

SOME NOTES ON LITURGICAL CHANT
(No Pun Intended)

Thoughts Gleaned from Here and There
By Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

*As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed
our tonalities from theirs. (Vid. Ps. 102:11).*

When people gather and worship they want to sing in their native tongue and employ stylistic idioms from music familiar to their ears. This is as common in the ecclesiastical world as it is in everything else. For this reason, we cannot express regret on the contemporary adaption of the "purer" form of ancient liturgical music. Legislating is one thing; real life is something else.

To attempt resuscitation is deeply impractical, and also an uncertain undertaking. Music is like language in the sense that it must rise spontaneously from within the community, coming from the people and not imposed by deliberate efforts of intellectuals or leaders. The prescriptivist solution in music is just as hopeless as an impositionist view of language. Music and language have an organic connection to the culture in which people live, and any attempt to get around that truth is destined to fail.

Everyone likes Chinese food. But to Western ears, authentic Chinese music has the sound of many dishes crashing to the floor. What this means is that music doesn't "translate" well into another culture or time. It has to be acclimated in order to thrive and survive.

To people who have grown up hearing western music, quiet, compunctionate chant is prayerful and pleasing to God; whereas loud, nasal singing (esteemed highly in many eastern and mid-eastern cultures) is extremely obnoxious to western eardrums. No doubt, to eastern ears, western singing sounds effete. So, which is the right way to chant? Also, as one of our faithful pointed out to me many years ago, musical scales with "weird" intervals (like the semi-flats in the scales of some eastern tones) "just aren't going to fly" — especially in congregations in the west.

Music, like an ancient text, needs to be translated into our idiom to be fully appreciated. From ancient times, this has happened many times in the Orthodox Christian world. And it will continue to happen as long as the world exists.