

Kyanaya: The Impromptu Mode of Melody Making in Syriac

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One of the Syriac musical repertory's unique features is the mode of making melodies referred to as *kyānāyā*, which means "natural." *Kyānāyā* is not a fixed melody as in *Rēš Qālā*, but one that comes naturally to a singer. It is a way of applying musical pitches in articulating mostly prose texts. In a way, the singer composes/gives shape to the melody while singing. The goal of the singer is to express the sound and meaning of the text correctly. The three most common types of texts that call for *kyānāyā* are scripture readings, prayers (*slōtā*) that are in prose,^[i] and any verse that does not follow the conventional metrical structures in Syriac poetry.

In the *kyānāyā* mode of melody making, the singer must be aware only of three things: the relative length of the syllables, the semantic units, and the cadences to indicate phrase endings.

Kyānāyā serves the purpose of chanting the entire liturgy, moving smoothly from prose texts to poetic texts, making the entire service sound like a single cantata. The best example is the Solemn Qurbana of the Syro Malabar Church from the Syriac era. Here, one can hear a smooth and seamless transition from prose texts to poetic texts.^[ii]

Musically, the process is open-ended. The melody varies from individual to individual, performance to performance, and from context to context. It could be simple or elaborate, straight or ornamented, depending on the singers' mood, musical capability, and availability of time. Individual variations are inevitable. The primary concern is not melody or rhythm but a solemn and proper articulation of the text's meaning. Albeit individual freedom in the performance practice of *kyānāyā*, the melody stays within a limited range, from a third to a perfect fifth, often in the middle register. We rarely hear a performance that employs the full range of an octave. More often than not, the third degree in the scale is minor. The approach to the final note may be either from above or below. Thus the practice of *kyānāyā* provides the singers with the freedom to embellish the liturgy by employing their musical talent outside the context of established melodies.

According to Fr. Mathew Uppani, who translated the Bible from the Syriac *Psita* version to Malayalam, the melody of the solemn form of the Lord's Prayer in the *Rāzā* (the most solemn form of Qurbana in the Syro Malabar Church; see Aramaic Project-70D) and the reading of the Epistle.^[iii]

The melody in *kyānāyā* is not bound by rhythmic periodization. The rhythm is free-flowing. The singer determines the caesura and cadences at the end of a sentence or semantic unit. Sometimes, the *kyānāyā* rendering of a particular prayer by an accomplished

musician may become popular enough for other singers to emulate. Even in that case, an individual singer has the freedom to lengthen or shorten a syllable or add neumes to mark boundaries of semantic units. We have not come across a performance that employs melisma.

Similar to other Syriac chants, the kyānāyā melodies existed in oral transmission. The use of any notation is not widespread. There have been only limited attempts to notate individual performances of kyānāyā melodies for propagation, learning, or standardization. Heinrich Husmann made a staff notation of three slotha-s from the evening prayer in his *Die Melodien des Chaldaischen Breviers Commune* (Husmann 1967: 109,111, and 116). However, there is no evidence of using this notation to learn by anyone in the Syro Malabar Church.

In the early 1960s, the Syro Malabar Church translated the Syriac liturgy into Malayalam. Fr. Abel made the first edition of the Hours in three volumes. In them, Fr. Abel used nineteen model melodies from the Syriac repertory. In a letter dated 15 December 1997, Fr. Abel made a hint to the rationale for his selection of the model melodies; [\[iv\]](#) he chose melodies that have relatively more rhythmic flow and more feasible for community singing. There is an element of unpredictability in articulating the text in the kyānāyā mode of melody making. For that reason, kyānāyā may not be suitable for community singing. That may be why Fr. Abel ignored it in the Malayalam version of Qurbana or the Hours. Fortunately, the Syro Malabar Church did not lose the kyānāyā tradition yet. There are a few young priests who have mastered the music of Solemn Qurbana in Syriac and preserve the slōṭā tradition. Our library contains several videos and audio recordings of those priests.

Reference:

Husmann, Heinrich. 1967. Die Melodien des Chaldaischen Breviers Commune. Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum. Pp. 109,111, and 116.

See also Res Qala

[\[i\]](#) See Aramaic Project-70T: <https://youtu.be/cZrYWH5X8iM> and Aramaic Project - 165-38 <https://youtu.be/Wf8ewp24Pfg>

[\[ii\]](#) See one example in Aramaic Project-157 <https://youtu.be/n4hov04vDHM>).

[\[iii\]](#) See examples at <https://youtu.be/BTZASAepV1c>; https://youtu.be/t_LIMWIZ6v0).

[\[iv\]](#) See <http://www.thecmsindia.org/researches/resources-for-researchers/fr-abel-s-letter-to-fr-joseph-palackal-on-syriac-chants>.