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THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT  
of  
BYZANTINE MUSIC

AN ABSTRACT OF  
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by  
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The music of the Greeks originated during the time of the Byzantine Empire. This was a period which began in 395 A.D. and ended with the Empire's downfall in 1453 A.D. It was a glorious period during which Constantinople, the capital city, became a world leader culturally. It was the storehouse of classical Greek education, art, literature, religion and the envy of all who knew her.

The most unique appeal of this Greek civilization was its musical tradition. The Byzantines built their melodies on a solid structure of scales which they called modes. These modes, eight in all, were thought to have a particular effect on the character, conduct and emotions--the doctrine of 'ethos'. The Greek 'ethos' was reflected in the character, music, attitudes and habits of the people.

Along with the modes came the development of a system of musical notation. At first, the notes consisted of little strokes, curves and lines which were called neumes. These neumes were placed over the words to aid the singers when they chanted their hymns. The neumes proved so successful that more signs were added, representing trills, turns and other various important parts of a melody.

The hymn writers were inspired by this new notation and began to write prolifically for the church. At first, the manuscripts did not have the neumes placed over every syllable, so the singers had to have a fairly good idea how the music should be sung. Consequently, much revision was made to perfect the system.

By the eighth century, a systematic way of writing began to take form whereby all the neumes and the newer additions were combined to correspond to letters of the Greek alphabet. Up to this time, the music of the church was purely vocal. It consisted of a simple melody line within a limited range and it was unaccompanied.

The system of notation was constantly being perfected until it finally reached the stage of round notation with the addition of an elaborate rhythm. This was a great aid to the chanters and choirs. The music also developed from a single line of melody to a magnificent arrangement of harmony, aided by the use of the organ, which was previously prohibited in church music. With the advancement to the use of harmony in the churches, the work of bringing the youth to the churches was begun. Prior to this, mostly adults attended church services.

The neume characters that were invented by the Greeks so long ago were used in a present day music program. In one instance, a group of third grade children were introduced to music reading with neumes rather than notes. Three neume characters that were used were:

- upward degree
- \ downward degree
- held note

The students were able to recognize the direction of the melodies and were quick to observe the held notes. In this way, the children did not become confused with naming

notes of learning duration. The use of the neumes proved to be a useful 'bridge' in preparing the students to become acquainted with music reading.<sup>1</sup>

The religious music of the Byzantines later influenced the writing of Greek folk melodies. The same formation of tones was used in folk songs as in the hymns. The folk songs were the means by which the Greeks expressed themselves, along with dancing, poetry and the theatre. Any evidence of social life or private celebration, such as a wedding or holiday, was a subject for the creation of folk songs or dances.

Along with their drama and dance, the Greeks used music as a means of preserving the language, the customs and ideals of the Greek people through the ages.

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<sup>1</sup>This procedure was used by the writer in her work with the children from the elementary schools of Newtown, Connecticut during the 1962-1963 school year.