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Chapter 2

THE BYZANTINE MATERIAL SYMPHONY: SOUND, STUFF, AND THINGS

HAGIA SOPHIA, THE great cathedral church of the Byzantine world, once made—that is fundamentally formed—Byzantine or Orthodox Christian subjects (Figure 7). It gathered them in under its great dome or consigned them to side aisles and balconies in order to bring them into being that properly bodied a medieval Orthodox subjecthood. The building created its own unique environment, an environment larger than any human participant. Emperor and patriarch, it has been said, were the only humans fully able to understand the cosmos under the dome, because their importance for the empire ensured them places at key moments in the centre of the building, from where all components of the building coalesced into a perfect capture of God's creation. That visual supremacy can't be quite accurate; no one standing beneath the dome can see and, more importantly, comprehend the relationship among the diverse and rich constituent parts of the building: the main and subsidiary domes, the withdrawing secondary spaces and levels, and the deceptively porous surfaces that seem to be primarily for streaming light, for making the interior a special kind of outside. In this space, every human scale is reduced to, well, human; no one feels outsized in relation to the cosmos there.

In this great church, sound, voice, matter, subjectivity formed around and within the architectural space. It happened with the liturgical performances memorably enacted there and with the movements and attentions of human subjects fundamentally made by the sound, light, and elements, such as water, actively in concert there.

I am purposefully moving around the human-centred descriptions of agency normally assumed to be in play in a building, or anywhere, for that matter. I am trying to expand the subject-making potentials of a Byzantine building to include all entities in this made world, beyond just us and comprising buildings and objects and nature (which is never out of these buildings), the very stuff from which the building is composed.¹

This chapter will try to encourage a listening and looking that is carefully and sympathetically attuned to a more fully animated world than we normally accord our surroundings. In Hagia Sophia, all these elements played out a kind of Orthodox harmony. Liturgical action and singing not only activated the humans performing, but also the building around them, the structure that received, amplified, and returned the sounds as newly animated and independent voices. Matter, too, vibrated to that sound, taking on a voice and subjecthood through the aural intensity. And the glorious objects that were the things in the church, the liturgical furnishings made of valuable substances, also participated in a symphonic intensity of sound and sight that touched all participants. This chapter tries to evoke a fully animated world through all those sensory effects, from building to human, down to the very atomic level of creation—all the levels where God made and found symphony in that world.

¹ See Wharton 2015; Burrus 2018, 165–85.



Figure 8. Byzantine Fresco Chapel, interior view to the east.
The Menil Collection, 1997–2012. Architect: François de Menil.

The difficulty in an argument such as this is that it has to happen, in the first place, far from the object of study and through this verbal demonstration I am performing. In the second place, the historical building is so fundamentally altered through its long existence that capturing any kind of original or authentic experience is impossible. All our descriptions and imaginings have to look or sense away the accretions and revisions of its structure and appearance. The church was built between 532 and 537 by the emperor Justinian (r. 527–65), a miraculous achievement that led to legends of angelic craftsmen needed to bring the project in under time, and even by 558, with the collapse of the dome, a major renovation and reshaping of the nave was necessary. The church became a mosque with the conquest of one of the very last holdouts of the Byzantine world, when Mehmed II the Conqueror (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) captured Constantinople in 1453.

Until 1935, Ayasofya Büyük functioned as a mosque, when it was then converted to secular museum. It straddled both faiths in some ways and it retained elements of both identities while asserting its nondenominational character as a museum in its institutional apparatus of opening hours, tour groups, and constant (it seems) scaffolding.² In other words, searching for the authentic Hagia Sophia is a quixotic mission, and the search must proceed indirectly, through the traces left of the building and its descriptions over the centuries and through museum buildings that more fully embrace the

² The necessary work on the subject is Nelson 2004. On Hagia Sophia in Trebizond, a building that has travelled from church to mosque to museum to mosque, see Peers 2018b, 89. Likewise, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is once again a mosque, having succumbed to political and confessional pressures.



Figure 9. Byzantine Fresco Chapel, interior of chapel. The Menil Collection, 1997–2012.

modernist interpretation and mediation of those historical realities than a monument such as the present-day Hagia Sophia can possibly perform.

To bring to life some of the qualities of Hagia Sophia, let me transport us instead to Texas, to the former Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum, where I will try to evoke, counter-intuitively, authentic experiences of medieval Orthodoxy. The museum was active from 1997 to 2012 (Figure 8), was a marvellous site of encounter with a partial Byzantine fresco cycle. The frescoes had been looted from a small rural chapel outside Lysi, a village on the northern, Turkish side of the island of Cyprus; restored beautifully and then installed in a purpose-made pavilion on the Menil Collection campus in Houston, the frescoes spent fifteen rich years in Texas before being (willingly) repatriated to Cyprus, where they can now be seen in the Archbishop Makarios III Byzantine

Museum in Nicosia, sadly, the still-divided capital of a still-divided country.³

The Menil Chapel was designed by Francois de Menil for the frescoes, and the pavilion strangely echoes Cypriot mountain churches (which Lysi would not qualify as) and speaks in modernist idiom. The result was deeply satisfying and generative. The outward shell is geometric, reserved, nondescriptive, a huddle of cement cubes. (It's still used, now for long-term contemporary art installations.) But it opens slowly, subtly: first, a water reservoir, which is channelled under the entrance atrium, leads to a small, cloistered garden; then slowing in the transitional zone between inside and outside adjusts eye and mind to the space into which visitors emerge in the centre of this little complex; and finally, a space quite unlike any other I've encountered myself: the room, hooded by darkness and ringed by light spill, framed a scale version of the thirteenth-century

3 Carr and Morrocco 1991. See now Whitaker et al. 2020 and Fincham 2015.

chapel from Lysi. Outlined with semiopaque glass panels and stitched by metal rods, the chapel stood there in uncanny isolation (Figure 9). Inside the dome and apse, the original (though carefully restored, it must be said) paintings emerged theatrically to visitors when they were fully drawn into the little structure within that vibrant, diverse space.

The modernity of this setting and, one might say, the theatricality of the frescoes' display make authenticity here appear to be impossible. But I'd like to try to render elements of the Menil space sufficiently "real" that we might even use descriptions of this experience, now sadly possible only in fading memory and weak verbalization, for knowing, somehow, Hagia Sophia. In his book *Sacred Place in Early Medieval Neoplatonism* from 2004, L. Michael Harrington posed this provocative question: "if the medieval builders of the Lysi chapel were to possess the technology needed to build the fresco museum chapel, would they choose to do so?"⁴ His book examines the apparent paradox of material space from a Neoplatonist point of view, how a base world can reflect or describe a more perfect, immaterial realm, and he finds compromise for those very different realms in this world. One of those compromises might be said to be the Byzantine chapel, though he does not say so outright.

Language used by the Menil Collection to position the Byzantine chapel shows alertness to a vaguely Neoplatonist understanding. The chapel was called an "infinity box," but also an "immaterial materiality," the latter phrase used by Neoplatonists, as Harrington points out, to indicate truly immaterial entities that can be shaped as matter is, such as the soul. The chapel's infinity box brought out a different kind of experiential paradox. The confinement of the space was clear; the cement walls delimited the interior, and the light cascading down the walls made evident the shifts in time through the changeable East Texas sky entering those seams on the walls' surface from the outside. And yet the black shell suspended above and inserted into the ground-level enclosure erased the temporal and spatial. The apparently contradictory qualities of time/not time and space/not space distilled into a very condensed construction are the means by which (to use Neoplatonist language) our mortal comprehension can know the immaterial symbolically, to be sure, but through the fully sensual means that are natural to us. That is to say that symbolism can be only partial—human sin makes it impossible for us to know its meanings fully—but that part is all we can really know, and it is here condensed in the church space, the part that is available to us through our bodies. Father Maximos Conostas put it another way, which keeps us in the theological, and not art-historical, language: "Like a detour made necessary by an insurmountable obstacle, paradox marked the way, the mysterious path of ascent, but it also designated the place, for it was the symptom, the sign, the irruption into the world of something beyond the world."⁵ The Byzantine chapel at the Menil spanned worlds effortlessly. Consecrated, it served as a church for the local Orthodox community and as museum for Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike.

Hagia Sophia has not been able to manage any such accommodations. The stakes are too high for any number of communities, primarily conservative Turks who see ethnic glory in the repurposed building *and* many Greeks, who still call Istanbul "e polis," or "the city." But

⁴ Harrington 2004, 1–2.

⁵ Conostas 2014, 21.



Figure 10. Byzantine Fresco Chapel, view into dome. The Menil Collection, 1997–2012.

if political and religious rapprochement have been impossible in Istanbul, the ways in which the building sustains irresolvable paradox are not. Those paradoxes have often been noted: the apparently insubstantial qualities of the curtain walls, which soar far above the floor level; the dome, with its window piercings that seem to allow the apex of the building to float; the seemingly immeasurable space contained by walls and domes, so excessive to any one person's ability to see at any one time; and the textures, colours, and diversity of materials covering walls, floors, and ceilings that also manifest natural phenomena in the outer world. All of this is on a scale impossible at the Menil, and anywhere else, for that matter; and the expansive qualities of these paradoxes have always been the goal of writers attempting to capture the building.

In the past, writers have struggled with the limitations of language and the impediments of literary genres. Now we are impeded by the building we experience, since the building we encounter is only very vaguely like the medieval iteration of that monument. The museum identity preserves the building, but it also slows the pulse to well below normal rest, let alone the quickened rate of its former life. As Martina Bagnoli has written about museum senses, "Two hundred years later, museums' displays are still made for 'appetiteless' looking; they are designed to foster an engagement with art that is intended to take the body out of the equation."⁶ That may seem a contradictory statement when used to argue that the Menil chapel provided an authentic experience, but the confluence of its compelling qualities produced an extraordinary experience in ways a unique Hagia Sophia can also provide, even if the cathedral-mosque-museum is not transparent to its medieval selves any longer.

But in their original forms, however we now come to imagine or experience them, those two churches made those who came into their realms. Those buildings each formed subjects, not by mirroring or reflecting human experience, but by fundamentally determining them through their assertion of agency and autonomy. Perhaps an effective way into how these spaces formed subjects is through the figural decoration in the interior of some of these domed churches—though not Hagia Sophia, which did have figures of Christ circulating throughout the building, if not in the dome itself. In the modest chapel from Lysi, however, that sense of subject-creation emerged forcefully and clearly (Figure 10).

⁶ Bagnoli 2016, 14.

The intensity and strength of the figure of Christ in the dome of the Cypriot chapel are expressive miracles of a kind, and they were felt as such in Middle Ages, as texts attest.⁷ The particular moment depicted here is difficult to pinpoint: Christ stares fixedly out of the canopy of heaven, with one hand clutching a book and the other raised in a gesture of address; the angels, along with John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary, indicate the scene of the *Deesis*, the moment of interventions on behalf of those to be judged before the Judge of All; and the empty seat, the *hetoimasia*, or things made ready, awaits the arrival of the Judge (the court having risen, it needs only the great decider to appear). In other words, a dynamic and powerful scene is readied for those who came into the tiny rural chapel or those who made the journey across a parking lot, through the decompression chambers, and into the centre of the infinity box in Houston. (The current installation of the frescoes in Nicosia has robbed the dome of nearly all its majestic intensity.)

How did such figures take charge of and make medieval orthodox Christians? The visual and spatial control effected by those figures is still evident to us, but those Christians had what we might call more transitive expectations from their sacred ritual environments than most of us now do. That's to say, the environment does not "reflect" those expectations.⁸ It determines them and in doing so forms those Christians. These Pantocrator figures have intense fixity of expression. The Lysi Christ doesn't blink; he is forever about to enter the world, collapse the threshold between the worlds of the divine and created. Leo VI (r. 886–912) wrote that you might think you were "beholding not a work of art, but the Overseer and Governor of the universe Himself who appeared in human form, as if He had just ceased preaching and stilled His lips."⁹ Sources tell us of the Pantocrator Rorschach test: Nicholas Mesarites in the twelfth century famously stated that Christ makes himself benign in appearance to those with clean consciences and fearsome to those with stained souls.¹⁰ Meanwhile, some comparable Cypriot programs contain inscriptions that make the menace of the Christ epiphany unmistakable: fear, tremble, make yourself a more perfect Christian, or this is the terrible visage and voice you will witness at the end of time.

A particular story from a tenth-century hagiography demonstrates the full transitive state of these frescoes. In this story, a man falls into the depths of despair over his chances of salvation, and while praying over a long period of time in a fully decorated church, the image of Christ in the dome finally addresses him and, in the end, absolves him.¹¹ Painted inscriptions give guidance, but the face is sufficient: it always returns your gaze, and moreover, it sustains that gaze, because it is always watching when your gaze is elsewhere. As Father Conostas again points out, the gaze is not a distant, disembodied act, outside of self and senses; as with Zacchaeus spied in the sycamore tree, God's gaze

7 See Binning 2018.

8 Pace Binning.

9 Akakios 1868, 245; Mango 1986, 202–3.

10 Angold 2017, 94.

11 Wortley 1987, 92–95; Wortley 1996, 101–2.

captures all from that place looking over the rim of heaven, and it pulls each person in, just as Zacchaeus was told to offer his hospitality (Luke 19: 1–11).¹²

Here, a subject is made among those who might have assumed they were in possession of the controlling gaze, but these painted spaces have ways of undermining that assumption of self-control and self-determination. Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662) increased the intensity of selves imbricated in these encounters when he wrote that it was “like a crystal-clear mirror capturing completely the whole shape of God the Word who is looking at himself in me.”¹³

That visual mirroring was intensely formative in a neck-bending way, in the manner of an infinity mirror, the constant, perpetual work of God’s likeness in humans. In addition, the deep faceting of the experience with the aural complicated subjects’ integrity in these vibrant and complicating spaces. The voices read and acknowledged through inscriptions in these church interiors, as well as the reports of the paintings talking and talking back, reveals some of the verbal—and not just visual—charges there. I would like to try to describe some of the ramifications of this visual and aural mixture in a Byzantine interior. Perhaps, just as the Menil chapel showed how an infinity box worked and made meaning in a Byzantine mode,¹⁴ that infinity’s sonorous reach and hold on its human subjects can also be described.¹⁵

The voices of God, prophets, and living persons have, from an early point in Christian examination of self, been intertwined. The voices of the Psalms are the best example. In the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria famously talked about the voice of Christ speaking through David speaking through Christians praying the Psalms, to the degree that each voice is folded into the other, like the infinity mirror with sound. We could put it this way, taking a passage from Dominic Pettman’s recent book, *Sonic Intimacy*: “At some level, thanks to our strong theological heritage, we all suspect that we are puppets and other unseen forces are making us speak. Existence is essentially ventriloquial. This is what the voice is telling us.”¹⁶ Another way might be to assert the sonic imbrication of the Psalms, for example, as opening selfhood to divine and historical voices speaking with and in our own voices.

However, I also want to try, briefly, to argue for the voices that extend beyond the human and divine maker. Voice is not the sole possession of humans, nor also of other creatures, but also the possession of elements and matter. I would like to make a short plea for the voices that all matter can use to enter into a harmonious chorus

12 Conostas 2014, 31.

13 *Patrologiae Graecae* 91, 1137B; trans. in Conostas 2014, 32.

14 From “The Library of Babel,” in Borges 1998, 112: “In the vestibule there is a mirror, which faithfully duplicates appearances. Men often infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite—if it were, what need would there be for that illusory replication? I prefer to dream that burnished surfaces are a figuration and promise of the infinite.”

15 The chapel museum has hosted a series of musical events, such as a marimba-cello concert in March 2012, along with a choral concert in the lead-up to the frescoes’ departure, and a saxophone performance in March 2018.

16 Pettman 2017, 91.

with the maker, even in these medieval buildings (or maybe especially) such as Hagia Sophia. Some indigenous cosmologies make this claim, such as the testimony in Patricio Guzmán's documentary *The Pearl Button* (2015), which deals with Chilean persecution of First Nations peoples and political activists under Pinochet: "They say that water has memory. I believe it also has a voice. If we were to get very close to it, we'd be able to hear the voices of each of the Indians and the disappeared."¹⁷

We need to extend the range of thought and voice and accept the many subjects at work in an activated building such as Hagia Sophia or the Menil chapel—accept that persons are throughout, not just humans. As Eduardo Kohn wrote, the world is also enchanted in an ecology of selves, a place of indistinction, as he puts it.¹⁸ Sound is part of the web of individuals, and it forces representation, that is self-making, among all who hear there.

I can give a couple of examples that might show better how sound makes subject in Byzantine telling and understanding. The first comes from classical legend, from the life of the great warrior Achilles. Not in Homer's account, but in other classical authors and very popular, the story relates in its basic terms an attempt by Achilles's mother, Thetis, to preserve the life of her son by hiding him in disguise as a woman at the court of Lycomedes on the island of Skyros. The Greeks cannot win the Trojan War without the great warrior, so Odysseus is sent to retrieve him. The wily one flushes Achilles out with a sonic reflex. He has the trumpet sounded, an alarm for entry into battle, and Achilles answers his *true* nature without thought, sheds his drag, and seizes a weapon. Here is one way sound returns us to our selves, through an involuntary submission to sonic imperatives. The trumpet tells Achilles who he is, in other words, and the glorious warrior cannot help but obey.

The trope of the musical instrument possessing some kind of soul and personhood goes deep into antiquity, too, and it also has implications for the Christian performance of God-bound selves. The singing of the Psalms already mentioned, for example, engages instruments beyond the human (and others') voices, namely, the harp, which is sometimes conflated with the human performer, in the sense of God playing the singer like a harp. That confusion of agency—the human playing the instrument is also the instrument played by God, and so on—is a fundamental means by which human and other subjects are formed in Christian thought and performance.

The reed and flute are related to this extension of subjectivity. God can be the player, and the Christian the reed pipe or flute, but the world outside God and human creation is also in concert. Jacob of Serug (451–521), for example, not only claims a role as God's flute, filled with melody through inspiration (a purposeful pun) of the Lord, but he also makes a case for reeds in the wild creating their own musical praise in concert with the wind.¹⁹

Moreover, water was naturally voice-full thoughtful in the Byzantine world: the traveller known as the Bordeaux Pilgrim (writing about a journey in 333–34) mentioned, for example, that the pool at Siloam observed the Sabbath and ceased flowing on this

¹⁷ Guzmán 2015, 1:17.

¹⁸ Kohn 2013, 16.

¹⁹ See Haines-Eitzen 2017, 118.

day, and Egeria, the Spanish pilgrim of the fourth century, likewise described the reactive quality of the fountain that flowed at the site of Job's dunghill when it changed its nature to issuing blood, pus, and gall.²⁰ Hagia Sophia had potent waters that healed and sang, what Eunice Dauterman Maguire calls "liquid utterances,"²¹ because the fountain in the forecourt babbled and burbled its pure streams, according to the ekphrasis of Paul the Silentiary in the mid-sixth century.²² The sound and its kinetic energy (it "leapt into the air") lent force to its nature as healing agent, too. The water was known to "drive away all suffering" when drawn in "the month of the golden vestments" and at the "mystic feast" of Epiphany, which occurs in January, but also when the consuls came to office in their sumptuous robes. There is a long tradition of the healing and apotropaic qualities of water, and the watery basis of medicine and protection was well established in the church. Moreover, a liquid understanding of the entire building was frequently expressed: according to Paul, the marble on the floors of the church represented water, and some lanes in the flooring were treated like rivers of paradise.²³

That description is more than metaphor: stone was formed by compressing earth and water, according to ancient and Byzantine geology, and marble reveals its aqueous origins in its veining, polish, and glitter, very similar to gold, which likewise is a watery substance. Not only was gold most frequently found in rivers and streams and therefore considered to be primarily a water-born metal, but it also revealed its watery nature in its self-destabilizing glow and halation, when light makes gold shine and blur. In the interior of the church, covered with marble and gold (and little or no figuration), the abstract fields of floor, walls, arches, and dome lived a liquid identity in its material demonstrations of indistinctions.

The acoustic qualities of the paradoxically watery composition of the interior of Hagia Sophia have been studied recently by Bissera Pentcheva and colleagues. Those scholars have attempted to measure and replicate sound performance, and they describe the power of melody and assonance in the building, the ways it built its sonic power during its frequent liturgical celebrations. The building both revealed its acoustic dynamism in moments of clarity, for example, when the patriarch rose onto the ambo in the middle of the nave to deliver his sermon—though even then, the ambient distractions were no small thing—and moments of sonic confusion, which seem more common in analysis, when words became lost in the murk of the resounding noise of the music, perhaps even resembling thunder at times, according to Agathias, another sixth-century

20 On the Bordeaux Pilgrim, see Geyer et al. 1965, 16 (592); Wilkinson 2002, 30; and on Egeria, see Geyer et al. 1965, 57 (*in lacuna post* 16.4); Wilkinson 2002, 129n8; Alturo 2005; De Bruyne 1909.

21 Dauterman Maguire 2016, 183.

22 Mango 1986, 85. See also van Opstall 2018. And on the apotropaic qualities of water, see Maguire 2019, 207.

23 Onians 1980, 9, on Paul the Silentiary, *Narratio de S. Sophia*, 26 (Preger 1901–07/1975: 1:102–4; Mango 1986, 101), "The significance of this passage is considerable. By implying that Justinian himself saw the marble as representing water and stating that particular strips of marble were treated as representing the rivers of paradise in early rituals it takes our texts out of the realm of mere rhetorical inflation into that of real contemporary experience."

writer on the building.²⁴ That oceanic sound must have had deeply affective power for all the human participants as they swam in the noise of that vast space.²⁵ That noise was both a sign of well-being for the Christian empire and created unity and relation among all the humans trembled by those reverberating sounds.

Byzantines are often viewed as a strongly scopophilic culture, with their rich visual traditions and extensive speculations on image theory, but sound provided a complementary affective presence in ritual performances, such as the singing of Psalms. The resonance of the Psalms, an essential part of every liturgy, troubled the smooth surface of discrete subjectivity, but the sound amplified and noised by the interior of the great cathedral had a more immediate affective impact on humans in that space. That impact might be close to what Dominic Pettman calls an “aural punctum,” where the “unexpected piercing by sound” leaves a deeply affective wound or trace, a stirring, in listeners who are also in this case performers.²⁶ The Psalms return to the humans singing, both confused and intensified. Jean-Luc Nancy has written succinctly about this effect: “To sound is to vibrate in itself or by itself: it is not only, for the sonorous body, to emit a sound, but it is also to stretch out, to carry itself and be resolved into vibrations that both return to itself and place it outside itself.”²⁷ Here, sound enlarges and ramifies, pulling each participant into the same voice, a voice that transcends temporal limitations and subject positions.

In this chapter, I’ve attempted to hint at the symphonic effects of voices gathered together in particular Byzantine buildings, voices that included human and divine, building and representation, instrument and Psalm. Those multiple subjects also resonated in space and among themselves. The mingling of subjects, it seems to me, is the process of divinizing, of the thoroughgoing entry of God into every part of creation. It also seems to me that the Menil Chapel was also a Byzantine space, able to speak Byzantine subject formation to modern people, open, despite ourselves, as we’ve always been, to the face and voice, the light and sound, of that divine power emanating from the dome.

24 Frendo 1975, 143 [5.3–4]: “He also produced the effect of thunder and lightning in his room, using a slightly concave disk with a reflective surface by means of which he trapped the sun’s rays and then turned the disk round and suddenly shot a powerful beam of light into the room, so powerful in fact that it dazzled everyone it came into contact with. At the same time, he contrived to produce the deep, booming sound by the percussion of resonant objects and achieve the effect of loud and terrifying peals of thunder.” See Papalexandrou 2017, 72.

25 See Schwartz 2011, 28, “Just as noise is what we make of certain sounds, the meanings we assign to noise are no less consequential than the meanings we assign to other sounds. Noise may be unwanted or incomprehensible sounds; it is never insignificant sound.”

26 Pettman 2017, 44–48.

27 Nancy 2002, 8.