for the liturgical text at hand. Many of these provide “melodic reminders,” similar to Father Seraphim’s work, but never at the expense of a direct rendering of the text. Following the precedence of these other traditions, Papa Ephraim and others like him, as our craft develops, will be able to provide a repertoire parallel to the Greek, able to be sung within the same liturgical services.

This, I believe, is the future of Byzantine Chant in the United States, and perhaps in other English-speaking countries as well. I want to make it clear that we absolutely cannot lose the Greek. Especially in the case of hymnography, however (as opposed to psalmody), which includes so much invaluable theological exegesis, it is imperative that it be sung in the vernacular, so that church-goers may be educated, enlightened, and enriched by the texts of the over 50,000 hymns of the Orthodox Church. I do not believe it necessary to understand every single word of our liturgical services in order to validate one’s liturgical experience; I have had amazing experiences in Russian Churches in which I have understood perhaps 5% of what was said, and nevertheless was transfixed by the transcendence and catholicity of the liturgy. That being said, in the tradition of the Orthodox Church, which has always understood the necessity of the faithful to worship in their own language, it is again imperative that the hymnography of the church be translated clearly, set well musically, and taught to the faithful cantors of the church.

I will close by presenting some of my own work in this area. As the Πρωτοψάλτης of the Metropolis of San Francisco, I have set many musical pieces to English for various occasions. I have not had a chance to embark on writing a whole Ἀναστασιματάριον or any such great work, although I hope to be able to do so soon. The largest projects I have been able to undertake so far are three: 1) a performing edition in Western notation, alternating Greek and English for the Great Vespers and Matins of a Third Mode Sunday, for a conference of the San Francisco Church Music Federation in 2001:

Great Vespers

Arranged by John Michael Boyer

Melody

Ἀπήχημα.

Lord I have cried un - to Thee, (3)

Isokratima

2) a complete setting of the Service of the Little Paraclesis Canon, according to the traditional melodies of the Ἀναστασιματάριον of Ἰωάννης, using the metered translations of Archimandrite Ephrem (Lash) and the late David Melling:

Troparia.

(M) (N) (Γ)

M ost ho - ly Moth - er of God, save us!

(M) (Γ) 3 6 (M) (N) 3

B y ma - ny temp - ta - tions I am held fast, and seek - ing

and 3) a bi-notational setting of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom according to the official translation of the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain:

TRISAGION

Ἦχος Δα.

H
(Δ)

TRISAGION

Second Mode

(G)

This project was created in association with an editorial committee including the director of the world-renowned vocal ensemble *Cappella Romana* and leading historian and liturgical musicologist Dr. Alexander Lingas; musicologist, cantor, composer and teacher of Byzantine Music Mr. Ἰωάννης Ἀρβανίτης; music teacher, musicologist and cantor Dr. Jessica Suchy-Pilalis, and conductor, singer, composer and professor Mark Bailey of Yale University and St. Vladimir’s Seminary.

The format, excerpted above, includes Byzantine notation and transcription in Western notation in facing pages. The Western notation pages include three lines of music: the original Byzantine notation, a structural or “dry” transcription in Western notation, and one possible ornamented realization. This

realization is reflected in a double CD recording of the whole liturgy, to be released in 2008. A bi-notational book of everything on the recording will be released, as well as a filled-out edition, completing the liturgical cycles and modes.

My own adaptation and compositional process is to begin with the best translation possible, and, as a rule, this means using the translations of Fr. Ephrem (Lash), the official English language translator for the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Then, while keeping in mind the original melodies, and attempting to include as much of them as possible, I compose the melody within the rules of the mode and style appropriate to its liturgical genre. In some cases, this means departing from the original melody completely, if it is not appropriate for the textual scheme of the English text. A good example of this is my setting of the hymn of Pentecost, Βασιλεῦ Ὀυρανίε, Heavenly King, excerpted here:

Ἦχος λ π Πά

H^(π) eav - - - en - - - ly___ King, Par - a - clete, Spir -
 - it___ of___ Truth, pres - - ent ev' - ry - - where,

In comparison to the classical melody from the new sticheraric repertoire in Greek:

B a si le eu Ou v ra ni i e Pa ra a klh
 h h te to Pne e eu ma a thj a lh qei ei ei aj

My setting is certainly very different, but, in my opinion, is faithful to the spirit of the original, in that the melody is composed for the text, and not the text for the melody.

Being a cantor in the Greek Orthodox Church in America requires many things, not the least of which are patience and discernment. In a time that still sees Western-style polyphonic choirs and organs in the vast majority of Greek parishes in the United States, patience has become an invaluable virtue, most necessary for those of us that are in the know about traditional Byzantine Music. Also, with a growing number of resources available online from various sources in English, discernment of the quality of approach of these resources is becoming increasingly important. Unfortunately, although many people are doing some very good quality work, we now have the problem of needing to distinguish between this work and that of those whose process is perhaps less than practical. However, I believe there is great hope for the future of Byzantine Music in America. Like any great change, however, it will take time, patience, and above all, prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit.