

## The Impact of Translated Text on Musical Form in Byzantine Liturgical Practice

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### Abstract

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Liturgical text and its music share greater artistic co-dependence than is generally apparent in our current modes of sacred singing. This is evident in the ancient Byzantine texts themselves, revealing numerous examples which were liturgically and poetically structured to be sung. In spite of this condition, various ongoing cultural influences have all but relegated current stewards of liturgical language and of liturgical music into separate creative existences.

This paper, therefore, proposes the re-unification of these worlds into a form of liturgical creativity which encompasses in the process the dimensions of both text and music. This is not to say that poets and composers must become one and the same. Rather, they must work in light of the impact one is to have on the other. This proposal begins by acknowledging from the composer's point of view the liturgical principles which co-dependently link text and music in the Byzantine liturgical tradition. The paper further visits a limited number of translated sacred texts, and recommends, through somewhat technical advice, a means of uniting the creative process of text and music as it relates to the liturgical singing of English today.



### *Introduction*

The ultimate goal of well-crafted liturgical music in the Byzantine tradition is to enliven and express audibly the sacred words of worship. In so doing, liturgical music, like the Byzantine icon in its use of inverse perspective, attempts to draw the faithful into the image and meaning of the text. As a result, believers become part of the thematic essence being sung as they simultaneously engage in the liturgical component taking place or about to take place. Music, therefore, creates a bridge between liturgical text and liturgical ceremony, carrying those gathered from one to the other within the unity of a common pulse, rhythm, melody – indeed, within a common voice and song.

These principles are born of sacred music composers, conductors, and singers who begin their artistic concerns with liturgical function and purpose. From this point of view, the liturgical arts serve not as ceremonial ornamentation or decoration, but as the necessary means by which to elevate liturgy above and beyond the mundane. Within this process, music and text form a particular alliance, as both move in partnership through each liturgical segment to provide, as it were, the vehicle for the journey.

However, the best style of music for achieving worship in an elevated state remains unclear. Some musicians argue, for instance, that monophonic chant, which shapes text and melody into one unified sound, is the most direct and unadulterated form of liturgical expression. Others see greater vitality in the multi-voiced sounds of polyphony or homophony. Still others argue for the functional authenticity of chant, not in unison, but imbedded in various forms of counterpoint. Whatever the contentions that propose one style of sound over another, the link to liturgical meaning and relevance is threatened when music fails to find compositional shape and definition in the text which it accompanies, no matter how glorious the resulting sound.

The elevated and comprehensible expression of Byzantine liturgy, therefore, evolves from a creative process which ideally involves a well-designed text further shaped by music.

One must ask, however, what happens when an element of this creative process is altered – when, for instance, original text is translated? How does music respond and to what extent is it altered as well? Furthermore, where in history, especially in the Slavic Churches which dealt extensively with Byzantine translations, is the musical relationship to text most dramatically affected? And finally, what impact does all this have on the singing of English translation in the Byzantine churches of today?

To address these questions and to uncover their implications, this paper will: (1) identify the liturgical foundation which governs the relationship between original sacred text and music; (2) discuss the unique musical problems which arose in the Slavonic tradition when sacred text became translated; (3) examine further the issues surrounding translated text using examples from nineteenth-century Slavic common chant; (4) discover the extent to which these issues are present in English translations currently in use; and (5) propose, as a result of objectives one through four, a list of suggestions and necessary ingredients when translating liturgical text into singable English for Byzantine-style worship.

### *I. Byzantine Liturgical Foundations Governing Text and Music*

The principles which govern ancient Byzantine liturgical structure link sacred text and sacred singing in an unbreakable bond. As proof, the Church resisted the use of solo or accompanimental instruments in worship. This is not to say that instruments, in and of themselves, are unworthy. Rather, they are incapable of conveying concrete ideas, including the tenets of faith. As a result, the worshipper may withdraw inwardly from the unity of the faithful to interpret independently the sound that is heard. Even instruments which are limited to accompanying singing may imply, through any number of compositional configurations and gestures, meanings that remain outside the text. In opera, for instance, accompaniment can warn the audience of impending doom beyond the knowledge