

But is it Byzantine?

By Dr. Tikey Zes

It is often claimed that the music our choirs sing in the United States today is not “Byzantine”. And, that the only true Byzantine music is sung by chanters, and not by choirs, and certainly without organ accompaniment. And furthermore, that this is the way it is done in Greece today, so why not here in the same way in the U.S.

First of all, a definition of Byzantine music is in order: it is the official liturgical chant of the Greek Orthodox Church that is sung in unison with or without a drone or ison (a sustained tone sung throughout the chant). So, harmonized music that is based on Byzantine chant is, strictly speaking, not Byzantine music. In effect, it is composition or arranging that is based on a traditional Byzantine melody.

Many years ago I went to Greece on a sabbatical leave from San Jose State University to do some research in Byzantine music. While there, I visited many churches in Athens. Most of the churches had all male choirs and usually sang in two distinct styles: (1) Byzantine chant with and without drone; (2) four part western style harmonization, usually of the 19th century. In the church of St. Dionysis there were two liturgies performed with the first being done in strict chant style and the second in rather sophisticated 4-part harmony.

Actually, harmonization of the chant was introduced by the end of the 19th century and popularized by John T. Sakellarides (1853-1938) who was a famous cantor and choir director in Athens. Sakellarides studied both Byzantine and European music, including harmony and counterpoint. In 1914, he brought out the “Eiera Hymnodia” based on traditional melodies with 3 & 4 part harmony. This hymn book became the basis for many imitators. In fact, three of Sakellarides’ most famous students adopted this style of harmonizing chant melodies and brought their liturgies to the United States in the early part of this century. They were George Anastasiou, Nicholas Roubanis and Christos Vrionides. Choirs were established and the organ was introduced in order to facilitate learning the music, usually in a rather simple style of harmony. In the late 1940’s, Frank Desby (choir director at the St. Sophia Cathedral in Los Angeles) did extensive research into Byzantine chant and discovered that the theoretical basis of the

music was often misunderstood by Sakellarides and his pupils. So he wrote and published a liturgy which incorporated his understanding of Byzantine music theory into harmonizations. Other composers followed suit and a new style of composition based on a more correct understanding of Byzantine music and more sophisticated harmonization of the traditional melodies was inaugurated. It is this kind of music that we often hear today in many of our churches in the United States. However, also performed is the music of Sakellarides and that of his students mentioned above throughout the country today.

So to return to the original question, “But is it Byzantine”? It depends upon your definition, of course. However, the tradition of harmonized music based on traditional Byzantine chant has its roots in Greece in the early part of the 19th century, was carried over to this country with mixed choirs and the addition of the organ, and has evolved over the years to the present day.



Tikey Zes was born in Southern California in 1927, and studied with Ingolf Dahl. He received his Master of Music degree in violin and composition, and his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in composition from the University of Southern California. He became a professor of music at San Jose State University in 1964, where he taught theory and composition until 1991 when he retired. In 1976, while on sabbatical leave in Greece, he studied the notation and transcription of post-Byzantine chants and has

since composed numerous timely transcriptions of the chant. Dr. Zes has directed Greek Orthodox choirs since 1953 and has been director of the St. Nicholas Choir of San Jose, California, since 1971. He has been guest conductor and workshop clinician for Greek Orthodox Choir Federations throughout the United States and has composed/arranged extensively for the services of the Orthodox Church, including five liturgies (one in English).