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The Music of the Byzantine Liturgy

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FEBRUARY 16, 1909.

F. GILBERT WEBB, Esq.,

IN THE CHAIR.

THE MUSIC OF THE BYZANTINE LITURGY.

BY R. R. TERRY.

IT is rather disconcerting to hear the chairman say that you are coming "to sit at my feet"; especially so as my own interest in this subject only dates back to last year, when, in my professional capacity, it was necessary for me to be responsible for the music of an entire—I will not say Greek Mass: we all use that expression, but it is quite incorrect. After all is said and done, the term "Mass" is peculiar to the Roman liturgy. The Greeks never called their liturgy a Mass, and in dealing with any question of this kind we should always use the name which the people engaged in a particular form of service give to it themselves. Therefore we speak of the Byzantine liturgy, not the Greek Mass. Indeed it is not strictly correct to call it even Greek; we have to remember that it exists in about fourteen different tongues, of which Greek, Old Slavonic, Arabic and Roumanian are the chief. True, it was composed in the Greek language, but of course this applies equally to all Eastern rites, especially those of the Armenians and the Slavonians. The famous liturgies of the Apostolic Constitutions of Antioch and Alexandria—entirely different rites—were originally written in Greek also. The thing which is characteristic of its use, as of all uses, is the place where it was written, that place of course being Constantinople. The old name of Constantinople was Byzantium, so we speak of the Byzantine liturgy, just as we speak of the Roman Mass because the local church from which it took its origin was in Rome. Mass, therefore, was the exclusive term for the celebration of the Eucharist according to the Roman rite; but at no time have the Greeks called their service a Mass. Liturgy is the correct word, the name they give it themselves, and having sprung from Constantinople it naturally takes the name of Byzantine

Liturgy. Therefore, as Dr. Fortescue, one of the principal authorities on the subject, has said: "Before you have anything to do with the study of this liturgy you must get out of the habit of calling it a Greek Mass." Besides the "Orthodox" Greek Church, there are a large number of Greeks called Uniates, who use a Byzantine rite corresponding to the Orthodox rite as used in Europe. It would be convenient to call them Melchites, but that name is only used for Syria and Egypt. The Byzantine Uniates may be thus grouped: (1) Those of Syria and Egypt, about 11,000 in number, called Melchites, under the Patriarch of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem. Their liturgical language is Arabic, interspersed with Greek; but of course any of their clergy can celebrate entirely in Greek if they wish. (2) There are a few hundreds in Turkey in Europe, and Greece, who depend upon the Latin delegates at Constantinople and Athens; they use Greek. (3) One Georgian Uniate congregation at Constantinople, the last remnant of what was once a great church, using partly Georgian. (4) Then there are the Ruthenians (nearly four millions), in Austro-Hungary and in corners of Russia. They have six bishops, but none in Russia. They use Old Slavonic. (5) The Bulgarian Uniates use Old Slavonic also. (6) The Roumanian Uniates (about one and a half millions) use their own language liturgically. (7) The Greeks in Italy (about 50,000 altogether), a remnant of the Church of Greater Greece, are chiefly centred about or near Rome, as well as in Sicily. They are under the jurisdiction of Latin Ordinaries. All these use Greek liturgically, but their rites are considerably Latinised.

The earliest Byzantine rite is that of St. Basil, but this is kept for a few days in the year only. Then there is the liturgy of the Pre-sanctified, which is used only on week days in Lent. It is supposed to have been composed by Gregory the Great in 1604, when at Philippi; but for all the services on other days of the year we have the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, which we can consider as the normal and usual one. The history of this liturgy, like the history of other liturgies, is one of gradual development, a long process of building up. What is known about it may be summed up thus: In the first place, none of the names are quite correct; that of St. Gregory certainly is not. Nor are the other rites the complete works of St. Basil or St. John Chrysostom. They are all the result of long development. No liturgy is ever the work of one man. In their essential parts—the Lessons, probably the Lord's Prayer, the Breaking of Bread, the Communion—all go back to the very beginning. Then each grows step by step. What is characteristic of a liturgy is that it has not one author, but one local Church, from

which it has sprung with its customs and traditions. In this case that place is Constantinople, and all the three liturgies which I have mentioned bear the stamp of that Church, just as the liturgy of the Roman Missal bears the stamp of Rome. The starting point of the development of the liturgy may be said to be Antioch: any Eastern rite can be safely catalogued under the heading Antioch or Alexandria. St. John Chrysostom is a further development of the rite of St. Basil, made by shortening the priests' prayers. There is a certain amount of tradition for attributing this particular liturgy to St. John in 1407. All the ritual of the Great and Little Entrances is much later. So also is the insertion of the *μονογενής* (which we are to sing this afternoon) and Creed. They were added in Justinian's time (527 to 565). The Cherubikon (*ὕμνος χερουβικός*) is supposed to have been composed by his successor, Justinian the Second (565 to 578), and the authorship of the Trisagion (or Tersanctus) is generally attributed to Proklos of Constantinople (434 to 437). The complicated preparation of the offerings was developed between the ninth and sixteenth centuries. This liturgy, unchanged since the sixteenth century or so, is now practically, though not historically, the fundamental one. It is always printed first in the Service Books. Then follow those parts of the rite of St. Basil where they develop from the preparation ceremonies—the chant of the choir and the lessons. Those of St. John Chrysostom are also used for St. Basil. The third liturgy (of the Pre-sanctified) is modified from St. John Chrysostom. Changes have been made to make it suitable for the rite of Good Friday. Its first part is mixed up with the Hesperinon or Vespers. This rite has been ascribed to various people, St. James the Great, St. Peter, St. Paul, and so forth. Although no author is named in the initial books, it is now commonly referred to St. Gregory, because of the legend that when he was Legate of Constantinople, in 578, seeing there were no fixed rites for the service, he composed this one for it. But really it is very much later. As the rite presupposes a church fitted for it, we need to know something about the style of a Byzantine church and its decorations before we can rightly understand the music which is sung. I hope you will not mind my refreshing my memory. I have a short text of the service on which I can comment as we go along. You will notice a term which is frequently recurring with reference to "the doors." The rite presupposes an ikonostasis or screen across the church. It is not in the least like a rood screen, and it is quite incorrect to call it such: just as it is incorrect to speak of a Greek Mass. In this screen there are three doors, the middle or royal door, and the North and South doors with their respective ikons. But it is not to these doors that the deacon

refers when he says, for instance: "The doors, the doors, in wisdom let us attend." He refers to the doors of the church which (after the departure of the Catechumens) were jealously guarded, lest in the times of persecution any "informer" should obtain entrance.

Having said this, I will not trouble you with many ceremonial details this afternoon; for, after all, this is a Musical Association; but it is only necessary to give some of these small explanations beforehand so that you will not have any trouble in following the music we sing. There is one thing which strikes us first when the text is sung in Greek. It is sung with the Modern Greek pronunciation which to those brought up on the ordinary English pronunciation, is somewhat of a trouble at first, especially it (as I had to do for this particular service) one has to write it all out phonetically in Roman characters for the singers. Further, when we speak of Greek Church-music—(that is the common term)—most of our minds are carried over to Russia, and we think of those magnificent Russian basses, and the rich sonorous harmony one hears there. I do not propose this afternoon to say anything about Russian music, because, however beautiful it is, it is more correct, I think, to say that it is music composed *for* the Byzantine rite, than it would be to say, it is *Byzantine music*. The true music of the Byzantine rite is that which exists in their Service Books, printed in their curious characters, and used liturgically. That is where I want to make the difference between Byzantine music and music for the Byzantine liturgy. It is of course no use trying to trace the author of any of the tunes; but some of them are very remarkable, and I must leave it to yourselves to say whether they are remarkable for their beauty or merely remarkable because of their origin.

When I first had to prepare a service of this kind, I found I had got quite a wrong idea of how it should be sung. I did not think that the way I was taught to make my singers render it was any more beautiful than my own; in fact I thought it was quite the reverse. But I was told that it was the correct way. I had a highly respectable Archimandrite to put me through the mill on the subject, and one or two Constantinople Greeks. So, however ugly it may sound, I have the satisfaction of knowing—on the authority of people who ought to know: dignitaries of the Greek Church—that it is the way they prefer it to be done.

I do not propose to say much, except in general terms, about the mere notation of the music, because one does not want to repeat what is easily procurable elsewhere, and there is a very excellent article which I remember having seen in the "*Internationale Musik Gesellschaft*" (in 1907), where you have the whole thing set out clearly and lucidly, with all

the carefulness of a German author: so different from some of the French books on the subject, which are often diffuse about matters which do not particularly concern the music. But there is one little point about the notation. To put it briefly, it is something like Pitman's shorthand gone rather mad, as the following extract (in the 7th mode) will show:—

which in modern notation would read:—

The notes of the scale begin on *πα βου γα δι χε ζω νη*, corresponding to our *re, mi, fa, sol, la, si, do*, and on these notes you have the different modes. At the beginning of the piece they put the initial letter of the mode. That indicates the mode and the note that you start on. Then they have various devices for raising and lowering the pitch of the note. Of course there are no such things as staves or bars. One can have all this information in a nutshell in the excellent article I have referred to. But there is one piece of the notation which perhaps deserves a little more attention than the rest. That is called the *Ison*. The *Ison*, in its earliest application, is a note like a pothook placed lengthways That means, you repeat the previous note; and if you see a number of these *Isons*, it means you go on repeating the note. But it is used in another sense. In this other sense it applies

to the tonic of the mode, which is sustained like the drone of a bagpipe throughout the entire composition to be sung. The Ison is generally sung by boys' voices, although where boys cannot be procured, they have men. The Constantinople Greeks, whom I heard, had men; but they prefer boys. Sometimes in a church (and I think it is so in Paris) they have only one boy. The duties of the Ison boy are many and varied. In the monasteries he is supposed to do a certain amount of manual work. He then goes into the choir, and, for those who have not heard the Ison before, the effect is rather startling when you hear the "Ison boy" let out a tremendous sound, and then hum under his breath the note of the mode. In one instance I know of, they sing the dominant of the mode, but generally it is the tonic. The idea is to keep the singer in the key. When I first had to make myself sufficiently acquainted with this music to be able to transcribe it and perform it, I could not understand why so much stress was laid upon the Ison and the key; but when I heard a good Arab singer attempt to sing the "Grand Doxology" I realised very vividly the use of the Ison, and the difficulty there was in keeping the singer in his key. The Oriental ear being very much more subtle than ours in certain respects, I have no doubt he was very often in the key when one thought he was not. The necessity of these Isons therefore became all the more apparent. I have heard someone attempt to imitate an Eastern melody on the violin. It sounded correct to me, but the performer was promptly told by the singer that it was nothing like it. Suppose, by way of illustration, we sing one of the smaller items with the Ison. The way it is done is this: in the monastery church it is the usual custom for the choirmaster to have a long stick, and of course when the mode changes, as it sometimes does, the Ison note must change too. The changes are conveyed to the boy by means of a blow on the head with the stick. Whether this secures a more emphatic Ison or not I do not know. I must ask you not to smile at the singing, because the effect of hearing this music for the first time with trained English voices is curious. When you hear the regular Arab singing it is much as if a person were holding his nose and howling. Even Dr. Fortescue, in his book, calls it cater-wauling. The tameness that results from having trained European voices to sing it is very curious indeed; so much so, that in my first attempts, before I had coaching from these Easterns, I used to make the men sing softly and smoothly with the Ison fairly loud. But I am told that is wrong. The singing must be heavy and pounded out. They all do it like that. The only thing is, that the Western ear is not sufficiently subtle for the singer to wander about as Easterns do, in all the keys, so you will be spared that.

In the beginning of a piece the Ison is not always sounded at the same time as the piece begins. It generally enters a few beats after the music has begun. (Choir sings "O Monogenes.")

A PORTION OF "O MONOGENES" IN MODERN NOTATION.

Ο μο - νο - γε - νης Υι - ος χαι λο - γος

του θε - ου α - θα - να - τος υ - παρ - χων

χαι χα - τα - δε - ξα - με - νος δι - α την

η - μη - τε - ραν σω - τε - ρι - - αν. &c.

I do not wish to take up more time than necessary, so I will only give you a bald idea of the rite: what music comes in, and where it comes in. At first there is a very long process of preparation, when the priest and the deacon, going behind the screen, go through a very elaborate ritual. But that does not concern us, and during the whole of this time the choir has very little to do. On the particular occasion when I had to prepare this music, the Grand Doxology was sung. It corresponds with the Gloria in Excelsis, and a great many other phrases which come in almost all liturgies; but the brief directions are simple. The singers wear cassocks, but no surplices, and stand on a carpet outside the screen some way back on the right side. No one kneels at all during the Greek Rite. At the beginning of the service (conducted by the celebrant, the deacon, and anyone else who may be assisting) the choir has nothing to do. In a monastery church some persons may recite portions of the Byzantine Office, but in an ordinary secular choir it is never done. Towards the end of the preparation the deacon comes out and incenses the church. After this there comes a very long litany. I was anxious to obtain all the information I could about the Byzantine rite and music before I had to do it myself, and I once asked a friend of mine for his

impressions of the Byzantine service held in Rome. "Well," he said, "it seems to me, as far as I can make out, to consist entirely of Kyrie Eleisons." He was referring to the three long litanies. (Choir sings Kyrie Eleison.)

After a number of these petitions the celebrants inside the screen end with a prayer. This first litany has eleven petitions, and there is nothing for the choir to do but sing "Kyrie Eleison," "Si Kyrie," "Amen." Then the deacon begins a second litany which is much shorter, but between these litanies an Antiphon is sung. After the same process has been gone through, the deacon begins the third litany. Immediately the deacon has gone into the Sanctuary the choir goes on at once after "Amen" into the third Antiphon, which consists of the 94th Psalm. Then comes the Little Entrance, the Epistle and Gospel; and it is at this point that we get the music which is more or less characteristic of the service. The Cherubikon, for example, is very long, and we also note that at a certain point the choir must wait until the deacon makes his entrance through the royal doors before they continue the music. The deacon and acolytes go in procession to the north door of the screen. They sing before the royal door; then the deacon sings "sophia" (wisdom). That is a phrase constantly recurring: it is a relic of the old times, when services had to be rendered with closed doors, and whenever anything special was about to be done, the deacon cried out "Be wise, attend"; and just before Consecration, the deacon still cries out "The doors, the doors; in wisdom let us attend." After that, the choir goes straight on to the "Trisagion." The deacon speaks to the Celebrant, the Celebrant says a prayer, which finishes in the usual way with "Amen." Then the Elder reads some verses (something to do with the feast of the day), then the Epistle, then the Celebrant begins to give his blessing (as he does a great many times during the service), and the choir sings Alleluia to that three times. This Alleluia, you will find, is much less diatonic than the other items you have heard. Then is sung Hagios O Theos, "O Holy One, Oh Strong One, O Immortal One" (sung in the Roman Church on Good Friday). (Choir sings.)

ALLELUIA.

You can see from that, the Ison has a certain value. If you did not know my choirmen *meant* to sing those notes, you could easily imagine they had gone clean out of the key. Eastern singers give a peculiar click at the end of phrases, such as you hear from uncultured singers, especially from—I think they call them—"Lady Comediennes." (Choir sings.)

Easterns sing very much from the nose. That is one of the characteristics of the singing, and they think it in their own minds very beautiful. (Choir sings "Trisagion").

TRISAGION.

Then there is another litany (of the Catechumens) and the usual responses. I need not go into other details, as they really do not concern the music. Then follows the Rite of the Faithful ; which includes the Great Entrance, to which I

have already alluded. At that point in the service, begins the Cherubikon, part of which we shall sing.

CHERUBIKON.

Οι τα χε - - - - -

- - - ρου - - - - - ε χε -

- ρου - ει - - - - - ιμ

μν - στι κω - ως ει - κο - νι - -

- - - - - ζο - ει

κο - νι - ζον τε - - - - - ες &c.

The Cherubikon is a simple diatonic composition; and at the middle point, where one must wait until the deacon comes in, holding the diskos on his head, we reach the most dramatic moment in the service. (Choir sings.) And so it goes on. Then come more litanies, and then the responses, "Lift up your hearts," and "We lift them up unto the Lord," &c. (Choir sings.)

RESPONSES (SURSUM CORDA, &c.).

Ε - λε - ον ει - ρη - νης, θυ - σι - αν αι - νε - σε - ως.

Και με - τα του πνευ - μα - τος σου.

Ε - χο - μεν προς τον Κυ - ρι - ον.

Α - - - - - ξι - ον και δι - και - ον ε - στι

προ - σκυ νειν πα - τε - ρα Υι - ον και

Α - γι - ον Πνευ - μα. τρι - α - δα ο -

μου - ου - σι - ον και α - χω - ρι - στον.

I must say that was not part of the music. [N.B.—A slight mistake had occurred.] I am afraid the gentlemen were reading the last few notes a second too high. Those are the unrehearsed effects which combine to make Eastern music so very interesting to the person who hears it for the first time. That little slip brought the music nearer to what it sounds like when done by Orientals than when trained musicians attempt it. In fact, to my mind, in the mouths of trained singers this music is much paler than when Orientals are singing through the nose. We get the notes, but we have lost the Oriental flavour. (Choir sings.) The main thing seems to be, either sing very loudly through the nose, or pound out the notes.

I am afraid that these disjointed remarks perhaps do not give a very clear idea of the liturgy. As I said before, I had no knowledge of it whatever until last year, and my interest in it has been confined to its practical side. I meant to have said something about the books used, about which there is no order or regularity. The principal one is the Euchologion, which contains most of the music of the liturgy, but the rest must be sought for in other books. I have not been able to do more than touch the fringe of a very wide subject, but as a general summary I trust it has not been

without interest, and I hope that even with European voices singing to European ears, we have perchance imported something of the Byzantine flavour into this highly interesting music.

POLYCHRONION IN THE FIFTH MODE.

Πο - λυ - χρο - - - - - νι - ον ποι -

η - - - - - σαι Κυ - - - - -

ρι - ος ο Θε - ο - - - - - ος

τον μα - κυ - ρι - ω - - - - - τα - τον και α

γι - ω - τα - τον και σε - βα σμι - ω - τα - τον η - μων

αυ - θεν - την και δε - - - - - σπο - - - - - την &c.

DISCUSSION.

THE CHAIRMAN.—I feel sure I am expressing the sentiments of all present when I say we feel much indebted to Mr. Terry for his interesting paper, on a subject of which so little is known. I doubt if we are able now to fully appreciate the amount of research and number of facts brought before us; to do so we must wait until the lecture is printed in the Proceedings. These, I think, will be yet more informing if we ask the lecturer for further information on certain points, and with this object I would submit a few to his kind consideration. The chanting we have heard seems to me an early form of Plain-song. If so, has it modes corresponding to the Dorian and Phrygian, &c.? Is the chanting always in unison? What is the effect of different dialects on the musical inflections? I presume that Russian sacred music is much more modern than the Byzantine. Is the former a corruption of the latter? Doubtless other questions will occur to several members of the Association, who will feel with myself that this is a golden opportunity for acquiring information on a recondite subject.

MR. THELWALL.—Is this music used in the Greek churches in London?

MR. TERRY.—It is not in the one in Moscow Road; they use modern Russian music there.

MR. THELWALL.—With regard to the screen, I fancy it is a solid wall. I have been in several Greek churches in the East, and, if I remember rightly, the priests go right through doors into a separate chamber and are invisible to the audience. It makes the services rather trying to the casual visitor that everybody has to stand; there is no sitting or kneeling.

MR. BLAIKLEY.—One thing has occurred to me with regard to that pedal note. Does it help the singers to sing in true intonation, quite apart from modern ideas of harmony? Although to our ears it might be a great divergence from the original note, yet the reciting note may be of great service in keeping them strictly in tune, if they judge the intervals from that reciting note.

THE CHAIRMAN.—I take it they get a good deal flat.

MR. TERRY.—With regard to the question of keeping in the key, the Ison has a distinct value. My own experience is that when Oriental singers get to the upper notes of the scale, it is generally difficult to know what they are trying to sing. In any case the chromatic melodies sound weird when listened to for the first time. Most of my friends—after I

have given them a bar or two—say “Thank you” with such fervent emphasis that it clearly indicates they have had enough. The Gramophone Company asked me to give them three records of this Byzantine music, and when the first had been duly recorded, the courteous Secretary also said “Thank you” with equal fervour, and opined that one such record in their catalogue would be as much as a philistine British public would stand. I have no doubt the music was Greek and diatonic in origin, modified chromatically from Turkish and Arabic sources, for the modes as they stand are very similar to the Gregorian ones. I am not well acquainted with Indian music, but such as I have heard is very similar in performance to the chromatic Byzantine. The singing of the Liturgy is always in unison and unaccompanied, if it is *Byzantine* music. That which one hears in Russia and in the Greek churches in London is frankly modern, and in no sense Byzantine. With regard to the question concerning the dialects, I do not think they have much effect on the music. Vernacular settings of the Liturgy would be chiefly used in those parts of Europe where there is little or no singing. I have not myself come across any vernacular books of the Liturgy with music. With regard to the liturgical books themselves, there is great confusion. There is no co-ordination of rites, and the rubrics are very confused. We may see the deacon, for instance, in one part of the sanctuary, while the rubric would indicate that he should be in quite another place (the rubric for moving him having been omitted). Custom and tradition—varying in different countries—really rule everything, the Greeks having no body corresponding to the Roman “Congregation of Rites” to settle such matters. Such rubrics as are generally observed are only the opinions of the best writers as to how things should be done, and are not of the nature of distinct rubrical directions. I had a large quantity of Russian music for the Liturgy sent me from many quarters when the question of a public performance of it was first mooted. It was almost all of the folk-song type, and not infrequently harmonized in a musicianly manner, especially by the leading St. Petersburg musicians. But of course such music does not come within the scope of this afternoon’s subject. With regard to the ikonostasis, or screen, it is in most churches permanent, and part of the structure, but a temporary screen is allowable, as was the case in the service for which I had to prepare the music. The effect of the voice of the celebrant chanting behind the screen is very impressive. I think I have now answered the points raised by the different speakers, and can only thank you very heartily for the patience with which you have listened, especially as my remarks have necessarily been disjointed, and of the nature of a running commentary. An

exhaustive treatment of the subject would be impossible in an afternoon's session.

THE CHAIRMAN.—I should like to ask for a vote of thanks for the singers as well as the lecturer. With all respect to Mr. Terry, we should have had a very vague idea of the Ison if it had not been for them.

(The votes were passed, and the meeting terminated.)