

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – October 17, 2006

Moderator: *Dr. Vladimir Morosan*

Chat room topic: **Setting Texts to Music**

Dr. Vladimir Morosan

It's a pleasure to be here tonight. In order to make my initial point about the several "generations" of textual adaptation into English, I thought we would begin with something very basic -- litany responses.

The first example illustrates these three generations or stages that we have seen over the past half-a-century or so that the Church in America has been singing in English. In Example #1, the differences are apparent between Stage 2 and Stage 3, and how this brings about a very different result in that constantly repeated prayer "Lord, have mercy."

Question:

I do not understand the stages...

Answer:

If we were walking behind Christ like the 10 lepers in the Gospel, and calling after Him, we'd be saying: "LORD_____, have mercy!", "LORD_____, have mercy!" as in the 3rd-generation setting, not as in the 2nd generation setting that we're so used to.

In examples 2a and 2b we have actual litany settings that incorporate this principle. The same adjustment occurs in "Grant it, O Lord." When we petition someone to give us something, we say "GIVE me this" or "GRANT me this", not the other way around, emphasizing "IT". And of course some litany settings already do this.

Here perhaps the most difficult or controversial adjustment I'm proposing is "And with YOUR spirit." When the priest says, "Peace be with you all," he is not saying "Peace be with your bodies" (as opposed to spirit). But he's wishing peace to OUR spirits, and we say in return "And with YOUR spirit." A very slight change in vocal inflection results in a rather important difference in meaning.

Question:

So Grant and Lord are emphasized?

Answer:

Exactly!

Comment:

Well, I'm certainly no theologian, but when he says peace be to you all, I still want to respond with the emphasis on SPIRIT rather than YOUR.

Response:

Would it be different if he said "Peace be with you" and we replied "And also with you"?

Reply:

Yes, it would be different.

Response:

How so? Isn't that what we're saying here?

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Reply:

Yes it is what we are saying here, but normal English usage makes your example sound like the accent is on the wrong syl-LA-ble, if you get what I mean.

Response:

My point is why the emphasis on “spirit”? As opposed to what? The musical setting...

Reply:

Perhaps in this case it would be better to retranslate for more clarity.

Response:

And Ex., 2b achieves that. We’re talking here about a “feminine” ending which we’ll get to later tonight (or in another session, perhaps).

Anyway, my suggestion is to consider this and think of the liturgical exchange that’s taking place. But for now perhaps we can move on to example 3. In examples 3 and 4 we see other applications of how mechanical application of adapting from another language, in this case, Church Slavonic, can get us in trouble. The Slavonic word for “Magnify” is “Velichay” with emphasis on the last syllable. So many of our settings have taken this musical pattern and applied it to the word “Magnify” emphasizing the last syllable, that there’s probably a generation of English-speaking Orthodox who think the word is “Mag-ni-FY”, when, in fact, it’s MAG-ni-fy.

Are there any other examples you can think of?

Comment:

I think people accent the word “rejoice” incorrectly.

Response:

Not only that, they mispronounce it: It’s not Ree-joice, but Rih-JOICE. In Example 3c the change of emphasis is achieved.

Question:

Quick question about example C - why the melodic change? My favorite examples are in Obikhod prokeimena: “Let Thy mercy be upon us AS we have set our hope on Thee.”

Dr. Morosan:

We may ask, how is emphasis achieved within a musical phrase? How DO we achieve emphasis (right or wrong) in a musical phrase?

Question:

I understand what you’re saying about “Magnify,” but it loses something beautiful melodically in example C. Perhaps if we kept the melody as in example A, but translated it, O my soul, Magnify?

Response:

Can we keep the melodic beauty and still achieve the correct emphasis? Sometimes changing the translation is not an option. Any suggestions on how we achieve emphasis?

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Suggestion:

How about “Mag” covering A-B-C, quarter, quarter, half?

Response:

You’re on the right track, although we’re dealing with melodic pickup notes here, which you’re assigning to a strong syllable “Mag”, which also leads to potential conflicts. We’re talking in this case about an English translation set to a melody originally used for a Church Slavonic setting.

Comment:

I think in some instances when the translation can’t be changed then maybe the melodic line should probably changed to one that allows for correct emphasis.

Response:

One hears the vowel “ah” (as in Mag) reiterated more than it needs to be, weak, weak, strong “Ma -a – a.” Whereas you could write a multi-note melody on the syllable “Mag” and make it work. But it would be a different melody altogether.

Question:

But trying to work out this particular melody, without sacrificing the A B C at the beginning? We could have a half note on Mag on A, then quarters on ni and fy on B and C?

Answer:

I think in your final suggestion, you’ve hit upon a good solution, but it’s not one that’s immediately obvious. It took a bit of thinking and trial and error.

I’d like to get back to the more general principle of how we achieve emphasis and then perhaps we can return to this specific example. There are three ways we can accomplish emphasis: rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, or some combination of two or all three.

And that is how this process works. Not necessarily the first thing that comes to mind. But it’s a good solution. Any thoughts on this?

Comment:

Well, you can read through a piece of music repeatedly and in theory, sing it different every time?

Response:

I think that’s theoretically possible, of course, but would we want to be changing inflection (and potentially meaning) every time? Isn’t that why we have certain “formulaic” ways of doing things, to minimize that type of subjectivity?

Reply:

Perhaps matching the original texts (slavonic, greek, or whatever) to a formula that corresponds with the limits/possibilities of English.

Response:

The formulaic structure of our chant melodies allows for that, and we can certainly develop greater skills at recognizing all the various possibilities.

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Comment:

I think the best solution is the example given as Example 3/C, it does correspond to the intention and in fact reality of the original slavonic setting.

Comment:

I guess I'm in the minority - I like the A and the B. I don't want to give it up. The other setting is less musically interesting to me.

Suggestion:

If I were trying to find a happy medium, I would have quarter notes for everything until "soul" it keeps the pulse of the text flowing to the end, but not rushed on example 3/C.

Response:

It is a valid point about the loss of melody, even though it wasn't much of a melody to begin with, both ideas have merit.

Dr. Morosan:

Let's move on to example 4: The refrain "Christ is risen from the dead" is a slightly different problem. Here one of the two important words, "Christ," tends to get lost in the A version due to the difficulty of pronouncing FOUR consonants on a single quarter note. With the B version there is no question as to WHO is risen from the dead. And it's easier to sing. Comments?

Comment:

It's easier to sing, but honestly would prefer a completely different melody that would reflect the accurate emphasis.

Comment:

In this case, I prefer the emphasis on risen in example A, and the long, extended Christ stops the action.

Comment:

I'd rather do something entirely different, because B is less musically interesting to me.

Response:

It took me a number of years to arrive at Version B, to get used to it, and now it's second nature to me. I'm sure there are other solutions out there, as suggested in your comments.

Comment:

But in the context of a long Holy Week and the late hour and the length of the canon, B does kind of stop the flow in my opinion. But I understand the principle you are espousing, and I think you are absolutely right.

Comment:

I do like very much the choral placement of "Christ" and the same result could be achieved just by changing the dotted half to a quarter note.

I have told my choir "Relax and look up from the music" on the refrain :-)

Suggestion:

How about a dotted quarter on Christ and an eighth on is?

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Question:

Taking example A, changing the half on “Ris”, and removing the G/E movement

Dr Morosan:

That brings up another fascinating topic... the indivisible unit of time, called the ‘mora’ by linguists. In chant there’s a basic unit of time that you can’t subdivide, without bringing about unacceptably choppy, awkward results, but sometimes in English it works on very fleeting, unaccented syllables.

I don’t think we will get through all my examples tonight, but what our discussion shows is that, ultimately, it’s going to be up to a FOURTH generation of settings, composed by English-speaking composers, instead of adaptors from another language, that will result in vibrant English church singing that will SPEAK English and hopefully speak TO new generations of Orthodox converts, and that includes cradle born as well as those who aren’t in the church yet.

We can all benefit from learning to hear and sing English in a different way.

Professor Drillock:

I want to thank Dr Morosan for a very informative, interesting, and challenging discussion.

Our next chat room session will be on Wednesday, November 9, 2006 at 8:30pm EST, when Mark Bailey will lead the discussion on ‘reconciling music theory and practice in Orthodox liturgical singing.’