

A NOTE ABOUT METER AND TIME SIGNATURES IN GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH MUSIC

by Stan Takis

You will find that the time signatures change frequently in the music on NEWBYZ.ORG. At first, this may look a little daunting, especially if you are used to staying in one meter throughout a piece of music. Actually, changing time signatures frequently is not that difficult, especially if you realize that the rhythm of Orthodox liturgical chant is based upon the rhythm of speech. In both Greek and English, these texts have accented and unaccented syllables, as well as more important words and less important words. If we consider an accented word or syllable to be the first beat of a measure, and the unaccented syllable(s) that follow it to be the rest of the beats in the measure, then we can see through regular speech that there will be measures with two, three, four, five, and six beats. (Very rarely will one find more than five unaccented syllables strung together at one time. Also, it is rare to find two consecutive accented syllables.)

With experience you will find that, since the music follows the speech pattern of the text, the use of changing time signatures actually makes the chant easier to perform. In America, we use many of the melodies of John Sakellarides, a Greek chanter who, in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, was one of the first to put Byzantine melodies into staff notation, rather than the traditional neumes of the older Byzantine notation system. When he did this, he attempted to put all of the music into 4/4 time. In order to do this he had to add several half-notes (2-beat notes) to create a four-beat pattern from three syllables. He also had to put bar lines in the middle of six-syllable phrases, thus creating musical accents where they should not be. Unfortunately, Sakellarides ended up disrupting the flow of the texts by trying to fit uneven metrical patterns into a steady 4/4 rhythm. For our website, we have attempted to correct Sakellarides' errors by removing some of the unnecessary half-notes and bar lines. This results in the frequently changing time signatures. In my experience, after using them for a while, my choirs find it easier to sing with these changing metrical patterns rather than the unnatural rhythm patterns created by Sakellarides' attempts to put everything in one meter.

Some people, when transcribing Church hymns into staff notation, do not use time signatures or bar lines at all, because one does not find any in the Byzantine notation (although a few Byzantine notation scores have short bar lines). These people claim that time signatures and bar lines interrupt the flow of the chant. I agree that the chant should flow naturally, but I find the time signatures are an aid to Western-trained musicians who look at rhythmic patterns visually, and that they don't have to interfere with flow because they are not designed to affect tempo. They are only informative. They certainly help me when I am conducting a choir from a score. Also, although Byzantine notation may not have bar lines, it does have many accent symbols that show where metrical patterns begin—in effect, doing the same thing as bar lines, since the first beat of a staff measure shows where the metric pattern begins with an accent on the first beat of the measure.

Therefore, I suggest that you should not be daunted by the presence of changing meter and time signatures, but appreciate that you are chanting the right way with centuries of Orthodox tradition behind you, and you are keeping alive the holy musical art of the Church.