

Of Saints & Singers: the Liturgy Music

By Steve Frangos
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CHICAGO- Given the central role of the Orthodox Church in the lives and identities of Greeks in the United States, it is curious that we know so little about the history of liturgical music in this country.

The Iakovian Era not only offers us an initial bedrock study of this topic but simultaneously provokes a host of additional questions (c.f. History of the Greek Orthodox Church in America eds. Rev Miltiades B. Efthimiou and George A. Christopoulos (New York: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, 1985; 303-323)). Yet, some twenty years later, rather than advance our on-the-ground knowledge of specifically who, what, when, where and why brought, performed, wrote and even recorded Orthodox liturgical music in North America we find

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ALL HISTORY

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writings focused on canonical questions. Sadly this is not unexpected.

Current writings on Greeks in the United States, by many Greek-born (or based) scholars, seem hopelessly mired in questions related to the concerns of researchers focused on Greek values and historical understandings. For reasons that remain unclear Greek-Americans are not directly consulted by these researchers about their lives or the choices they made, but rather are judged from afar. While liturgical music is obviously a living part of the Orthodox faith that does not remove it from either historical circumstances or wider sociological issues. If we simply wave aside the liturgical music Greeks in the United States chose or created for themselves as not worthy of study then we move beyond history or the sociology of everyday into a curious realm of prejudice and frankly pure fantasy.

The discography provided here is meant to establish a baseline for future study. Drawn from public sources as well as many of the actual records the following descriptive listing offers as full a citation of commercially issued records showcasing Greek Orthodox liturgical music as I could locate. Given that many of the original records (as well as re-recordings) are now in public archives across the country this is a topic anyone can follow. Naturally, other recordings may well exist. Only an open and objective review of music available to all will provide the cultural history of this specific musical genre.

The number of Greek commercial liturgical recordings in North America surpassed their demographic presence. The question is, why were there so few of them?

As will become immediately

records included a chorus and the musical accompaniment of I. Skizas and A. Kondikos on mandolins. Next, we find Milton Kazis, a respected tenor, who sometime during February 1928 recorded Defte Lavete Fos, Christos Anesti and Angelos Evoa, Fotizou Fotizou (Columbia 56097-F and Columbia 11677) and then Anastiti O Theos, Pasha Ieron and Doxastikon, Anastaseos (Columbia 56098 and Columbia 11678).

Nineteen twenty eight was also the year Christos Demetrapoulos and his chorus released their own liturgical records. Given that Demetrapoulos was up to this point known only as a successful comedian makes these records doubly unique. On January 16, 1928, Demetrapoulos entered the New York City studios of Victor Records and successfully performed Christos Aneste (Christ Is Risen) and O Angelos Evoa (The Angel Spoke), both arranged by Antonios Sakellariou (Victor 68954). During the same recording session the group also recorded Allouia: O Nimfios: Tou Nimfona—from Good Friday Service and I Zoi En Tafo: Axion Esti; E Genee Pase—from Good Friday Service (Victor 68995 12"). For these last recordings aside from the credit given to Demetrapoulos and Sakellariou, all that is currently known is that there were four additional male singers serving as a chorus. In terms of musical accompaniment Basil Fomeen is credited on organ and Alfredo Cibelli on chimes. What is especially unique about the hymn I Zoi En Tafo is that this record features the voices of three (unidentified) boys.

On December 11, 1929, the most successful male vocalist in the history of Greek music produced in North America, Tetos Demetriades, recorded Kavaras' version of Kyrie Eleison (Victor 58043). Lina Dorrou accompanied Demetriades as lead soprano along with a chorus. Demetriades would soon travel to Greece to field record popular music and musicians. As part of these estimated 200+ individual recordings Demetriades was

to issue in the United States Ka-

calendar have included calendar custom songs along with liturgical music. This was done since a number of the original records appeared with a mix of such musical genres on the same record. The decision to present these two genres together is also the result of what I was told about the actual use of these records by Greek-Americans. In 1980, while conducting research on the National Endowment of the Humanities funded museum exhibition, The Greek American Family: Continuity through Change, I learned how commercial records were used by one extended family, in their everyday lives, during the early 1900s.

From Benton Harbor north along the lake shore past Muskegon is the fabled fruit belt of western Michigan. While the literature on Greeks in the United States categorically states that Greek immigrants did not become farmers, many Greeks owned groves throughout the Michigan fruit belt.

In 1980, an elderly woman raised on one of the groves just northeast of Muskegon, during the early 1900s, described for me her life with her extended family in what was then a remote area. This family only infrequently saw other Greeks. All the children of this extended family were taught Greek every Sunday by an uncle. Church services were held in the family's large rural farm house at sunrise. First, one of the men would read from the Bible, and then a 78rpm of Greek Orthodox liturgical music was played on a crank-up Victoria. On holidays, special records were played such as Kalanda Chrisougenon (RCA Victor 26-8077A) or Anastasis (Orthophonic S786A). With Greeks scattered across the vastness of Ameriki, is it any wonder that in the early decades of the last century the Greek faithful turned inward among their own and searched for any reminder of home?

RECORDINGS 1927 TO 1931

Greek liturgical music was a genre that never saw vast production. Nonetheless, in the commercially driven world of foreign language, recordings we do find a regular, if limited overall issuance, of Greek liturgical records. Five extremely successful Greek musicians issued liturgical and calendar custom recordings between 1927 and 1931.

First, we have Constantine Kazis, the popular baritone, who sometime in October 1927 entered the Columbia studios to record four songs: Christougena Kalanda, Kalin Esperan and Agios Vasilis, Arhi Minia (Columbia 56080-F and Columbia

Anna Chrisougenon and Avasilis (RCA Victor 26-8077). Then, Perifora Epitafiou, and on the reverse side Anastasis, both of which credit "a church choir with music by the Athenian guard" (c.f. Orthophonic S-786). We can hear Demetriades accompany the choir on this last recording.

Finally, in September 1931, we hear the noted choir director and liturgical composer Christos Vrionides, with only piano accompaniment; offer his heartfelt rendering of Axion Esti and Kyrie Elesion (Columbia 56260-F). As this cursory survey on Greek liturgical music in the United States reports not only was this genre of music regularly recorded by leading musicians, available documentation attests few of these recordings ever went out of print.

Ultimately the final question still remains, why overall were there so few of these liturgical recordings? As research has well established the fact that the overall number of Greek commercial recordings produced in North America far and away exceeded their demographic presence. Compounding this American-based level of musical production were the imported recordings which were often targeted marketed to highly specific groups within the general Greek-American population. Establishing church parishes while not the very first action of Greek workers in North America was without question the very first public institution Greeks living in the United States placed before the entire world to see.

As even this curt chronological listing of recordings demonstrates Greek immigrants tried mightily to bring their traditional religious and calendar custom traditions with them to the New World. Given the strong identification Greek-Americans have always felt toward their home parishes I wouldn't be surprised if some enterprising Greek(s) had not recorded in some fashion their church's choir. Which, then, begs the questions, are there more recordings? Ultimately, the current surge in the issuance of individual parish histories will provide the "history" on which such questions.

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