

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – November 9, 2006

Moderator: *Professor Mark Bailey*

Chat room topic: **Using theory to achieve practical answers in liturgical music**

Professor Mark Bailey

The point of tonight is to discuss the importance of theory in helping to come up with practical solutions. Too often, today's liturgical musicians emphasize needing practical instruction, as if it is a choice over theory instead of theory.

My point is that they have to go hand in hand, and, in essence, we are talking about liturgical theory. Understanding the liturgical natures, essence, and purpose of a particular moment, which helps further determine the music we choose and how we sing it.

Without that background, practicality is unguided. Therefore, choosing a piece of liturgical music is not just about the music itself. It is also, about how well that music serves its liturgical function and of course carries the text.

One example: at a funeral, those who mourn are accompanying the body of the departed one to the grave -- the liturgical means of doing that is to sing Holy God as a procession and therefore, whatever style of music that is sung – chant, harmonized, whatever – needs to sound and sing like a procession; able to move the faithful step by step to the grave site (or any other location).

In other words, the “theory” that enables this to be a liturgical procession guides the musical choice and how we sing it. I would suggest, for instance, that the typical Obikhod – common chant – version does NOT serve liturgical function here.

Question:

When you say Obikhod version, are you speaking about melody, harmony, or both?

Answer:

In this case, both – in terms of an elongated repetitive chord.

Question:

My choir is currently doing almost exclusively plain chant pieces. Given that my rector tends to prefer Obikhod-sounding pieces, what would you suggest I try to start implementing?

Answer:

First, choose something that has clear liturgical movement to it, such as an entrance, for which the music may have a processional quality. 2. Ask your priest for his liturgical conception of it – such as the “little entrance” – what is going on, what does he have to make sure happens, etc. Then, 3. confirm with him the manner of music that, stylistically, will best match the liturgical movement and activity of the moment.

Very often, it will not be simple chords in Obikhod style. The Obikhod version of Holy God that is well paced in half notes (basically) in spite of musically taste [such as sung typically at Liturgies when the bishop is visiting], works pretty well, as opposed to run-on chords.

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IF, for instance “Come Let us Worship,” sung at the “Little” or Gospel Entrance, truly is to invite the worshippers into a period of scriptural proclamation, then again, the music should facilitate that...and if there’s a refrain there (and there is), the people should be able to sing it as well.

In addition, for the people to sing, a well-paced chant like melody is much more engaging than repeated notes over the same chord patterns.

As choir directors, practically speaking, engage the priest and get him on board thinking with you. Many priests take the music for granted and think of it in terms of style, not in terms of its liturgical function. Think about function too.

Question:

Don’t you think that we have very little choices of music that is available and less that is appropriate choice?

Answer:

What is appropriate is a fairly small list, admittedly, though there is very much available I think, even in English now, posted all over the internet.

A few guidelines help, such as:

- Is the text presented in a clear and understandable way?
- If there is a refrain, is it distinctive as such in the music (or can it be made so?)
- In addition – though it is a bit of a judgment call (like anything else), does the music seem to be calling more attention to itself and away from liturgical prayer and movement, or is it guiding us to it? And that has to do with the way in which the music is sung, as well as the music itself.

Admittedly, for a time, some music was written to cover moments in liturgy that many churches now bring forth to their parishioners and worshippers. Such as certain prayers in the Anaphora that, in many churches now, are no longer covered. Therefore, we should probably avoid music that was written to cover them etc. And try not to have music wrestle with liturgy but enliven and enhance it.

For those of you who sing OCA style – which makes sense for this chat room, I would highly suggest the new (revised) Divine Liturgy book published by St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, which really does try to move us that much closer to truly liturgical singing, not just music sung during liturgy. It’s a great foundation.

Question:

Could it then be said that Obikhod does just the opposite, leaving the text ‘high and dry’ without enough ornamentation?

Answer:

Maybe Obikhod isn’t my favorite thing in the world, but well set and well sung, it can work fine for stichera. When the congregation has time to listen and ponder as they pray. If, however, I

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truly want them to sing along on a refrain, generally Obikhod does not do the trick as well as other more chant-like and tuneful options.

Question:

Would using ‘plain chant’ for every litany because we “don’t want to be too fancy” work against that theory – by not engaging the congregation to join in the response to the petitions?

Answer:

Right, and again, it’s not about “fancy” – because “simple” isn’t the guarantee of congregational participation. ‘Two chords’ over and over is hardly the way to elevate prayer in a liturgical manner.

Observation:

Obikhod (Common Chant) is that, while it may not be the ideal musical setting, it is by far not the worst either. And any other style of chant sung badly is infinitely worse than Obikhod sung well.

Response:

Right, this isn’t about Obikhod per se, but about serving liturgy *liturgically*.

And here’s the theory winding in – both too simple and too fancy can be off-putting.

Observation:

There seems to be a tendency from some directors and even clergy that live by that approach.

Response:

Right, because there lacks a theoretical understanding of what the music is trying to enable.

For instance, a litany clearly invites the congregation to punctuate petitions of prayer through audible response. Therefore, the music we choose, and the way in which we sing it, truly should invite that audible response. In fact, ideally, it should be hard for the congregant NOT to sing along on “Lord, have mercy.”

Therefore, it’s a matter of looking for settings that can invite that sort of participation. Moreover, likely those will be tuneful (chant-like), over a common pulse, memorable, and nice to sing.

Harmony or not, either way is fine. We’re looking for qualities in the music and the way we sing it, not one genre or style of music over another. Each style has the potential of being great liturgical music and not so great.

Observation:

I have found that repetition is the key, it may take a while for people to catch on to something that is different but they eventually do.

Response:

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Right. Here's a hint...and it's practical, the first time something new is done in liturgy, it has to be really good, if you know what I mean...Well-rehearsed, etc. and then it has a better chance of catching on. If a new setting isn't quite ready, wait a week, have another rehearsal, then try it later. First impressions – they last!

Observation:

That is great advice and it is unfortunate that so many choirs sing new music, which they have not rehearsed well enough.

Response:

They wind up working against themselves that way and trying to correct a bad first impression.

Follow-up comment:

As a result, the reaction by the people is often negative.

Response:

Exactly.

Observation:

I think that many times that is what happens with Byzantine chant. It is not done well, and people do not want to hear it.

Comment:

Prompting the reaction: "We don't like that; we prefer our "traditional" music."

Response:

Yes, and depending on the parish and what they are used to when introducing something new, you may want to make sure some of the standards – well sung, etc. – are still there for other places in the liturgy.

I know people who, out of nowhere, from a tradition of choral singing, will suddenly have Byzantine chant Sunday. BIG mistake...in bits n' pieces, not all at once.

Follow-up Question:

I do use a couple of "Byzantine" pieces – a Holy God, and the litany after the Gospel.

Response:

It would be good for you to purchase the SVS Press Liturgy book too...and see if you like some of the things in there.

Follow-up Comment:

I just find that people seem to catch on to the traditional harmonies easier.

Question:

I was looking over Slavonic Psalter and Russian Psalter and English Psalter and I saw the difference in each.

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Response:

In English there will be differences, certainly, on whether it was translated from the Hebrew or the Greek. What translation of the English Psalter are you using? Is it taken from the Septuagint?

Question:

Is Slavonic Septuagint?

Response:

As much as it can be. Even the numbering is slightly different between the two. The Slavonic is translated from the Greek. For instance, if you are using the RSV, you will get Hebrew numbering and translations generally.

Question:

However, there is still a difference between English and Slavonic. I checked Soroka's psalm translations from matins and it is good with Slavonic.

Response:

And there are a number of different English translations. I'm not sure I have even seen a Russian translation of the Psalter – Dave have you?

Professor Drillock:

I have seen one, from the American Bible Society. But I have never used it.

Professor Bailey:

You know that the Russian is not used liturgically by and large, just Slavonic at this point.

Comment:

I have not heard good things about the Russian Psalter from Slavonic-speaking Russians.

Response:

To be honest...may Russians think they know Slavonic better than they do...it's really only about 50% the same, give or take.

Follow-up comment:

We know this too, but those we have talked to have definite knowledge of Slavonic.

Response:

The Ukrainian Church I grew up in worshipped in Modern Ukrainian, not in Slavonic. It takes a while to get any language up to speed liturgically...look what is happening with English!

Comment:

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The only psalms I thought looked good with Slavonic so far are those set by the Sorokas and from the Antiochian prayer service book. There is still one I will look into: one I assumed to be translated from Septuagint. I have the catalog so I will order it.

Professor Drillock:

Mark, thank you very much for a wonderful session and we will see you at the next chat in two weeks: Tuesday, November 21, 2006 at 8:30pm EST, when John Graham will lead the discussion on music and chant in the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Goodnight everyone!