

Domin Adam

Psaltic Modes - Meanings and Symbolics

Abstract

The Universe of Byzantine music is a profound one, that is why every side should be analysed for getting to the essence of psaltic soul of the singing. Every sign has a certain meaning, every mode has a certain composition and every singing genre is interpreted in a certain way. It is important to search and analyse the historical evolution of every of the mentioned categories for being able to form a holistic image about what Byzantine music meant and means.



Rev. PhD Assoc. Prof.
Domin Adam, Faculty of
Orthodox Theology of
"December 1st 1918"
University, Alba Iulia,
Romania

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1 Introduction

I will not make a historical radiography of the voices, but I will make a brief presentation of the Byzantine or psaltic modes in order to discern the meanings and symbolism of the voices. Often we sing or listen the church's psaltic voices but we can't pervade beyond what the voices seem. They are much more than just a song, but to pervade these meanings and symbolisms we need much dedication and leaning on the sacred. They were made with a certain sense, not only for the pleasure of being listened but also to feed the soul. I will refer to this more in the present study.

Christian worship is born in the Jewish faith and we observe how the Savior and his disciples give great attention to the worship of the Great Temple in Jerusalem and to the song practiced here (not giving old or new testamentary arguments). Thus, there is in the song of the first Christians a transfer of the Jewish worship song, but the new Christian song will develop and enrich more and more because of those who were converted and who were part of *foreign nations* other than the Jew.¹

Psaltic religious voices (and generally the religious music) have as main objective the creation of a silent atmosphere favorable to meditation. The interpreter is required to avoid any exaggeration, that would figure something else than the holy. In fact, it is the purpose of church's music: to address the soul, as well as some musical genre address the body or the reason. This music should be, should become, "*the music of the angels*" (at this level must be reached the unity between the heavenly and the earthly), to be sung in such a way as to create a proper atmosphere for reflection, meditation and real meeting with God in the Church.

¹ Elena Moraru-Saviuc, *Worship music as segment of eternal music*, (Oradea: Editura Scriptura, 2008), p.26.

2 Byzantine Music and Spirituality

The voices give birth to a different feeling in every soul; sometimes we can deduce from them the doxological song, prayer, strengthening of the faith, sometimes the spiritual joy.

Byzantine Music is an art of prayer, of spirituality, it is a part of the Church's worship and a spiritual fact in the life of every Christian, because through it, is glorified God.

St. Vasile cel Mare in his homily to the youth speaks about the psycho-educational and therapeutic value of the music and shows that any *voice* or *manner* (eh), especially dorian, of the music (*let's say: Byzantine-laic*) has a certain characteristic and effect on the human psyche². The variety of feelings created by the Byzantine music brings in the most practical way, spiritual peace.

First Ehul voice or **voice I Doric** begins rising on **PA (D)** brings in the human's soul the feeling of glorifying God. This is the voice that defines the music in the category of arts, because, as St.Ioan Damaschin said: "Of all (voices) you have the first victory."³ The first voice brings the hope of salvation to humans, because it creates a sense of strength and of steadiness, is full of optimism and melodiously.

The second Ehul or the **second voice – FRIGIC voice** starts ascending from **VU (E)** brings in the human's soul the feeling of gratitude, because it makes us be thankful for all that God gives us. Listening to the second voice, one becomes gentle and quiet, and this ehul is a starting point on the path of communication between God and human.

² Vasile cel Mare, *XXII Homily towards youngs*, în P.S.B., partI, Translated by Dumitru Fecioru, nr.17, (București: Editura IBMBOR, 1986), pp. 575-576.

³ Ioan Damaschin, <http://www.doxologia.ro/terapie-pentru-suflet/muzica-drept-rugaciune-arta-terapie>, traducere Lucian Filip, *apud* <http://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2013/10/byzantine-music-as-art-of-music-and-art.html>, (accessed on 04.08.2014).

The third Ehul or the third voice – **LIDIC voice**, start ascending from **GA (F)** is characterized by simplicity, strength, and awakens in us a feeling of endless joy and secret hope. This is a voice of the march.⁴

The fourth Ehul or the **fourth voice** – **MIXOLIDIC voice**, starts ascending on **DI (G)** awakens in human the feast feeling. There is no wonder that at the two major holidays, Ascension of the Holy Cross and Sunday of the Holy Cross (Lent) which are strictly holidays of resurrection through the cross, the doxology is sung on the fourth voice. Likewise, in the Annunciation and in the Entrance of Theotokos in the Church the ninth song is also played on the fourth voice.

The fifth Ehul (plagal of the first voice) or the **fifth voice** – **EOLIAN voice** starts ascending on the **KE (A)** and is characterized as a voice of lamentation. It creates a complaint together with joy and makes human to give God a request prayer. Upon hearing this voice we feel deep down joy repentance and rebirth and personal resurrection. Not without sense were ordained certain chants of Resurrection (Tropar Christ is risen, and other chants from the Easter's Sunday) to be sung on the fifth voice, but just in order to emphasize the passage from death to life, from the Cross to the Resurrection and the sorrow and pain to joy and good humor.

The sixth Ehul (plagal of the second voice) or the **sixth voice** – **LOCRIAN voice**, starts ascending from **ZO (B)** and brings a total joy, is characterized by love for God, by hope and it is a mistic eh; humble, softens the human's soul and renews it in a new life.

The seventh Ehul (plagal of the third voice) or the **seventh voice** – **IONIAN voice**, begins ascending from **NI (C)** and is characterized by being grave, hard. It planted in our souls the feeling of eagerness and tiredness on the spiritual path, is like a march of hosts, as St.Ioan Damaschinul said.

⁴ Ibidem.

The eighth Ehul (plagal of the fourth voice) is also a voice of celebrating festive cadenced voice, flowing and encouraging. Byzantine Chant is monodical (gr.μόνο: single-ωδή: song) sung on one voice, and the song is the element of expression. The Byzantine chant expresses the paramountcy of God and is accompanied by a continuous sound with the same height, called accompaniment (gr.ίσον equal), which gives the byzantine's monody a comparison with the golden fund of icons. The accompaniment symbolizes God's omnipresence and is like a soundtrack of a film, one soundtrack of the entire existence.

For a theology of the Byzantine musical semiography we have as a landmark the Treaty of Michael Blemmydes, about whom had written several byzantinologists including the most famous, who is Nicolae Gheorghita from National University of Music Bucharest.

The Byzantine musical universe doesn't allow to be understood the fact that what the protopsalter "commits" is accidental. Any utterance, even an intonation formula (apechema), invokes Christ and His help: *by this term-ananeanes-ava vai avex is shown the introduction into them (eh) and means "Truly, God has forgiven me!"* The term is, originally, ανάξ, vai ανέξ and indicates the fact that any start, *start from / and with God* and ends *just in God*.⁵

Michael's Blemmydes Treaty is the only work that addresses trenchant the semography of the Byzantine music from theological perspectives.

Each voice or eh, before singing has an introduction formula in the melodic mood of the voice that intones a singer slowly, before the beginning of the song⁶; all treaties of the theory of psaltic music include these formulas of introduction. It is about

⁵ *The Hagiopolites-A Byzantine Treatise on Musical Theory*, Preliminary edition by Jorgen Raasted, Copenhagen 1983, p.123.

⁶ Grigore Panțiru, *The notation and ehs of the byzantine music*, (București, Editura Muzicală, 1971), p. 211.

the summative creation of the melodic character of the voice, enabling the interpreter to sing the song noted on Neum. In the song without Neum (oral)⁷, just the text applied on the melody of the voice, generally it is not used formula of introduction. The benchmarks in this type of song are melodies learned before on a known text, usually a sticheron, singing a hymn or another, they are the melodic patterns containing inside the atmosphere and the character of the voice.

With the crystallization of Christian worship, it appears the first musical genre. Each of them have a specific meaning. For example: **katavasia** means descent - when katavasia was sung the two church pews came down in the middle, under the chandelier, and hence, standing, sang the song⁸. The **kontakion** - is a solemn hymn that tells the essence of the feast, therefore it was necessary to be marked. **The enlightening** was sung when it was day, towards the end of Matins (when it was night), etc., including the names of their signs have meaning and purpose in Greek: ison-law, oligon-less, petasti-throws, chendima-embroidery, epistrophe-return, elafron-light iporoi-drain, hamil-low, clasmă-sharing, gorgon-fast, applicable-simple, argon-slowly, variable -heavy, omalon-brill, antichenoma-time relents start again, psifiston-each syllable, to choose between them, eteron-other, endofron-meditation, interior [Frosini-thinking], ifes-calming, soothing [ifes-standing facing down], [ephesus-appeal, agitation], sticheron-alignment , ghost-line of words , irmos-which must be heirmologion-chain, i.e. legatto, agem-neplin, ftora-sticare etc.

Of all genres, features and symbolisms of the voices we deduce the savior role of the Byzantine art psaltic music. Byzantine church music calms the hearing, humbles the heart and elevates

⁷ Grăjdian Vasile, *Elements of Church cant and types*, Sibiu, Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga”, 2002, p. 56.

⁸ *Dictionary of musical terms*, (București: Editura Enciclopedică, 2010), p. 100.

the mind, so its purpose and character is saint⁹. These voices are composed of everything that can bring our salvation and have always had the objective to renew and restore the human. God left us the legacy to full our hearts, to feel safe, without needing other type of music that leads to the degradation of our souls¹⁰.

Music is of eternal significance because the Heavenly Father's throne is surrounded by consonant harmonies. We just need to find the color of this harmony and resonate with it, otherwise the harmonic sounds of music becomes distorted and thus the music becomes not music even harm our soul and psyche. God originally gave us the music in order to glorify the Trinity and to help the human in his own exaltation in spirit. And after the fall, the music also had a supportive role of lifting the human; new situation, new role. We do not know how the edenic music was, but we think it was a particularly beautiful since the devil always seeks to pervert it. And this *Pepelea* of the music managed to attract people towards the destructive music, to sounds which have reverberations that attract people and destroy them, or like the sticky bands that say "attract and kill" substantially certain types of music destroy human's psychological system, slowly, surely and irreversibly.

At the Christ's Birth angels sang an unheard song: *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men*" (Lc.2, 14). Probably this is the song of the heaven's inhabitants. The heaven's music, the music of the Celestial Spheres is one continuous, smooth, as is the music of nature on earth (a glimpse from the beauty of the spheres' music). The music of the spheres and the music of nature is one without rhythm and without a tonal center of gravity within the meaning we give today, a song we would say in *unison* (though the term is vague

⁹ Jacob Yameos, *The principal aspects of the history of church music* translation by Luca Mirea, (Alba Iulia: Editura Reîntregirea, 2012), p. 42.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

and relative to what we mean). The music of nature and of celestial spheres is like an accompaniment whose position changes from time to time into a dominant position for harmony.¹¹

This song in unison was borrowed by man to express his different feelings, but in a cadenced, rhythmic way (crucially dependent on the feeling expressed through music) and with a starting point, a landmark, with musical intervals smaller or larger but without being theorized or extremely problematized (the documents are very few from those times removed). The music in unison is found in all antiquity, in all nations and in all cultures and spiritualities, at the Hebrew and at the Christians of the first millennium. Then appears the polyphony and the harmonic music, but they are not the subject of this study.

The early Christians borrowed from the Hebrew the type of song chant solo, refrenar, antiphonal etc. The songs of biblical inspiration adopted by Christians and sung in the mentioned manners in the Jewish religion, were the subject of an extensive musical development within Christian worship. First psalms, hymns and finally spiritual songs made the concern of the Christians in the first centuries in the cult.

The space with the strongest mark on the Christian worship was the Hellenistic space – Greek was the language of propagation - here there had already existed a musical culture, musical concerns etc. Here were crystallized the first musical genre: tropar, kontakion, dogma, thanks to the genius, wisdom and inspiration of the melodists. Then observable are the kinds of interpretation: irmological or troparian tact, sticherarion and dandelion. Each of these tacts have a certain sense: the tropar is the cadenced walking toward the eternal kingdom, the sticherion suggests the approach of the kingdom's peace and dandelion songs (cherub, Chinon) mean contemplation, smelling the scent of the Kingdom.

¹¹ See the study on ison: „*Ethos of the byzantine music*” written by Emanuel Cristian Cercel.

From now on we can already speak about the Byzantine music, name received from the capital of the Greek Empire; it is a music that represents "the highest expression of the gracious, orthodox theology¹²", a doxology music and a music of spiritual elevation¹³. This new music will be framed in modes, meaning ehs, as in antiquity, but had nothing in common the new modes with the ancient Greek modes (ancient Doric with medieval Doric etc.), only the names. Victor Giuleanu and Victor Iușceanu in their treaty of music say that the medieval modes have nothing in common with the ancient ones because "the medievals took the wrong terminology of the Greek modes, which were descending, applying it to scales with ascending melodic signification"¹⁴. Extending the Christianity from the Jewish in the Hellenistic space, the new musical religious creations came into connection with the ancient Greek modes: **DORIAN- E (E, D, C, B, A, G, F, E) FRIGIAN-D, LIDIAN -C, MIXOLIDIAN-B, HIPODORIAN-A, HIPOFRIGIAN-G, HIPOLIDIAN - F** which sang descending.

In XVI century the voices sits different. It sets out a number of 7 modes and are ordained in the order that they naturally appear on the musical staircase C major: Mode I = Ionian (mode C); Mode II = Dorian (mode D); Mode III = Frigian (mode E); Mode IV = Lidian (mode F); Mode V = Mixolidian (G mode); Mode VI = EOLIAN (mode A); Mode VII = Locrian (mode B). The modern theory on the popular diatonic modes uses these seven medieval names.¹⁵

In the crystallization process of the byzantine music contributed several factors: Hebrew songs, the Greek musical culture, the neumatocal musical notation and the fact that

¹² Elena Chircev, *Confessions and dialogues about Byzantine music*, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Risoprint, 2013), p.136.

¹³ Constantin Secară, *Byzantine music -doxology and spiritual uplift*, (Editura Muzicală, 2006).

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p.136.

¹⁵ V.Giuleanu, V. Iușceanu, *Threaty of music's teory*, (București: Editura Muzicală, 1962), p.138.

Byzantium was the most important center for the spread of the musical culture, culture that will be called Byzantine. In the political, cultural and theological center of Constantinople came to study monks from throughout the known world, including Pope Gregory the Great, who led the musical culture of Byzantium in the area which he came from. First Ambrose of Milan speaks about four main modes (they were probably already known Greek modes, but untheorized), then Gregory adds another four secondary. Gregory influenced by the Byzantine modes, modes organized in eight ones (octoehs)¹⁶ studied during his linger in the capital of the Byzantine Empire, took over the system organized into **eight ehs**,¹⁷ would be led in the West by the future Pope Gregory where it would be named system modes, built ascending: **Dorian started on D (D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D) FRIGIAN - E, LIDIAN -F, MIXOLIDIAN - G, EOLIAN-A, LOCRIAN- B**

The first four of these modes will be called **own ehs, authentic¹⁸ or rents¹⁹, principal or independent.**

- First Eh named **protheses (DORIAN)**, from the **PA (RE)** and symbolized **the air**;
- The second was called **deuterus (FRIGIAN)**, from the **VU (MI)** and symbolized **the earth**;
- The third called **Trita (LIDIAN)**, began on **GA (note F)** and symbolized **water**;
- The fourth was called **tetartos (MIXOLIDIAN)**, began on **DI (G)** and symbolized **the fire.**

¹⁶ Octoeh-eight modes, ehs or voices.

¹⁷ Grigorios Th. Stasis, *The charm of the past and present musical byzantine art*, translation from gr.by Florin Cătălin Ghiț (Masterclass of byzantine music on Mănăstirea Nicula-Final night-byzantine concert preceded by a conference), September2013, in: Tabor Magazine, Cluj-Napoca, Anul VII, nr.12, December.

¹⁸ Authentēs (gr.) speak by itself, something that stands out and can not be questioned.

¹⁹ Chirii (gr.) has the meaning of supreme authority.

The Byzantine ehs, as ancient modes, received names of ancient Greek cities: Doria, Lydia, Frygia, Milet, which in ancient times had a special melodic character. In the Middle Ages (early) the songs' character had nothing in common with the ancient melodic characters nor with the organization of sounds: the ancient modes were descending and the medieval modes were ascending.

In ancient times the modes settled the stretching of the song²⁰ and had, wore itself the following characters or symbolisms:

-Mode I Dorian-VU (E); - this mode was considered a warrior, energetic, serious;

-Mode II Frygian-PA (D);- was considered thrilling, passionate, with much pathos

-Mode III Lidian-NI (C); - was considered era socotit melancholic, dreamy, soft;

- Mode IV Mixolidian-ZO (B)²¹ - was considered full of tension, agitation, unstable.

The character of these descending ancient modes are no longer met today. Popular modes or ecclesiastical modes (ascending) carries other characters that I mentioned above. For practical reasons the ehs or modes are called and noted with Roman numerals (as in the case above) or Arab. As a structure the gregorian modes are different from the byzantines, they only borrow the name²².

In addition to these four authentic voices, the Greeks were counting four more modes, ehs, that derived from the genuine ones. They started with a quint below and wore before the **Plaghios²³** prefix:

-Eh V Plaghios Protos-PA- DI descendent (base on **DI**);

²⁰ Jacob Yameos, *op. cit.*, p.21.

²¹ The forth is named mylitis-citadel of Milet from Asia Minor-the same with the byzantine mixolidic.

²² Victor Giuleanu, *The byzantine melodic*, București, Editura Muzicală, 1981, p.27.

²³ Plaghios-plagal.

- Eh VI **Plaghios Deuterios-VU-KE** (base on **KE**);
- Eh VII **Plaghios Tritos-GA-ZO** (base on **ZO**);
- Eh VIII **Plaghios Tetartos-DI-NI** (base on **NI**).

It is used the prefix **Hypo**²⁴ for derived modes, or **Hyper**²⁵ if they were made at the upper octave (mode V **Hypodorios** , mode VI **Hypolydios**, mode VII **Hypofrygios**, mode VIII **Hypomixolydios**).

The musical greek mode of thinking, as I said, will be taken in the West by Pope Gregory the Great (the second half of the VI century) that stayed for years as ambassador in Constantinople, sent by Pope Pelagius II; model scales will be used for 12 centuries by Westerners. This modal system is composed by scales and ranges which are structured differently from the later tonal system - tones and midtones are arranged differently in the major and minor known by us. It is richer system than the tonal, in the stairways and number ranges, but also this system, as the tonal one has a tonal center.

The tonal system has given us the possibility of using two natural diatonic modes: **Major natural- IONIAN MODE** medieval become C Major and **the minor natural, EOLIAN MODE** - A minor (with variants)²⁶. On JS Bach's time the foundations temperate tone, with the starting point in the medieval modes, ehs organized by a specific system which belongs to G. Zarlino²⁷ (untempered system)²⁸. The modal system, in addition to Ionian and Eolian mode, still has five natural diatonic modes: **DORIAN, FRIGIAN, LIDIAN, MIXOLIDIAN** and **LOCRIAN**, as the modes came from their changing with chromatic elements.

²⁴ Hipo (gr.)- *means down, under, below.*

²⁵ Hyper (gr)- *means above, up*

²⁶ V. Giuleanu, V. Iușceanu, *Threaty of the music theory*, op.cit. , p.129.

²⁷ Giosetto Zarlino-theoretician and italian composer(1517-1590), takes the theories of Aristoxene din Tarent (sec.IV b.Chr.).

²⁸ V.Giuleanu, V. Iușceanu, *op.cit.*, p.142.

A recognition of the importance of the inexhaustible source of the rich musical thesaurus affirms the composer Camille Saint-Saëns, who says that the music goes to archaic modes. He provided the direction of the musical art, showing that the domination of major-minor will fall and that the popular modes and oriental ranges will come into the musician's attention; what is really happening.²⁹

3 Conclusion

If in literature we do detailed analyzes to understand and properly use all its forms in everyday speech, in the same way we must analyze, explain and use correctly the senses and the meanings of all musical elements.

Nowadays we see more and more *celebrities* on television, or in church *singers, protopsalters* who think if they have voice they know everything, but it is not enough the talent if you're not looking to interpret the deepest meanings of the music. Therefore any interpretation requires to be studied and interpreted according to the meanings, symbology and styles; a return to these will give the church's chant a new breath.

A summative conclusion of this study is the following: each psalm or eh has its character (therefore it must be considered as such), each voice has a special intonation and fluency given by the three tracks which have the meaning mentioned above. All these combined will give a sense to the psalm singing, so beautiful melos of the OrthoAdox Church.

²⁹ Victor M. Iușceanu, *Modes and scales*, (*apud* Camille Saint-Saëns, *The history of the universal music*), (București: Editura Muzicală, 1960), p. 64.

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