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Back to Byzantium

by Timothy Mangan

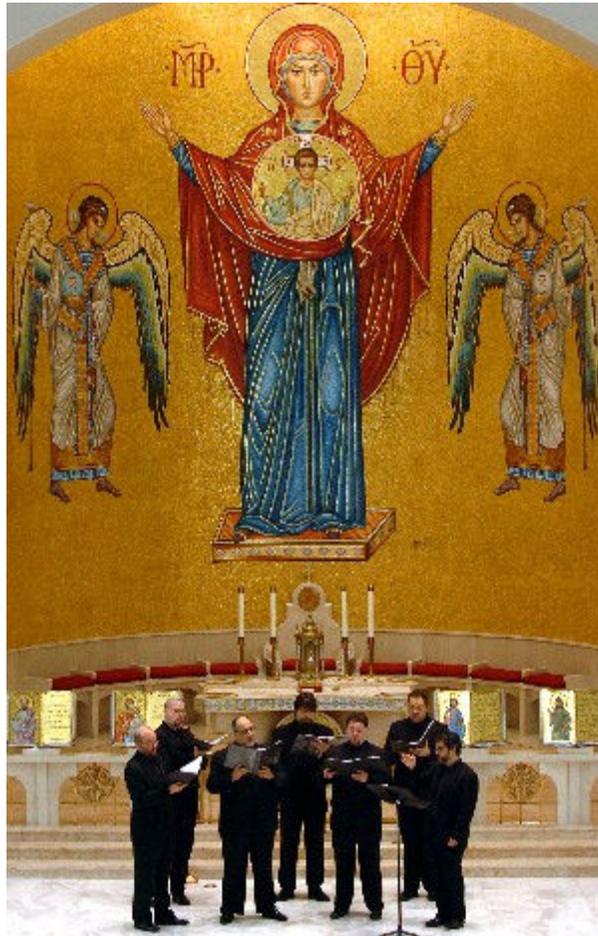


photo by Sang H. Park

Byzantine chant, and many other types of early music for that matter, tends to be confusing to read about. I remember my college course in Medieval music history as mainly a bewilderment in terminology, a parade of bad recordings and a struggle to stay awake. I was reminded again of the density of the writing on these subjects in preparing for the chamber choir Cappella Romana's presentation of Byzantine chant at St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church in Irvine on Saturday night. I read several articles on the subject and perhaps understood 30 percent.

But hearing Byzantine chant is something else. All the academese just falls away in the face of the power, simplicity and beauty of this music. As the seven men in this current configuration of the flexibly sized Romanans came in procession up the aisle of St. Paul's, singing an Invitatorium to the Vespers of St. Catherine, from 1334, I knew that all was well. I only wished for the aroma of incense.

Based in the Northwest and led by founder and director Alexander Lingas, Cappella Romana offered an evening of music from the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine's at the base of Mt. Sinai in Egypt, among the oldest continuously functioning Christian monasteries in existence. Emperor Justinian founded the place between 548 and 565. St. Catherine's is trove to a large number of Byzantine musical manuscripts (in Greek).

Some of the earliest Byzantine musical notation, from the 9th and 10th centuries, is difficult to decipher: it relied heavily on an oral tradition, serving to remind singers of melodies they already knew. Later notation can be musically reproduced with a certain exactitude, however, and Saturday's performance of music from the late 13th, 14th and 15th centuries was given in an edition translated into modern notation by Ioannis Arvanitis.

Along with the Invatorium, Cappella Romana performed excerpts from Psalm 103, some by the significant composer St. John Koukouzeles; from the "Lamplighting" Psalms; as well as "The Service of the Furnace," the only Medieval liturgical drama in Greek; and the "Imperial Acclamations for Christmastide," composed for the Byzantine emperor John VIII Palaiologos (1392-1448). The concert was to travel to the Getty Museum today, performed as part of an exhibition of Byzantine art there. St. Paul's provided its own dramatic backdrop of medieval-style mosaics.

One settles into this music rather easily. To modern ears, it can seem that not much is happening. But after a while, you begin to notice small changes in the music as it goes along, and these small changes become major events. The trio of singers in the second row, provided drone tones, single notes hummed for minutes

at a time. Over them, the quartet would chant the sometimes ornate, sometimes spare melodies. The relation of the chants to the drones was a constant source of pleasure, as the melody went in and out of dissonance with the bass tones. When one of the drone singers would add a lower octave, a whole new aural vista opened up.

Minute changes in texture – a sudden clause in unison, no drone, or a solo sentence or two -- became significant. Some of the chants went along plainly, basically one note per word syllable. Others introduced elaborate melisma, making floral garlands out of a single vowel.

Throughout, one heard (or thought he heard) Middle Eastern influences in the melodies, not only in the scales themselves but especially in the way the line included quick-turning chromatic ornamentations, like Hebrew chant. “The Service of the Furnace,” retelling a story of the three children in fiery imprisonment from the Book of Daniel, introduced a dialectic between the Youths, the Chanters, and the Choir. One would love to see it staged. Within this drama, “The Angel of the Lord came down,” by Manuel Gazes the Lampadarios, revealed the drones jumping about in all sorts of unexpected harmonic directions. The closing “Imperial Acclamations” were especially vivid, a declamatory salute to the emperor and his wife that would have been sung in an elaborate ceremony including lighting effects.

Cappella Romana sang it all with somber elegance, Lingas gracefully tracing the musical progress, conducting while singing. The two halves of the program consisted of two periods of 40 and 35 minutes of non-stop singing, a taxing vocal exercise that here and there showed before second and third winds kicked in. This is a compelling ensemble of musical scholars which we hope returns soon.