

Orthodox Liturgical Musical Terms

The Orthodox Church certainly has a rich musical tradition and with that tradition comes terms specific to a particular purpose for the various hymns of the Church¹. The most commonly used terms are:

Troparion	Prokeimenon
Apolytikion	Antiphon
Kontakion	Stichera
Theotokion	Megalinarion

Troparion (Greek, Τροπάριο; plural *troparia*) is a general name for hymns in Orthodox Byzantine music. They could be hymns of one or more series of stanzas. The term is believed to have its origin in the Greek word τρόπος of which one of the definitions is to *turn* or *repeat*.

The term troparion can apply to many types of hymns chanted in almost all of the Orthodox services, liturgies and sacraments alike. Examples include

- short refrains chanted between verses of biblical psalms that precede the Antiphons
- commemoration hymn for the saint or feast of the day
- apolytikion sung during Liturgies or at Vespers as the Dismissal Hymn
- canons which are chanted at the Matin (Orthros) services
- Holy Unction, Funerals and Weddings

Troparia are also sometimes used as refrains for chanted psalm verses, though stichera more often serve this function.

Apolytikion (Greek Απολυτίκιο, plural apolytikia) This is a composite word, από + λυω + τικος (to release from or dismiss), and translates to *dismissal hymn*. Apolytikion is a specific type of troparion which summarizes the accomplishments and/or purpose of the saint or the feast being celebrated on a particular day. Also referred to as the “troparion of the feast” or the “troparion of the day.” On Great Feasts it is sung at the end of Vespers and immediately after the Great Doxology.

A model of faith and the image of gentleness, the example of your life has shown you forth to your flock to be a master of temperance. You obtained thus through your humility, gifts from on high, and riches through poverty. Nicholas, our father and priest of priests, intercede with Christ our God that He may save our souls.

Apolytikion of St. Nicholas

Apolytikion are also chanted after the Small Entrance. In Protestant terms this most closely resembles the term Daily Collect.

¹ For more information see

1. Website [ΛΕΞΙΚΟ ΛΕΙΤΟΥΡΓΙΚΗΣ](#)
2. A Concise Glossary of Hymnography Terms by Elena Kolyada, Journal of International Society for Orthodox Church Music, Vol 4 Section 3

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Kontakion (Greek Κοντακίο, *plural* kontakia) The word means “rod” or “pole,” (indicating the rod the scroll was rolled onto) and originally referred to a rather long poetic sermon on a given theme, consisting of some 24 or more stanzas or poetry. Today these stanzas are much reduced and typically only the opening stanzas are chanted. A kontakion tends to have more theological content as opposed to other types of troparia that are simpler in nature.

St. Romanos the great Melodist of the Orthodox Church was known for the long poetic forms of kontakia. The Akathist Hymn to the Mother of God is an example of a kontakion where the more lengthy stanzas have been preserved. One of the more well-known kontakio is *Τη υπερμάχῳ στρατηγῶ... or O Champion General*, which comes out of the Akathist Hymn.

Saintly One, (St. Nicholas) in Myra you proved yourself a priest; for in fulfilling the Gospel of Christ, venerable One, you laid down your life for your people and saved the innocent from death. For this you were sanctified as One learned in divine grace.

Kontakion of St. Nicholas

Theotokion (Greek Θεοτοκίο) As the name implies the Theotokion is a troparion specifically dedicated to the Theotokos. While the hymns contain supplications to the Virgin Mary, they also contain Christological statements about the unity of the two natures of Christ, His birth and His incarnation. For this reason they are sometimes referred to as Θεοτοκία Δογματικά (Dogmatic Theotokia)

O Mary, as the Lord's hallowed vessel, we pray you to raise us up, for we have fallen into the chasm of awful despondency, and transgressions and suffering. For you have indeed become the sinners' salvation, and their help in need and their prevailing protection; and you save your servants.

Theotokion from the Matins of St. Nicholas

Prokeimenon (Greek Προκείμενο, *plural* prokeimena) This is a composite word (προ + κείμενο), that is “before” and “text” or “reading.” A Prokeimenon is a verse(s) from the Psalms and is intoned just prior to a Bible reading, either from the Old Testament, such as in Vespers or before the Epistle such as in the Divine Liturgy. For common services the Prokeimenon is specific for each day of the week and the Sunday Prokeimena alternate for each of the eight tones of the day. There are three (3) types of Prokeimena

1. Liturgical – specific for the Great feasts of the Lord and the Theotokos and common liturgies
2. Vespereal for common services – intoned on weekday and Sunday evening Vesper services
3. Vespereal for Great Feasts

Antiphon

This is also a composite word (αντι + φωνη), that is “opposing” and “voices.” Antiphons are chanted or sung between alternating or “opposing” right-left choirs or chanters. Although this type of chanting is the historical style and is the method common in most monasteries, it is not so often practiced in the parishes.

The most well-known antiphons are those sung during the first part of the Divine Liturgy, *Ταις πρεσβείαις της Θεοτόκου, Σώτερ, σώσον ημάς» (Through the interseccions of the Theotokos, save us)*

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and «Σώσον ημάς, Γιέ Θεού, ο αναστάς εκ νεκρών, ψάλλοντάς Σοι Αλληλούϊα» (*Save us O Son of God, who is risen from the dead, Alleluia*).

Antiphons are also sung in the Matins after the Resurrectional Eulogitaria (Ευλογητάρια) and the Hypakoe (Υπακοή) when the Antiphons of the Anavathmoi are chanted.

Stichera (Greek Στιχηρά) is the name for short troparia sung during the Matin services and most often come out of the Octoechos. Examples would be Resurrectional Stichera towards the end of Matins.

Megalinarion (Greek Μεγαλυναριον) The term means μεγαλύνω or to magnify hence the English word "Magnificat." The use of Megalynaria in Orthodox liturgical practice dates back to the 8th century with St. Cosmas the Melodist who wrote the megalynarion to the Theotokos that is sung in the Divine Liturgy up to today, "*More honorable than the Cherubim...*" Other megalynaria magnify various other Orthodox saints.

