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## **Towards perfect unity: himnography and some musical reinterpretations within serbian chanting practice**

**ABSTRACT:** This paper explains the musical treatment of the hymnographic genres within the Serbian chanting practice. As it is known, the original Byzantine poetic structure written in verse – which was in perfect unity with the Byzantine chant concerning the rhythm and meter – was lost in Church–Slavonic translations. The Slavonic hymnography in prose inevitably caused modification of the music language, i.e. establishing of the new bond between the word and a tone. Accordingly, a creative practise of “tailoring” the church melodies to the structure and semantics of the particular hymnographic genre occurred within Serbian chanting practise. Eventually, many songs from the Octoechos, General Chanting, as well as certain songs of the Festal Chanting, gained the status of the “fixed” chants, the proof of which are the first Serbian chanting collections from the 19<sup>th</sup> century written in staff notation. In these chants semantics and music are set in a specific manner and they represent a model by which the chanters govern themselves while singing other church hymns. Ideal unity of hymnography and music in the fixed chants is reflected in coinciding of textual and music phrases. Such an ideal balance contributes to the clear transmission of the hymnographic content to the faithful. However, sticheras, irmoses, troparions and kontakions which lack the ideal balance, may cause the hymnographic narration and, at some places, even the theological points to be incomprehensible and imprecise. To creative chanters it is an opportunity to “tailor”, i.e. to reinterpret the chants in order to compensate for these imperfections. Such a creative interpretation is possible only by skilled chanters who, above all, thoroughly understand the meaning and structure of a particular hymnographic work. Amongst such chanters were some of the bishops and patriarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Certain chants related to this problem are examined in this paper.

**KEYWORDS:** hymnography, chanting, genres, music, poetics.

Entire hymnography of the Orthodox Church is sung. The reason for that is clearly explained by St John Chrysostom by saying: “melody united with pious text sweetens and charms the soul and thus enables the fullest experience of the literary text”. According to St Gregory, that is why “great David tied a melody with moral teaching” [Бичков 2012: 236-237]. The rules that Orthodox music is based

upon derive from the rhythmic and metric structure of the hymns. The original Byzantine poetical structure of the hymns written in verse — which was in perfect unity with the Byzantine chant in regards to the rhythm and meter — was lost in Church-Slavonic translations. “In Slavic translations”, as Oliver Strunk pointed out, “this exact agreement disappears, and naturally so, for translators were concerned, not so much with syllable count and accent distribution, as with the conservation of the original word order and the literal rendering of the individual word. The Slavonic hymnography in prose inevitably caused modification of the music language, i.e. establishing of the new bond between the word and a tone. That is probably why early Slavic notation transmitted only the essential features of the Byzantine melody [Strunk 1977: 227]. Although they distinguished between prose and verse, Serbian medieval translators and writers did not regard a verse a sole element of poetic expression with its own rhythmic rules [Јакобсон 1966: 117]. It is clear that Slavic service books are not mere translations of the Greek original, but a creative response to the foundation adopted from the Byzantium tradition, poetics and aesthetics [Томин 2001: 5]. In time, this response initiated the occurrence of the different versions of Byzantine chanting, one of which is Serbian church chanting. Serbian medieval chanting practice had not been based on neumatic notation, but on the experience of adjusting of the melodies to the texts, most likely according to the traditional chant established in oral tradition [Петровић 2011: 90].

Accordingly, a creative practise of “tailoring” of the church melodies to the structure and semantics of the particular hymnographic genre developed within Serbian chanting practise.<sup>1</sup> Older medieval practice seems to have offered more freedom while being more complex and creative at the same time. Hymnographic work which does not belong to the established liturgical canon has been preserved. Such are the sticheras of monk Yefrem [Богдановић 1978: 109]. In the Serbian newer chanting, melodic formulae match the semantic ones. They are usually marked with a full stop or comma, which serve not only as punctuation, but elements which determine shorter or longer logical units known as *stroka* or *colon*. In another words, melodic model of the structure of the Serbian church chants corresponds to the colon from hymnographic passage, and its length always depends on the length of the colon.

Musical treatment of the hymnography in Serbian chanting practise relies almost entirely on chanters. Serbian chanter has always been, and still is a performer of the melody, and also its arranger. “The aesthetic and music value of chanting depends on the chanter’s voice quality, his music and spiritual sense and proper knowledge and understanding of the church service” [Илић 1988: 9]. Differences in rhythm, embellishing tones and metric patterns indicate that the chanter could

<sup>1</sup> Principals of tailoring, however, have their own practical sense as the chanter who knows how to tailor and knows the Typicon, can simply use all liturgical books necessary for the service. He uses music manuscripts for songs set to music, i.e. for the fixed songs.

express his personal freedom even in a tradition regularised by the strict church canons. Indeed, his freedom to lengthen or shorten the melodies, to change certain music passages within musical formulae and to adjust the tempo of his singing in accordance with the flow of the church service, was never denied. “The chanter begins with reading of the text to himself and melodic shaping of the textual first phrase, adjusting it to the particular formula of the mode and chant (...) Punctuation is helpful here, but it may not always indicate logical units“ [Стефановић 1992: 14-15]. Having in mind the meaning and entirety of the text, the chanter intentionally lines melodic formulae. During that process, in order to determine the next colon, i.e. a logical unit, he ‘looks forward’. “A good singer-chanter reads the text in advance and (...) relies on punctuation. From his rich melodic experience, almost at the same time he ties the melody with the text and thus creates a unit. This procedure is a truly authentic creative act” [Stefanović 1992: 14-15]. Protojerej Nenad Barački also states: “Church chanters, who are even vaguely familiar with music notation, could (...) correctly chant each church song according to the set formulae, should they previously divide its text into sections, i.e. should they previously correctly tailor the text either according to the logical sense or the marked punctuation...” [Барачки 1938: 114]. However, Petar Bingulac believes that: „The chanter even does not know how many segments there are and where they might be, but through his chanting practice he became used to singing them in a certain order and even could not sing them differently“ [Бингулац 1971: 372].

A good chanter may repeat the same formula twice, or omit another one, especially if the text allows it, should he judge that a certain melodic formula from a particular chant will be more suitable to the meaning of the text. “Many favourite pretty church songs have some sudden turns and exceptions, their particular changes and exclamations — not regular and not always used” [ibid.: 25]. Obviously, in such case the tonal stability of the mode must not be weakened neither.

A chanter should pay attention to a poetic meaning of the text, i.e. the expressiveness of certain words, as much as possible. That means that the words such as **СЛАВА ВО ВЫСНИХЪ** (Glory in the highest), **НЕБО** (Heaven) or **ВОСТАНИЕ** (Resurrection) should have an ascending melodic movement, i.e. the interval. Similarly, the words **ЗЕМЛЯ** (earth) or **ГРОбЪ** (tomb) should move, if possible, with a descending interval. In the past, chanters used to particularly stress the words **Богъ** (God), **Господь** (Lord), **Богородица** (Theotokos), etc. By a rule, such words were stressed by the length, melodic embellishment or a short melismatic movement. All these actually emphasised the meaning and importance of particular words. Any church chant manuscript by Gavriilo Boljarić, Jovan Živković or Nenad Barački vouch for that. Even Stevan Mokranjac, whose melographic style is somewhat simplified for learning purposes, emphasised important words with long notes [Ђоковић 2013: 187].

Holy Fathers considered chanting a prayer and when a chanter has that in mind, he can transmit his own prayer to the faithful. However, to achieve that

his own heart should be in concordance with what his mind projects. The chanter, therefore, must continuously struggle to pray while chanting.

However, the chanter's freedom in tailoring of the melodies must be based upon thorough knowledge of the particular hymnographic content and, above all, its theological foundation. When a chanter has no such knowledge, misinterpretation of the hymnographic text is inevitable. Understanding of Christian dogmas is secured by the chanter's theological education related to his necessary spiritual growth, as well as his continual mastering of the Church-Slavonic language the service books are written in.<sup>2</sup>

Serbian chanter masters a skill of tailoring in the process of learning chants which is based on the Octoechos. The process of learning the chanting should not be based on memorising by heart, but on learning the musical notation by which is then possible to read the chanting manuscripts correctly. However, a small number of specific chants, known as fixed chants from each mode of the Octoechos are learnt by heart due to a cyclic nature of the Octoechos. Once the chants, i.e. the modes of the Octoechos are memorised, chanter can use the melodies and tailor them to the requirements of the particular hymnographic content.

Many songs from the Octoechos, General Chanting, as well as certain songs of the Festal Chanting, gained the status of the "fixed" chants, the proof of which are the first Serbian chanting collections from the 19<sup>th</sup> century written in staff notation. In these chants semantics and music are set in a specific manner and they represent a model by which chanters govern themselves while singing other church hymns. Ideal unity of hymnography and music in the fixed chants is reflected in coinciding of textual and music phrases: the length of the melodic formulae is reciprocal to the length of syntactic and semantic unit. In another word, there are no passing tones or groups of tones for the purpose of connecting the principal series of tones" [Пећо 1994: 148]. Therefore, fixed chants stand for models, the best examples of tailoring of the church melodies to liturgical texts in the Serbian Chanting practise. However, even all fixed sticheras do not have this necessary unity of the word and sound. In the past, due to the lack of music manuscripts, this relationship used to be regulated by an incompetent person, e.g. a self-taught monastery novice whose "contributions" survived on the basis of a strong oral tradition [Krneta 1974: 67]. In the learning process, even in the theologian seminaries, these troparions and sticheras were learnt without critical approach and were transmitted through generations to this day.

Ideal balance between word and tone contributes to the clear transmission of the hymnographic content to the faithful. Among the others, Serbian patriarch Pavle used to write about this. He emphasised that "By using correct accentuation of the words, logical separation of the complex sentences and pointing out their

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<sup>2</sup> In practice, Serbian chanters today have no significant knowledge of this old language. Lately, translations of church books into modern Serbian language have emerged, which does not contribute to the status and preservation of the Church-Slavonic.

certain parts, and also by simplifying the ornaments and trills in some modes, the Holy Fathers principle that melodies help better understanding and easier acceptance of the sung content can be achieved” [Павле 1998: 82]. Better understanding and easier acceptance of the sung content are precisely the reason why the relationship between the text and music in some Serbian chants (even in the fixed ones) should be revised. Thus, the required, perfect unity of the text and music would be achieved.

Christmas kontakion **ДѢВА ДНЕСЬ** (Today the Virgin) is an appropriate example to illustrate this assertion.<sup>3</sup> The text of the second part of the kontakion is as follows: **НАСЪ БО РАДИ РОДИСА ОТРОЧА МЛАДО ПРЕВѢЧНЫИ БОГЪ** (For unto us is born a young child the pre-eternal God). Not taking into account embellishments and passing notes, all melographers of Serbian chanting wrote the main melodic structure of the St Romanos the Melodist’s famous kontakion in the same manner:

НАСЪ БО РА - - - ДИ

ро - ДИ - СА о - тро - ча МЛА - - - ДО

пре - вѣ - - - чныи БОГЪ.

The verse contains two small sections: A (**НАСЪ БО РАДИ**) and B (**РОДИСА ОТРОЧА МЛАДО ПРЕВѢЧНЫИ БОГЪ**). Analysis of the melodic line shows a certain tension created by a melodic movement:

It is interesting that under that melodic movement is the word *radi* (for unto) which is not nearly as important as other words in that verse. A characteristic ascending movement would be suitable for the most important word in the verse — **РОДИСА** (is born), a synonym for the feast of Nativity. In the corrected version, which has this word fixed to the mentioned ascending melodic movement, the whole kontakion gains ideal unity of music and words:

<sup>3</sup> Music examples are taken from Ненад Барачки, Нотни зборник српског народног црквеног појања по карловачком напеви, прир. Др Даница Петровић, Каленић, Музиколошки институт САНУ, Матица српска 1995.

НАСЪ БО РА - ДИ РО - - - ДИ - СѦ  
 О - ТРО - ЧА МЛА - - - - ДО  
 ПРЕ - БЪ - - - ЧНЫИ БѢГЪ.

If the corrected version is compared to the same song from the Greco-Byzantine tradition, many similarities become obvious. The characteristic ascending melodic movement with the word *γεννήθη* (is born) written underneath is present in the Byzantium kontakion as well. Among the other things, this example clearly shows that basic characteristics of the Serbian chant, and partially its identity too, derives from the Byzantine chant:

Δι' ημάς γαρ ε - γε - ννή - θη  
 παι - δι - ον νέ - ον

Another song from the Service of the Nativity of Jesus Christ requires critical analysis since its verses, divided into smaller syntactic units, do not entirely correspond with the existing melodic formulae of a particular mode. It is the stichera **ВЕСЕЛИСА Јерουσαλιμ** (Make glad, o Jerusalem). As it is a fixed stichera, which serves as a model for learning of the sticheras of the 4<sup>th</sup> mode, it is not unusual that Serbian melographers again wrote it down almost in the same manner, i. e. without carefully considering the meaning and relationship between the words. One of the verses is **ИЛАДЕНЕЦЪ БО РАЖДАЕТСА ИЗЪ НЕА, ВСЕОВЕРШЕННЫИ БѢГЪ** (For God the All-perfect is born a Child of Her):

МЛА - ДЕ - НЕЦЪ БО РА - ЖДА - ЕТ - СѦ,  
 ИЗЪ НЕ - А, ВСЕ - СО - ВЕР - ШЕ - ННЫИ БѢГЪ.

The verse is divided into two melodic formulae and it seem that it has not been done in accordance with the meaning of the text. First melodic formulae is not “stretched” enough, i.e. to a comma, which would be a logical textual unit. Instead, the melodic formula incorporates only three words **МЛАДЕНЕЦЪ БО РАЖДАЕТСА**. It is a fine musical phrase on its own, but by omitting **ИЗЪ НЕА** (of Her), musical narration relativises the accurate thought of the hymnographer.

The following formula **ИЗЪ НЕА, ВСЕСОВЕРШЕННЫИ БОГЪ** is skilfully written down and aesthetically it does not seem to be hymnographically incomplete. The corrected version also keeps both melodic formulae, while the more correct semantic distinction has been applied:

МЛА-ДЕ НЕЦЪ БО РА-ЖДА - ЕТ - СА ИЗЪ НЕА, \_\_\_\_\_

ВСЕ-СО - ВЕР - ШЕ - ННЫИ БОГЪ \_\_\_\_\_

Namely, the first one is **МЛАДЕНЕЦЪ БО РАЖДАЕТСА ИЗЪ НЕА** and it represents the more successful approach to tailoring as it does not only states that the God is born, but also that he is born of Her (Theotokos). The second formula is tailored in a melismatic manner in relation to the remaining two words – **ВСЕСОВЕРШЕННЫИ БОГЪ** (God the All-perfect).

Third example is the excerpt from 4<sup>th</sup> mode *Bogorǫdigenâ* (Theotokion) from the Octoechos. This is also a song that all Serbian melographers wrote down in almost the same way. The music structure of this troparion, according to the formal structure of the 4<sup>th</sup> mode, develops through two mutually dependant formulae. The dynamics between them is based on the “question and response” principle,

ГО- БО-Ю БО-ГО-РО-ДИ-ЦЕ СЪЩЫМЪ НА ЗЕМЛИ \_\_\_\_\_ ГА-ВИ-СА

БОГЪ, ВЪ НЕСЛИТНОМЪ СО-Е - ДИ - НЕ - НИИ ВО - ПЛО - ЩА - ЕМЪ \_\_\_\_\_

It is clear that the text of the first formula is **ГО-БОЮ БОГОРОДИЦЕ СЪЩЫМЪ НА ЗЕМЛИ ГАВИСА БОГЪ** (through Thee, o Mother of God, was revealed to those on earth God), while the text of the second one is **ВЪ НЕСЛИТНОМЪ СОЕДИНЕНИИ ВОПЛОЩАЕМЪ** (took flesh in an unblended union). Possible musical correction of these two verses, as in previous examples, derives from the necessity to adjust the melody to the meaning of the words. However, this example is specific because even though the melographers kept the original punctuation (useful when tailoring

the two music formulae) it was not sufficient in terms of the theological discourse. The key is in adjustment of the relationship between the words of the two verses and the two music formulae. The first formula would be *ТОВОЮ БОГОРОДИЦЕ СЪШЫМЪ НА ЗЕМЛИ ПАВИСА*, and the second one *БОГЪ ВЪ НЕСЛИТНОМЪ СОЕДИНЕНИИ ВОПЛОЩАЕМЪ*.



The crucial change is in the word *БОГЪ*. By its changing of the position from the first into the second formula, the meaning of the text is emphasised, i.e. that “God took flesh in an unblended union”. Creative approach in reinterpretation of this hymnographic content is not possible without knowledge of the dogmatic teaching of the faith such is this one of the two natures of the Jesus Christ’s personality. These examples show it is possible to innovate in the musical expression of the hymnographic text. In the church chanting it is not only possible, but sometimes also necessary to make innovations and reinterpretations. To creative chanters it is an opportunity to “tailor”, i.e. to reinterpret the chants in order to compensate for possible imperfections. Such a creative interpretation is possible only by skilled chanters who do not rely only on their musical talent but who, above all, thoroughly understand the meaning and structure of a particular hymnographic work. In this way, skilled chanters will tailor the melodies successfully, although it should not be forgotten that tailoring is in its essence the adjustment of the melody to the text, and not the other way around — adjustment of text to the melody. Amongst such chanters were some of the bishops and patriarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church, such as bishop Atanasije (Jevtić), late bishop Sava (Vuković) or beloved Serbian Patriarch Pavle.

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