

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – December 5, 2006

Moderator: *Professor Joseph McLellan*

Chat room topic: **The structure and order of Vespers**

Professor David Drillock, Chair of the OCA Department of Liturgical Music and Translations
Tonight, we would like to welcome Professor Joseph McLellan as our guest speaker who will be speaking on the structure and order of Vespers.

Professor McLellan

Glad to be here and glad to hear that several of us have been to Vespers (for St. Nicholas) this evening. Congratulations on the feast of that favorite of Orthodox saints.

Before we actually begin, let me remind you that I sent two files that are available from the OCA Department of Liturgical Music section on the OCA web site: one with the skeletal outline of Vespers, and the other with a narrative explanation of how some key parts of the service work. They might be useful as a reference in discussion. But, like anything on this topic that can fit onto a single page, they leave a lot unsaid.

Why don't we go straight to questions.

Question:

How hard or how easy is it to learn how to put together Vespers?

Answer:

Well, that's a little like asking how hard chemistry is, or Latin. It's easier for some people than for others. Being familiar with the service by attending it frequently might help speed your learning along. Going to the services is an excellent start and observing what comes after what. The tricky part comes within the larger parts: Which kathisma? or Blessed is the man? or none? Or how many stichera on "Lord I Call"? And from where? And what about the Theotokion?

As an example, for Saturday night Vespers, you nearly always need the Octoechos, which contains the services for Sundays in the eight tones. And normally the first sticheron at "Lord I Call" will be from the Resurrection (i.e. Sunday) service in the tone of the week on a Saturday night. The other book that is essential is the Horologion, which contains the unchanging parts of all the daily offices, of which Vespers is the first.

Question:

Why is everything after "Hear me O Lord" usually omitted until 'Bring my soul out of affliction.'? Is it wrong to include it?

Answer:

I typed out the "Vespers at a Glance" handout as a reference, so people could keep an eye on what comes after what, if they wanted to use it for that purpose.

"Hear me, O Lord" is the refrain for that part of the service. If you look at it, you have the first verse of Psalm 140: Lord I call upon Thee, hear me. Then the refrain: Hear me, O Lord.

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
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Then the entire verse: Lord, I call upon Thee, hear me. Hear the voice of my prayer, when I call to Thee, hear me, O Lord.

Then the second choir (kliros) takes up the singing. (If you have only one, of course, it continues) the next verse: Let my prayer arise in Thy sight as incense, and let the lifting up of my hands be an evening sacrifice. Then the refrain again: Hear me, O Lord.

After that the “sweet singing” stops (in the tone) and you either read the verses, or sing them in a recitative until you need to start the stichera. So after that you don’t hear the refrain (“Hear me O Lord) again. In my experience.

It’s like some psalms, where you have the refrain “Alleluia,” here the refrain is “Hear me O Lord.” Then all the remaining verses of Psalms 140, 141, 129 and 116 are read or sung in a recitative, stopping to intersperse stichera with the psalm verses the right number from the end (10, 8 or 6). So when there are 10 stichera (on Saturday night, e.g.), you stop at “bring my soul out of prison...”

When I was finishing my dissertation, I used to go to the local Antiochian church on Saturday evenings sometimes, (a shorter drive than all the way home to Boston) and they *always* read or chanted all the psalm verses there. Same for the OCA parish in Cumberland, RI I used to visit in those years. Those churches did all the psalm verses. I wish more churches did them all because it maintains the integrity of that part of the service.

Question:

Why do the rubrics call for forefeast music for St. Nicholas? Such as the stichera after *Now and ever* in Lord I call.

Answer:

It’s part of the service to St Nicholas, written right into the menaion. It is true that the actual forefeast of the Nativity of Christ begins in late December, (Dec. 20 is the usual date...) But we start observing it as early as the Entry into the Temple of the Theotokos (Nov. 21) by singing the katavasia of the Nativity at the Sunday and festal Matins services.

Question:

What is the rule for moving the Augmented Litany to the end after the troparion? And if we’re singing the opening psalm, does it make sense to move the litany?

Answer:

Actually, it’s more a matter of moving the augmented litany *from* its place after the dismissal hymn to an earlier place, before “Vouchsafe O Lord.” Since I think the simple order (non-Sunday, non-festive) is prime, and the Sunday/festal order is derived from it.

Actually the opening psalm is normatively sung only at a Vigil. But some priests like to have it sung at other Great Vespers services. St. Nicholas is a Vigil-ranked Saint. That is, it is always appropriate to serve a Vigil for his day (which is a big deal). The transposing of the two litanies was perhaps done in error. Great Vespers has the same order of the litanies as Vespers at a Vigil.

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – December 5, 2006

“Blessed is the man” is actually derived from the first stasis of the first kathisma of the Psalter and is an abbreviation of it done in most parishes.

I always say, a choir director should always try to have a good working relationship with the priest. And in the end, if a priest insists on doing something that is unusual, but not horribly wrong, it is better to do what he says. Peace is more important than getting your way sometimes. Even if you’re right. (Don’t forget the phrase in the typicon: “if the rector/abbot so wishes”)

Question:

Would you go through the names of the books used in the services, and what they contain?

Answer:

I mentioned the Horologion before. This is possibly the most basic book, because it contains the unchanging parts of all the daily services. It is the “Book of Hours” and there are Vespers, Compline: the Midnight Office, Matins, First Hour, Third Hour, Sixth Hour, Ninth Hour.

The next main book is the Octoechos, which means “Eight Tones” and it contains the Resurrection service (for Sundays) in all 8 tones. In the Greek practice, the weekday services in the 8 tones are in a separate book called the “Paraklitos” while in the Slavic practice, the relevant parts of the weekday services in the 8 tones are also found in the Octoechos as well.

So at a very minimum, to put together Vespers on a Saturday night, you need both the Octoechos, the Horologion, and the Menaion. In Great Lent, the Triodion, and after Pascha the Pentecostarion.

The Sunday Octoechos by itself contains only 7 stichera at “Lord I call” and we need 10. So, the rest have to come from the service associated with the day, not necessarily the Sunday. On the Sundays of Lent and the Pentecostarion, the service to the Saint of the day is not usually done. The typikon calls for doing that service “at compline” And before Lent, in the 3 Sundays of the Triodion, you only combine great Saints and feasts (like the Meeting of the Lord) with the Sunday service.

For example, in the Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, NY, the ecclesiarch counts up all the Sundays when the Saint’s service is not performed and assigns them to the various Compline services over that period. Therefore, the memory of the Saints is kept (even if not on their actual day). But for most Sundays, outside the Triodion and Pentecostarion, you need the Menaion as well.

Question:

If Annunciation falls on Holy Saturday, what kind of rubrical changes occur?

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – December 5, 2006

Answer:

Quite a few. Basically, you have a polyeleos and megalynarion (“With the voice of the Archangel.”) and a prokeimenon and Gospel for the Feast in the middle of the Matins service before the Epitaphios.

The Vespers of Holy Friday, with the stichera about Noble Joseph also has the Annunciation stichera “The pre-eternal counsel...” in a Tone 6 Special melody: “Having set their hope aside...”

And you have to combine the Annunciation troparion (“Today is the beginning of our salvation,”) with the troparia of Holy Saturday (“When Thou didst descend to death O life immortal...” and “The Noble Joseph...”

Question:

Isn't it a schizophrenic service in a way? You're singing about the announcement of the conception of a person you are burying at the same time.

Answer:

Well, the Alpha and the Omega do come together on that day. Remember, Holy Saturday service is really the first hint of the Resurrection.

Think what Gospel is read after you reenter the church after the procession...

Question:

Psalm 33 at vespers what tone do you sing it in?

Answer:

In my experience they don't use one of the tones for Ps. 33. Instead we use a familiar melody (starts major, then goes to minor – the Creed is sometimes sung to it). Sometimes you find specific tones assigned to psalms, such as the 118th psalm at the funeral service.

Professor Drillock:

Professor McLellan, I want to thank you very much for leading tonight's discussion. We hope to have you return in the spring and review Matins with everyone. Very shortly, the Department will be posting on the OCA web site, the first part of our Liturgical Orders resource section, focusing on Vespers.

It should be very useful, and goes into detail with many of the themes or parts of Vespers which Joseph was explaining this evening. This is devoted to Rubrics, and will define Vespers, Daily, Great, Vigil, with Polielei, Lenten, etc.

On the 19th of December, Fr Sergei Glagolev will be the guest speaker who will talk about effective music leadership, using the example St. John of Damascus who was a trained poet, musician, and theologian. We hope you can join us!

Good night.