

Hesychia and Psalmody Today

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Abstract: The Romanian Patriarchate declared that the year 2022 was to be devoted to the commemoration of the Hesychast saints Simeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas, and Paisios of Neamț. This led us to the idea of discussing the connections between the tradition of Hesychasm and psalmody, even more so as Saint Paisios was one of the greatest supporters of psaltic music in the communities he shepherded. To what extent can we still speak of hesychia in psaltic chanting today, when many Orthodox parishes experience a state of stagnation or even degradation of chanting? Is hesychia an experience meant only for monks or can psalmody lead to hesychia even in the case of ordinary churchgoers?

When we talk of psalmody, in the broad sense of chanting hymnographic texts, we refer to a sacred act of prayer expressed through different states of mind. These moods or *ethe* are the true music that springs from the inside and overflows outside through outward forms of expression such as one’s posture, facial expression, spoken words, and, finally, intoned melodies. All these forms expressing one’s inner *ethe* generate, in turn, different moods in the souls of those who listen and pray to the words and melodies of the chants. According to the teachings of the Holy Fathers of the Eastern Church, liturgical chanting creates a direct, extremely strong and mysterious connection between the inner experiences of the chanter and those who listen and receive these states of mind directly by audition. Therefore, the psaltis or chanter must know and be able to control all the objective or subjective factors that can create certain states of mind.

Keywords: hesychia, psalmody, psaltic, melos, rhythm.

1. Introduction

When I received the invitation to speak about Hesychasm and psalmody, my first thought was to present the psaltic tradition established at Neamț Monastery by Saint Paisios Velichkovsky, a theme that left a strong mark on a large part of my doctoral thesis (Sîrbu, 2019) and on the psaltic repertoire I have interpreted with “Byzantion” Choir.

However, gradually, a question started to take shape in my mind, leading me to the present study, which was conducted not so much in my capacity as a researcher but rather as a psaltis. To what extent can we still talk today of hesychia in psaltic chanting, when so many Orthodox parishes experience a state of stagnation and even degradation as far as chanting is concerned? Is hesychia an experience intended only for those monks who lead a highly spiritual life, or can psalmody lead to hesychia even in the case of ordinary churchgoers? And if

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the latter is possible, what are the objective factors in the reality of church choirs that prevent it from happening? Let us not forget that at the end of the 19th century, the precarious situation of church choirs led many intellectuals, and even bishops or priests, to start a campaign for the westernization of church musical culture, demanding that our Church should turn its face towards “the great culture of Europe”. This is why we ask ourselves: should the quality of chanting and service be an element that influences one’s inner experiences during service or not?

2. On the role of psalmody

Many Holy Fathers left teachings about the spiritual formation of monks or Christian churchgoers. Talking about the healing effects of chanting, St. Gregory Palamas dedicated an entire sermon to this topic, saying that “worshipping God relentlessly, through prayer and psalmody, founds and secures all the good, and avoids and brings salvation from all the evil and trouble” (Lingas, 2003, footnote 10, pp. 70-79.). Saint Gregory Palamas lived at the same time as the great composer Saint John Koukouzelis (approx. 1270-† before 1340), the incomparable master of calophony, apprentice to master John Glykys. Both these saints were psaltes at the Great Lavra on Holy Mount Athos and both witnessed revelations that helped them to strengthen their zeal for the holy service they provided: Saint Gregory Palamas was admonished by Saint Anthony, who advised him not to neglect common prayer out of too much confidence in the superiority of praying in one’s mind, whereas The Mother of God herself came to Saint John Koukouzelis in a dream and asked him to sing in her honour and healed him of a foot disease caused by too much time spent in prayer (Lingas, 2003, footnote 26).

The writer Paladie mentioned in the *Lavsaiicon* a certain Elpidios, a monk who lived in one of the caves around Jericho, who “only ate on Saturdays and Sundays, and stayed awake at night chanting psalms” (Paladie, 2007, p. 105). It is said that “when he returned from threshing or some meeting with other old men”, Abba John the Dwarf “used to go into prayer, meditation and psalmody, up until he brought his mind back to the state it had been in before all that” (*Paterikon*, p. 96).

Is this hesychia an endeavour intended only for the life of monks? Father Zacharias of Essex Monastery points out that “Hesychasm is absolutely necessary for all members of the Church” (Zaharou, 2023, p. 40-47, 43). Without a night spent in deep prayer, in hesychia, Father Zacharias tells us, “the believer will not comprehend the true power of the Church Mysteries”. The same father considers that metanoia or the inner change of each of us is directly linked to hesychast prayer: “Unless the name of Christ clings to our every breath, we cannot truly change and become spiritual” (Zaharou, 2023, p. 40-47, 43).

3. Chanting and its inner effects

There is therefore no doubt about the benefits brought by peace of mind and prayer to each individual Christian. Moreover, the Holy Fathers are proof that appeasement, hesychia, was closely related to psalmody, whose practising brought tranquillity and inner peace.

It would be appropriate, therefore, to take a closer look at the effects that chanting has on the soul. One's moods or *ethe* (from Gr. ἦθος) are generated by several factors, the most important of which make up a unitary triad: the *logos* or the word (from Gr. λόγος), the *melos* or melody (from Gr. μέλος) and *rhythm* (from Gr. ρυθμός). The unity of this triad is given by the fact that the three elements cannot be dissociated from each other. When someone is speaking, reading, preaching, that uttering has in itself a *melos*, a melodicity that, in turn, has an inner rhythmic movement. Our great theologian Dumitru Stăniloae also refers to this when he says: "Psalmody does not necessarily mean chanting. Any spoken prayer acquires a rhythm, an inner harmony, which is in itself akin to chanting. Only hurried prayer does not have this order, and gets united with disorder" (Stăniloae, 2016, footnote comment, p. 629, footnote 880).

Therefore, there is no *word*, no speech that does not simultaneously contain a *melos* and a *rhythm*; in this context, *rhythm* is not just a sequence of rhythmic structures, but, in a deeper sense, a movement (from Gr. κίνηση), expressed either externally through sound, or internally, through inner movement. This triad thus shows the way we, as speaking beings, can fully praise God-The Word. In the same vein, the great theologian and researcher Athanasios Vourlis says: "This coming together of the divine word, the sacred melos, and rhythm helps one receive God's words joyfully and effortlessly, and thus, man can listen to them with sinless pleasure. Yet pleasure becomes sinful when we sing to indulge our own selfishness"¹.

Coming back to the specificities of each *ethos*, it is the *word* that gives to the mind the noetic meanings of the chanted texts and keeps it awake to make it constantly think about what it heard. On the other hand, if sung in the right spirit, the *melos* feeds the soul, because it does not use words, but sounds, intervals, scales, whose effect and functioning move the soul and raises it to a higher level. Saint Euthymios Zigabenus makes an analogy between psalmody and Adam's fall from Heaven, explaining that *melos* recovers, reconstructs the fallen man's *inner ethos*. This idea matches that of St.

¹ Athanasios Vourlis, Conference *Ethosul psalmodiei în învățătura Sfinților Părinți* [The ethos of psalmody in the teaching of the Holy Fathers], Zilele Psaltilor Români [Days of the Romanian Psalters], Second Edition, 2022. Asociația Culturală Byzantion [Byzantion Cultural Association]. Iași, Romania. Romanian interpretation by Associated Prof. PhD Maria Alexandru (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5doVuVT_DEs

Gregory the Theologian, who says that the spiritual man has inner harmony, while the passionate man, disharmony, dissonance, and terrible noise.

Returning to technical aspects, the workings of *melos* are permanently connected to *rhythm*, and they can be of several types:

The *melos* of *hurried chants* (or troparion hymns) expresses an *ethos of watchfulness* (*εγγρήγορη*), as shown by Professor Athanasios Vourlis. Alternating between binary and ternary structures, fast-paced chants imprint on one's mind a state of *permanent shuddering* and *spiritual awakening*, which are meant to keep us in a state of relentless mind movement and working. This kind of *melos* covers most of the Orthodox service and, by the massive presence of hymnographic texts, has an obvious catechetical nature. Thus, including many troparia, the services of Vespers and Matins are in and by themselves a catechesis of that celebration. In this respect, Father Roată Ionel² said in a speech addressing the faithful: "Pay attention to the Matins service, because it is the sermon of that day's feast".

The *melos* of *moderately paced* chants (in which, in general, the melodies lengthen the syllables over 2 to 4 beats) represents a balance between the word and the melody, which in a way makes the transition from the catechetical aspect to a more doxological one, as professor and deacon Sabin Preda shows. The extension of melody on each syllable, the more ornate melodic phrases give more respite and tranquillity to the mind, to let it think about each word separately. The more one finds inner peace, quiet, and the exercise of concentration during service, the more one will love these chants, which give a lot of temporal space to the mind for it to understand and experiences every word it hears.

The *melos* of *slow-paced extended* chants is the one that has the greatest power and resources to help the soul find its peace. In chants such as *koinonika*³, *cheroubika*, *praises*⁴, or *mathima*⁵, the mind is offered the peace it needs to take in every word heard and then take it down to the heart, due to both the extended melodic formulas and the wide, steady tempo.

For example, in the case of the *koinonikon*, the words are extended over several chant pages. Its goal is not only that of covering the temporal space in which the ministers and the faithful are taking communion, but, first of all, that of expressing, through a song that goes beyond words, a Christian's

² Minister in the parish "Sf. Anthony the Great" of Iasi.

³ A chant performed during every Holy Liturgy, during the communion of priests and churchgoers.

⁴ Verses preceded by the text of the small doxology, *Slavă Tatălui și Fiului și Sfântului Duh/ Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit* or *și acum și pururea și în vecii vecilor/ Now and forever. Amin!/ Amen!*

⁵ Large-size chants of a high level of difficulty often composed with a didactic purpose, to "strengthen the disciples".

moment of highest elevation, that is, taking communion with The Body and Blood of Christ. For this reason, the *koinonikon* is the most profound melodic embodiment of the Holy Liturgy, meant to suggest the silencing of the mind in front of the sacrament, just as we chant on Holy Saturday: *Să tacă tot trupul [...] și să stea cu frică și cu cutremur [...] că Împăratul împăraților și Domnul domnilor merge să Se junghie și să Se dea spre mâncare credincioșilor / Let the whole body be silent [...] and stand trembling with fear [...] because the King of kings and Lord of lords is to kill Himself and give Himself as food to the faithful.*

As Professor Grigorios Stathis also explains⁶, during the *koinonikon*, the mind is no longer called on to think about the multitude of texts in the troparia, but to calm down, making room for the heart to experience what reason can no longer understand. It is here that the soul finds its own way of being, of expressing itself, and speaking to God as to a close friend. Rhythm plays an essential role in all this. Melodic formulas give a repetitive pattern to the chant, a spiralling ascension, a wheel in constant motion, a principle similar to the prayer of the heart. The movement of interiorization and intimacy enticed by the *koinonikon* is unequalled by any other chants, because now, when Christ sacrifices Himself for us, words are powerless to pen the mystery. Only the prayer “Jesus, our Lord” lingers as the breath of the soul immersed in the mystery⁷.

We may say that hesychast prayer fits best the mood created during the *koinonikon*. During the time that the prayer *Lord, Jesus Christ* is uttered, one understands the point of this chant much more easily. The mind disciplines itself to stay collected and learns to leave room for the soul to seek its own forms of expression in dialogue with God.

We could say that extended slow-paced chants, and especially the *koinonikon*, are an *embodiment of hesychia in psalmody*, and it is a great loss that, since the mid-19th century, various reforms and the westernization of church music have led to the total disappearance of slow-paced chanting in churches in general, except for some much simplified and fragmented cheroubika. It is a phenomenon in the spirit of our times, marked by haste, restlessness, lack of quietness. Communion time often produces bustle and movement, which scatter any attempt at concentration and internalization. Removing extended chants from the church choir service is something akin to

⁶ During the presentation *Despre importanța chinonicului* [On the importance of the *koinonikon*], delivered at the 13th edition of the Iasi Byzantine Chanting Masterclass (July 12-15, 2020).

⁷ For audition, we propose an example of a particularly expressive extended chant, a calophonic heirmos, an improvisation by Panagiotis Neochoritis, Archon Protopsaltis of the Great Church of Christ on the text *Toată nădejdea mea spre tine o pun / I put all my hope in you*. Note how the melos does not dilute the meaning of the words, but, on the contrary, makes it more powerful. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yvui3p5-Rk4>

a monk who does not know what the prayer of the mind means, it is akin to a mind that does not know how to rest even for a moment.

We cannot help but notice the reality of church choirs, in which, on the one hand, the psaltes do not have the necessary training to be able to perform an extended slow-paced chant, and, on the other, the ministers are reluctant to the idea. Simpler chants that are easier to understand by simple people are preferred, but the people should be presented, through catechesis, which chants were recommended by the Holy Fathers. There is often a fear that people will get bored listening to slow-paced chants, without understanding a word of what is being chanted, but we must not underestimate the ability of the faithful to guess, to sense the inner effect that these chants are meant to create. Referring to the current situation, deacon Sabin Preda considers that we are witnessing a kind of “liturgical schizophrenia”: in the altar, the priest finds himself in the most mystical and intimate moment of the Liturgy, while in the church attention derails in other directions, to texts that have another destination, or to chants that are completely foreign not only to what is happening in the altar but to the liturgical spirit as well. Unfortunately, at the time of the communion people start to scatter, to move, disturbing the psaltes as well. Many of the faithful leave the church at this moment, which has become an occasion to chant pieces that are faster-paced, or pietistic, or simpler, with a lot of text, as a form of acoustic entertainment that does not bore the faithful, which denotes a deep misunderstanding of the mysterious, mystical aspect of the moment.

4. On movement and scattering

Of the three *ethes*, the *word*, the *melos* and the *rhythm*, the last is an extremely important element in that it sets the mind and soul in motion on the same tempo as the chants, the ekphraseses, the liturgical gestures, and the general dynamics of the service. Therefore, a priest who has found inner peace and tranquillity will pass on the movement of his soul to the faithful (and implicitly the psaltes), and in the same fashion one hurried, indifferent or troubled psaltis will pass on his soul movement to the others. In the same way, people with no inner calm and tranquillity feel the need to move on the outside, either with their body, or with their senses, constantly looking at those around them. This is why we must emphasize that peacefulness comes when what happens in the church, every movement and gesture, is made with the greatest economy, in the spirit of prayer and introversion. It is a particularly important aspect, because the easiest way to spread the attention and concentration of the mind happens through sight. The psaltes know only too well how easy it is for the mind to be scattered if one’s gaze is not fixed on the music stand. In this sense, deacon Sorin Mihalache compares attention and concentration to a “muscle of the mind” who exercises and gets stronger, able

to think of any word heard, without being distracted by what is happening around.

5. Peace of mind comes from good ordinance

Tranquillity comes on the background of a *settling down*. Settling down is born out of *persevering* in observing the holy ordinances, the holy ordinances represent tradition, and *tradition* is the legacy of the Holy Fathers of the Church. Chaotic changes in the ordinance, backed by no argument, liturgical innovations and changes of all kinds, are all caused by *unrest* and *inconsistency*, and this leads to a lack of inner peace, which comes from constancy and tranquillity. The liturgy is not an opportunity for an artistic performance or simplistic, uniformed, or pietistic chanting for the sake of the people. The service cannot be arbitrarily shortened, because this means that we no longer trust the Holy Fathers. By their wisdom and inspiration from the Holy Spirit, they conceived the service according to an order that has its inner logic, which we must not doubt. It is only when everyone in a church understands, feels, and experiences this need for liturgical discipline and steadiness, for strong consistency in the observance of ordinance (including chants, by tones and melodies) that the understanding of the purpose of these ordinances becomes possible.

6. On the right chanting spirit

The service is not performed for men but for God, says Athanasios Vourlis, and, in the same way, neither the chanting of psaltes nor the ekphoneses of deacons should be meant to impress people by the use of one's voice. Church music is not intended to create acoustic emotions. It should be pointed out that, more and more often, the virtual space fosters the promotion of interpretations that sometimes glide towards the sentimental and the pietistic, and this creates a false image about the genuine liturgical music of the Church. Many are surely impressed by some interpretations, but often these artistic expressions are taken as a point of reference for liturgical chanting. Therefore, a clear distinction should be made between simply listening to a song, at a concert for example, and, on the other hand, personal, assumed participation in the holy service. The former may create emotion, a certain state and thrill, but the latter pursues repentance, inner work and transformation, sensing the mystery, seeing one's own sins, the emptying of one's self, the struggle with one's passions, the shutting down of one's senses, the flight from scattering, *hesychia*.

7. The psaltis and his role

In what regards the relation between tranquillity and the observance of the ordinances established by the Holy Fathers, we need to understand that the

psaltis' inner experience is even more effective as he becomes aware of his status as servant and not as a mere singer, as noted by father Ionel Roată. His attributions are not only musical but also spiritual, like those of the priest. A psaltis should prepare for the service from a musical, liturgical, and spiritual point of view, trying, with the priest's blessing, to take communion with the other ministers during each liturgy. The psaltis' status as a servant, dressed in ministerial clothes and invested with the spiritual power given to him by the bishop's blessing, replaces him in the natural order of the service and gives him a completely different awareness of his calling, of the capacity he has, and of his spiritual responsibility to the altar and to the faithful.

Conclusions

Church music represents the inner movement of the man who seeks to calm down, to know himself, and to find God in the depths of his soul. All thought and all attention must focus inward and engage all the capacity of the mind, heart, and body to do this inner work.

The most powerful work of psaltic music is hidden in its slow-paced chants (which have now disappeared from most churches), because it is in this version that it becomes closest to wordless prayer. It is from the extended slow-paced chants that the working and the *ethos* of every tone become clearest. Peace comes from this inner movement, from the immobility of the body and the non-scattering of the senses. At the same time, tranquillity also comes from the strict observance of the holy ordinances, which, in time, leads to stability and consistency.

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