

## Music in the Service of Prayer

### Interview with Jessica Suchy-Pilalis

*Note:* Jessica Suchy-Pilalis is a Greek-American music theorist and harpist. In addition to being a professor at the State University of New York at Potsdam, she is also a *hieropsaltria* in the Church and a tonsured reader. She is one of the few experts in the modal analysis of Byzantine chant and has played a seminal role in melding Byzantine music with English translations of liturgical texts. Patricia Fann Bouteneff caught up with her recently in her office at SUNY Potsdam.

*You once told me that you fell in love with Byzantine chant as a child. You then studied harp, music theory, and chant, and we'll get to that in a little bit. But to start, what was the situation of chant in the GOA [Greek Orthodox Archdiocese] in the 1980s—when you were finishing your master's degrees at the Eastman School of Music and working on your doctorate at Indiana University?*

First of all, I was born into a very musical family, where I was surrounded by Greek folk music, lots of classical music (my mother is a professor of music and an avant-garde composer), and all sorts of other music. But there was something that touched me so deeply about going to church and hearing the chant. At that time, my Greek wasn't good enough for me to understand the words—and of course there was no English used in any service when I was little.

In many Greek parishes it was typical to hire somebody who could both teach Greek school and chant services. Most of the time, they could not read Byzantine music since they had learned "by ear."

*So in the 1980s, when you came back from your studies in Greece, how did your qualifications differ from theirs?*

By that time, I was absolutely fluent in Byzantine music. I was certified

by both the Church and the State of Greece as a chanter. I had been chanting as part of a Byzantine choir at a large church in Thessaloniki that also gave public concerts, and I had been studying with well-respected teachers, including Dimitrios Sourlantzis and Eleftherios Georgiadis, so I had a very strong set of credentials that most men in the U.S. did not have at the time.

*And you're saying "men" because chanters, by and large, were men at the time.*

They were men.

*Were there ever women at the chanters' stand?*

It seems odd now, but I remember a time when, if women were at the *psalterion*, it was because there was nobody else to chant. Women chanted in parishes by *oikonomia* [special dispensation] only, not because it was a standard, accepted practice. So when I became the *protopsaltis* in Indianapolis, to my knowledge, no other woman had ever been officially titled and salaried.

*What was the reaction of the parish? Did they realize that something unusual had just happened?*

When I was made a *rassophoros* in the early 1980s, it came as a com-

plete surprise to me. Bishop Timothy of Detroit brought me out from the *psalterion* in front of the priests, the deacon, and all the people. The *rasso* was put on me, the prayer and blessing were bestowed, he raised me up and shouted, “Axia!” and the church responded “Axia!” with great enthusiasm. It just went to the depth of me, because I’d never heard the feminine of “*axios*” shouted before.

*I don’t think many people in the Church have heard “Axia!” before.*

It was something else! I think he wanted to make sure that everyone recognized that I was legitimate as a *protopsaltis*, that I would be able to enter the sanctuary as is necessary to a chanter’s function—because there are certain hymns which, by tradition, are chanted from there—which showed a great amount of insight on his part.

*Some of your qualifications are related to studying theory and applying it to Byzantine chant in ways that people hadn’t really done before.*

Yes. I had a one-year grant to study chant in Thessaloniki, and so in that year I earned both a four-year diploma and a five-year diploma in Byzantine music from two different conservatories. I also studied privately. I was able to achieve this by applying my understanding of Western music theory and my aural skills to Byzantine music, to fill gaps in my knowledge quickly. And when I started working more with English, the fact that I’m a music theorist had everything to do with my analytical ability to use the modes to compose melodies for the English translations.

*You’ve been credited with helping shift the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese from Western-style music to Byzan-*

*tine chant. That would seem like an almost impossible task, not only because of how hard it is generally to change an organization’s culture, but also because so many people in the GOA had grown up with Western-style music as their tradition. Was that your goal from the beginning—to effect such a transition?*

Did I set out to help shift the GOA from more Western-style music back to Byzantine chant? No, I simply wanted to restore, promote, and nourish Byzantine chant in this country. For this to happen, the chant also had to support and convey our hymns in English. I felt that people—especially young people who had no knowledge of Greek—needed it to worship, to pray, and to deepen their theology—to be truly Orthodox. Even with this goal, I don’t think I went so far as to think, “I’ll be the standard-bearer,” but I somehow sensed that I had a calling, and I knew that I had been given the tools. I think it was just stubbornness, out of passion for the hymns. I remember being invited to a National Forum meeting, where I was a panelist on the use of English, and explaining that this *could* be done, and people saying, “No, it can’t.” And I’d be saying, “Yes, it can, and here’s how.” The “how” was to take my research and apply it.

*So you’re talking about a move back to Byzantine chant—that can be done.*

In many parishes, chant was viewed as old-fashioned and passé, and was often restricted to the services that the choir couldn’t do or that were sparsely attended. I remember giving a talk, probably in the mid-1980s. I said, we had come to the point where the chanters were like a warm-up band for the choir. We would often

chant Matins to an almost empty church, and then the choir (and the congregation) would come in for Liturgy. That was something that I felt very strongly about, because chant is deeply beautiful and yet most of the congregation heard so little of it.

However, I believe it would be most accurate to say that I was—and still am—advocating *for* chant, not *against* choral settings; *for* the inclusion of English, not *against* the use of Greek. I have seen a great resurgence and renewed respect for Byzantine chant in this country in the last few decades. There are Byzantine choirs, schools, workshops, websites, recordings . . . this is a wonderful thing.

*A lot of the readers of The Wheel come from jurisdictions, such as the OCA, in which Western-style music is the norm. Why did you think it was important to advocate for chant? What does Byzantine chant convey in the liturgical setting that other music might not?*

Chant has the ability to serve text, not just accompany it, and these texts are our prayers. These hymns and their chant melodies convey our theology in a way that no other type of music can, and chant does that because the text—the prayer—generates the actual melody. Because of that intimacy between music and text, it is absolutely powerful for prayer. A lot of music can stir my emotions, but it cannot reach me the way that chant can.

*It's a very complicated process, if I remember correctly, to generate the music from the text.*

Yes, and that is where I started. In the 1970s, I began working on the analysis of the modes, examining how the

melodies were constructed, cataloging the numerous melodic formulas that define each mode. I started from needing to understand the modes, not only intuitively, but by proving that one formula functions in a certain way, that another formula does something else . . . figuring all that out. The purpose was so that someday I could chant fluently in English. This research allowed me to reverse-engineer hymns using English as the melodic generator instead of Greek. So, when I first went to the National Forum and said, “We can write hymns in English,” it was because I could take my analysis and apply it.

Hymnography is a discipline very much like iconography: one subjects oneself to fasting and prayer in order to be a melodist, to create those melodies. And just as an iconographer doesn't decide, “Today I'm going to paint the Virgin's robe in polka-dots,” we don't innovate melodically. We subject ourselves to the tradition. There is an iconographic style that has evolved to illuminate our theology, and there is chant that has done the same. We hear iconography referred to as “theology in color.” Chant is the same—our hymns are “theology in sound.”

*So, you gave people the idea that this could be done and you knew how to do it. What was the next step after that?*

Let me back up. Some people were already trying to put hymns into English. The reason others were saying it couldn't be done was because the approach was backward. People were taking melodies crafted for Greek verbatim—note-for-note—and trying to fit English text to the music. Because of the way Greek translates into English, in order to



make the text align, sometimes extraneous words were added, word order was reversed, and unstylistic melismas (many notes to one syllable of text) were used. Often an accented syllable would end up on a rhythmically weak note. The results were clumsy and didn't sing well. Those who knew the Byzantine chant tradition would feel uncomfortable with the English settings but wouldn't know why, and they'd conclude that English was an inappropriate language for chanting. It was because the text-music relationship had been broken and distorted. People felt they had to treat the *melody* as sacred and therefore tried to fit the text in a Procrustean fashion, not realizing that the modes themselves were designed to adapt to what is truly sacred—the text! I wanted to chant a prayer; I didn't want to chant something incomprehensible just because it matched a pre-existing melody! It was necessary to revolutionize the entire approach.

*Once you did the reverse-engineering, how did you make it known?*

This is one of my faults: I had always wanted to keep working until I had the full system put together and then distribute it. The full system still isn't quite complete, although it's extremely extensive—but people need it. I shared some of the research, and even the approach to the research, so other people have gone ahead and done a lot of hymnography in English which has been published and is easy to get. That's good for the sake of prayer. But I still haven't published my own research, though I've continued refining the system. I use the research constantly in my role as a melodist, and each time I do, it's a micro-step towards refining it for eventual use by others. Often, I'll receive a request via e-mail to set a particular hymn text, and it is a joy to fulfill this. These requests have come from just about every jurisdiction. By now, quite a few of my settings are

out there, some published. *Musica Russica* published the entire Nativity Canon of St. Kosmas, and the Paschal Canon should be coming out soon. I have a commission for the complete service for the Lesser Blessing of Water. Some are on CDs, some posted on websites, but most of them are still with me.

But I want to say, I couldn't do this if it hadn't been for everything in my life: upbringing, education, scholarships, grants, research, teaching, blessings of the Church . . . I can't help but think of all the miraculous twists and turns, the unexpected opportunities afforded to me and the many kindnesses shown me. For those, I thank God and I pray that my contributions as a melodist and hymnographer may be to his glory.

As for my influence, I suspect that it also came from going around giving workshops. I would give the participants the *Orthros* [Matins] of the day, which I had just created for the English texts, and we would chant it together.

*It sounds as though people took what they learned in your workshops and ran with it.*

Yes, I think the workshops made it more acceptable for people—not only in the GOA, but also in other jurisdictions—to start chanting in English in a way that would work, rather than stuffing a translation into a pre-existing melody.

*How do you see the state of chant currently in the States?*

In Greece, there was and still is a wonderful resurgence of Byzantine chant. And that has brought many educated chanters to this country. It's a whole

different situation from when I started chanting, and it's healthy. Now there are all sorts of choirs chanting, giving concerts, and making recordings. I think the resurgence in Greece helped to fuel things in this country as well. Here I feel we have regained a sense of its worth, not as an archaic artifact but as a living tradition.

*Where do you see chant headed in the U.S.?*

I foresee that there will be increasingly diverse parishes, such as the one I now serve in this small college town. It has a mix of just about every ethnic group possible, recent immigrants and converts, so it is essential to have a blend of all sorts of Orthodox musical traditions. And while there may be enough people in a small congregation to support harmony some of the time, chant is much more user-friendly if there are only a few choir members—it only takes one chanter to lead the congregation—so there are practical considerations, as well.

*Is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to talk about?*

Yes, the story of writing the *apolytikion* [troparion] for St. Olympia, the patron saint of our mission parish in Potsdam. It happened on the very night our young mission church was named, when it was officially given its patron saint. Our bishop, Vladyka Michael (Dahulich), had brought Professor David Ford with him. David was in the process of translating some of the letters that St. John Chrysostom had written to St. Olympia. For quite some time, I had been thinking about crafting an *apolytikion* for St. Olympia, as she is one of the saints who get a generic hymn, but I hadn't found the inspiration yet. As David was read-

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Suchy-Pilalis' *apolytikion* to St. Olympia is available at <http://saintolympiaorthodoxchurch.org/images/Music/St.Olympiaapolytrop.pdf>.



ing those letters to the congregation, I heard the *apolytikion* in my head. After everyone left the chapel that night, I sat down with my laptop and wrote it all out. The text is, for the most part, taken from Chrysostom's own words. Then the chant melody was crafted to fit the text. I had read some of those letters before, but when I heard David read them aloud, everything came together in one of those holy moments that I cannot explain.

*You created it from scratch, as it were.*

Yes, there was no Greek for this. This hymn was written in English; it is not a translation. I purposely picked the same mode used for Chrysostom's *apolytikion*. I wanted them to be a pair.

So the *apolytikion* was born on that night, the night the church was named. That's something that I will always remember because it wasn't me, it was *through* me, just the way an icon is *through* the hand of someone. This is how a hymnographer or melodist must work. And this is the hymn this parish chants every Sunday.<sup>1</sup>

So maybe the future of Byzantine music in our country is something along these lines, as more American Orthodox saints are revealed. I've also set the *apolytikia* for St. Raphael Hawaweeny, when he was being canonized, and for the Saints of America—which of course are also not in Greek. So, if we talk about the future, it's generating chant for saints in this country and for worshippers here whose patron saints may not have a Greek (or Russian, or whatever) hymn already written. These hymn melodies will be indigenous to the text; they will be generated from English and they will be Byzantine chant. ✱

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Music theorist and harpist **Jessica Suchy-Pilalis** is a professor at the Crane School of Music at the State University of New York at Potsdam. As a specialist in Byzantine music, she currently chants at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Camp Hill, Penn. In 2006, The National Forum of Greek Orthodox Church Musicians bestowed on her the St. Romanos the Melodist Medallion, its highest honor.