The Long Arm of Rhetoric: 21st Century Choral Performance of 6th-9th Century Orthodox Christian Hymnography

Ancient Christian hymnography, both prose and poetry, is performed by chanter or choir even to this day, whether in Greek, Arabic, Slavonic, or modern languages. In performing and directing this choral performance in English, I have noticed how many good interpretative decisions are the result of an education in Latin and Greek literature. Pleasing sound, accurate intonation, clear diction, and lengthened vowels can ensure basic comprehension in this modern aural culture, but the phrasing and dynamics guided by rhetorical devices in the text are necessary to produce a meaningful experience for those who stand, listen, and pray. This paper examines the rhetorical structure of texts selected from a vast corpus (sixteen volumes) with short demonstrations sung in the Greek, Serbian, and Russian "Kievan" tonal systems.

The Hebrew Psalms are the basis for Orthodox Christian services. This Semitic poetic structure is often binary: statement followed by modified restatement. Semitic Christian poetry, exemplified by Ephrem the Syrian (4th century), is also replete with reversals, e.g., expulsion from and re-entrance into Paradise, movement from darkness to light, from death to resurrection. (Brock 1990).

Within the services of Vespers and Matins, verses of Psalms, binary in nature, are sung in alternation with short non-narrative didactic encomia composed in accordance with Greco-Roman rhetorical standards. These are sometimes called "the verses on the verses." Some are anonymous, and others by well-known composers such as Romanos the Melodist (6th century), John of Damascus (8th century), and Kassiani (9th century), the last a woman whose work not only survives, but is duly credited.

The first verse we here examine uses two reversals followed by a tricolon, which within itself also incorporates a reversal. Another example uses disparate images, interlacing them in such a way that by the end the whole becomes an unexpected metaphor. A third example uses layered imagery, with each additional image of the same theme deepening the impression in the mind. Still another example uses a series of paired similes based on historical events followed by a single phrase rounding out the encomium. (Mother Mary & Ware, Lambertsen)

All these were composed not to be read, but to be sung, conveying not only information, but more importantly beauty, to open not just the mind, but also the heart. The job of the choral conductor, or single chanter if no one else shows up, is to turn the page, apply the proper melody indicated at the start of the text (out of 30 standard melodies), and sing the text without musical notation and with phrasing that highlights such rhetorical structures as indicated above.

Thus classical rhetoric is a living, musical art form. Some of our students might be pleasantly surprised to hear this acknowledged, however briefly, in the classroom.

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