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Amy Gillette  
*Barnes Foundation*

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# PEREGRINATIONS

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## The Music of Angels in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art

AMY GILLETTE

*Barnes Foundation, Research and Education*

Many Byzantine writers who offered metaphorical interpretations of the liturgy believed that angels and humans shared the space of the church, together filling it with psalmody.<sup>1</sup> This belief was reified primarily in the Late and Post-Byzantine periods, in personal and communal icons, in liturgical objects employed in the service, and in monumental paintings that decorated the interiors of churches.<sup>2</sup> Even some church soundscapes were designed to help human hymns sound angelic.<sup>3</sup> To date, however, there is no single survey of Orthodox scenes of angels' song.<sup>4</sup> The absence is striking because music-making angels in contemporaneous Western art have been the subject of

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<sup>1</sup> The *Historia Monachorum* (c. 410) attested this longstanding belief: "The church assembly should resemble the choirs of angels, imitating the celestial armies by endlessly singing hymns and praises of God" (*PL* 16, 724). Also: J. Pelikan, "The Great Chain of Images: A Cosmology of Icons," in *Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton, 1990), p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> For churches, most of which were newly built for monastic use: I. Stefanescu, *L'illustration des liturgies dans l'art de Byzance et de l'Orient* (Brussels, 1936): 176. For the liturgy: E. Peterson, *The Angels and the Liturgy* (Darton, 1964) and H. Schultz, *Byzantine Liturgy: Symbolic Structure and Faith Expression* (New York, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> For sonic effects: S. Gerstel, "Monastic Soundscapes in Late Byzantium: The Art and Act of Chanting," in *Resounding Images: Medieval Intersections of Art, Music, and Sound*, ed. S. Boynton and D. Reilly (Boston, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> The following are excellent resources for the depiction of liturgical song in Byzantine churches, but do not engage specifically with angels: the chapters "Psaumes liturgiques illustres" and "Hymnes et tropaires illustres" in Stefanescu 1936, pp. 171-176 and 176-184; N. Moran, *Singers and Setting in Late Byzantine and Slavonic Painting* (Leiden, 1986).



**Figure 1** *Angel-Clergy Perform the Great Entrance, Peribleptos Church, Mystras, 1370s.*  
**Photo: E. Bolman.**

considerable art-historical and musicological scholarship, and indeed the most prominent Orthodox examples were created in places exposed in varying degrees to Western images, e.g., Serbia, Mystras, Crete, Thessaloniki, and Mount Athos. The various incidences of musical angels—Latin and Orthodox—reveal that patrons and artists purposefully negotiated angelological and idiomatic subtleties across creed, time, and space. To depict angels at all was complicated because they were thought to be

incorporeal.<sup>5</sup> To depict them singing was even more so, because they were technically silent as well.<sup>6</sup>

Yet since Late Antiquity, liturgical and theological texts had asserted that, in spite of angels' ineffability, the nine orders thereof (in varying capacities) could and often did bridge the realms of heaven and earth.<sup>7</sup> The Divine (Eucharistic) Liturgy connected angelology with the physical fabric of churches, conceived as a series of performative spaces forming a microcosm of Paradise. For example, in the Little Entrance (the procession of the Book of Gospels to the altar), the priest implored God to have the angels serving in heaven to join him and the faithful on earth.<sup>8</sup> Maximos the Confessor (d. 662), Germanos I of Constantinople (d. 733), Philotheos Kokkinos (d. 1379), Nicholas Kabasilas (d. c. 1392), Symeon of Thessaloniki (d. 1429), etc., described further tangent moments enacted by angels and humanity during the Divine Liturgy, notably the consecration of the Eucharistic gifts and the performance of the *Trisagion* (Sanctus) hymn.<sup>9</sup> In the course of discussing such phenomena, these and other writers

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<sup>5</sup> See Pelikan 1990 and G. Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium* (Berkeley, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Theodore the Studite, for example, described the "secret silence of their hymns of triumph, with which they praise the ineffable mystery," *Orations* VI.1 ("On the Holy Angels"), PG 99: 732, trans. in Pelikan 1990, p. 175.

<sup>7</sup> Most Byzantine and medieval theologians accepted the nine angelic orders that the Pseudo-Dionysius (fl. c. 500) described in his *Celestial Hierarchy*, in descending order: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, virtues, dominations, powers, principalities, archangels, and angels. See G. Podskalsky and A. Cutler, "Angel," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, 2005). [Oxford Reference Online](#).

<sup>8</sup> M. Mudrak, "Kazimir Malevich and the Liturgical Tradition of Eastern Christianity," in *Byzantium/Modernism: The Byzantine as Method in Modernity*, ed. R. Betancourt and M. Taroutina (Leiden, 2015), pp. 46-7.

<sup>9</sup> N.B. The later authors persistently engaged or even copied the earlier authors (e.g., the Divine Liturgy of Chrysostom remained normative through the Byzantine period, and Symeon of Thessaloniki worked in the Dionysian tradition).

examined the nature and scope of angelic liminality. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. c. 500) proposed that “angels are heralds of the Divine silence, and project, as it were, luminous lights revealing Him Who is in secret.”<sup>10</sup> John of Damascus (d. 749) wrote that they “take different forms at the bidding of...God, and thus reveal themselves to men and unveil the divine mysteries to them.”<sup>11</sup> On the authority of Symeon of Thessaloniki: “The souls of the saints reside above with the angels, and together with them they keep watch around us, dwelling within our churches.”<sup>12</sup>

One way to think about Byzantine and Post-Byzantine scenes of hymning angels is that they revealed a spiritual reality that the most-elevated could see and hear mystically, but not physically. Yet to depict their sound of silence proposed an exoteric interpretation of liturgical texts and the angelological ideas that they encompassed.<sup>13</sup> The liminal capacity of angels meant that these spiritual beings mediated, rather than simply paralleled, the liturgies of heaven and earth. Further, angels, icons, and human beings were all considered (from at least the Middle Byzantine period) to be “imprints”

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<sup>10</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*, IV.2 in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York, 1987), p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> John of Damascus, “Concerning Angels,” *Exposition on the Orthodox Faith*, II.3, trans. F. C. Chase (Washington, D.C., 1958), p. 208.

<sup>12</sup> Symeon of Thessaloniki, *Dialogue* 296B, quoted in N. Constan, “Symeon of Thessaloniki and the Theology of the Icon Screen,” in *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, ed. Sharon Gerstel (Washington, D.C., 2006), p. 170 n. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding the exoteric agency of angel images, Henry Maguire stated: “For the most part, then, Byzantine art was more circumspect [than] Byzantine literature with respect to the depiction of emotion. But there was one curious exception to this rule, in which the artists were bolder than the writers, namely in the frequent portrayals of angels displaying emotion. In Byzantine art, angels displayed both joy and grief.” In “The Asymmetry of Text and Image in Byzantium,” *Perspectives Médiévales* 38 (2017), p. 17.

or manifestations of God, metaphysically and existentially linked by the purpose of praising him.<sup>14</sup> Therefore images of angels' song were not passive indices of belief, but rather active forces of engagement, which opened the door to heaven and enticed human beings into spiritually joining their liturgy.

I will first establish the set of hymns that angels were shown to sing in various types of sacred art—monumental and small, fixed and portable. Because the images date almost exclusively to the Late and Post-Byzantine periods, I will restrict my discussion thereto.<sup>15</sup> In order to analyze the images, I will employ statements concerning angels and their hymns in angelological, mystagogical, and liturgical texts. A selection thereof, both early and late, signals that the fundamental precepts about angels' song remained consistent relative to the dramatization of their images and associated aspects of the liturgy. I will then propose some ways in which scenes featuring the *Cherubikon* and *Trisagion* hymns exerted pastoral power both mystically and ethically in their role as icons of the Divine Liturgy, for which they were often a

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<sup>14</sup> John of Damascus, *Orations on the Holy Icons*, PG 94: 1337-44; trans. in Pelikan 1990, p. 175.

<sup>15</sup> The Second Council of Nicaea (787) posed problems for depicting the purely spiritual phenomenon of the angelic liturgy by basing the validity of icons on their faithful rendition of the prototype. Still, this council did legitimize angels *per se*, on the basis of their scriptural appearances. Early exceptions include the Riha and Stuma *rhipidia* (c. 577). C. Walter, *Art and Ritual of the Byzantine Church* (London, 1982), pp. 218-19; W. Woodfin, "Celestial Hierarchies and Earthly Hierarchies in the Art of the Byzantine Church" in *The Byzantine World*, ed. P. Stephenson (New York, 2010), pp. 311-13. For Post-Byzantine art: E. Spratt, "Toward a Definition of Post-Byzantine Art," *Record of the Princeton University Art Museum* (2014), pp. 3-19, who wrote that it adhered to or promoted the doctrinal tenets of Orthodoxy and often witnessed East-West interactions.

synecdoche.<sup>16</sup> Two ways to consider these icons' vectors of expression and consequence are a comparison to contemporaneous Western images, especially with reference to the depiction of musical instruments and angelic joy as well as the visual and verbal representation of angelic multiplicity as a sanctifying act.

### **Angelic Hymns in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art: A Survey**

A survey of Late and Post-Byzantine images—selected from sites across the Orthodox world—reveals angels singing hymns designated as “angelic” by scriptural or liturgical authority, in objects and spaces involved in the performance of hymns. The two most prominently displayed, the *Cherubikon* and *Trisagion*, derived from the seraphic cry of Isaiah 6:1-3: “I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne...above it stood the seraphim... And one cried unto another, and said, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.’” The *Cherubikon* opened with the words “We who mystically represent the cherubim and who sing the thrice-holy hymn,” and the *Trisagion*, “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory.”<sup>17</sup> These hymns were sung sequentially during the Divine Liturgy: the *Cherubikon* during the Great Entrance (the procession of the Eucharistic gifts to the altar), in which

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<sup>16</sup> The earliest known picture of the Celestial Liturgy modeled on the Great Entrance is the cupola of the Panagia Olympiotissa at Elasson, Greece (c. 1294-1304). Also: Walter 1982, pp. 217-21; Woodfin 2012, pp. 122-24; G. Millet, *Monuments de l’Athos*, I (Paris, 1927), plates 64, 1; 118, 2-3; 219, 3; 256, 2; 257, 2; 261, 1-2; Stefanescu 1936, pp. 71ff., 189-90, and plates XXIX, 1-2; XXX, 1-2; LV; I. Spatharakis, “Representations of the Great Entrance in Crete” in *Studies in Byzantine Manuscript Illumination and Iconography* (London, 2006), p. 293 n.2.

<sup>17</sup> R. Taft, “Cheroubikon” and “Trisagion,” in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (ODB) (Oxford, 2005).

the clergy presented as spiritual representatives or icons of the angels; and the *Trisagion* during the consecration rites, proclaiming the fusion of the human and angelic communities.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 2** *Great Entrance / Divine Liturgy*, Peribleptos Church, Mystra, 1370s.  
Photo: After No. XXVIII in J. D. Stefanescu, *L'Illustration des Liturgies dans l'art de Byzance et de l'Orient* (Brussels, 1936), p. 74.

A multitude of frescoes depicted the Great Entrance, and explicitly or implicitly the *Cherubikon* (e.g., the central dome of the Gračanica Church, after 1320; the *prothesis* chamber of the Peribleptos Church in Mystras, c. 1370s; the sanctuary apse of Markov Manastir, 1370-1372) demonstrating the mystical union between human and angel clergy (**Figs. 1, 2, 3**).<sup>19</sup> The Mystras fresco, for example, shows angel-deacons bearing veiled patens on their heads followed by angel-priests with veiled chalices, singing

<sup>18</sup> The *Trisagion* hymn is ascribed to St. Proclus (446), Archbishop of Constantinople. It calls for the joining of the angels with the community of the faithful through baptism as an invitation for participating in the greater feast days of the church. In addition to Taft 2005, see M. Mudrak, "Kazimir Malevich and the Liturgical Tradition of Eastern Christianity," in *Byzantium/Modernism* 2015, p. 41 n. 12.

<sup>19</sup> M. T. Djurić, "To Picture and to Perform: The Image of the Eucharistic Liturgy at Markov Manastir," *Zograf* 38 (2014), p. 131 (123-140). At Markov Manastir, the images of Bishops Basil and Gregory carry scrolls inscribed with the *Cherubikon*.

“Holy, Holy, Holy” as they approach the priestly Christ at the canopied altar.<sup>20</sup> This hymn also figured in *epitaphioi*, enormous Eucharistic veils used during the Great



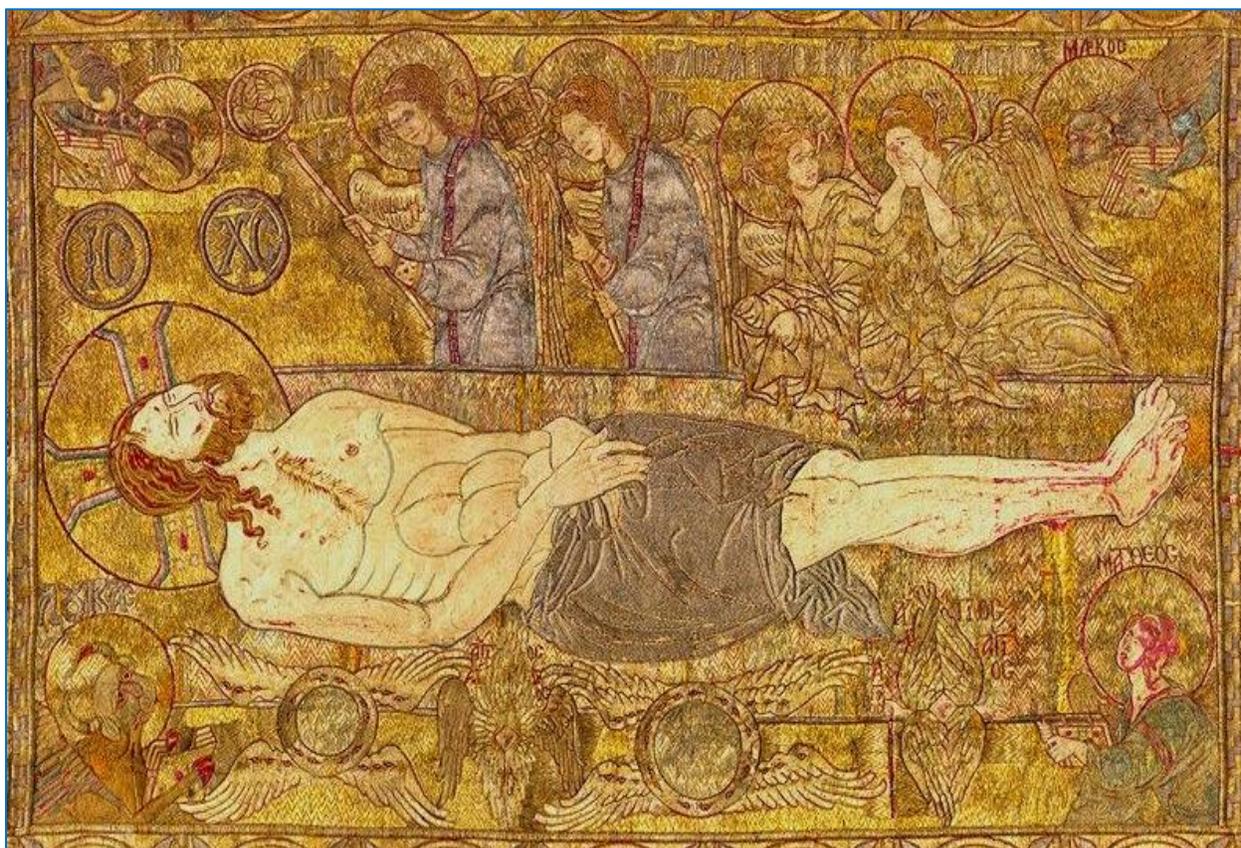
**Figure 3** *Divine Liturgy*, central dome, Gračanica Church, Serbia, after 1320. Photo: [http://www.srpskoblog.org/Archives/Gračanica/exhibits/digital/dome/dome-3\\_s.html](http://www.srpskoblog.org/Archives/Gračanica/exhibits/digital/dome/dome-3_s.html)

Entrance.<sup>21</sup> Symeon of Thessaloniki explained the meaning of these veils: “The deacons [come in the Great Entrance] one after another who have the order of the angels...carrying over their head the sacred great veil which has the depiction of

<sup>20</sup> There is an inscription from the liturgy in this space, and the angels follow liturgical directions: e.g., Symeon of Thessaloniki, *Contra haereses*, PG 155, 340. For frescoes: Spatharakis 2006, pp. 293-335, esp. pp. 294-299.

<sup>21</sup> See S. Ćurčić, “Late Byzantine *Loca Sancta*? Some Questions Regarding the Form and Function of *Epitaphioi*” in *The Twilight of Byzantium*, eds. S. Ćurčić and D. Mouriki (Princeton, 1991), pp. 251-261; H. Schilb, “Singing, Crying, Shouting, and Saying: Embroidered *Epitaphioi* and the Sounds of the Byzantine Liturgy” in *Resounding Images: Medieval Intersections of Art, Music, and Sound*, ed. S. Boynton and D. Reilly (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 167-187.

of Jesus naked and dead.”<sup>22</sup> Thus the central panel of the famous Thessaloniki *epitaphios* (c. 1300) portrays seraphim, cherubim, and thrones singing “Holy, Holy, Holy,” while two angel-deacons wave *rhypidia* (liturgical fans) over Christ’s prone body (Fig. 4).<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 4** Thessaloniki *epitaphios*, c. 1300 (detail). Photo: ArtStor.

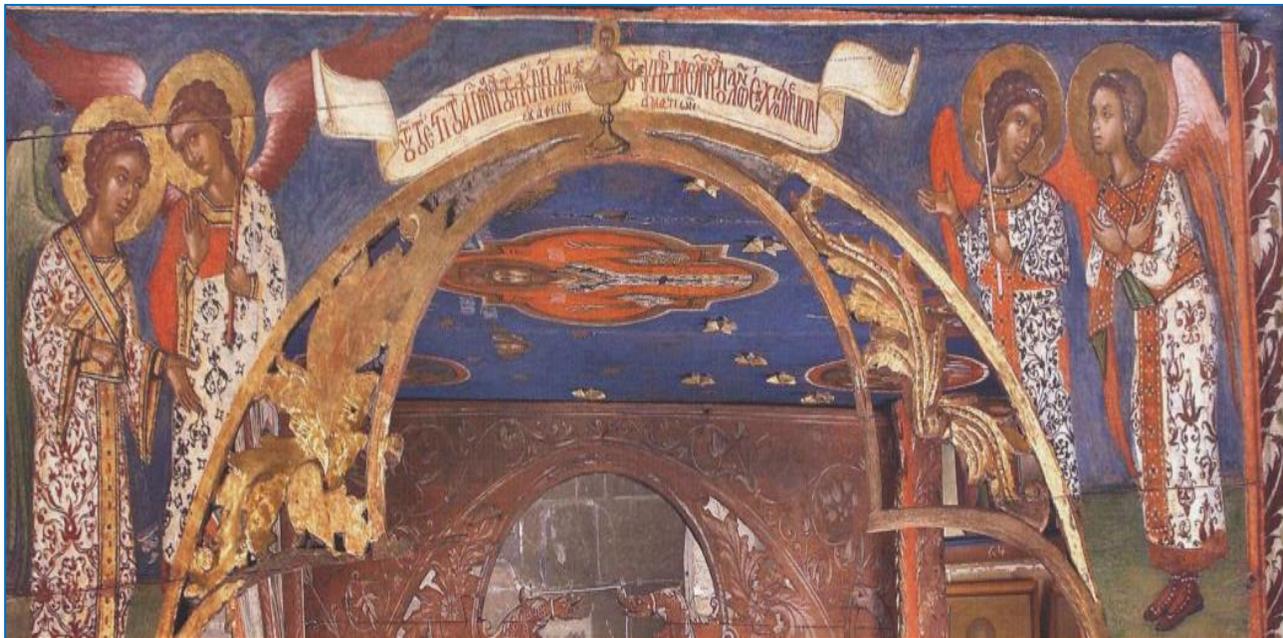
<sup>22</sup> Symeon of Thessaloniki, “Explanation of the Divine Temple” in *The Liturgical Commentaries*, ed. and trans. by S. Hawkes-Teeple (Toronto, 2011), p. 127. The *Cherubikon* is translated in R. Taft, *The Great Entrance: A History of the Transfer of Gifts and Other Preanaphoral Rites of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Rome, 1975), pp. 54-55.

<sup>23</sup> W. Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon: Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium*. (Oxford, 2012), p. 125; Roland Betancourt, “The Thessaloniki Epitaphios: Notes on Use and Context,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 55:2 (2015): pp. 489-535; S. Gerstel and A. Antonaras, “Between Heaven and Earth: Views of Byzantine Thessaloniki” in *Viewing Greece: Cultural and Political Agency in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean* (Turnhout, 2016), pp. 87-111.

**Figure 5** *Rhipidion*, Zographou Monastery, Mount Athos, 1468. Photo: after cat. no. 69 in H. Evans, ed., *Byzantium: Faith and Power 1261-1557* (New York, 2004), p. 133.



Pictures of the highest triad of angels—the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones—were portrayed in direct proximity to the Godhead and hymning the *Trisagion* in *ornamenta* related to the consecration of the Eucharistic Host. Among these were *rhipidia* such as a pair given in 1468 to the Zographou Monastery on Mount Athos by Stephen the Great of Moldavia, d. 1504). The liturgist Nicholas of Andida (fl. late 1000s) remarked that “the *rhipidia*...are as a type of the Cherubim” because deacons would



**Figure 6** *Angel-Deacons / Divine Liturgy, ciborium of St. Mamas, Morphou, Cyprus, c. 1500. Photo: E. Bolman.*

imitate the beating wings of the endlessly chanting angels by waving them over the exposed Host; scenes of the Divine Liturgy frequently show angel-deacons wielding (*rhipidia* decorated with cherubim or seraphim (e.g., the Thessaloniki *epitaphios*, the central dome of the Gračanica Church, and the *bema* of the Studenica Church, 1314).<sup>24</sup> The Studenica fresco and another at St. Neophytos in Paphos (15<sup>th</sup> century) further highlighted the liturgical convergence of the *Trisagion*, ministering angels, *rhipidia*, and deacons by inscribing the words “Holy, Holy, Holy” on the angel-deacons’ *oraiai* (Fig. 7).<sup>25</sup> Images of angels chanting the *Trisagion* were, indeed, also deployed on the superstructures (symbolizing heaven) of sacred architecture, both monumental and miniature. Examples include the central dome of Gračanica Church, and the roof of the sixteenth-century ciborium of St. Mamas in Morphou, Cyprus (Figs. 3, 5, 6).<sup>26</sup> On the Morphou ciborium, Christ as “king of kings and priest of priests” is framed by a barbed quatrefoil and wreathed by seraphim, cherubim, and thrones on the ceiling plus a further band of seraphim in the cornice. The latter are accompanied by two inscriptions,

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<sup>24</sup> Nicholas of Andida, *Protheoria*, PG, 140, 426, 440, and 442. Also see Walter 1982, p. 220 and Woodfin 2012, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> There are illustrations of angel-deacons wearing *oraia* with the *Trisagion* inscribed? at, e.g., the Studenica monastery in Serbia (1314) and the Dochiariou Monastery of Mount Athos (sixteenth century). The depiction of angel-priests was legitimized by Psalm 103, “Bless the Lord, you his angels...you ministers of his, that do his pleasure.” Yet angel-priests did not join angel-deacons until the Late Byzantine period, a relatively late development apparently because the ancient mystagogical tradition and, from the twelfth century, frescoes and vestments made it clear that the celebrant was Christ’s icon on earth. For celebrant ministers acting *in persona Christi*: Symeon of Thessaloniki, *Expositio de divinotemplo*, PG 155, 709. Woodfin 2012, p. 313.

<sup>26</sup> For the *rhipidia*: A. Ballian, “Liturgical Implements,” in *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*, ed. H. C. Evans (New York, 2004), pp. 132-133. For Gračanica: S. Čurčić, *Architecture in the Balkans from Diocletian to Suleyman the Magnificent* (New Haven, 2010), p. 666. For the Morphou ciborium: E. Bolman, “Painting Heaven: The Art of the Liturgy” in *The Canopy of Heaven: The Ciborium in the Church of St. Mamas, Morphou*, ed. M. Jones and A. M. Jones (Nicosia, 2010), pp. 135-165.



**Figure 7** Angel-deacons with the *Trisagion* on their *oraia*: Studenica Monastery, Serbia, 1314 (left); St. Neophytos, Paphos, Cyprus, 15<sup>th</sup> century (right). Photo: <https://kb.osu.edu/handle/1811/40937?show=full> (left); E. Bolman (right).

the *Trisagion* plus the exclamation: “The incorporeal nature, the cherubim, glorify you with ceaseless hymns! The six-winged creatures, the seraphim, exalt you with endless voices!”<sup>27</sup> Facing outward from its spandrels, four sweet-looking angel-deacons

<sup>27</sup> Bolman 2010, p. 143. It seems to me that the lower angelic orders were presented as actively engaging with the upper ones as remote, because the nine orders conventionally mapped human spiritual ascent via a ladder of purification, illumination, and *theosis*. Pseudo-Dionysius established the persistent analogy of this process to the clergy’s roles in the liturgy: “The holy sacraments bring about purification, illumination, and perfection. The deacons perform the order which purifies. The priests constitute the order which gives illumination. And the

promote decorous angelic behavior—as a means of ensuring sacramental efficacy—by arresting the viewer’s attention, pointing to the Host, and modeling a gesture of veneration.<sup>28</sup>

Other angelic hymns included the doxology *Glory to God in the Heavens*, by which angels are shown proclaiming the Nativity as described in Luke 2:14; Marian hymns including parts of the *Akathistos* and John of Damascus’s *In Thee, Rejoiceth*; and the Psalms of Praise.<sup>29</sup> Byzantine Christmas hymns centered on the angelic doxology of Luke’s Nativity story. The Athonite monk Dionysius of Fournia (d. after 1744), in his painter’s manual of traditional iconographies for sacred art, instructed for scenes of the Nativity: “Above the cave [of Christ’s birth] a crowd of angels...hold a scroll with [the angelic doxology].”<sup>30</sup> A sixteenth-century icon of the Nativity at the Barnes Foundation (BF362), made on Crete for personal devotion, presents in the upper portion of the scene “a multitude of the heavenly host praising God” (Luke 2:13) (**Fig. 8**). The banderoles held by the angels peering over the clouds record their hymn of praise (Luke 2:14):

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hierarchs, living in conformity with God, make up the order which perfects” Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, p. 248; see N. Costans, “Symeon of Thessaloniki and the Theology of the Icon Screen,” in *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, ed. Sharon Gerstel (Washington, D.C., 2006), pp. 166-168, for Late Byzantine reiterations of this analogy. That is, depictions of the “minister” or messenger angels were bound to be more demonstrative than the “assistants” whose cosmological locus was singing endlessly around the heavenly altar.

<sup>28</sup> The angels, archangels, and principalities “preside, through each other, over the Hierarchies amongst men, in order that the elevation, and conversion, and communion, and union with God may be in due order. [...] The first rank of the Heavenly Beings [seraphim, cherubim, and thrones]...encircle and stand immediately around God; and without interruption, dances round His eternal knowledge in the most exalted ever-moving stability.” Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, III.1-2 and IX.2.

<sup>29</sup> See F. E. Brightman, ed., *Liturgies Eastern and Western* (Oxford, 1896), p. 385.

<sup>30</sup> Dionysius of Fournia, *The Painter’s Manual of Dionysius of Fournia*, trans. Paul Hetherington (London, 1974), p. 32 (Nativity).



**Figure 8** Icon of the Nativity, 16<sup>th</sup> Century, The Barnes Foundation (BF362).  
Photo: [collection.barnesfoundation.org](http://collection.barnesfoundation.org).

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (“Δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῶ, καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς / εἰρήνη, ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας”).<sup>31</sup> Slight variations on this iconography are the frescoed Nativity scenes on the vaults of the Holy Apostles Church in Thessaloniki (early- to mid-1300s) and the Dochiariou Monastery of Mount Athos (1568), both of which bear inscriptions stating that the angels sing (**Fig. 9**).<sup>32</sup>

The Marian hymns *Akathistos* (sung in full on the fifth Saturday of Lent) and *In Thee, Rejoiceth* (*Epi soichairei*, sung after the transubstantiation of the Mass of St. Basil) honored Mary as Mother of God. Images of the seventh stanza of the *Akathistos* (which announced, “Rejoice, for the things of Heaven rejoice with the earth. Rejoice, the things of earth join chorus with the Heavens”) and of the *In Thee, Rejoiceth* (sung by “all creation, the assemblies of angels, and the race of man”) accordingly reiterated or mutated the iconography of the Nativity, including the incorporation of armies of angels to celebrate the Incarnation.<sup>33</sup> For the seventh *Akathistos* stanza, Dionysius of

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<sup>31</sup> The icon’s setting and figures derived from a Nativity fresco of c. 1370-1380 in the Peribleptos Church in Mystras, via its copies in earlier Cretan icons such as the “Volpi Nativity” in the Andreadis collection (c. 1400-1425). The Barnes icon differs from these in depicting the Virgin as kneeling instead of reclining, a posture that Cretan painters (e.g., Nikolaos Tzafouris, fl. 1487-1501) adapted after c. 1450 from Italian images.

<sup>32</sup> For inscriptions: the following can be deciphered at the Dochiariou: “hoi angeloi...ton ouranon hymnon”; for the Holy Apostles: S. Gerstel, “Monastic Soundscapes in Late Byzantium” in *Resounding Images*, ed. S. Boynton and D. Reilly. Turnhout, 2015), p. 143. G. Galvaris mentioned that the angel choirs in a twelfth-century Nativity icon from Sinai “express the joy which fills the Christmas liturgy” in the *kontakion* “Rejoice, universe, when you hear it heralded: with the angels and shepherds, glorify him,” in “Icons from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery*, ed. K. Manifis (Athens, 1990), p. 101.

<sup>33</sup> For the *Akathistos*: Moran 1986, pp. 93-94; E. Wellesz, “The Akathistos Hymn,” *Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae Transcripta* 9 (Copenhagen, 1957), xx-xxxiii, with an edition of the text, pp. lxxviii-lxxx. This hymn was composed in the fifth century, but not portrayed in fresco until the late thirteenth. For *In Thee, Rejoiceth*: Moran 1986, p. 100, 135. This hymn is attributed to John of Damascus. Also see Stefanescu 1936, pp. 177-180, specifying, “Les anges chantant l’hymne.”

Fourna instructed simply, “Everything as for the Nativity of Christ.”<sup>34</sup> One example of many is a fresco in the bema of Markov Manastir, c. 1380.<sup>35</sup> Icons and frescoes of the *In Thee, Rejoiceth* (e.g., by the Cretan artist Giorgios Klontzas in the 1500s) visualized said angels and men rejoicing in the Virgin by enthroning her and the Christ Child within concentric rings or simply swarms of the nine angelic orders plus members of the human faithful, including John of Damascus, to whom the hymn is attributed (Fig. 10).<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 9** *Doxology* (Nativity), Dochiariou Monastery, Mt. Athos, 1500s. Photo: Millet, no. 210.

**Figure 10** Giorgios Klontzas, *In Thee, Rejoiceth* (detail), 1500s. Photo: <http://art-in-space.blogspot.com/2018/06/georgios-klontzas-all-creation-rejoices.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Dionysius of Fourna, *The Painter's Manual of Dionysius of Fourna*, trans. P. Hetherington (London, 1974), p. 51 (*Akathistos*).

<sup>35</sup> N. Ševčenko, “Icons in the Liturgy,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991), p. 48; A. Patzold, *Der Akathistos-Hymnos: Die Bilderzyklen in der byzantinischen Wandmalerei des 14. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1989).

<sup>36</sup> Moran 1986, p. 135.

The Psalms of Praise (Ps. 148-50), too, were sung for the Divine Office with the same doxology, and were sometimes graced by Alleluias and the *Trisagion* as exultant refrains.<sup>37</sup> A fourteenth-century cycle in the Lesnovo Church in Macedonia shows this ceremony initiated by Christ in a vault amidst angels (**Fig. 11**).<sup>38</sup> Although they do not physically appear to be singing, Dionysius of Fournas' manual again affirmed this act by prescribing Christ and the nine choirs of angels, with the top triad saying "Holy,



**Figure 11** *Psalms of Praise* (148-50), Lesnovo Church, Macedonia, 1300s.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

<sup>37</sup> R. Taft, "Trisagion" in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, edited by A. Kazhdan (Oxford, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> Moran 1986, p. 89, 119. The complete unit came to be known as the *Pasa pne* ("Let everything that has breath praise the Lord").

Holy, Holy” and the rest making pronouncements of glory.<sup>39</sup>

### The Divine Liturgy

The images just noted concretized the performance of angelic hymns in objects and spaces that promoted their mystical concelebration. In so doing, these works of art deputized the liminal role of real angels in the liturgy. And liturgy — so often a bridge between form and meaning — was a direct and vital artery to gaining the bliss promised by depictions of angels’ song. From here, I will focus on scenes featuring the *Cherubikon* and *Trisagion* (again, sung successively during the procession of the Eucharistic gifts to the altar and then their consecration) because they visually embodied the doctrine by which the liturgies of heaven and earth coincided, i.e., they functioned explicitly as icons of the Divine Liturgy. The pictures imaged forth the themes of concelebration leading to *theosis* that were vocalized by these hymns.<sup>40</sup> Both hymns had melodic components suggesting the sonic quality of angels’ song, to the extent that human voices could evoke their “secret sounds” by means of continuities layered with silences.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Dionysius of Fournia 1974, p. 45.

<sup>40</sup> For the Great Entrance, I rely on Taft’s translation of the *Cherubikon* and the general course of events, crafted from a series of liturgical manuscripts (both Basil and Chrysostom) and mystagogical treatises. Taft listed his sources on pages xxvii-xxxix of *The Great Entrance*, 1975.

<sup>41</sup> See L. Steenbridge, “We Who Musically Represent the Cherubim” in *Acoustic Architecture: Music, Acoustics, and Ritual*, ed. B. Pentcheva (New York, 2018), pp. 143-162.

The entire Divine Liturgy, likewise, transpired as a sequence of veiling and unveiling, shifting between spiritual and physical realms while moving through spaces of greater or lesser sanctity. For the Great Entrance, priests and deacons sang the *Cherubikon* to themselves as they prepared the Eucharistic gifts and commemorated the angels and saints in the *prothesis* (the northeast chamber of the sanctuary), while a deacon swung his censer.<sup>42</sup> This liturgical event constituted a shift of mode and tone within the celebration, transfiguring the clergy as surrogates of the angelic orders while delivering the angels into the physical world.<sup>43</sup> The hymn intoned:

We who mystically represent the cherubim and sing the thrice-holy hymn...let us lay aside all worldly care to receive the King of All escorted unseen by the angelic hierarchy. Alleluia. [...]  
Let all mortal flesh be silent, and stand in fear and trembling...for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords comes forth to be slain and given as food to the faithful. The choirs of angels go before him, with all the principalities and powers, the many-eyed cherubim and six-winged seraphim, faces covered, and proclaiming the hymn: Alleluia!  
Now the powers of heaven worship with us unseen, for behold the King of Glory enters... In faith and love let us approach in order to become sharers in eternal life. Alleluia.<sup>44</sup>

Then these clergy members processed the gifts through the nave, still singing. They met the celebrant at the doors of the iconostasis, from where he took the gifts to the altar, and said the silent consecration prayer invoking “thousands of archangels and myriads of angels, with the cherubim and six-winged seraphim, many-eyed, sublime,

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<sup>42</sup> Taft 1975, pp. 3-10, for the general order of events.

<sup>43</sup> Mudrak in *Byzantium/Modernism*, p. 45 n. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Translated in Taft 1975, pp. 54-55.

winged...singing, crying, exclaiming the hymn of victory."<sup>45</sup> At this point, the human faithful proclaimed this hymn of victory, the *Trisagion*, with the angels:<sup>46</sup>

It is very meet, right and befitting...that we should...sing unto you...O Lord...of all creation, visible and invisible...to serve you and pour forth an unceasing hymn of glory: angels and archangels, thrones, dominions, principalities, powers and virtues, and the many-eyed cherubim praise you; about you stand the seraphim...crying one unto another, with continuing voice unstilled songs of praise...exclaiming: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts: heaven and earth are full of your glory."<sup>47</sup>

The singers' voices seemed to mingle in the dome as a point of connectivity between earth and heaven, intimating future bliss. Maximos the Confessor commented on this human-angelic harmony: "The unceasing and sanctifying doxology by the holy angels in the *Trisagion* signifies...the equality in the way of life and conduct and the harmony in the divine praising which will take place in the age to come by both heavenly and earthly powers."<sup>48</sup> Kabasilas reiterated this doctrine in the present tense:

Angels and men form one Church, a single choir because of the coming of Christ who is both of heaven and earth. That is why we sing [the *Trisagion*] after the procession of the Gospel, thus proclaiming that by coming among us, Christ has placed us with the angels and established us

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<sup>45</sup> Stefanescu 1936, pp. 82-83 (Anaphora Prayer of St. Basil); Laurent, *Le rituel de la proskomide*, p. 129 (commemoration of angels).

<sup>46</sup>Taft 1975, pp. 79-80.

<sup>47</sup> Taft, "Trisagion," in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, 2005). [Oxford Reference Online](#).

<sup>48</sup> Maximos the Confessor, *Maximos Confessor: Selected Writings*, ed. George C. Berthold (New York, 1985), p. 207. Cf. Kabasilas, "The Thrice-holy Hymn has been taken in part from the angels, and in part from Book of Psalms by the Prophet David; it was made into one hymn by the Church of Christ and dedicated to the Holy Trinity...in order to show both the harmony of the Old Testament with the New, and that angels and men form one Church and one choir." In *Nicholas Cabasilas: A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, trans. J.M. Hussey and P.A. McNulty (London, 1960), p. 60.

amid the angelic choirs.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the ceremony—as noted above—images of angels following these liturgical rubrics could be seen in frescoes and on other objects, performing the requisite hymns. Such images revealed their status of sublime versions of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the power of communion to elevate the faithful to their ranks, and their actual presence. Consecration converted their Eucharistic gifts into the body and blood of Christ to sanctify the faithful, who (according to Nicholas Kabasilas) “gain...the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven, and similar good things.”<sup>50</sup> Late Antique theologians like Chrysostom determined that, when the priest presented the sacrifice, the angels physically entered the church: “Angels surround the priest; the whole sanctuary and the space around the altar are filled with the heavenly hosts, worshipping him who lies upon the altar.”<sup>51</sup> Symeon of Thessaloniki, also described the sanctuary as a space for angels and officiating priests.<sup>52</sup> Hence the dome of Gračanica portrays “myriads” of angels, presided over by a seraph holding *rhypidia*, flocking the

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<sup>49</sup> Kabasilas, *Divinae liturgiae interpretatio*, PG 20, 412-413A, quoted. in C. N. Tsirpanlis, *The Ecclesiastical Theology of Nicholas Cabasilas* (New York, 1979), p. 183.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholas Kabasilas, *Divine Liturgy*, I, qtd. In Bolman 2010, p. 138. Communion was the normative locus of *theosis*, transforming the person into a member of Christ’s body.

<sup>51</sup> Chrysostom, *Treatise on the Priesthood*, VI, 4, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, 1889), *Documenta Catholica Omnia*; Peterson 1964, p. 34.

<sup>52</sup> M. Djurić, “To Picture and to Perform: The Image of the Eucharistic Liturgy at Markov Manastir,” *Zograf* 38 (2014), p. 125 (angel-deacons) and p. 134 (angel-priests). Angels as priests in the Heavenly Liturgy first appeared in monumental painting in Dečani. The same idea is highlighted in the concept of the liturgical space in the doctrine of Symeon of Thessalonike, according to which the sanctuary was a space for angels and officiating priests: see X. Werner, “L’ espace liturgique d’ après S. Siméon de Thessalonique (1416–1429),” in: *L’espaceliturgique: ses elements constitutifs et leurs sens* (Conférences Saint Serge. LIII semaine d’études liturgiques, Paris 27–30 Juin 2005), ed. C. Braga, Roma 2006, p. 113.

consecrated Host (**Fig. 12**).



**Figure 12** *Divine Liturgy*, Gračanica, detail of the consecration.

Photo: <https://blog.obitel-minsk.com/2017/12/chalice-of-eternity-look-at-orthodox.html>.

Thus, imaging forth angelic action in liturgy and icons each contributed to mystical assimilation of human participants with the angels. Returning to the notion that the angels themselves cooperated in this process as links in an essentially liturgical chain of images emanating from God, it is important to understand that images of the *Cherubikon* and *Trisagion* dramatized the traditional doctrine that the liturgy itself was

not just an index, but a mimetic “icon” of the heavenly one.<sup>53</sup> These pictures of angel-clergy were distinct from icons of individual angels like Gabriel and Michael insofar as what they really showed were offices rather than persons: angels representing the human clergy representing the orders of angels. Pseudo-Dionysius expressed that the material representation of the heavenly liturgy made its mystical observation possible:

[It] is not possible for our mind to be raised to that immaterial representation and contemplation of the Heavenly Hierarchies, without using material guidance, accounting the visible splendors as reflections of the invisible splendor...of the feast of contemplation within the mind; and the ranks of the orders [of angels], of the harmonious and regulated habit, with regard to Divine things; and the reception of the most Divine Eucharist...and whatever other things were transmitted to Heavenly Beings supermundanely, but to us symbolically.<sup>54</sup>

Kabasilas concurred that images and their mental equivalents prepared the mind to celebrate and receive the Eucharist, and to bring the faithful to *theosis*.<sup>55</sup> Last, the patriarch Germanos had specified the concept of liturgy as icon to the Great Entrance, assimilating its material and mystical facets as membranes connecting the celestial and sublunary:

By means of the procession of the deacons and the representation of the fans, which are in the likeness of the seraphim, the *Cherubikon* signifies the entrance of all the...righteous ahead of the cherubic powers and the

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<sup>53</sup> Djurić 2014, pp. 125-26. See W. Tronzo, “Mimesis in Byzantium: Notes toward a History of the Function of the Image” in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 25 (1994): 61-76; C. Barber, “Mimesis and Memory in the Narthex Mosaics of the Nea Moni, Chios,” *Art History* 21.3 (2001): 323-337.

<sup>54</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy* I.3, 121C-124A.

<sup>55</sup> Nicholas Kabasilas, *Explication* 66, trans. in Woodfin 2012, pp. 115-119.

angelic hosts, who run invisibly in advance of...Christ, who is proceeding to the mystical sacrifice, borne aloft by material hands. [...] In addition...the choirs of angels, who have seen...the victory over death...with us exclaim Alleluia.<sup>56</sup>

Hence images of angels enacting the *Cherubikon* and *Trisagion* were tools of *theosis*, suspended between the immanent and transcendent, and inseparable from their performative contexts. The formulation seems simple—and yet representations of music-making angels from the Gothic West complicate the proposition. They serve as a reminder that there was no determinate way of conveying angels' song in image or action.

### **Gothic Angel-Musicians**

In the West, portrayals of angel-musicians joined secular musical practice with an exegetic synthesis of the seraphic hymn in Isaiah, the instruments populating the Psalms of Praise, and the harps played by the apocalyptic Elders for the celestial liturgy of Revelation.<sup>57</sup> Their apparitions in image and performance were meant to entice the faithful to mystical participation in their liturgy by cognitive, aesthetic, and mimetic means. For example, in Spinello Aretino's *Coronation of the Virgin* altarpiece (c. 1400) for the Church of S. Felicità, Florence, angel-musicians energetically celebrate this event as

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<sup>56</sup> *St. Germanos of Constantinople on the Divine Liturgy*, trans. John Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY, 1984), pp. 86-87.

<sup>57</sup> For the argument and bibliography: Amy E. Gillette, *Depicting the Sound of Silence: Angel-Musicians in Trecento Sacred Art*, unpublished Ph.D. diss. (Temple University, 2016).

a rough analogue of the Byzantine Divine Liturgy; or in a reliquary shrine made in Paris for Elisabeth of Hungary (c. 1320-1340), play a sweet tune to honor the sacramental reality of the Eucharist symbolized by the Nursing Virgin; or rejoicing and praising Mary as an intercessor to Christ, as stated by their scroll in a window from the Beauchamp Chapel at St. Mary's in Warwick (*Gaudeamus omnes in domino diem festum celebrantes sub honore Marie virginis de cuius Assumptione gaudent angeli et collaudant filium Dei*) (Figs. 13, 14, 15).<sup>58</sup> In each case, the angels' convincingly rendered instrumental and choral performances emphasized their liturgy as a source of comfort and joy in divine love, within a devotional ecosystem in which images offered an interactive channel through which the song of angels could touch and move the "bodily imagination" as articulated by the Cambridge friar Walter Hilton (d. 1396):

Our Lord comforts a soul by angel's song. This song cannot be described by any bodily likeness, for it is spiritual, and above all imagination and reason. (...) For just as a soul, in understanding spiritual things, is often touched and moved through bodily imagination by the work of angels, as when Ezekiel the prophet saw in bodily imagination the truth of God's hidden mysteries, just so, in the love of God, a soul by the presence of angels is ravished out of mind of all earthly and fleshly things and filled

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<sup>58</sup> "Let us all rejoice in God, celebrating the feast of the Virgin Mary for whose Assumption the angels rejoice and praise with the Son of God." For the Beauchamp Chapel: A. Buckle, "'Fit for a King': Music and Iconography in Richard Beauchamp's Chantry Chapel," *Early Music* 38.1 (2010), pp. 3-19. For the reliquary: Z. Falvy, "Angel Musicians on a Fourteenth-Century Reliquary," *Imago Musicae* 4 (1987), pp. 229-238.

N.B. The Mass was depicted only rarely in art of the Latin West: M. McNamee, "The Origin of the Vested Angel as a Eucharistic Symbol in Flemish Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 54 (1972), p. 264; J. McKinnon, "Representations of the Mass in Medieval and Renaissance Art," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 31.1 (1981), pp. 21-52.

with a heavenly joy, to hear angel's song and heavenly sound, according to the measure of its love.<sup>59</sup>



**Figure 13** Spinello Aretino, *Coronation of the Virgin*, S. Trinità, Florence, c. 1400 (detail). Photo: ArtStor.

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<sup>59</sup> Walter Hilton, "Of Angel's Song," in *The Cell of Self-Knowledge: Seven Early English Mystical Treatises Printed by Henry Pepwell in 1521*, ed. E. Gardner (New York, 1910), pp. 43-44.



**Figure 14** Jean de Touyl(?), Reliquary Shrine, Paris, 1320s-1340s.  
Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure 15** *Gaudeamusomnes*, Beauchamp Chapel, St. Mary's, Warwick, 1440s.

Photo: [https://vidimus.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/issue\\_46\\_2010\\_feat4.jpg](https://vidimus.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/issue_46_2010_feat4.jpg).

Sometimes, crowds of mechanized angels further enlivened the “actual” angels’ incursions into the liturgy — as well as paraliturgical performances, courtly and civic spectacles, and celestial-themed devices, such as clocks.<sup>60</sup> Conceptually reminiscent of the angels adorning the Gračanica dome (**Figs. 4, 12**) were a set of wooden statues, now lost, at St. Margaret’s in Kings Lynn, England. According to an early sixteenth-century description of these automata, the angels appeared to plummet from the roof to the

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., J. Gimpel, *The Medieval Machine* (New York, 1977); P. Meredith and J. Taliby, eds., *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages* (Kalamazoo, 1983); S. Lightsey, *Manmade Marvels in Medieval Culture and Literature* (New York, 2007); E. Truitt, *Medieval Robots* (Philadelphia, 2015); P. Butterworth and K. Normington, eds., *Medieval Theatre Performance: Actors, Dancers, Automata, and Their Audiences* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2017).

high altar at the elevation of the Host and retracted “at the end of the chant.”<sup>61</sup> Akin in execution and apparently rampant were the “Paradise machines” built for the paraliturgical mystery plays held in churches and public spaces throughout Latin Christendom. An Orthodox bishop from Russia, Abramo of Souzdal, was deeply moved by a few such spectacles when visiting Florence in 1439 for the Ecumenical Council. He enthusiastically chronicled the “inexpressibly beautiful” Annunciation play in S. Felice, staged from a tall scaffold “meant to represent the heavenly spheres” erected over the entrance of this church.<sup>62</sup> Following some preliminaries, an actor playing a Prophet announced, “Thence shall God come to seek the lost sheep,” and then:

The curtains of the upper scaffold open and from there comes a volley of shots imitating Heaven’s thunder... Up on the scaffold is God the Father surrounded by more than five hundred burning lamps which revolve continually, going up and down. Children dressed in white, representing the angels, surround him, one striking the cymbals, other playing flutes or citterns in a scene of joyful and inexpressible beauty. After some time, the

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<sup>61</sup> “Oct. 20, 1502. Thomas Goisman, aldermannus de Villa Begia super Hull. Sep. in capella S. Trin., parteboriali, juxta meumpatrem et matrem, coram S. Virgine Katerina. Lego eidemcapellae xli., in honore Sacramenti, ad faciendum ad summumaltare descendent et ascendent (sic) ad tectum capellae inter levationem corporis Christi et sanguinis Domini, sicutest apud Lynne in eccL cath. [=St. Margaret’s]; scilicet angelisascendetur et descendeturusque ad finem cantationis, et Ne nosinducas in temptationem. Resid. Aliciseuxorimeae.” (“October 20, 1502. Thomas Goisman, alderman of Hull. I leave to [Trinity Chapel, Hull] 10 pounds, in honor of the Sacrament, for descending to the high altar and ascend to the roof of the chapel between the elevation of the Host, as it is done in Lynn Cathedral; that is, angels ascend and descend at the end of the chant.”) Will #102 of Thomas Goisman of Kingston upon Hull, in *Testamentaeboracensia, a selection of wills from the registry at York*, vol. 4 (London, 1869). Also see Miri Rubin on late-medieval Eucharistic culture: *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991); and for more about automata, Margaret Aston, *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion, 1350-1600* (London, 1993).

<sup>62</sup> Meredith and Tailby 1983, pp. 242-245. For more about the construction history of the S. Felice Paradise machine; N. Newbigin, “Greasing the Wheels of Heaven: Recycling, Innovation, and the Question of ‘Brunelleschi’s’ Stage Machinery,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 11 (2007): 201-241.

angel sent by God descends on two ropes...to announce the conception of the Son. The angel [looks] exactly as celestial angels are to be seen in paintings. While he descends he sings in a low voice, holding a branch in his hand. [Mary assents to the Incarnation.] The angel hands over to her the beautiful branch and ascends... A fire comes from God and with a noise of uninterrupted thunder passes down three ropes...rising up again in flames and rebounding down once more, so that the whole church was filled with sparks. The angel sang jubilantly as he ascended, and moved his hands about and beat his wings as if he were really flying. The fire poured forth and spread with increasing intensity and noise from the high scaffold, lighting the lamps in the church... When the angel arrives back at his point of departure the flames subside and the curtains close again.<sup>63</sup>

The Gothic portrayals of angel-musicians, like angelic music itself, were meant to enchant, edify, and comfort souls, restoring them to an angelic *habitus*; angel machines especially were a late, but consummate expression of applied angelology.<sup>64</sup> All of these images could also be considered as Dionysian theology in its negative sense, revealing what Byzantine angels overwhelmingly were not: that is, instrumentalists or active singers, shaped by secular musical practice, and manifestly happy. The Gothic angel-musicians therefore generate questions concerning the metaphysical and existential positions of their Byzantine peers.

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<sup>63</sup> Meredith and Tailby, eds., pp. 244-245; G. Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (Cambridge, 1987); Tydeman, ed., *The Medieval European Stage, 500-1500* (Cambridge, 2001).

<sup>64</sup> For angels' song and especially angel-harpists to comfort the soul — a topic that needs investigation! — see e.g., St. Francis, Bartholomeus Anglicus, Grosseteste, mystics such as Julian of Norwich, and the Wycliffite homilies.

## Questions about Byzantine Angels

The most interesting questions strike me as these: were there any Byzantine or Post-Byzantine depictions of music-making angels? And why did the angels of these traditions appear so gloomy relative to Western ones?

With respect to musical performance, I have found no Byzantine images of angels playing instruments. Some Byzantine churches displayed monumental images of choristers (*psaltai*) that referred to actual choral practice, such as those singing the fourteenth strophe of the *Akathistos* on the south choir wall of the Dečani Monastery church in Kosovo (c. 1350). Yet these images showed human rather than angelic performers and had a simply prescriptive relation to the liturgy, unlike the iconic one asserted by the depiction of angel-clergy enacting the Divine Liturgy in the dome of Gračanica (**Figs. 3, 12**).<sup>65</sup> Also, scenes of David playing a harp or indeed the full *instrumentarium* of Psalm 150, as shown in the Hamilton Psalter (c. 1300), confirm that Byzantine artists did depict musical instruments. Nevertheless, the instruments in the Hamilton Psalter are striking for being inert, and the angelized David leaves them

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<sup>65</sup> See Moran 1986, pp. 5-6. Post-Byzantine artists in Russia and Romania eventually replaced the human choristers with angelic ones, in response to campaigns against depicting non-holy figures in icons. See B. Uspensky, *Semiotics of the Russian Icon* (Ghent, 1976), for the question of “how to deal with those figures who are not themselves objects of reverence, but which are present in icons being worshipped” (p. 68).

behind when a bigger angel whisks him away following his final Psalm of Praise (Fig. 16).<sup>66</sup>



**Figure 16** Psalm 150/1, Hamilton Psalter, Cyprus, c. 1300. Photo: Index of Christian Art.

The status of the Hamilton Psalter as a bilingual Greek-and-Latin book made on Lusignan Cyprus engenders a sequent question: did angel-musicians emerge at all in the art of the Latin East— Latin or Orthodox, medieval or post-medieval? Musical angels did accompany images in the mendicant churches of Venetian Dalmatia. (There are, to the best of my knowledge, no extant medieval examples from Cyprus, Venetian Crete, or the Frankish Morea. However, the extensive circulation of patrons, artists, and small-

<sup>66</sup> J. Braun, “Musical Instruments in Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts,” *Early Music* 8.3 (1980), pp. 312-327. Cf. the winged, harp-playing David in the Lincoln Cathedral Angel Choir, 1256-1280. Representing King David with angels’ wings seems to have been justified by Psalm 139:8-10: “If I ascend up to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in hell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall your hand lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.” See P. Binski, *Becket’s Crown: Art and Imagination in Gothic England, 1170-1300* (New Haven, 2004), p. 280.



**Figure 17** Giovanni di Pietro or Dujam Vučković, altarpiece of the Virgin and Child Enthroned, St. Jerome, Ugljan, Croatia, mid-1400s (detail).  
Photo: <http://djelatnici.unizd.hr/~ehilje/Gsz-Html/Gsz-p14.htm>.

scale objects suggest the affirmative.) Examples include Nicolò di Pietro's altarpiece of the Virgin and Child Enthroned (1394), commissioned by Vučina Belgarzone for the church of St. Dominic in Zadar; and the high altarpiece of the same subject for the Franciscan church of St. Jerome in Ugljan by Giovanni di Pietro or his collaborator Dujam Vučković (mid-fifteenth century), in which angels playing vielles are visible around the throne in the central panel (**Fig. 17**).<sup>67</sup>

In addition, beginning in the 1500s, the presence of Venetian art and artists on Crete evidently inspired their Orthodox Cretan peers to depict angel-musicians celebrating the celestial liturgy of Revelation (the same subject that had originally vindicated angel-musicians in Western art). Georgios Klontzas (d. 1608) painted a triptych for use on Sinai that portrays the iconography of *In Thee, Rejoiceth* on the exterior and the Last Judgment on the interior. He incorporated a scene of heaven in which music-making angels surround the heavenly Christ above and accept the souls of the blessed from a priestly Christ below.<sup>68</sup> Another Cretan painter— further invigorated by the circulation of German engravings— created a fresco around 1600 in which angel-harpists celebrate the “new song” of Revelation 14:1-3, in the Apocalypse cycle

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<sup>67</sup> D. Cooper, “Gothic Art & the Friars in Late Medieval Croatia, 1213-1460” in J. Beresford-Peirce, ed., *Croatia: aspects of art, architecture and cultural heritage* (London, 2009), pp. 80-83 (76-97), with further bibliography in his notes 38 and 44-46.

<sup>68</sup> See cat. no. 32 by Maria Kazanaki-Lappa in A. Drandaki, ed., *Origins of El Greco: Icon Painting in Venetian Crete* (New York, 2009), pp. 90-91.

decorating the portico between the *trapeza* and *katholikon* of the Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos (**Fig. 18**).<sup>69</sup> Even later, and perhaps in response to this cycle, Dionysius of Fournia recommended “a crowd of angels holding harps” to illustrate the “new song,” and for the Second Coming, Christ and Mary on a throne of Cherubim “accompanied by psalms and hymns and many organs with the great glory of angels.”<sup>70</sup>

In brief, it seems that angel-musicians did not feature in Orthodox art until painters on Venetian Crete adopted them in the sixteenth century to illustrate the celestial liturgy of Revelation. Angel-musicians never joined the ranks of angel-clergy performing the Divine Liturgy in monumental church cycles. Their delayed and limited appearance probably concerned some level of resistance to Western innovations plus perhaps the tighter parallelism (versus the West) between the liturgy and sacred images of the “participatory mode.”<sup>71</sup> For one, the Byzantine liturgy excluded readings from Revelation and did not accept this book as canonical until the fourteenth century.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, while the heightened theatricality of the Great Entrance and other liturgical events encouraged the mimetic commemoration of Christ’s Passion, the tradition of

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<sup>69</sup> “I heard a voice from heaven, as the noise of many waters and as the voice of great thunder. And the voice which I heard was as the voice of harpers, harping on their harps. And they sung as it were a new canticle, before the throne and before the four living creatures.” The monks would read the Apocalypse during meals, but not during the service. Millet, *Monuments de l’Athos*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1927); also P. L. Vocotopoulos, “Monumental Painting” in *Treasures of Mount Athos*, ed. A. A. Karakatsanis (Thessaloniki, 1997), p. 37.

<sup>70</sup> Dionysius of Fournia 1974, pp. 48-49.

<sup>71</sup> See H. Maguire, “Two Modes of Narration in Byzantine Art,” in *Byzantine East, Latin West*, ed. D. Mouriki (Princeton, 1995), pp. 385-395.

<sup>72</sup> See J. Irmscher and A. W. Carr, “Apocalypse,” in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, 2005). [Oxford Reference Online](#).



**Figure 18** Angel-harpists (Apoc. 14:1-3), Dionysiou Monastery--Mount Athos, c. 1600. Photo: Wikimedia

paraliturgical theater to which Byzantine sacred images could or would make reference remained extremely spare, especially in comparison to the abundance of Western productions.<sup>73</sup> Symeon of Thessaloniki, like Abramo of Souzdal, had evidently seen a Latin mystery play of the Assumption, but reacted with categorical contempt. The use of actors to play the parts of holy figures struck him as obscuring the distinction between image and substance (“And this man represents the Virgin, and they call him ‘Mary’”) and, altogether, as “contrary to reason, and foreign to the tradition of the Church, and [things that] do violence to the mysteries and to Christian piety.”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup> A. White, *The Artifice of Eternity: A Study of Liturgical and Theatrical Practices in Byzantium*, Ph.D. diss. (College Park, MD, 2006); A. Karpozilos and A. Kazhdan, “Theater” in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, 2005), [Oxford Reference Online](#); R. Ousterhout, “Women at Tombs: Narrative, Theatricality, and the Contemplative Mode” in *Wonderful Things: Byzantium through its Art*, eds. A. Eastmond and L. James (Burlington, 2013), p. 233.

<sup>74</sup> Symeon of Thessaloniki, *Contra haereses*, PG 155, 112C-113A. Quoted. by Ousterhout 2013, p. 232.

As for the emotional life of Byzantine angels, John of Damascus remarked paradigmatically, “[The angels] are above us for they are incorporeal, and are free of all bodily passion, yet are not passionless: for the Deity alone is passionless.”<sup>75</sup> Evidence from art (not texts) does give the impression that angelic misery was prominent. They suffered storms of weeping from the 1100s, a passion that flourished particularly amongst the non-clerical angels represented in *epitaphioi*, where they transposed the experience of those present for the ceremony.<sup>76</sup> One given by the nun Jefimija (1398/1399), now at the Putna monastery in Romania, even embroidered a *troparion* for Holy Saturday Orthros below the lamenting angels: “Seeing the strange sight, the host of angels uttered an unaccustomed cry of anguish, O Son of God, Word.”<sup>77</sup> The point was a living expression of Byzantine theology in which the display of human emotion at the events of Christ’s life and death—perhaps especially by angels, who were simultaneously exemplary and supposed to be exempt from sorrow—underscored the marvelous reality of his Incarnation.<sup>78</sup>

But did angels in the Byzantine tradition experience joy? They did, even to an unspeakable degree, and (as in the West) it was their natural state and always had to do

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<sup>75</sup> John of Damascus, “Concerning Angels,” *Exposition on the Orthodox Faith*, II.3, pp. 207-208.

<sup>76</sup> H. Maguire, “The Depiction of Sorrow in Middle Byzantine Art,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 31 (1977), p. 145.

<sup>77</sup> Email correspondence 12/13/2016 with Henry Schilb regarding the Jefimija *epitaphios*; also *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, p. 320.

<sup>78</sup> Maguire 1977, p. 173. Also, according to mystagogical interpretations, “every liturgical gesture is interpreted as a symbolic repetition of Christ’s earthly life, death, and Resurrection.” Djurić 2014, p. 129, citing R. Bornert, *Les commentaires byzantins de la Divine Liturgie du VIIIe au XVIe siècle* (Paris, 1966) in its entirety.

with the process of regaining Paradise for humanity. Joy as an angelic attribute traced to a statement by Christ in Luke 15: “Even so, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents.”<sup>79</sup> The Pseudo-Dionysius commented on this passage in his *Celestial Hierarchy*:

I must explain [...] what Scripture intends in the reference to the joy of the heavenly ranks. Now, these ranks could never experience the pleasures we draw from the passions. The reference, therefore, is to the way they participate in the divine joy by the finding of the lost... They are unspeakably happy in the way that, occasionally, sacred men are happy when God arranges for divine enlightenments to visit them.<sup>80</sup>

The liturgy offered numerous, recurrent opportunities for venting angelic happiness to counterpoise their “unaccustomed anguish” at Christ’s death. Their delight in the process of salvation surfaced in the words and melodies of various hymns that I quoted above, such as calls to rejoice with the angels for Christ’s Nativity (e.g., “Rejoice, for the things of Heaven rejoice with the earth” in the *Akathistos*). Chrysostom propounded moreover of the *Trisagion*:

Above, the hosts of angels sing praise; below, men form choirs in the churches and imitate them by singing the same doxology. [...] The

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<sup>79</sup> Also Psalm 98, when psalmody was understood as an angelic act: “Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. Sing unto the LORD with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm.” Also see Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Celestial Hierarchy* VII.4, in Luibheid 1997, pp. 165-166: “Theology has transmitted to the men of earth those hymns sung by the first rank of angels whose gloriously transcendent enlightenment is thereby made manifest... In my book *Divine Hymns* [a lost or fictitious treatise] I have already explicated, to the best of my ability, the supreme praises sung by those holy intelligences which dwell beyond in heaven.”

<sup>80</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 15.9, in Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series graeca, ed. cit.*, 3, col. 340; C. Luibheid, trans, *Pseudo-Dionysius, the Complete Works* (New York, 1987), p. 190.

inhabitants of heaven and earth are brought together in a common assembly...one shout of delight, one joyful chorus.<sup>81</sup>



**Figure 19** *Annunciation*, Homilies of James of Kokkinobaphos, c. 1130-1150. Photo: Index of Medieval Art.

Byzantine and Post-Byzantine artists rarely actually fashioned happy angels, like the eight exulting by holding up their arms in the Annunciation miniature in the Homilies of James of Kokkinobaphos (c. 1130-50) (**Fig. 19**).<sup>82</sup> Their motivation is the homily's statement that when Mary consented to the will of God, "all the intellectual

<sup>81</sup> Chrysostom, *PG* 56, col. 97. In discussing the *Trisagion's* place in the Divine Liturgy, Nicholas Kabasilas also established chant in the choir of the angels, but this comment refers to the Little Entrance (*Sacrae liturgiae interpretatio*, *PG*, 150).

<sup>82</sup> Paris, Bibl. Nat., gr. 1208, folio 173v. Maguire 1977:, p.160.

powers exulted” and “heaven on high rejoiced exceedingly.”<sup>83</sup> One angel in the aforementioned Dionysiou fresco also raises its arms in delight; several in the Barnes Nativity icon even smile gently, in the manner of angels in Italian art (**Figs. 19, 8**). Yet these are rare exceptions amidst images of hymning angels that register as passionless, beyond joy or sorrow, a trait most marked in the theologically happiest first triad. Even noting that the angels’ essential joy could break out in musical tones, in sermons, and so on, there must have been something purposeful to their dispassion as depicted, in light of the animation of angels or singers in other contexts. In part, the condition of God’s *apatheia* compounded with the persistence of classical ethics and a general suspicion of laughter valorized a *habitus* of tranquility.<sup>84</sup> Relatedly, I believe this portrayal of angel choristers concerned their position in the liturgical chain of images, and would add moreover that the sociability of Gothic images tended to be a way to compensate for their essential exclusion from transcendental realities, while Byzantine ones could act as direct conduits to mystical concelebration. On this topic, John of Damascus explained that “figures...of invisible and immaterial things in bodily form [lead to] a clearer apprehension of God and the angels,” and elaborated that “an image is expressive of

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<sup>83</sup> Maguire 1977, p. 159, quoting James of Kokkinobaphos, *Homilies*, PG, 127, col. 653A.

<sup>84</sup> A. Cutler, “Emotion” in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, 2005). [Oxford Reference Online](#).

something in the future, mystically shadowing forth what is to happen” as well as “a hymn of praise, a manifestation.”<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

As a coda, I would like to consider the extent to which assemblages of Byzantine or Post-Byzantine images of angel choirs in portable, wearable, and architectural imagery adhered to any programmatic unity.<sup>86</sup> Here are some ways to think about the “program” formed from several fixed and moveable image types that were activated by angelic concelebration in quasi-serial, functional settings: multitude as evidence of angelic blessedness and eschatological hope; hierarchy as emulative and transcendent; and *theosis* as the goal of sequence.

The multiplication of scenes of angels’ song in these heterotopic spaces emphasized one of the most characteristic angelic traits: their multitude.<sup>87</sup> The idea that there were great numbers of angels came out of Biblical passages that announced, “Thousands of thousands [of angels] ministered to [God]” (Daniel 7:10) and “You are to come unto...the Heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels” (Hebrews 12:22). The idea was taken up by the consecration prayer’s “thousands” and

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<sup>85</sup> John of Damascus, *Apologia* I-III, in *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY, 2003).

<sup>86</sup> It is common for scholars to note that images overlapped and colored each other through the liturgical year, but less common to spell out what this meant for given sets of images. See, e.g., N. Ševčenko, “Icons in the Liturgy,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991), 45-57.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. S. Burge, *Angels in Islam: Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti’s al-Haba’ik fi akhbar al-mala’ik* (London, 2015), for great many angels in Islamic thought and art.

“myriads” of angels, the “multitude of the heavenly host praising God” in the Christmas doxology of Luke 2:14, the full orders named in the *Cherubikon* and *Trisagion*, and indeed in sacred art. It signaled the angels’ perfection—for the upper, assistant orders more than the lower, ministering ones, because theologians figured that the closer something was to God, the more it proliferated.<sup>88</sup> Thus, in general, the multiplication of portrayals of hymning angels propounded their immanence in the Divine Liturgy, properly performed; and amounted to a promise to “come unto the Heavenly Jerusalem.”

With respect to sequence, art and architecture mapped the liturgy as it unfolded simultaneously in heaven.<sup>89</sup> The permeability between architecture, liturgy, image, and imagination meant that types and settings nuanced, but also conspired in the motion from precept to mysticism.<sup>90</sup> The three major architectural divisions (narthex, nave, and sanctuary) could evoke the three angelic triads, the tripartite structure of the cosmos, and—because they formed one entity—the multiplicity within the unity of the Trinity.<sup>91</sup>

*Epitaphioi* were symbolic burial shrouds whose removal from the Host meant the

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<sup>88</sup> “I think we also ought to reflect on the tradition in scripture that the angels number a thousand times a thousand and ten thousand times ten thousand. Those numbers, enormous to us, square and multiply themselves and thereby indicate clearly that the ranks of the heavenly beings are innumerable. So numerous indeed are the blessed armies of transcendent intelligent beings that they surpass the fragile and limited realm of our physical numbers.” Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, XIV, in Luibheid 1987, p. 181.

<sup>89</sup> Representations of the Great Entrance in the central dome constituted “a direct expression of Byzantine liturgists’ interpretations of the unity between the two churches and the simultaneous occurrence of the liturgy in heaven and earth.” Djurić 2014, p. 135, citing Bornert 1966, pp. 78, 80-81, 122, 176-178.

<sup>90</sup> Constans 2006, p. 166; Ousterhout, “The Holy Space: Architecture and Liturgy” in: *Heaven on Earth*, ed. L. Safran, pp. 81-120.

<sup>91</sup> Constas 2006, p. 167.

Resurrection and the rending of the Temple veil, to show the church of the angels.<sup>92</sup> The iconostasis both demarcated and mediated the sensible and supersensible, providing the terms in which Symeon of Thessaloniki explained the arrangement of icons on its entablature:

And thus [the icon] of the Savior is placed...in the middle of the sacred icons of [his] Mother, and of the Baptist; and of the angels, and the apostles... These icons teach us that Christ is in this way in heaven among his saints, and also [here] with us now, and will come again.<sup>93</sup>

The ciborium was the tomb of Christ as well as the heavenly altar and throne of God. To assess the distribution of the angel orders portrayed in successive liturgical spaces suggests that they were “gestalts” that cooperated to forge holistic inner worlds in clergy and laity.<sup>94</sup> Spiritual unification was indeed the purpose of the celestial hierarchy: “Every procession of illuminating light, proceeding from the Father...restores us again gradually as a unifying power, and turns us to the oneness of our conducting Father, and to a deifying simplicity.”<sup>95</sup>

To sum up: Byzantine and Post-Byzantine sacred images showed angels performing the hymns attributed to them in the Bible and liturgy, including the

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<sup>92</sup> Woodfin 2012, p. 125.

<sup>93</sup> Constan 2006, p. 170, quoting Symeon of Thessaloniki, *Dialogue* 345CD.

<sup>94</sup> E.g., P. Crossley, “Medieval Architecture and Meaning: The Limits of Iconography,” *The Burlington Magazine* 130 (1988), pp. 116-121; Willibald Sauerländer, “Integration: a Closed or Open Proposal?” in *Artistic Integration in Gothic Buildings*, eds. Virginia Raguin, Kathryn Brush, and Peter Draper (Toronto, 1995); P. Binski, “The English Parish Church and its Art in the Later Middle Ages: a Review of the Problem,” *Studies in Iconography* 20 (1999), pp. 1-20.

<sup>95</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, I.1.

*Cherubikon, Trisagion, Gloria, Akathistos, In Thee, Rejoiceth, Psalms of Praise, and, in the Post-Byzantine period, the “New Song” of Revelations. Except for the last of these, which was the only one to admit Western-style angel-musicians, the pictures reified the celestial liturgy as it was performed in the church. This process depended on the mediating status of angels, icons, and hymns, as well as by angelic multiplicity. Concepts of hierarchy and sequence generated the thought that angels’ liminality premised their ability to sublimate, expressed by their display on liturgical implements, veils, screens, and high places. Their images multiplied to indicate events when they were supposed to physically manifest in their church, and the exalted status of the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones was conveyed by their lack of ministerial vesture and tendency to congregate in higher architectural zones. Each point underlines that images of angels’ song were integrative forces in achieving the joy of Paradise regained in the real presence of Christ and the angels. 🙏*

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