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The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West

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Music as Religious Propaganda: Venetian Polyphony and a Byzantine Response to the Council of Florence

Dimitri Conomos

Among the 380 Byzantine manuscripts at the Library of the Docheiariou Monastery on the Holy Mountain of Athos there are preserved two very remarkable entries in an otherwise conventional anthology of Greek chants. What is so remarkable about these items is, first, that they are written in a polyphonic style (Byzantine music is *par excellence* monophonic plainchant); second, they are accompanied by an informative rubric indicating that the compositions are in the style of Latin chant; third, they were composed in the late fifteenth century by one Ioannes Plousiadenos, a Greek convert to Roman Catholicism resident in Venice in the aftermath of the Council of Florence; and, fourth, their purpose was, I believe, to introduce Western musical idioms into the Greek liturgy, this being part of a larger mission to enforce the so-called union of the Greek and Latin churches that had been ratified at the Council of Florence.

If these features alone do not demonstrate the uniqueness of these compositions, there is one further totally-unexpected aspect that singles them out: Neither their composer, Plousiadenos, nor the scribe of the Docheiariou manuscript, who copied them into his chant anthology around one hundred years after the pieces were written, could have imagined that these works would furnish music historians today with an involuntary record of a fifteenth-century Venetian musical practice that is rarely-encountered in Western musical manuscripts though is known to have existed.

These particulars, then, should explain the multi-thematic nature of the title of this essay. And we can begin our story by turning our attention first to

some of the major protagonists—others will turn up later. First we have the propagator, Ioannes Plousiadenos (c. 1429–1500), second his mentor, Cardinal Bessarion (1402–1472) whose teachings constituted the single most important influence on Plousiadenos' religious outlook, and finally, the anonymous scribe of MS Docheiariou 315 who notated the Latin-influenced hymns in the late sixteenth century. Looming in the background is the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1439) and its aborted union of the Greek and Roman churches. Looming also is the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the subsequent flow of refugees, especially of refugee intellectuals, into the most Byzantine of Italian cities, Venice.

We should actually begin by looking at this background. Let us first consider the Union of Florence which, around fifty years after the Council sessions, provided the inspiration and the raison d'être for the writing of our alleged Latin-influenced polyphony.

After roughly three-and-a-half centuries of schism, preceded by a long period of estrangement, the churches of East and West, Latin and Greek, met in the Council of Florence in the years 1438 and 1439 to discuss unity.[1] Why they met at that time and in Italy was the result of many factors. On the Latin side there was a genuine desire to end the schism and, in an age of Latin councils (Pisa, Constance, Basle), a council seemed an apt means. The Latins also desired to extend the jurisdiction of the Papacy over all Christendom. On their side the Greeks had the same genuine Christian desire for Church union and had always insisted that only a council could achieve that. What made them accept the West as a venue of the council instead of holding out for Constantinople, was the fact that Constantinople, with a population of less than 50,000 inhabitants, was then nearly in its death throes since the Turks had conquered most of its ancient empire and, surrounding it on all sides, were only awaiting an opportunity to deliver the *coup de grâce*. The Byzantine Empire was in most urgent need of help to be able to defend itself. Hope for that lay only in the West. The one institution there that might channel effective aid was the papacy which had launched and directed so many crusades of European Christianity—not all of them particularly agreeable. It was clear, however, that the Byzantine emperor was willing to close his eyes to the plunder of the fourth crusade and to negotiate with the pope. The emperor was

[1]Bibliography on the Council is vast. Among the major publications in English are J. Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge, 1959); idem, *Personalities of the Council of Florence* (Oxford, 1964); J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford, 1986), 267–86; G. Alberigo (ed.), *Christian Unity: The Council of Ferrara-Florence* (Louvain, 1991).

Plousiadenos: Kanon for the Council of Florence

Canticle III: (Heirmos)

O Towers of piety, O defenders of the Churches. You shepherds and teachers of the universe. Today the theologians have piously proclaimed that the Holy Spirit clearly proceeds from both the Father and the Son.

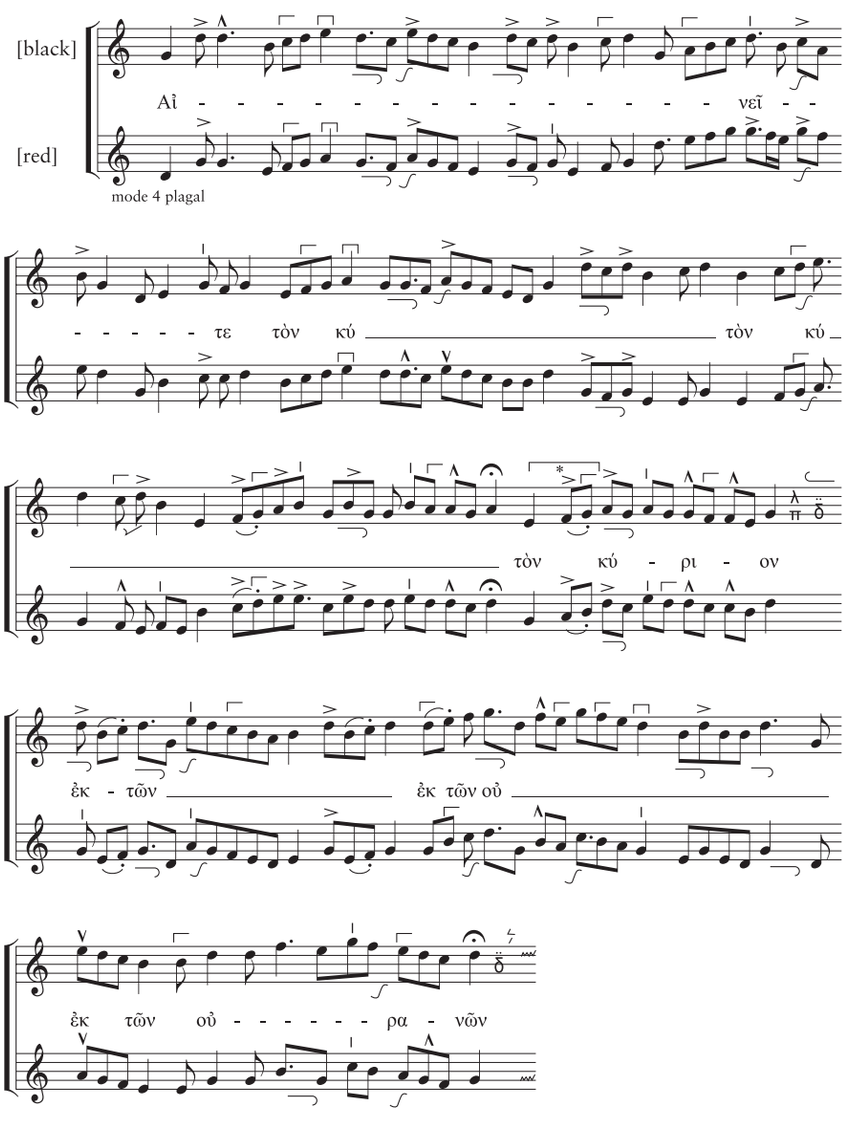
Canticle V:

We loyally honour this venerable and holy Council devoutly assembled in Florence by the Holy Spirit Who has guided the irremediably-sundered Churches to unity.[19]

It is interesting that Plousiadenos borrows a familiar melody and poetic metre—those of St John Damascene—in order to propagate his views. In so doing he follows an ancient practice, one which is known at least as early as the fourth century in Syria where Saint Ephraim (c. 306–373) trained choirs of virgins and boys to sing his Orthodox hymns that were based on the metre and melodies of the heretical psalms of Bardaisan. Bardaisan popularised false doctrines through his greatly admired chants and by way of retribution Ephraim wrote substitute texts to match the heretic's melodies.[20] It is also reported that Saint John Chrysostom introduced processional chants in Constantinople in the fourth century, using the same technique, to counter the Arian innovation of popular marches and songs with erroneous teachings. This rather effortless replacement, known as *contrafactum* in music or *prosomoion* in liturgics, is no doubt older than the fourth century and continues throughout music history even to our own times. People enjoy a good, familiar tune—Plousiadenos knew that. And to ordinary folk, while the teachings in the text are of secondary bearing, through dint of repetition, the words and their meaning remain in the mind and germinate in the subconscious. Perhaps Plousiadenos knew that as well.

[19]The kanon to Saint Thomas Aquinas is published in R. Cantarello, "Canone graeco inedito di Giuseppe vescovo di Methoni (Giovanni Plousiadeno: sec. 15) in onore di San Tommaso d'Aquino," *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, 4 (1934), 145–85, see 151 ff. That for the Eighth Ecumenical Council (ed. Migne, PG 159:1095–1101) forms part of a discussion of this genre of Greek medieval literature in K. Mitsakis, "Byzantine and Modern Greek Parahymnography," *Studies in Eastern Chant*, 5, ed. D. Conomos (New York, 1990), 9–76.

[20]See the article, "Ephraem Syrus, St" in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1977), 551.



EXAMPLE 1: Ioannes Plousiadenos, Psalm 148:1; Mount Athos, Monastery of Docheiariou, MS 315, fol. 66^{v}

Rubric: Διπλοῦν μέλος κατὰ τὴν τῶν ἑλατίνων [sic] ψαλτικήν ("A double melody according to the chant of the Latins").