

Problems in the Musical Translation of Religious Texts: Church Slavonic/Greek to English

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Johanna E. Katchen 柯安娜
National Tsing Hua University 國立清華大學
katchen@mx.nthu.edu.tw

Abstract

Although most people may think that translation involves text alone, it is seldom that simple. When one deals with a text that will be set to music and sung, for example, the translator takes liberties to make the song sound natural and appealing in the target language. However, when one works with the setting of religious texts to existing chant patterns, any change in the text must be approached carefully because the replacement of one synonym by another could be dogmatically incorrect.

The Orthodox Church (東正教會) has always used the vernacular, the language of the people, for its church services; Greek and then later Church Slavonic was subsequently translated into other languages as necessary. Often, however, it was not until the second and even third generations born from immigrant populations gained maturity that the spoken language of the street appeared in the church.

Orthodox liturgies in English in the USA started to be introduced regularly in the 1960s; to date there is still no consensus in many of the musical traditions of the ideal form; even the English translations themselves differ. This work is further complicated by the sheer wealth of textual and musical materials from a variety of services for virtually every day of the year.

The presenter has been actively involved in setting some of these texts to music for use in church services, previously in the USA and more recently in the Orthodox Church in Taiwan. After giving some historical background, the presenter will draw upon several examples of work she has done, one from Greek and the others from Church Slavonic Carpatho-Rusyn chant, to illustrate the problems encountered when striving to make the chant sound natural in English.

Key Words: Translation of music texts; Orthodox Church music; Church Slavonic music in English; Greek Orthodox music in English

Introduction

When the layman hears the word translation, he may think first, from his watching of CNN, the simultaneous interpreter at some gathering of international political leaders trying desperately not to cause World War Three over the mistaken rendering of some obscure term. The ordinary person then thinks of the translation of texts—of books, newspaper articles, and other print materials. The college educated may read world literature in their native languages. And that is the end of thought on the matter for the average native speaker of English.

In Taiwan the situation is different, of course, as more languages are in play. Mandarin may be everywhere, yet people may speak Taiwanese or Hakka at home. The Japanese influence remains strong, and English is seen everywhere. How many Chinese signs use the Japanese modifier の? My all-time favorite is 卡拉 OK karaoke, a Japanese word and concept consisting of two Chinese characters followed by the English OK—and the term *okay* is said to have its origins in West Africa!

Although most of the world is multilingual, places like the United States are somewhat less so. Nevertheless, in addition to areas where Spanish is widely spoken or where there are newer immigrant populations, there are other areas where heritage languages may be used: Chinese/Cantonese in the various Chinatowns, Yiddish in New York City, or German in rural Pennsylvania, to name a few. Among cultures where religion plays a central role in life, Greeks, Italians, and Poles, for example, the church has played a role in keeping alive heritage languages as well as the sense of being a hyphenated American.

Background to the Orthodox Church and the Position of Language

Until 1054, there was one Christian church. During the first centuries of the church, four centers developed: Rome. Jerusalem, Antioch (now the Syrian Orthodox Church), and Alexandria (jurisdiction over Africa), with Byzantium/Constantinople added shortly after as the seat of the Eastern Roman Empire. Although all were equal, the bishop of Rome was considered to be the “first among equals.” However, from the time that Emperor Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire to the East,

there was political competition and even tension between the Latin-speaking west and Greek-speaking east.

Each of the five jurisdictions mentioned above were autocephalous, meaning “self-heading”—they made their own decisions about internal problems. When there were serious doctrinal problems to discuss, an Ecumenical Council was called; seven of these were held between 325 and 787. Political tensions and intrigues, different languages, increasing isolation from each other—all these contributed to worsening relations between the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire, but the main reasons seem to have been Roman popes claiming universal supremacy over the whole church and Rome’s addition of the *filioque* to the original Nicene Creed (*filioque* Latin ‘and the son’ “..and the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father *and the Son...*”). Attempts to diffuse the situation did not go well and resulted in mutual excommunication in 1054, and further attempts at solving the problems did not succeed. To the Eastern, or Orthodox Church, a final blow came when Crusaders from the west sacked Constantinople in 1204.

Thus today we have the Catholic Church with its head, the Pope of Rome in the Vatican, and the various autocephalous Orthodox Churches which now number far more than five to include the Russian Church, Bulgarian, Serbian, Greek, Japanese, and many more. Unlike the Catholic Church, which used Latin until the Second Vatican Council of 1962, the Eastern churches have always used the vernacular, the language of the people. For example, in 863, when two Greeks, Cyril and Methodius, left Thessaloniki to Christianize their Slav neighbors to the north, one of their first tasks was to codify the language, inventing the Glagolitic alphabet, from which the Cyrillic alphabet used in Orthodox Slav nations was later developed.

Cyril and Methodius worked with Old Church Slavic, a South Slavic language, also known as Old Bulgarian, which was subsequently used in other Slav regions as they converted to Orthodoxy. Church Slavic was brought up to date a few times so that the Church Slavic or Church Slavonic in use today is not the same as was used in manuscripts 1000 years ago. Current versions of Church Slavonic date from the seventeenth century. The differences among the Slav languages are not as great as within other language families; thus, most of the vocabulary is comprehensible, but the grammatical endings may be different. More recently, there have been translations into the modern Slav languages such as Russian, Ukrainian, and Modern Bulgarian.

Much of the New Testament was written in Greek, and so Greek has pride of place as a liturgical language. Nevertheless, New Testament Greek is far from the Modern Greek language spoken today, and the language of the various church services, Middle Greek from the time of the Byzantine Empire, is not immediately and completely intelligible, but texts with glosses or even translation into Modern Greek help the congregation to understand the older language. There are other Orthodox churches in the Middle East using Arabic or even more ancient languages, but in this paper I will be talking about the Greek and Church Slavonic languages and musical traditions being translated into English forms.

The Role of English

Immigrants take their religion with them to their new homes. This is especially true in cases where the new home does not share the same religious belief, and even where this is the case, immigrants may set up their own church or transform what already exists, as is the case now in places like Austria and Ireland, where the number of Polish immigrants, also Catholics, is changing the demographics of some Catholic churches. The same is happening with Catholic churches in the southern US states as they become more Spanish-speaking.

English-speaking areas like the USA, Canada, the British Isles, and Australia have a primarily Western European heritage and are Protestant or Roman Catholic. Thus the first immigrants from Orthodox countries found no church of their own and had to work hard to get priests and bishops sent to their new home to set up their church affiliated with “the old country”. As the populations grew over a generation or more, these new churches might be granted their own autocephalous status.

However, there is not yet one American Orthodox Church because of jurisdiction issues. Greek immigrants set up Greek Orthodox churches, Russians Russian Orthodox churches, Syrians Syrian Orthodox churches, and Bulgarians, Serbs, Romanians, and so on set up their own churches. With the first generation, the church was part of the ethnic ghetto, a place where immigrants got together with their own kind and could speak their own language. As the children and grandchildren were more comfortable using English and less comfortable with their grandparents’ language, each church faced a need to perform the church services in English. Moreover, even if the descendants did speak their heritage language, as we have seen, the language of the church services was not the same (Middle Greek differs from Modern Greek,

Church Slavonic differs from the modern Slav languages). But since each church was separate, they each developed their own English translations.

The churches also faced their need for English at different times. Most immigrants speaking Slav languages went to the USA in the big wave of European immigration from the 1880s to 1924 to work in the factories and coal mines. With the coming of communism in Russia in 1917 and after World War II in the other Slav regions, immigration from those lands dried up. The lack of new immigrants speaking the languages led to the serious decline of heritage languages and the greater call for English. Thus some of the earliest and best work on English translation, including putting the music to English, came from the descendants of Russian immigrants with the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). The OCA is no longer exclusively Russian and includes those from Albanian, Bulgarian, Romanian, and other jurisdictions; it is now an autocephalous American church and uses almost all English as many of its members cannot trace their heritage to traditional Orthodox countries. The situation is not the same in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, where the flow of immigrants from Greece did not stop, Greek is still used exclusively in some churches, and priests must be able to do the services in Greek to some extent.

The System of Chants

A first-time visitor to an Orthodox church is often surprised that there is always singing going on. Indeed, reading is quite rare; even the prescribed readings from the Bible (Epistle and Gospel) are chanted in a simple style. The Liturgy is sung as a dialogue between the priest and the people/choir with a specific structure made up of fixed songs and variable chants. It is in the other services, however, such as Vespers and Matins, where the many variations in the chants are found.

First, there is the system of eight tones, known as the Oktoechos. Each week is marked with one of those tones successively, with Tone 1 succeeding Tone 8; this cycle restarts each year at Pascha (Easter). Then there are the immovable feasts which fall on the same day each year (Menaion), such as Christmas, with their specific songs and tones, and the so-called movable feasts, those associated with Pascha, starting ten weeks before Pascha (Triodion) and running until eight weeks after (Pentecostarion). The intersection of these three cycles results in variation each year.

Moreover, there are not just eight tones in total. Rather, there is a system of eight—eight tones of troparia, eight of automela (samopodobny--tones that are ap-

plied to multiple texts), specific variations on some of these tones, and individual tones which may be used only for one specific feast day. While Greek Byzantine Chant had its own system of tones, as the Liturgy and services were translated into other languages, the old tones may not have fit with the new language, so modifications were made. Eventually, the various peoples developed their own tones, and through the years each tradition has undergone changes. For example, the older *znamenny* chant of the Russian church gave way to the influence of western polyphonic musical styles in the eighteenth century. The result is that today, on Christmas, for example, the troparion of the feast will be the same text, the language depending on the usage within that church, and the tone will be prescribed as Tone 4. However, the actual musical string of notes of Tone 4 is different depending on whether it is being sung in a Greek, Russian, Serbian, or Ukrainian church.

Each chant itself has a structure, most often a repetition of two or three musical phrases which are repeated as many times as necessary to finish the given text. The first phrase may be musically different, and the end phrase is often different. Moreover, within each phrase there is a note which may be repeated as often as necessary to fit in the given text, making each phrase variable yet maintaining the same structure. A good chanter can look at a new text and sing it to the prescribed chant immediately, though most would prefer to run through it once or twice to make sure they have made an appropriate interpretation.

Putting the Chants to Music

Translations are done for different purposes, often so that the reader can access the materials in a language s/he can understand. Usually the ordinary layperson is not part of an official translation team. Yet even among experts, there can be disagreement. A prime example is the Greek word *Theotokos* to refer to Mary; etymologically it is “God-Birthgiver” (*Theos* = God; *tokou* = give birth + person suffix). The Church Slavonic *Bogoroditse* is an exact translation (*Bog* = God; *rodit* – to give birth + person suffix). Old English could form words in this way, but Modern English has a more analytic derivational morphology. English does not have one word meaning God-Birthgiver. Catholics have solved the problem by using *Mother of God* for every reference to *Theotokos*; the Byzantine Catholic Church in the USA recently decided to return to the term *Theotokos* and met with some grumbling among their congregations, comments such as “Why are they making us sing Greek? What does it mean?” Even

though it is not canonically incorrect to refer to Mary as “the Mother of God” and the phrase is also used in the various texts, the choice of words here is still considered very important by theologians and the chanter must abide by those decisions.

Syllable Structure. Perhaps the first major step in putting a text to a given musical structure is to analyze the syllable structure. Take a well-known simple tune like “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and try to sing the words of the nursery rhyme “Mary Had a Little Lamb” to it. This is basically how chanting works in the Orthodox Church; the psaltist or cantor or chanter or reader (the lead singer can be known by any of these terms and more) has the templates of the chants in his/her head and, as s/he meets the various texts marked for various tones, applies the template tone to the text. Actually, the most frequently used texts have been set to music notes, but those notes should accurately reflect the structure of the chant. What we will look at here is just how those texts are set to music notes while still maintaining the original spirit and sound of the chant.

To see how to do this, let us go back to our nursery rhymes and mark the stressed and unstressed syllables (stressed syllables in **bold**); then match the stressed syllables and you can make the song work. When we do this, we may have to add some unstressed syllable. In the first line, each long stressed *row* becomes a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed in *Mary had a little*; the second, third, and fourth lines have to begin with unstressed syllables *its*, *and*, *the* respectively..

<p>Row, row, row your boat, Gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, Life is but a dream.</p>	<p>Mary had a little lamb, Its fleece was white as snow, And everywhere that Mary went The lamb was sure to go.</p>
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Table 1

When we encounter a phrase such as “The sun and the moon were darkened” (Good Friday Lamentations, Second Stanza, Verse 5), we start the verse by placing the initial *the* as the fourth beat of the previous measure so that we can give *sun*, a noun, a main stress and let it take the first beat of a new measure. Similarly we place *moon* and *dark-* at the beginning of subsequent measures as they would receive stress in speech as important content words. The words *and*, *the*, and *were* are function

words; they help to show grammatical relationships but do not present new content. Thus, we try to avoid placing them in a position that receives a strong stress or beat.

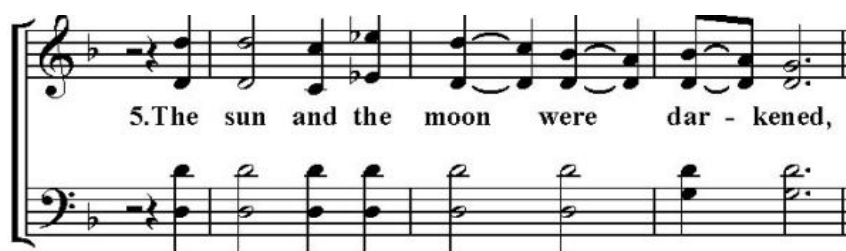


Figure 1

Choosing among Synonyms. When we attempt to sing the chants in English, we are usually working with English translations already made by experts and approved by the church. However, as we have said, there are several approved English translations; some have been made to bring the prayers to English speakers without any intention to have the texts sung. Those made to be sung may have had different chant traditions in mind. That is, a translation made for Greek chant may not work particularly well with Carpathian chant.

In 2004 our priest at the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Taipei, Fr. Jonah, asked me to have our few singers sing the three sets of verses from the Lamentations, a service done on Good Friday, in English. This service is always done in Greek Orthodox churches and well-loved there, but not necessarily in the Russian or Slav traditions. I had had one recording of it in Greek, and Fr. Jonah gave me a copy of another recording. This recording, also in Greek; had *a capella* singing in unison with a bass drone, and the impression was that of a group of simple peasant parishioners singing together in church. Though no doubt professional, their unpretentious singing style touched the heart.

My background is with the Church Slavonic, in particular with the Carpatho-Rusyn tradition, so I needed a lot of preparation to work with a text originally in Greek. I began by listening to the First and Second Stanzas over and over again and consulted the renditions in the Greek-Byzantine Liturgical Hymnal (I was more familiar with the tune of the Third Stanza and needed less preparation for that one.). After this came the hard part—fitting in the English texts for each verse. This task is not as straightforward as it may seem. Often there are several ways to do this, so one has to

decide which sounds better, which fits the rhythm of English better. and at the same time stresses the important words and concepts of the text.

For example, the rhythm of all three stanzas, and of a lot of music in English, too, emphasizes the first and (secondarily) the third beats of a four-beat measure. However, spoken English often also has a rhythm made up of a combination of unstressed/stressed syllables which in musical notation would fall on the second and fourth beats. Much of English poetry is iambic, which is this unstressed/stressed pattern, as in Robert Frost's well-known poem which begins: "Whose woods these are I think I know."

Consider, for example, the First Verse of the Third Stanza shown above. It is rendered in Papadeas as "All generations offer a hymn to Your Burial, O my Christ."

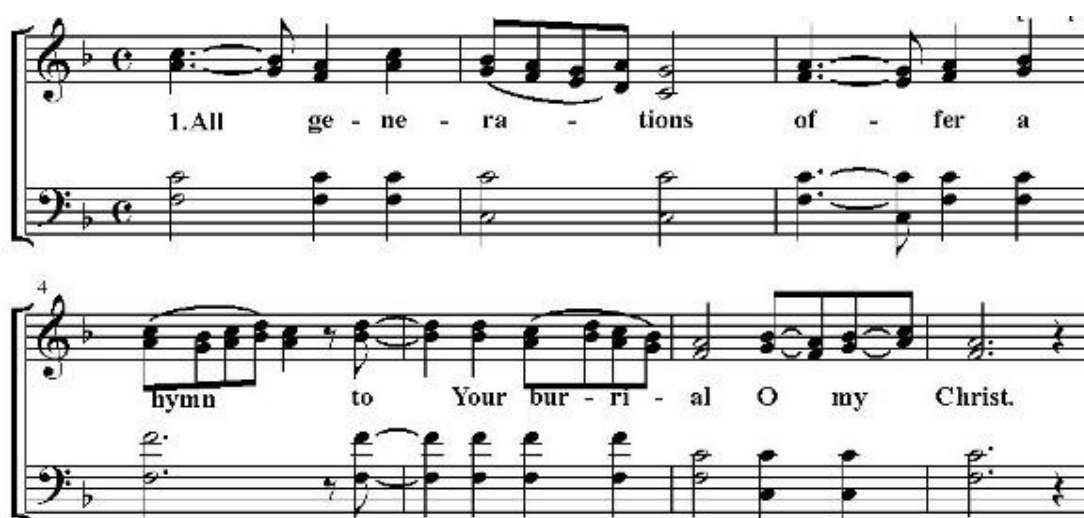


Figure 2

Papadeas' purpose was no doubt to help the children and grandchildren of immigrants understand what was going on in their churches in the USA; he probably did not mean his translations to be sung and should not, therefore, be faulted. Nevertheless, if we compare his translation, which is faithful to the original, with the one from the booklet inside the CD referred to above, the second, though not so exact, feels more poetic and fits the music much better (and one could easily change *Thy* to *Your* without affecting the style). One reason this translation works better is the echoing of *generations* with the word *adoration* on similar musical structure and word stresses; the word *entombment* also contributes to the similarity of style. For this musical structure, words from Latin with stress on the second or third syllable are more appropriate.

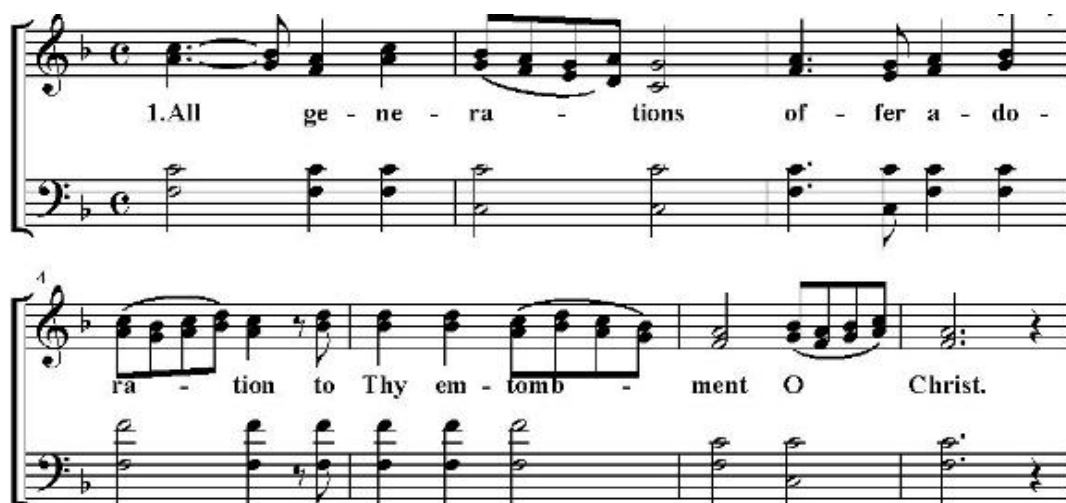


Figure 3

Experts tell us that English has about three times more words than other languages. This is due to the history of English and its ease in borrowing words from other languages. To its Germanic base many Latin words were added from the adoption of Christianity through the Renaissance until today. From the Vikings come Scandinavian words, the thousands of words from French as a result of the Norman Conquest and the more recent influence of French culture. Add to this the many Greek roots used in scientific terms and the countless other words borrowed from language all over the world. This history gives us a wealth of synonyms to choose from; English often has sets from Germanic, French, and Latin, such as *ask*, *question*, *interrogate*, respectively. Germanic words (and those from Scandinavian) tend to have stress on the first syllable, whereas those from Latin (and Greek) tend to be polysyllabic and have main stress on a later syllable.

Occasionally, the choice of synonyms might be made for reasons other than fitting the music. For Good Friday Vespers I was working with a set of texts and one had two different translations of a term: “When the heavenly powers saw You, O Christ, *calumniated/falsely slandered* by lawless men; ... Both *calumniated* and *falsely slandered* fit the music equally well. However, we would be singing this text here in Taiwan, where although nearly the whole congregation are not native speakers, English is still our lingua franca. The congregation would have the text in front of them in Mandarin and Church Slavonic in addition to English, but that verse would be sung in English. I wondered how many nonnative speakers, indeed how many native

speakers, would understand the word *calumniated*. The words *falsely* and *slandered* would most likely be understood by nearly all our nonnative speaker participants, and I made my choice on that basis.

Preserving the Original Chant. In addition to the selection among competing texts in order to fit the chant, there is the manner of actually putting the text to the music. Often the same text is interpreted quite differently. For example, there is today much controversy over the English interpretation of the Carpatho-Rusyn tradition; the 2006 promulgation of the Byzantine Catholic Church has been widely criticized by experienced cantors (the Carpatho-Rusyn chant tradition is shared by Eastern-rite Catholics and Orthodox from the Rusyn/Ruthenian area of East Slovakia and Western Ukraine and their descendants in the USA). An example of this difference can be seen in the prescribed Irmos (Ninth Ode of the Canon which replaces the Hymn to Theotokos on major feast days) for Christmas. In the Carpatho-Rusyn tradition, it was sung in Church Slavonic, as in Figure 4 below.

9. *mf*
 Тѧ-ни-ство странно-е вѣ-ждѡ ѡ пре-слав-но-е, нѣ-во вѣр-тѣнѡ: прѣстѡлѡ Хѣ-
 рѡ-вѣм-скѣй Дѣ-вѡ: ѡ-сан-вѣм-стѣ-ли-це: вѣ-нѣхѣ же во-звѣ-жѣ-
 не-вѣм-стѣ-мый Христѡсъ Богъ, Ѡ-гѡ-же во-спѣ-вѡ-ю-це ве-ли-чѧ-емъ.

Figure 4

The new version from the Metropolitan Cantor Institute (Byzantine Catholic) prescribes it to be sung in English as in Figure 5.

Irmos*Tone 1 samopodoben*

I see a strange and mar - vel - ous mys - te - ry: heav - en is a cave;
the cherubic throne, a vir - gin; the man - ger has be - come the place
in which Christ the in - comprehen - si - ble God lies down. Let us
praise him and ex - tol him.

Figure 5

Compare the version in Figure 5 with the version in Figure 6, which is my version using the English text from the Festal Menaion. In the Church Slavonic, the first word, *tajinstvo*, means mystery, and the whole theme of this text is that something strange and mysterious has taken place. Thus it makes more sense to put the stress of the second note on *strange* rather than on *see*. The sequence of E-F#-G at the end of the first and third phrases gets a stress but as a secondary afterthought; again, *do I see* is more appropriate than *mystery*. The reader can decide which version s/he prefers in terms of the translation and which is closer to the spirit and feeling of the original version.

S
 A strange and most wonderful mystery do I see:
 B

S
 the cave is heaven; the Virgin the throne
 B

S
 of the Cherubim; the manger a room in which
 B

S
 Christ the God, whom nothing can contain
 B

S
 is laid. Him do we praise and magnify.
 B

Figure 6

Concluding Remarks

Putting texts which have already been translated to set musical patterns is one very specific area of work. While it does not require the individual to do translation, those who can work from the original language have a great advantage in being able to comprehend and feel the spirit of the original chant in the language for which it was written and impart at least some of that spirit to the translated music. Some of the first translations of Orthodox music into English were not very good. Old chanters whose first language was not English were suddenly given English texts and told to sing them to the Church Slavonic chants they knew. Being nonnative speakers, they

were uncertain about where to place stresses on individual words they may not have been familiar with in daily conversation, or where to place stresses over phrases and clauses. Eventually better English translations were made, and next generation native speakers of English who had been trained or apprenticed in the original church music language became chanters.

Just as in translation something is always lost, in putting the chant to another language, the result may come up short. For those who love the Greek or Church Slavonic, the English is never as good. Nevertheless, we can try to make our English versions sound good enough to stand on their own merits as good English chants.

Two years ago our singers were practicing for Good Friday one Sunday afternoon in the church after Liturgy, and Fr. Jonah was busy talking with some other people. When we took a break, Fr. Jonah asked us, "You are singing that one in Greek?" We all replied, "No, that was English." Fr. Jonah, "I thought you were singing in Greek." For me, this was a compliment. We had rendered the English such that if one was not paying close attention, he assumed it was the original Greek. I concluded there were two important criteria to judge the success of the chant rendering in English: (1) the result is good English and it sounds good sung in English, and (2) it has the feel of the chant sung in the original language.

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