The Mnemonic Verses
A Quick and Easy Guide to the Byzantine Tones

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These songs (they certainly are not hymns!) were written to help beginning chanters remember the structural and cadential notes for the "syntoma" or "quick" hymns of each mode (hymns that are chanted syllabically, i.e., for the most part, one note per syllable).** In essence, the tunes were meant to serve as pedagogical apichimata (introductions) to help the students become more adept at getting into a given tone when (as is so often the case in this country) a neophyte is forced by "economia" to chant "on the fly". Of course, unlike a true apichima, these ditties are not to be sung aloud in a liturgical setting. The melodies have been composed so that each note name (PA, VOU, GA…) is sung on its corresponding pitch using the transcription of C=NI.

My class at the Antiochian Archdiocese Sacred Music Institute 2007 inspired me to write this. It is solely for this reason that I have used the word "tone" instead of "mode" in the lyrics and the Russian numbering instead of the Byzantine, since this is the practice of that jurisdiction (there is also a mode version).

Tone 1/Mode 1 (diatonic) - all "quick" hymns

Ne. Tone One rises first to THI and it finishes on PA.

Tone 2/Mode 2 (soft chromatic) - apolytikia and kathismata hymns. "Slow" kekragaria (Lord, I Call) and pasapnoaria (Let Everything That Breathes) are also chanted in the soft chromatic tuning.

The half flat on KE (A) reflects the microtonal tuning of the soft chromatic system. In the Kazan settings it is written/sung mostly as a full flat but sometimes as a full natural and in the majority of Greek harmonized hymns the trend is the reverse. These comments apply to all hymns that are chanted in the soft chromatic tuning (see Tone 4 and Tone 6).

Ne. This is Tone Two. To ZO* it can ascend and it can rest on VOU but it ends on THI.

*ZO is the highest structural and, albeit rarely, cadential point but NI is the often the highest melodic note.

**The "slow" (averaging 2-4 notes per syllable) and "quick" (syllabic) hymns often share the same scale and have some (or all) structural pitches in common. The melodic formulae usage differs. This guide does not illustrate the difference, and the formulae and structural pitches used to compose these tunes represent only the "quick" style.
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Tone 2/Mode 2 (hard chromatic) - antiphona*, and "quick" kanons*, sticheraric hymns and doxologies*.
Tone 6/Mode 2  Plagal -"slow" kekragaria (Lord, I Call) and pasapnoaria (Let Everything That Breathes) also use this tuning (with different formulae), as is the case for Tone 2 "slow" kanons*.

Ne. PA and THI are cadence notes in hard chromatic.

This is true for both Tone Two and Tone Six.

Tone 3/Mode 3 (enharmonic) - all "quick" hymns

Ne. Tone Three avoids its home note. It likes to pause on KE

and then most often goes to PA. These tend to alternate until the final cadence on GA.

Tone 4/Mode 4 (diatonic) - This tuning is used for all hymns except apolytikia and kathismata.

Ne. Most Tone Four hymns are diatonic so observe just how ZO shifts. This tone can cadence on THI

and more often on PA but it always ends on VOU.
Tone 4/Mode 4 (soft chromatic) - apolytikia and some kathismata (the other kathismata are special melodies in hard chromatic). See Tone 2 regarding use of the microtonal a-flats.

This is soft chromatic so ZO is never flat. The basis is THI but the final cadence is on VOU.**

Tone 5/Mode 1 Plagal (diatonic) - all "quick" heirmologic and sticheraric hymns

The note A is actually PA transposed to the level of KE which accounts for the stable ZO (=B-natural), since this note is VOU in "disguise", and the raised GA/F#, since this is actually a low ZO. (The "slow" heirmologic hymns are also based on KE. The "slow" sticheraric and papadika hymns are based on PA.)

Tone 6/Mode 2 Plagal (soft chromatic) - apolytikia, kathismata, anavathmoi, kanons and the following "quick" versions of hymns: kekragaria (Lord I Call), aposticha and pasapnoaria (Let Everything that Breathes). The "slow" versions are use the hard chromatic tuning from PA--see the scale of Tone 2.

**However, the ornamental terminal cadence for a hymn group ends on THI.

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Tone 7/Varys Mode (enharmonic)* - all "quick" hymns

There is also Varys diatonic from ZO but that is in less common use for "quick" hymns.

Tone 8/Mode 4 Plagal from GA (diatonic, but as if NI were transposed to GA, thus the ZO is always flat) - apolytikia, some kathismata, kanons

Tone 8/Mode 4 Plagal from NI (diatonic) - some kathismata, anavathmoi and the "quick" and "slow" versions of hymns: kekragaria (Lord I Call), aposticha and pasapnoaria (Let Everything that Breathes).

Primary Ison note

Ne. Varys is the Seventh Tone. Sometimes it descends to PA.

Its stopping point on THI is a step away from GA.

Some Tone Eight hymns are based on GA.

The ZO is always flat; internal cadences can also be on THI and the hymn will end on GA.

Tone 8/Mode 4 Plagal from NI (diatonic) - some kathismata, anavathmoi and the "quick" and "slow" versions of hymns: kekragaria (Lord I Call), aposticha and pasapnoaria (Let Everything that Breathes).

Ne. NI is the basis of most Tone Eight melodies.

These also cadence on THI and less frequently on VOU, but they always end on NI.