

Neil Moran

The Choir of the Hagia Sophia¹

I. The Choir of the Hagia Sophia

The architectural shell of the Church of Holy Wisdom surrounds a supernatural space preserving through the centuries the most exquisite acoustical and optical tensions imaginable. Justinian and Theodora conceived their church on the basis of strict neo-Pythagorean and Boethian mathematical and geometrical principles with the ellipses created by the shapes of the dome and hemi-domes concentrating their energy upon the elevated platform of the ambo. Emperors were crowned on the ambo and thus the ambo was conceived as being a point of contact to the cosmos and music of the spheres. According to Platonic and neo-Pythagorean thought, mathematical and geometric ratios gave the cosmos its ordered structure, but its soul was the *harmonia* generated by the sounds of the planets rising up in harmony and concord. Boethius maintained that even though arithmetic and geometry directed the mind "toward immutable truths, unaffected by the contingencies of time and space," it was music which advanced the mind toward the "summit of perfection."²

The ambo was the place of the singers. To fill this vast auditorium, it was soon found that the voices of male sopranos or castrati were most appropriate. The employment of castrati in the patriarchal liturgy can be traced back to Brison, a eunuch in the service of the empress Eudoxia at the beginning of the fifth century. According to the church historian Socrates, John Chrysostom was disturbed that Arian Christians had been attracting many Orthodox converts by their impressive chanting of the psalms in antiphony with two choirs of singers.³ Socrates says that St. Chrysostom called upon the services of

1 This paper is dedicated to the memory of Robert van Nice. In 2006 the director of the Institute for Gregorian Research in Cologne, Mrs. Sebnem Yavuz, plans a series of concerts in Istanbul involving the Irena Church and the Hagia Sophia. At that time I plan to undertake an acoustical examination of the Hagia Sophia with the acclamations to the emperors, which were sung from the ledge around the dome.

2 H. Chadwick, Boethius. The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy (1981) 100.

3 R. Hussey, *Socratis Scholastici ecclesiastica Historia* (1853) VI, 16, 6 and *Historia Ecclesiastica*, PG LXVII (1864) 689, 1537.

Brison to introduce antiphony into the patriarchal liturgy in Constantinople in order to win back members of his flock who were consorting with the Arians. Brison thereby established the two foundation stones which were to influence the development of musical culture until the thirteenth century: namely antiphony between two choirs of singers and the use of castrati.

In organizing the celebration of the liturgy in his newly erected Hagia Sophia church in 535, the emperor Justinian specified that the number of singers in the Great Church was not to exceed 25. From later documents we know that the choir of Hagia Sophia consisted of a director called the *protopsaltes* and two choirs of 12 singers, each with its own master (the *domestikos* of the left and the *domestikos* of the right). The so-called Council of Laodicea specified that the place of the singers in the church was at the ambo, the central pulpit in the nave.⁴

Both castrati and regular male singers figured in the choirs of the Hagia Sophia, but in the ninth century an event occurred during the reign of Leo V which gave the advantage to the castrati. Leo the Armenian considered himself to have a fine voice and liked to intone the beginnings of the chants for the choirs. Immediately after personally directing the chanting of the morning office before Christmas in St. Stephen's chapel in 820, Leo V was murdered by assassins. The assassins had assumed the costumes of singers and sneaked into the palace precincts through an outer door opened to admit the singers, who lived in private dwellings in the city. After this incident singers were required to live in quarters within the imperial palace.⁵ This regulation alone would have put 'bearded' singers with families at a disadvantage and must have hastened the universal adoption as castrati, who were forbidden to marry.⁶

As the castrati were tonsured and lacked facial hair, these traits can be used as indications for identifying castrati in illustrations. The best depiction of beardless tonsured singers appears in codex Athos, Dionysiou 587m of the

4 F. S. Funk, *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum* (1905) 571 (canon 26). Cf. Neil Moran, *Singers in Late Byzantine and Slavonic Painting* (1986) 14.

5 Georgii Cedreni *Compendium Historiarum*, PG CXXI (1894) 949.

6 After Brison the first singer to be identified by name is Euthymius Casnes, a *domestikos* of the Great Church. His name comes up in connection with the activities of the unworthy patriarch Theophylactus (933-956), son of the emperor Romanus I. According to the historian John Skylitzes, Theophylactus was more famous for his horsemanship than his piety. To ease up on the solemnity of the service at Hagia Sophia, the patriarch appointed Euthymius Casnes as *domestikos*, who reputedly introduced diabolical dances, obscure cryings and tavern songs into the service. To judge from similar accusations in a treatise called *The Defense of Eunuchs*, these were all characteristics of eunuchs performing in the theatre. Cf. Neil Moran, *Byzantine castrati, Plainsong and Medieval Music* 11 (2002) 99-112.

eleventh century.⁷ Folio 43 contains the Gospel selection for the Sunday of Orthodoxy, when a special hymn known as the *kontakion* was performed. In the illustration of the text a group of nine tonsured members of the lower clergy stand on the steps of an ambo. The three foremost appear to be young deacons, as they wear their narrow band of office around their necks, the *orarion*. The two figures at the top of the ambo presumably represent the senior lector, who presented the readings for the Sunday of Orthodoxy, and the castrato, who sang from the roll in his hands.⁸

Beginning in the tenth century references to eunuchs in Byzantine sources become more frequent, as a more positive attitude was generally adopted toward them. Authors drew parallels between the corps of eunuchs surrounding the imperial throne and the heavenly choir of angels, both being outside conventional space and time.⁹ The emperor Leo VI fostered this trend by establishing the monastery of St. Lazaros in Constantinople as a haven exclusively for eunuchs.¹⁰

Commenting on the canon relating to the marriage of church singers (*psaltai*), the twelfth century historian Theodoros Balsamon states that this rule had become obsolete, because by his time the *ordo cantorum* consisted entirely of eunuchs.¹¹ Eunuchs were forbidden to marry, but the emperor Leo VI even allowed them to adopt children.¹²

II. Music and Architecture in the Hagia Sophia

Historians are extremely fortunate in that a detailed description of the ambo in the Hagia Sophia remains preserved in a long sixth-century poem by Paul Silentiarius. His *ekphrasis* on the Great Church was recited before Justinian the Great in the year 563, that is shortly after the collapse of the original dome and destruction of the first ambo. In 1909 Prof. Antoniadès published his conception of the appearance of the ambo in a major study on the Hagia Sophia.¹³

7 S. M. Pelekanides et alia, *The Treasures of Mount Athos: Illuminated Manuscripts I* (1974) 179.

8 Moran, *Singers*, 34-35.

9 K. M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (2003) 142-162.

10 Raymond Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzantin* (1969) 299.

11 Theodorus Balsamon, *Canones Sanctorum Patrum qui in Trullo Imperialis Palatii Constantinopoli convenerunt*, PG CXXXVII (1865) 532.

12 S. Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI (886-912): Politics and People* (1997) 202.

13 E. M. Antoniadès, *Ekphrasis tes Hagias Sophias* (1907-09).

According to Paul Silentiarius, the ambo stood like an island in the middle of the church. It was joined to the sanctuary by a narrow passage called the *solea*.¹⁴ The area surrounding the ambo was marked off by a circular marble fence with eight columns. The ambo itself rested on eight columns and could be ascended by way of stairs to the east and west. A cavern underneath the large central platform was designed as the place for the singers.

Describing the rites of the Great Church, Symeon, archbishop of Thessaloniki from 1416 to 1429, says the place of the *domestikos* of the right choir during the service was on a right step of the *solea* in front of the ambo, facing south toward the archbishop. The remaining singers of the right choir were placed according to rank along the right side of the *solea*. Two lectors stood to either side of the holy doors. On high feasts the second *domestikos* stood on the left step of the *solea* followed by the members of his choir along the left side of the *solea*.

During the "Great Entrance" ceremony, the oblation is transferred from the side altar on the left of the central altar to the central altar to the accompaniment of a vocal composition called the Cherubikon. The procession originated at a side altar behind the NE conch. Beginning in this corner, the procession took a U-shaped route along the north aisle through the central north archway up to the ambo. It then proceeded past the ambo and up the *solea* to the altar.

In his architectural study of the Hagia Sophia, Robert van Nice¹⁵ meticulously recorded the survival of marble slabs of different colours in the central part of the church. Even though the ambo area was destroyed by the fall of the first dome, lines of green marble on the floor can still be made out. In a study of the four bands of green marble dividing the floor of the Hagia Sophia, George Majeska¹⁶ pointed out the significance of two marble slabs to the east of the third band which probably were used as points of orientation in processions. In the Great Entrance these likely indicated where the procession coming from the north side turned to approach the ambo.

In the middle of the Cherubikon sung by the castrati, there appears a solo section with three verses from psalm 23, containing the command "Lift up ye gates" followed by one verse from psalm 117. Paulus Silentiarius states that a slightly curved stout door (θυρη) marked the entrance to the ambo area. It would seem that these extra verses from psalm 23 were used as "fillers" while the dignitaries carrying the gifts were waiting for the emperor's procession

14 On the quality of the castrati voices cf. Thomas Walker, *Castrati, The New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* III (1980) 876.

15 R. L. Van Nice, *Saint Sophia in Istanbul. An architectural Survey. Installment I* (1965).

16 G. Majeska, *Notes on the Archeology of St. Sophia at Constantinople: The Green Marble Bands on the Floor*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 32 (1978) 299-308.

from his *mitatorium* along the south aisle to behind the ambo. In his commentary on the liturgy, patriarch Germanos imagined the ambo as the entrance to Christ's tomb:¹⁷ After passing through the "stout door," the procession with the gifts proceeded through the *solea* into the sanctuary.

Both Robert Taft¹⁸ and Thomas Mathews¹⁹ disagree with the route I have just outlined. According to their interpretations, the *skeuophylakion* at the NE corner of the church served as the starting point of the "Great Entrance". The *skeuophylakion* was the one part of the pre-Justinian church which survived its destruction during the Nika riots of 532. Each has, however, a different opinion on how the procession from the outside *skeuophylakion* entered the church.

Mathews believes the deacons left the sanctuary before the end of the Mass of the Catechumens and proceeded to the *skeuophylakion* at the NE corner. Taking the gifts, the deacons proceeded in procession along the north side of the church to the central door on the north side. From there the procession made its way to the ambo and altar. Taft, in contrast, favoured in his book a route through a small north east entrance of the church and down the north aisle.²⁰

When discussing their proposal of a procession originating from the *skeuophylakion* with Robert van Nice at Dumbarton Oaks, he agreed with me that this route was highly unlikely. First, the weather would have to be taken into consideration. The deacons and singers would have donned their finest vestments and they would have been carrying the oblation, fans, torches and the rest of the implements associated with the communion. This was not an outdoor procession. The distance from the west entrance of the *skeuophylakion* to the middle door on the north side is some 25 or 30 meters.

Second, Van Nice pointed out, that the present day floor of the *skeuophylakion* is six meters above the level of the nave of the church and it was reached on the east side by 21 steps upward. How are we to imagine that the clergy could have descended these steps and traversed the distance to the door of the church with dignity during a rainstorm?

17 N. Borgia, Il commentario liturgico di S. Germano patriarca constantinopolitano e la versione latina di Anastasio Bibliotecario (1912) 11.

18 R. Taft, The Great Entrance: A history of the transfer of the gifts and other pre-anaphoral rites of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (1975).

19 T. F. Mathews, The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy (1971). The scale on the floor plan of the Hagia Sophia in Mathews' book on p. 92 is wrong. What reads 20 meters indicates in fact 40 meters. The width of the Hagia Sophia is therefore not 35 but 70 meters! This same plan is reproduced by Robert Taft on p. 188 of his study.

20 R. F. Taft, *Quaestiones disputatae: The Skeuophylakion of Hagia Sophia and the Entrances of the Liturgy Revisited*, Part II: Liturgy, *Oriens Christianus* 82 (1998) 53-87, esp. 83.

Third, there is liturgical evidence in the 7th century commentary of Maximus the Confessor. Concerning the interval just before the Great Entrance, Maximus wrote “after the reading of the Holy Gospel and the dismissal of the catechumens there takes place the closing of the doors”. The closing of the doors is interpreted as the transition from the material to the spiritual world.²¹

Fourth, there can be no doubt about the existence of rings in the ceiling behind the porphyry columns of the NE and SE conches. The purpose of these rings was presumably to hold up curtains about that part of the church. It can therefore not be said that there were “no auxiliary chambers whatsoever”. The Great Entrance would have been formed behind this curtained-off area, just as the imperial procession was formed in the *mitatorium* in the SE conch. Robert van Nice believed the rings dated from the sixth century.

Finally, Taft attempted to disregard the reference to the closing of the church doors at the beginning of the Mass of the Faithful in the commentary of Maximus the Confessor by maintaining that “one of them, guarded by a deacon or porter, must have been left open for the procession” (Taft, p. 194). In an article of 1998, he elaborated this by claiming, “What would or would not be mentioned by a commentator is not always a convincing argument”.²² In other words, Taft believes it is not convincing, because it does not fit into his theory.

In the same article Taft vacillates about which door was used for re-entering the church: “On re-entering the basilica with the gifts, the Great Entrance procession may have used the same door, or the main door in the east end of the north aisle, or even the central doors in the north aisle ca. 29 meters away, since one might question the suitability of using a smaller “service entrance” to accommodate a solemn procession bearing large vessels and probably accompanied by ornately vested clerics bearing candles, thuribles, processional crosses, and other processional accoutrements.”

Taft and Mathews developed the theory of an outside procession because they believed that the liturgy in the Hagia Sophia evolved from open to closed forms. With regard to this openness, Taft writes: “there are simply no auxiliary chambers whatsoever” (Taft, p. 182) so that the Great Entrance had to begin “in an outbuilding, outside the church” (Taft, p. 194). Van Nice’s comment was that he could not imagine that Justinian could bankrupt the state by building the church and not make provision for the liturgical requirements.

In a recent article Wolfgang Schneider and Rudolf Stichel emphasized that

21 N. Moran, The musical ‘Gestaltung’ of the Great Entrance Ceremony in the 12th century in accordance with the Rite of Hagia Sophia, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 28 (1979) 168-193, esp. 180.

22 R. Taft, *Quaestiones disputata*, 83. Cf. Maximus Confessor, *Mystagogia*, PG XCI (1865) 693.

the Great Church was not only the cathedral of the city, “sondern zugleich auch die Hauptkirche des römischen Imperiums, Sitz des oikumenischen Patriarchen und als solcher vorbildhafter liturgischer Raum für die Aufführung des *‘theatron aplaston kai pneumatikon’* (Johannes Chrysostomos) des (byzantinischen) Gottesdienstes.”²³ A brilliant exposition on “The Interior Space of Hagia Sophia at Constantinople” was presented at the XXe Congrès International des Études Byzantines (2001) at the Sorbonne in Paris by Prof. Sorin Ullea.²⁴ He demonstrates that in erecting the shell of a building, the constructor “does not leave the air meant to be enclosed, that is the interior space, limp or flaccid like in a commonplace depot, but he compresses it very strongly in order to impose upon those entering the building a certain psychological impact, a certain state of mind.” In the case of the Hagia Sophia the gigantic interplay of spatial tensions is strengthened by the windows around the dome, with the result that “the cupola seems to hover over a circle of light which intensifies the aerial character of the space below. An incredible spectacle.”

The interdependence of music and architecture of the Hagia Sophia can best be illustrated by a rubric in codex Athens 2061 that the singers, bearing lights, ascended up onto the platform encircling the cupola to sing acclamations to the emperor at vespers.²⁵ Van Nice indicated to me how the singers would have climbed up to the dome through a stairway in the NW corner of the church. The effect of these acclamations, sung by castrati, ringing down from the dome must have been truly one of the most exquisite marvels of the building. Thomas Mathews in his study of the Hagia Sophia believed that “a special clerical choir ... did not exist in the Early Byzantine liturgy”.²⁶ Robert Taft wrote “there was no choir in the strict sense in Byzantine churches”.²⁷ I beg to differ.

23 W. C. Schneider and R. H. W. Stichel, *Der ‘Cherubinische Einzug’ in der Hagia Sophia Justinians, Performativität und Ereignis* (2003) 377-394, esp. 378.

24 I am grateful to Prof. Ullea for providing me with a copy of his paper. Cf. *The Interior Space of Hagia Sophia at Constantinople*, *Revue Roumaine d’Histoire de l’Art*, série Beaux-arts XXXIX-XL (2002-2003) 3-10.

25 N. Moran, *Zwei Herrscherakklamationen in einer griechischen Handschrift aus Süditalien* (Codex gr. 161), *Musikforschung* 30 (1977) 3-13. Codex Athens 2061 transmits the ‘asmatic’ office of the Great Church as practiced in Thessaloniki.

26 Mathews, op. cit., 124.

27 Taft, op. cit., 80.