

Byzantine music and Western church music

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How to cite this paper: Dong, T. H. (2025). Byzantine music and Western church music. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 1(3), 1-11. ISSN Print: 3104-4263, ISSN Online: 3104-4271. <https://doi.org/10.63313/IJED.9022>

Published: 2025-10-03

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Abstract

Byzantine music and Western church music share a common origin. Although their specific inherited elements may differ slightly, both can be traced back to early Christian music, Jewish music, and classical Greek music. Furthermore, the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western church music cannot be overlooked. Their similarities partly stem from shared origins, while others result from Byzantine music's influence on Western church music. As mentioned earlier, Western churches not only directly adopted musical works from the Byzantine church but also "learned from Byzantium," developing rudimentary notation systems and modal frameworks. Consequently, as Paul Henry Lang noted, "Byzantium transmitted the cultural heritage and civilizational characteristics it had inherited from classical traditions to the West." From this perspective, Byzantine music can be regarded as an integral part of Western musical development. Therefore, when examining the history of Western music, we must not overlook Byzantine music.

Keywords

Byzantine music; Western church music; common source

1. Byzantine Empire and the definition of Byzantine music

Both Eastern and Western church music evolved from early Christian traditions, with music itself being a case in point. Jewish music, early Christian compositions, and ancient Greek-Roman melodies are all integral components in Western music history studies, serving as crucial references for tracing the origins of church music. This demonstrates that despite diverging paths over time, these musical traditions share a common origin, maintaining a remarkably distinct yet profound connection through their shared roots.

2. Roman Church liturgy

Like Byzantine music, exploring Western church music requires a basic understanding of its liturgical traditions. The Roman liturgy in the West corresponds to the Eastern Byzantine tradition, and it also developed its own historical trajectory.

In early Christianity, virtually all churches inherited Jewish worship practices. However, due to regional autonomy and limited intercommunication among local churches, "the content and form of early church liturgies exhibited distinct regional characteristics, diversity, and lack of standardization." This situation did not last long after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. The Roman Church soon gained dominance across the Christian world, with the doctrine that "all churches must submit to the Roman Church" being firmly established [1]. To strengthen ecclesiastical unity, successive popes dedicated themselves to revising liturgies and promoting the Roman rite globally. For instance, Pope Damasus I (366-384), whose secretary Saint Jerome was "the recognized authority on Orthodox worship rituals," "established the Roman liturgical order modeled after Eastern practices." Pope Coelestius I (422-432) introduced alternating hymns originally used for daily prayers into Mass. Other pivotal figures in shaping early Roman liturgy included Gelasius I (492-496) and later Gregory I, as detailed in subsequent discussions. Although the Church of Constantinople later emerged to challenge it, the Roman Church's position in the western part of the empire remained unshaken. Consequently, from the 4th to 6th centuries, Western church liturgy gradually developed into a relatively standardized system known as the Roman Rite. Latin also replaced Greek as the official language of the Western Church by the mid-4th century. The fixed liturgical practices of the Western Church primarily consist of two components: daily prayers and Mass.

The daily liturgy, similar to the Byzantine Rite, is conducted at fixed times according to prescribed procedures and led by clergy. Its main components include "prayers, psalms, antiphons, alternating hymns, responsive chants, hymns, and readings" [2]. The earliest systematic documentation of standardized daily liturgies appears in chapters 8-19 of the Statutes of Saint Benedict (circa 520 AD), outlining a procedure that roughly follows this pattern:

- (1) Morning Prayer (Matutinus) Between midnight and dawn
- (2) Laudes (Morning Prayer) at sunrise
- (3) First Time (Prima) around 6 a.m
- (4) Third Lesson (Tertia) around 9 a.m
- (5) Mass (Missa) about 10 a.m. (also often held after the sixth or ninth lesson)
- (6) Sixth hour (Sexta) Noon
- (7) Nona (9th Period) is around 3 p.m
- (8) Vespers (around 6 p.m. / sunset)
- (9) Night Class (Completorium) After sunset (or before going to bed)

From a musical perspective, the most significant daily liturgical services in Western churches are Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Evening Prayer at sunset. Particularly noteworthy is the fixed chant "Magnificat anima mea Dominum" (The Magnificat of the Soul) in Evening Prayer, which "is the only part of the liturgy that has long employed polyphonic singing, holding special significance in the history of sacred

music." The Roman Church's more important and distinctive rite is Mass, a ritual evolving from early Christianity. "In early Christian practice, the Holy Communion was performed during each Sunday worship service. Later, the Western Church developed it into the 'Mass' rite," while the Eastern Church retained its original designation (i.e., Holy Body and Blood). As the core of the Roman liturgy, Mass is regarded by believers as "a symbol of Christ's atonement for His followers, serving as a ceremony where Christians reenact and commemorate the Last Supper" [3].

The Roman Church's Masses are categorized into three main forms: the Solemn Mass (*missasolemnis*), the Liturgical Mass (*missalecta*), and the Cantata Mass (*missacantata*). While differing in scale and participant demographics, all these Masses feature extensive recitation or singing elements. Notably, the Cantata Mass "expresses even the priest's words through song, beyond the vocal parts." Additional forms include the Eucharistic Commemoration Mass for the deceased and the Requiem Mass. Like the liturgical calendar of daily prayers, the Mass developed a foundational structure during early Christian times. Over centuries, it underwent continuous expansion across different regions and periods, gradually evolving into its current comprehensive framework.

The name of Mass actually derives from the final liturgical phrase "Ite missa est" (Latin abbreviation meaning "the rite is over, the congregation disperses"). The sections marked with "hymn" in the table above refer to songs chanted by the Latin Church. For instance, the opening "Entrance Hymn" serves as the ceremonial chant accompanying the priest's entry into the church. This hymn consists of alternating stanzas from the Psalms and the "Hymn of Praise" (doxologia), a structure reportedly introduced by Pope St. Celestine I. Other hymns also have their own distinctive features, which will not be detailed here. In practice, "certain parts of the Mass maintain fixed lyrics, while others vary according to the church's liturgical seasons or specific festivals and commemorations" [4]. These are called "ordinary Masses" and "special Masses." The former primarily includes the "Entrance Hymn," "Ascension Hymn," and "Offering Hymn," while the latter mainly features the "Psalter," "Hymn of Glory," "Credo," "Apostles' Creed," "Praise of the Lamb," and "Rogatio Christi." Ultimately, whether in daily prayers or Mass, music remains an indispensable element. Notably, many practices resembling Byzantine rituals can be observed, such as morning prayers, evening prayers, and readings from biblical scriptures.

3. Western Church chant

Due to space limitations, a comprehensive and detailed introduction to Western church music is not feasible. However, to illustrate the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western church music, it is essential to first understand the basics of Western church music. Therefore, the author focuses on its most renowned and widely recognized achievement: Gregorian Chant. The name originates from Saint Gregory I (The Pope, 540–604 AD), though this musical form was not his orig-

inal creation. As previously discussed, early church music first developed in the East, and Western church music initially emulated Eastern traditions. However, "during the mid-5th century under Pope Leo I (440-461 AD), the Western-produced *Antiphonarius* began trial implementation to replace traditional Eastern chants" [5]. Subsequent popes continued this reform, with Gregory I being particularly significant for his monumental contributions to standardizing Roman church rituals and chants. Consequently, later generations collectively referred to Western church chants as Gregorian Chant [6].

Gregory, born into the Roman Senate aristocracy, served as Roman consul in 572 and acted as papal legate to Constantinople from 579 to 585, which gave him profound familiarity with Byzantine liturgy and church music. After being elected Pope in 590, Gregory I expanded the Roman Church's influence through multiple measures. He "not only led religious affairs but also controlled the military and courts, even independently minting currency and constructing the city walls of Rome... effectively becoming a secular ruler of Italy" [7]. Furthermore, he reformed liturgical practices by collecting, selecting, and revising hymns from various churches to compile the **Liber Antiphonarius** (Book of Antiphons). This collection included liturgical chants for daily prayers and Mass, with clearly defined methods and timing for their performance. The richly unified Roman liturgy he established, featuring all hymns arranged according to the Church calendar, was permanently displayed on the altar of St. Peter's Basilica, becoming an eternal classic of Roman ecclesiastical music.

Six centuries after Gregorian I standardized the Gregorian Chant, this sacred music spread widely across Western Europe. Notable figures like Pepin the Short, King of the Franks, and his son Charlemagne both strongly supported Roman Church liturgy and chant. Historical records indicate that "Charlemagne decreed in his 789 Edict that all clergy must study and practice Roman Chant." After centuries of evolution, by the early 9th century, Roman Church chant had become the dominant form of liturgical music in continental Europe.

Similar to Byzantine church hymns, the lyrics of early Gregorian chant were derived from the Bible, as the Church generally held a conservative attitude toward non-Biblical poetry at that time. However, the Western Church later adopted a more open stance, allowing freer development of chant traditions. Beyond the main hymns, various other forms emerged, including antiphonal chants (*sequentia*), tropes (additional verses), liturgical dramas, and *conductus* (ritual movements). Like their Byzantine counterparts, these Western hymns evolved from early Christian hymns, sharing nearly identical characteristics with Eastern hymns. In fact, Western church hymn development preceded Gregory's reforms. The father of Roman church hymns, Saint Ambrose, is credited with "first introducing the sophisticated alternating verse form and hymns from Eastern churches into Western liturgical chants, pioneering the development of Western church music. He is thus hailed

as the 'Father of Western Church Music'." This innovation enabled Western believers to participate in morning and evening worship services. His Latin hymns remain widely known today, with the most celebrated work being "Aeternum Creator of All Things" (Aeternae rerum conditor), as shown in Figure [1].



Figure 1. Saint Ambrose composes the Latin hymn "Aeternae rerum conditor"

Other types of hymns need no further detailed explanation. Notably, the following two categories deserve special mention: the prostration and the addendum. The prostration refers to lengthy melodic fragments repeated in manuscripts, akin to the ritual melodies of Byzantine church music. The addendum denotes "newly composed music within a specific alternation chant of a dedicated Mass," which "serves as a prelude to formal hymns or interwoven between lyrics and musical sections." Crucially, the former traces its origins to "Byzantine liturgy," while the latter appears "to have emerged under Byzantine influence." Subsequently, Western church hymns diverged radically from Byzantine praise poetry. As Chen Xiaolu noted, "Regardless of circumstances, one need not debate..."

The refutation of this claim stems from the fact that the added elements of chant enriched and expanded both the chants themselves and ecclesiastical liturgy. Musically, this represents a horizontal development in melodic progression, which is succeeded by a vertical harmonic development after its momentum subsides. The extensive use of appoggiaturas proves particularly significant, as later developments saw "many appoggiaturas become polyphonic music," and "polyphonic appoggiaturas exerted immeasurable influence on the evolution of Western music" [9]. With the advancement of organum, Western music history entered a new phase characterized by polyphonic development, while Byzantine hymns fell into stagnation. From this point onward, Eastern and Western church music truly embarked on fundamentally divergent developmental paths.

4. Influence of Byzantine music on western church music

As evident from the preceding content, Western church rituals directly borrowed numerous elements from Eastern Christian traditions, with music being no exception. For instance, "the Marian Mass performed on the sixth Sunday of Lent in Ambrose Chant borrowed idiomatic melodies commonly sung by the Byzantine Church during the Feast of John the Baptist." Moreover, "whether in France, Italy, or Spain, many Mass and liturgical music pieces adopted musical motifs derived from the

Byzantine Church" [10]. This demonstrates that the influence of Byzantine music on Western church traditions first manifested through such direct borrowing of musical elements.

In addition, the influence of Byzantine church music on the West is also reflected in the notation and mode system. "Westerners took the Byzantine as their model, not only to have the preliminary notation, but also to have the preliminary mode system."

4.1. The Nieuwenhalschulbuch of the Latin Church

Like the Eastern Church, early Latin churches lacked a true notation system. During the early Christian era, music had not yet developed on a large scale and was primarily passed down orally, so believers paid little attention to notation. However, "as churches were established and developed across regions, the need for notation became evident, especially during the unification and promotion of Roman liturgical practices, where the issue of notation became an urgent priority." Scholars speculate that around the 6th century AD, Western churches used simple symbols attached to lyrics. Similar to Byzantine reading markers, this system likely evolved from stress marks indicating biblical recitation. Compared to the East, however, the symbols used by Western churches at this time were simpler. "The earliest punctuation in Latin Bible chapters was exactly like these—having no musical significance" [11]. Before the 9th century, Latin manuscripts almost never contained musical symbols, making it difficult to determine Byzantine readings...

Does the use of musical notation symbols correlate with Western ecclesiastical traditions? By the mid-9th century, the Western Church had developed a genuine notation system known as Neumatic notation. These notations were "clearly related to (yet distinct from) the ancient Byzantine Neumatic notation." The following image shows a 9th-century musical manuscript discovered in the Saint-Amand region, hence named the Saint-Amand Manuscript, now preserved at the Bibliotheque Nationale de France in Paris. (See figure)

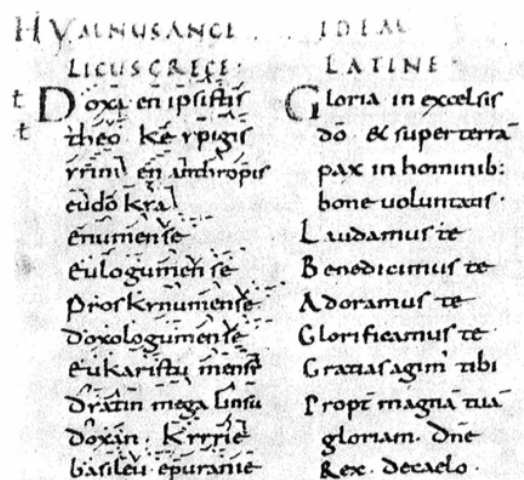


Figure 2. Saint Amand's manuscript

This manuscript is the earliest surviving Latin musical score with musical notation, containing a recorded Hymn to the Glory. The manuscript is divided into two parts: the left section features musical symbols while the right lacks them. Despite their visual differences, both sections actually record the same hymn, though the right part uses Latin script and the left part employs Latinized Greek letters. This manuscript suggests that Latin notation might have originated from Greek notation. Although the image is somewhat blurry, certain symbols resembling Byzantine neumatic notation (see Chapter 3: Byzantine Neumatic Notation Symbols) can still be discerned. Even if not directly derived from Byzantium, these musical symbols must have been influenced by it. The earliest known interpretation of Latin neumatic notation was provided by an 9th-10th century author now referred to as the "Vatican Anonymous." He wrote: "Pitch variations are indicated by accents and meters. From an accent perspective, they are raised notes, lowered notes, and trilled notes; from a meter perspective, brevis (short note) and longa (long note). Dots carry three meanings: short note, lowered note, and appoggiatura... A dot represents a short note (punctum); a long note, a prolongation mark (producta)." The so-called tremus note (tremulus) consists of three degrees, namely two short notes and a sustained note. Another symbol, the conglutated note (conglutata), comprises three accents: two closed notes and a subordinate note.... It can be seen that this passage is not explained with sufficient clarity, and the author has not clearly labeled the specific symbol shapes. We can only infer that certain names likely derive from Greek terminology, but there remains no conclusive evidence regarding the relationship between this neumatic notation and Byzantine neumatic notation.



Figure 3. A 15th-century copy of Gregorian chant using line notation and square notation

However, regardless of whether the notation described by this "Vatican Anonymous" was related to Eastern Byzantine music, the neumatic notation quickly developed its own evolution in the West. By the 10th century, churches across Western Europe had begun using neumatic symbols. "Although various notations differed in penmanship and the development of implied meanings (such as ornamentation), their initial basic forms were identical." Later, the Latin Church's neumatic notation evolved into a completely distinct form from Byzantine neumatic notation. For instance, placing symbols at different pitches above the lyrics (known as diastematic neume), gradually introducing staff lines, and ultimately developing into staff notation. Moreover, the notes of neumatic notation were transformed into square symbols around the 13th century. The Latin Church's neumatic notation has had a significant impact on modern Western music, with "square neumatic symbols still used in Roman Catholic liturgical books today" [12]. The image above shows a 15th-century manuscript of Gregorian chant, demonstrating the use of staff notation and square symbols.

4.2. Western church modes

While the origins of notation systems remain speculative, the influence of Byzantine modal frameworks on Western church music has been widely acknowledged by scholars. "Western composers not only adopted Byzantine modal principles for melodic composition but also integrated modal elements to develop their own system." A modal system consists of seven or more notes arranged in ascending (or descending) intervals around a central note, forming an organic structure that serves as the foundation for melodies.

As previously discussed, the Byzantine modal system is fundamentally simple, based on eight basic modes. Each mode consists of two connected natural four-note sequences: the four primary modes and their corresponding four secondary modes. The primary modes span an octave from the tonic to the dominant, while the secondary modes cover an octave extending either down a fourth or up a fifth below the tonic of their respective primary modes. A schematic diagram of the Byzantine church modal system is presented below:

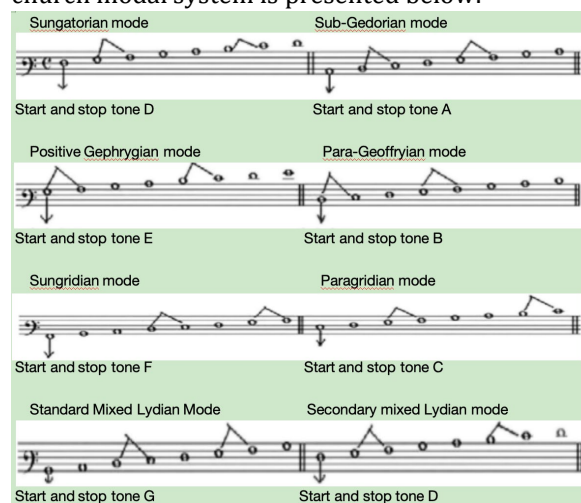


Figure 4. Byzantine Church Modal System

Furthermore, a fundamental principle of Byzantine modes was the systematic composition of melodies, which Western scholars also adopted and even directly borrowed certain formulaic melodies from the Byzantine Church. The exact timeline of how this Byzantine modal system reached the West remains undocumented, though tradition suggests it might have originated during the reign of Gregory I. It is commonly believed that Ambrose established the orthodox mode for Western churches, while Gregory I personally formulated the auxiliary mode. However, given that liturgical hymns were newly introduced from the East during Ambrose's era, and Western church music had not yet solidified by Gregory I's time, this theory appears implausible, and scholars currently lack conclusive evidence. The earliest known reference to Western church modes we see today comes from Alcuin, who "designated these modes using Latinized Greek terms: first (protus), second (deuterus), third (tritus), and a peculiar fourth (tetra-chius)" [13]. Aurelian of Re? (c. 850 CE) provided a more detailed account of early Latin modal systems. According to his account, each named mode in Western churches contained both orthodox and auxiliary forms, with orthodox modes spanning an octave from the opening to closing notes, while auxiliary modes occupied an octave below or above the corresponding orthodox mode's opening and closing notes. The Latin modal system is schematically represented as follows:

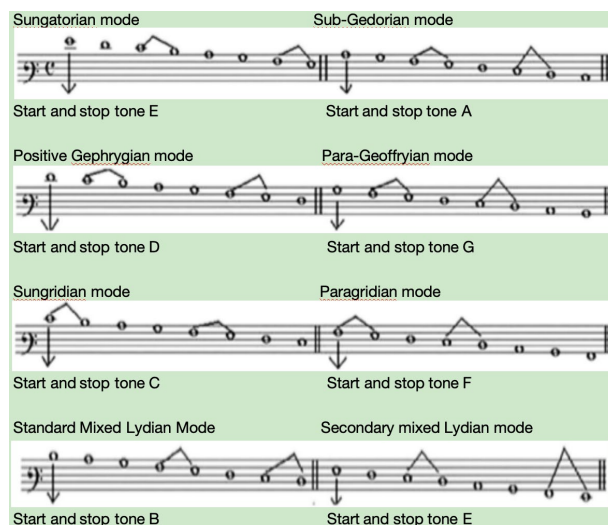


Figure 5. Latin tuning system example

In both modal systems, although the modal scales share identical names, their internal interval structures and modal significance differ fundamentally due to variations in the positions of the opening/closing notes and semitones within the scale, as well as differences in the direction of progression. The Byzantine Church's four primary modes use d, e, f, g as their opening/closing notes, while its four secondary modes employ A, B, c, d respectively. These modal scales follow an ascending order from low to high. Conversely, the Latin modal system uses e, d, c, B for its primary modes and a, g, f, e for secondary modes, with descending order from high to low. Both systems can form eight distinct modes, but the mixed Lydian mode (with secondary modes) shares identical scale structures with the major Dorian mode. Since the former lacks independent significance, the author argues that while theoretically there are eight modes in both systems, only seven exist in practical application.

Later Western modes placed greater emphasis on melodic cadences and pitch, continuously evolving through innovation. Beyond the original opening and closing tones, they introduced secondary cadences (confinalis), also known as dominant or tenor tones. By the 16th century, this system had expanded to twelve modes—adding the Ionian and Aeolian modes along with their secondary modes to the original eight. Examples include:

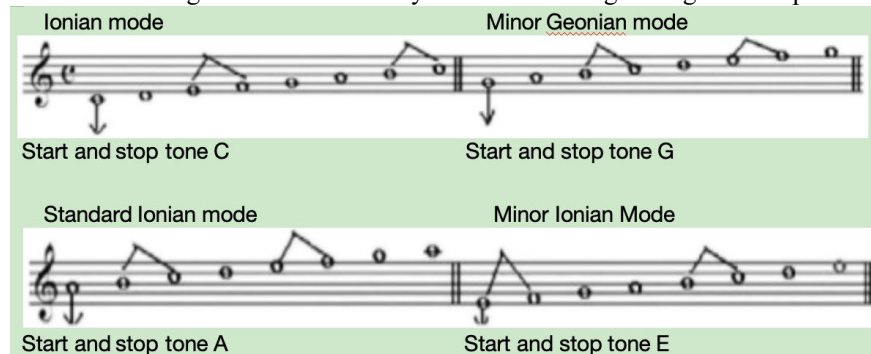


Figure 6. Ionian and Aeolian modes and their secondary modes

While these four modes share structural similarities with certain Latin and Byzan-

tine church modes in their arrangement and internal intervals, they possess distinct characteristics and unique tonal qualities that prevent confusion. Swiss music theorist Glauriannus (1488 – 1565) published his treatise "Thirteen Tones" in 1547, challenging medieval modal theories and incorporating the Ionian and Aeolian modes into the major-minor system. During the Baroque era, the German composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1750 – 1765) extensively utilized and popularized this system in his musical compositions and practices, achieving unprecedented development that continues to this day.

In conclusion, we cannot deny the historical connection between Western musical modes and the Byzantine modal system. While it may sometimes be challenging to determine whether specific elements of Western church music truly originated from Byzantium, the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western church music should not be overlooked. As repeatedly emphasized earlier, these two musical traditions share a common origin and coexisted for an extended period. However, they subsequently "followed divergent developmental paths shaped by distinct socio-political and cultural contexts, continuing to evolve under different principles until they blossomed with their own unique fruits." Exploring their similarities and differences not only deepens our understanding of their respective developmental trajectories but also provides valuable insights into the distinct evolutionary paths of Eastern and Western church music itself.

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