

Liturgical Music

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In the Orthodox Faith, our singing in church is meant to be an Icon of worship. We sing our prayers. Our prayers are sung. And hardly ever do we hear prayers simply said. The Orthodox Church's tradition is to offer up prayers to God in uttered heightened speech called sacred singing. It is important to understand that liturgical music is not something added to prayer. Rather, it is the way we pray in church when we assemble together as God's People.

This tradition of sung worship is fundamentally Biblical. For both the people of the Old Testament as well as the New, worship means first to gather as a group, and then to sing praise with one mouth and one heart. As a matter of fact, more than two-thirds of the Bible is phrased in such a way that it is obviously meant to be sung. Especially the Book of Psalms the essential prayer-book of the Church in essence, is a song-book. Orthodox hymnody developed from the singing of Psalms and Scriptural Odes, first as simple responses and refrains, later developing into Troparia, Kontakia and strophic hymns on these Biblical verses.

The word antiphon in our prayer-books describes how the people originally divided themselves into two parts and sang the Psalm verses back and forth, from one side to the other. Our liturgical texts show that the assembly responds in a type of song to whatever is chanted by the Bishop, Priest, Deacon, or Cantor. St. Justin the Philosopher, writing in 150 A.D., calls special attention to the way the people sing the Amen as their assent to the great Eucharist Prayer. St. Augustine reflects on the Orthodox tradition of the 4th Century, when he remarks: ...truly, is there a time when the faithful assembled are not singing? Truly, I see nothing better, nothing more useful or more holy that they could do.

We can see from the earliest tradition that choirs developed later. Choirs, however, were never meant to completely replace the voice of the people in worship. Not only must the chants and music help the people make the prayer their own, but, clearly, somewhere in every Orthodox Divine Service, the people themselves must take some part in singing.

At first the Church melodies were probably very simple, resembling a rhythmic song-speech, following the natural inflections and nuances of word-groupings. From Hebrew and Hellenic beginnings, the melodic kernels, patterns and formulae have been expanded, enriched and developed according to local practices in specific cultures that became Orthodox. Each Orthodox nationality has adapted the verbo-melodic models to the natural rhythmic and melodic sounds of their own unique language and culture.

Yet, in this process of absorbing and making one's own a liturgical music, the inculturation does not make the sacred singing of one Orthodox culture unrecognizable to another. There are in all Orthodox sacred singing those elements that are ancient, universal and constant. These familiar elements are found particularly in what we call canonical chant.

Russian Orthodox church music has its particularly unique development. Byzantine music remains basically monophonic (single-line unison singing). But part-singing appeared in Lvov and began to spread in Southern Russia and the Ukraine as early as the 15th Century. From this we can trace early experiments with harmonization, and in the 17th Century the influence of the Kievan schools of harmony on Moscow. Choirs of sorts began to be schooled in the Imperial Court, although they sang in small groups and were made up of male singers only.

It was Peter the Great in the 18th Century who gave rise to the Imperial Chapel Choir. The movement to introduce Western European harmonization and the chorale style spread very quickly, initiating the new period of concert-like choir singing. Bortniansky, under the patronage of Catherine the Great, still remains the best example of the composer-conductors and their church choirs of the choral tradition.

By the beginning of the 20th Century there was already a great interest among Church musicians to return to the traditional roots of the canonical chant systems. Kastalsky particularly stands out among them. While choral compositions and choir singing remain popular to this day, among serious students of Church music more and more is sacred singing looked upon as a discipline of liturgical theology rather than simply as a musical art.

This is particularly so in America, as we accept the responsibility for an Orthodox inculturation of a new land, a new language and a new people. As we attempt to find our own style in response to new needs and situations (especially those of the small missions), above all we seek to be anchored to the great Tradition.

This great Tradition, however, insists neither on a rigid formalism nor a return to a hypothetically more primitive practice. There is room in Orthodox culture for both choir singing and congregational participation, for ancient chants and familiar harmonized works, as well as perhaps for new adaptations based on the timbre of the English language, developed from the local materials of our own particular time and place. All of this is possible so long as none of it contradicts our ecclesial identity as the Orthodox Church.

Indeed, what must be understood is the function of sacred singing in Orthodox worship. What is singing in Church supposed to do? A sacred song is not unlike a holy Icon; except that the holy Icon is seen and the sacred song is heard, the functions are the same. This painting of words and sounds has as its purpose the bringing of the community into the presence and the awareness of sacred mystery.

Bringing us together is no small part of sacred music's function. Just as receiving Holy Communion together is a sacred sign that all who partake become one body in Christ, so singing must be the expression of this same unity of hearts and minds, drawing us harmoniously together into one voice. For ultimately, it is Christ Who is our Song.

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