

Music, Text, Translation: A Personal Interaction with the Lamentations

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To the Orthodox Christian, all of Holy Week centers around the church. This activity reaches its peak on Great Friday, when we commemorate Jesus' death on the cross. We have the beautiful Vespers with their verses full of meaning "When Joseph of Arimathea took You, the Life of all, now dead, down from the Cross..." (all English translations here are from Fr. G. L. Papadeas, *Greek Orthodox Holy Week and Easter Services*, Patmos Press, 1976). And anyone who has ever attended a Greek Orthodox Church on Great Friday cannot forget the beautiful service of the Lamentations, and in particular the lovely third set of verses beginning *Αἱ γενεαὶ πᾶσαι*....

I grew up in the United States in a church with Slav traditions from the Carpathian Mountains. For us, the Vespers were the high point of the day and Lamentations were no longer done. But as I was finishing graduate school, I happened upon a Greek Orthodox mission parish nearby which met the first Sunday of each month—and I began attending. At Pascha, all activity moved to the home parish, and it was there in 1983 on Great Friday that I first heard the



Procession with Epitaphios

Lamentations, and although everything was sung in Greek, it was an experience I will never forget. And what kept going around in my head was that melody from the Third Stanza.

Later I heard that tune again—on a CD made in Russia from the Moscow Patriarchate. It was used to sing the Trisagion in Greek. In Slav churches it is the practice at Pontifical Liturgies to sing the third repetition of the Trisagion (before Glory to the Father...) in Greek.

Then a few years ago the first Orthodox priest came to Taiwan and had regular liturgies and other services. Fr. Jonah is Greek, so, of course, we would do Lamentations and I would hear that tune again. In 2002 Fr. Jonah sang a few of the verses in English and we tried to sing along. In 2003 we had soprano and alto for only the Third Stanza. In Spring 2004 I had a sabbatical leave and we had meanwhile acquired a bass, so I was determined that we would sing English verses for all three stanzas in three-part harmony where feasible. We had the Third Stanza, and that was easy to harmonize, but what about the First and Second? These were not part of my tradition and were foreign to me. How could I manage this task?

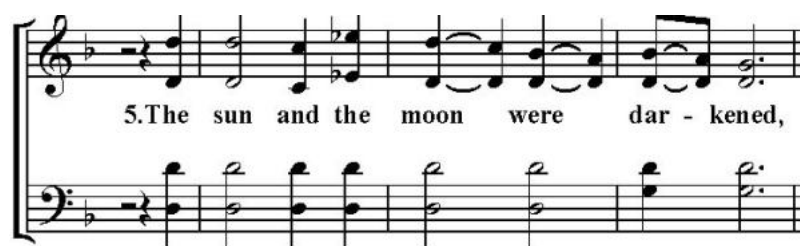
Thanks to a generous donation, we had received a box containing twenty copies of the book mentioned above, Papadeas, *Greek Orthodox Holy Week and Easter Services*, which gives

the Greek on the left and English on the right of facing pages. This was the text I would have to use as this is what our parishioners would be following. I had two recordings of these verses performed in Greek by famous psaltists in their solo professional style. In my opinion, such interpretations have their place, but not in the church. Fortunately, Fr. Jonah loaned me a different recording, also in Greek; singing was *a capella* 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.

I began by listening to the First and Second Stanzas over and over again and consulted the renditions in the Greek-Byzantine Liturgical Hymnal (Γ. Αναστασιου, Αρμονικη Λειτουργικη Υμνωδια, Philadelphia, no date given), wrote down the melody line and then struggled with various ways to put in an alto line and an acceptable bass drone. 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.”

When we encounter a phrase such as “The sun and the moon were darkened” (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. Words such as *and*, *the*, and *were*, are function words—they help to show grammatical relationships but do not present new content. Therefore, we try to avoid placing them in a position that receives a strong stress or beat.



After working with these texts and music rather intensively over the course of a week, I began to feel how the music worked and to appreciate the genius behind it. Think of the First Stanza, in Greek Η Ζωή εν ταφῶ... It sounds like a funeral dirge but has a very steady rhythm. I get the feeling of a group of people singing as they march slowly toward a cemetery carrying a deceased family member or friend for burial. It is a funeral march.

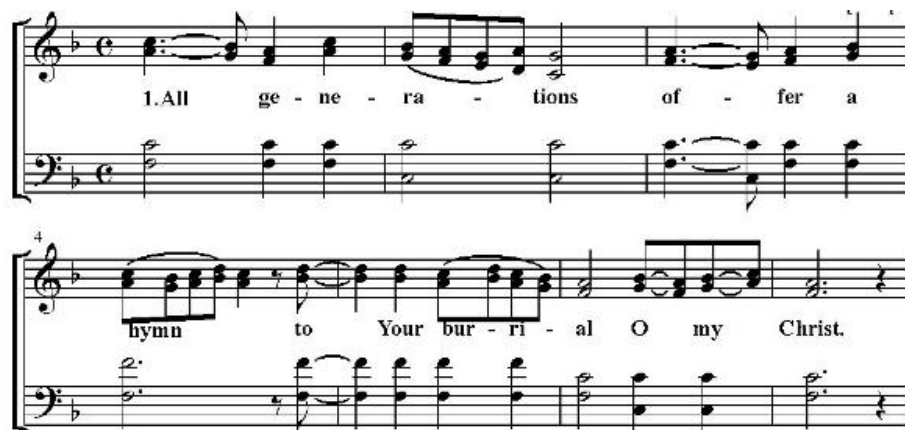
1.You O Christ the Life were laid in the tomb,
and ranks of an - gels were a - mazed, glo - ri -
fy - ing Your con - des - cen - sion.

With the Second Stanza, Αξιον εστι..., we have arrived at the burial site. Now the painful mourning begins. In the music one can almost hear the weeping and wailing of the women, of wives and children crying out to their husbands and fathers “Oh, why did you leave us? Now how can we survive alone, without you?”

1.It is fit - ting to mag ni fy You the giv - er
of Life, Who ex - ten - ded Your hands - up - on the
Cross, and shat - tered the po - wer of the e - ne - my.

Then we come to the Third Stanza, Αι γενεαι πασαι, and the mood changes. The funeral is over. Everything is over and we have to accept the reality that the loved one has left this earth. The music turns sweet (now in a major key) and we are resigned to the bittersweet memory—the memory of the loving father or friend and the shared good times. There are still tears, but the dominant feeling is overwhelming love for the departed. Those who

created this music so many years ago indeed had a profound understanding of the range of human emotions that are played out when we experience the death of someone we love.



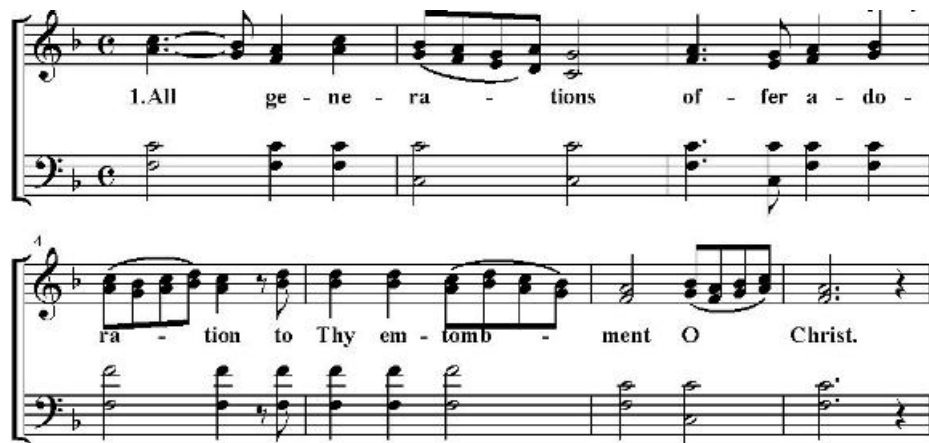
All of us may prefer the language we heard in our childhood, much as we enjoy that wonderful food grandmother made. There is nothing wrong with loving our own traditions best. And when music or literature is created in one language, translations often leave a lot to be desired. Even with my rudimentary knowledge of Greek, I can see that the Greek texts fit the music perfectly. Yet who has postponed his reading of Homer until he achieved mastery in the Ancient Greek language? If we want to spread ideas, we have to rely on translation.



Singing the Lamentations

English should be a good language to translate into from other languages because, due to historical factors and its penchant for borrowing, it has so many words. Estimates put English as having about three times as many words as other modern European languages. Thus many synonyms are available to distinguish slight nuances of meaning. The variety of synonyms also makes it possible to choose more appropriate words to fit the structure of a piece of music.

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.” 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 another one (reference lost), 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).



I've learned from this experience and others to appreciate the work of good translators and the different skills required to match translated text and music. Often it takes the efforts of several people to achieve a good result. I'm not too happy with my adaptation, but it serves our limited purposes. Moreover, there seem to be very few resources of music in English from the Greek tradition. For example, on the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, there are English texts of various services and a few sound files in English, but I could find no sheet music. Thus sometimes you just have to do it yourself.

In spring 2004, when we practiced our music for Great Friday, we had some difficulty. There was only one Greek American; the others were Ukrainians and Russians and they could not grasp the feeling of the First and Second Stanzas. They felt these were something new and strange. However, when the evening of Great Friday came and we began to sing, although we didn't always have all the harmonies in the First and Second Stanzas, the melody line prevailed and the congregation sang along. Suddenly all of us understood. Amidst the fragrance of the mound of flowers strewn around the epitaphios—the image of the dead Jesus in the grave—we were indeed participants in Jesus' funeral and expressing our participation through real human song and emotion.

Sheet music for the Lamentations in English based on the Papadeas translation can be downloaded from http://mx.nthu.edu.tw/~katchen/religion/Triodion_Sheet_Music/Triodion_Listing.htm

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