

A Systematization of Church Music in the 8th Century

Church music has been present in the heart of the Church since the beginning as a way of expressing faith and worship for Christians. Taken from the Jewish cult, Church music developed along with the history and evolution of the Church, and the periods of trial and tension that the Church endured determined the lack of an accurate systematization of Church ichos/tones/modes. The remedy of such a situation is due to St. John of Damascus in the 8th century.

Along with arranging the hymns according to the eight tones for Sundays over the year, he also intervenes in the systematization of the singing. It cannot be said whether the systematization of the *Octoechos* by St. John of Damascus concerns singing more than Church poetry; however, properly speaking, the separation of these two elements in hymnology is artificial or, at most, a way of saying.

Saint John of Damascus did not create anything new but maintained the echoes/ tones/modes already found in Church practice and the semiography or notes that existed then. From the three musical genres of the ancient Greeks (diatonic, enharmonic, and chromatic), Saint John stops at only two, namely the diatonic and the chromatic, considering them more suitable for Christian worship. Within these two main genres of tone, he applied a simplification to the modes, imposing a smoother, more weighted note on them and, therefore, more suitable for Church music. This also forced him to simplify and improve semiography, i.e., to adapt and specify the musical notation system. This system of Saint John of Damascus, known as the “Hagiopolitan notation” and crystallized in the 9th century as the so-called “Byzantine pneumas”, is the basis of all the later notation of Byzantine church music.

Therefore, Saint John of Damascus' intervention in religious chants appears as a work of systematizing chanting, which clarifies Church ichos/tones, implicitly a guarantee against any future alteration by profane melodies. To this end, he applies to tones the ancients' principle of the "ethos" in a particular form, strictly observing the moral character of melodies that distinguished modes from each other or ichos/tones from each other by the melodic essence. Saint John applies such a principle by grouping the hymns from the Sunday service so that they are no longer sung mixed but that Sundays are consecrated successively to one of the eight church tones. This meant the grouping of hymns according to the respective ichos/tones, which determined the categorical distinction of the ichos/tones from each other and the specification of their aesthetic character, being able to be clearly distinguished by the psychological impression determined by their singing. At the same time, however, a more rational rule was created in the execution, thus a more accessible role for the singer.

On the other hand, through his compositions, like his adoptive brother, Cosmas of Jerusalem, Saint John leaves classical and normative models for all the eight voices in which they introduced a better rule of tact, together with the other signs used for notation. All Church singing in subsequent ages, in its compositions and execution, referred to the system regulated by St. John.

Saint John of Damascus systematizes the melodies or tones in the Church as one who had learned music quite well from the monk Cosmas. He collected the songs sung in the Church and systematized them based on the Hellenic pentachord.

The theorist Chrysanthos of Brussa claims that the four upper distances of the Hellenic pentachord served as the basis for Saint John to systematize the four main ichos/tones. And the four lower distances of the same pentachord served as the basis for the four ichos/tones or secondary tones, also called plagal.

So that the eight tones can be learned quickly, Saint John also wrote some theoretical principles for their practice. Small fragments of the musical grammar of St. John Damascene written on parchment with questions and answers have been preserved in the Holy Mount Athos.

In addition to this grammar, he wrote another book of musical theories entitled: *Hagiopolitis*, in which he shows how Church music can be learned. But so that the church voices could be learned and applied as he systematized them, Saint John of Damascus drew up the *Octoechos*, according to the number of the eight tones of the Church, which is in use until today.

The hymns of *Octoechos* are set especially for the divine service of Sunday. These hymns change every Sunday, beginning with tone I and ending with tone VIII, after which the first voice is repeated.

The content of the hymns in *Octoechos* is panegyric, dogmatic, moral, and generally didactic, and the psalmody is simple and free of old musical figures. Saint John of Damascus did not invent the Psaltic notes or the Church tones; he only systematized them.

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