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FROM OUT OF THE DRAWER: FAITH, RITUAL AND RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY – NIKOLAI KORNDORF’S SETTING OF THE DIVINE LITURGY¹

The centerpiece of this study is a remarkable exemplar of sacred music composition literally extracted from the drawer: a complete setting of the Russian Orthodox Divine Liturgy by the late-twentieth-century Russian-Canadian composer, Nikolai Sergeevich Korndorf dated 1978.² It has a two-fold purpose: (1) to explore some of the circumstances of its creation (how, why and when?) and, (2) to use it to frame a commentary on the impact of the Russian Orthodox Church on Russian music composition in general, looking to nineteenth-century precedents for lingering/prevaling attitudes towards it, posing the questions: Why has the Russian Orthodox Church been largely overlooked in Russian music production and why has it assumed a role in recent years?



Example No. 1 – Title Page of Nikolai Korndorf’s Liturgy.

From the tenth to nineteenth centuries Orthodoxy defined Russia. The Christianity of the Greek Church, whose mandate was to maintain the pluralism of those lands into which it witnessed, gave both form and content to Russian culture; for centuries its elaborate ritual comings and goings for every conceivable occasion shaped the lives of the Russian people. But Christianity was syncretically adapted to and erected on a preexisting pagan foundation that has continued to underpin it, and both have coexisted to the present among the faithful held in a centuries-old symbiotic balance.

After the Socialist Revolution, the Orthodox Church with its adherents became the supreme casualty of Soviet oppression; under Communism Orthodox Church and believers were under constant threat. It is virtually impossible for those of us who have come to know Russian Orthodoxy from abroad: perceived as a church repressed, fractured, in bondage, a puppet of the Soviet State since the Russian Revolution – to fully comprehend its impression on an emergent

¹ First presented as a paper at the “After the End of Music History – for Richard Taruskin”, which took place at Princeton University, February 9–12, 2012.

² A special thanks to Galina Averina-Korndorf for providing me with a copy of the unpublished manuscript.

generation of Russian composers active in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Thus, these 'modern' Russian composers' encounter with Orthodoxy, with its trappings, traditions and those rituals, seemingly obscure and antiquated, must have been strange: familiar - "Babushka's church" - yet foreign. For these musicians whose youthful indoctrination had been one of state enforced atheism and the imposition of the Communist Party's hackneyed pseudo-religion; the new dawn of religious freedom and the rediscovery of their 1000+-year tradition was a revelation.

The religious revival began in the 1970s, a period of stagnation within the Soviet Union, but which appears as a sort of nexus. A watershed time that marked the beginning of a spiritual awakening, the allure of Russian Orthodoxy crossed generations drawing many to and back into its fold, as if they were saying 'this was once ours and we need to reclaim it to make us whole'. From the late 1980s Russia's religious re-embrace, for which we can more easily account, received its external impetus from the country's shifting social and political dynamic of the *Perestroika* years. Even then, members of the new generation could not simply return to the faith or institution of their pre-Revolutionary forefathers nor did they evince the desire. Rather, consciously or intuitively, they sought something buried deep in Russia's spiritual past; something deeply rooted in Russian soil (*почвенничество*). So it was for Nikolai Korndorf (+2001) and his contemporaries, who had embarked on a quest of spiritual fulfillment, and were seeing religion through newly opened eyes and for the first time.

Seven decades of Soviet rule could not expunge a millennium of Orthodox tradition; it succeeded instead to 'disconnect' at least two generations from it. Yet there were some pre-Revolutionary precedents for the resulting estrangement. The Russian Orthodox Church had been a societal presence for a millennium, but from the time of Peter the Great it had been subjugated to imperial authority, becoming a vassal of Tsarist autocracy and increasingly a redundant bureaucracy. A daily constant, it was perceived by pre-Revolutionary progressives as reactionary, rigid, even moribund; it was something the populace took for granted. Nonetheless it was integral to the society's fabric. Before the clampdown on sacred music composition by the Soviet authorities what then was the state of affairs in Russian sacred music composition and what sort of role did the Russian Orthodox Church play in the lives of Russian composers? More to the point, what were their attitudes towards it?

In her 2007 study, Marina Frolova-Walker, posits a few reasons why church music has been traditionally passed over, most germane to our discussion: it was of low musical standards.³ Nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia with its imperial triune mandate of autocracy-orthodoxy-nationality was as secular a society as the rest of Europe with church music production reflecting the same *Cecilian* movement then prevalent in the West.⁴ Russian church music at this time like that for the Catholic Church music production in the West had long ago lost its organic relationship between music and liturgical action. Composers wrote settings of the Divine Liturgy, more for financial gain than as an act of faith or for particular love of the established tradition. And to do so, they donned the powdered wig of that 18th-century exponent of the St. Petersburg Imperial Capella, the Italian-trained Dimitri Bortniansky, and perpetuated his style no matter how odious, well into the twentieth century, eschewing any kind of stylistic development beyond what had been the norm since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Only from the 1880s had a systematic scientific enquiry into the old chant begun in a bid to scrape away decades of Italianate accretion. Undertaken by the likes of Undolsky and Razumovsky, then continued by Smolensky, Metallov, Preobrazhensky, Findeizen, among others, their research stimulated much needed reforms to Russian sacred music and whose pioneering research and publication still form the cornerstone of contemporary research,

³ Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism from Glinka to Stalin*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 174.

⁴ Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 95.

research that was bravely kept alive by such lone figures as Maxim Brazhnikov and Nikolai Uspensky within the USSR, and in the emigration by scholars like Johann von Gardner.

Unfortunately, the efforts of these founders of the so-called “New Trend” were too little too late. While laboring to establish a choral sacred music style rooted in traditional Russian practices, i.e., by resurrecting and reintroducing Znamenny Chant, liberated of foreign (i.e., Italianate) influences, they could not break the hold of those who monopolized church music composition for three successive generations from Bortniansky to L’vov to Bakhmetev (universally acknowledged as the ones guilty of reducing the standard singing to simple-minded tonic-dominant pitter patter), one that held fast for decades until it was successfully challenged in 1878 by Tchaikovsky and his publisher Jurgenson.⁵

Beyond the Revolution, church music composition had reached a point of stasis in its stylistic development – with the church’s very existence in peril, sacred music production had largely ceased after 1917 and the Russian émigré communities abroad went into preservation mode, ‘embalming’ the conservative style of the early nineteenth century. None of these composers were particularly big names. They were talented, well schooled but painfully traditional; they composed in a bland, sentimental and anachronistic ultra-conservative style, but their works are sung in perpetuity in every Russian church worldwide to the present day. We have also come to identify church music composition with the vocation of those in exile, those physically disconnected (Chesnokov, Gretchaninoff), whose works were as much personal expressions of longing, imbued with nostalgia, that *тоска по родине* for something lost. Rachmaninoff’s recycling of material from his celebrated *All Night Vigil* in his last work, the *Symphonic Dances*, was such a wistful backward glance, albeit oblique. It is no wonder that church music has thus been relegated to the back burner in the history of Russian music.

Western scholarship too has been largely silent on the impact of church music traditions on Russian composers, to which Frolova-Walker shrewdly ascribes to its lack of recognition as a musical topic.⁶ Noted exceptions are the recurrent references in the literature to the *Pannikhida*, the Orthodox Memorial Service. However couched or disguised in a work, it served as a living liturgical link to Russia’s Christian heritage equally for those composers within the Soviet Union (from Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 5 to Alfred Schnittke’s Piano Sonata No. 1), and exiled abroad (Stravinsky’s *Symphonies of Winds*).⁷

While end-of-century Russian composers assumed an air of indifference toward the Russian Orthodox Church, the signature, readily identifiable homophonic/diatonic ‘church music style’ has resounded through generations of composers (again from Stravinsky to Schnittke) as a constant regardless of the genre or individual musical language, persisting well beyond its Pre-Revolutionary heyday. It has informed and has been a source of raw material for the forging of art music compositions, however couched, permeating the fabric of every genre and resurfacing in the oddest places.⁸

But paying lip service to a ‘church music tradition’ begs the question: In the composer’s bid to recast something old to create something new, does the use of pseudo-modal, diatonic harmonies, with their absent or lowered leading-tones, in imitation of the old chant, sufficient to qualify it as a return to Russia’s religious musical roots?⁹ In most instances the composer is trying to recapture a past time and place by writing in a pseudo-archaic style. We may also ask: to what old source material did they have recourse? Minimal access to or knowledge of Russia’s traditional body of ‘ancient’ plainchant, the *Znamenny rospev*, and that knowledge did not (*and still does not*) antedate the seventeenth century. The single historical point of reference

⁵ Tchaikovsky’s antipathy toward Bortniansky is well documented.

⁶ Loc. cit., p. 174.

⁷ Richard Taruskin, *Defining*, pp. 530-531.

⁸ As an unlikely example, see the second movement of Glazunov’s Saxophone Quartet.

⁹ Frolova-Walker, pp. 265, *passim*.

and source were the schismatic Old Believers, whose use of the monophonic repertory was their exclusive purview. Indeed, those woody sectarian xenophobes and enduring symbols of unenlightened Rus', who provided the *living* musical link with Russia's *Znamenny chant* past, were at the center of a grassroots movement in the 1990s, and could be construed as an indicator of the revival that seemed to have had as its mandate "this is who we are."

By way of a summation concerning the allure of the Orthodox Church and its impact on composers, perceived musical shortcomings and criticisms notwithstanding, a partial explanation for those opening questions are proffered. Throughout their history, Russians have been fixated on the external and experiential aspects, i.e. the *ritual*, of the Orthodox Liturgy with its pageantry and drama. As the most notorious example, history reminds us that at the core of the still unhealed *Great Schism* of 1666 were a disagreement over elements of ritual (two fingers or three, two alleluias or three). Even long before as the *Russian Primary Chronicle* recounts the Byzantine emperor ordered the patriarch to don his finest vestments and put on a show for the grand prince's envoys. The impact on the Rus' envoys was such as to elicit that celebrated apocryphal account that has echoed down through the ages, "we did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth."¹⁰ The enlightened tenets of Orthodox theology, however, eluded, or did not even interest, most. The eminent medieval Slavist Francis Thomson expressed it best when he described Russia as having existed in a state of "intellectual silence" until the seventeenth century; in matters of faith Russia chose – and continued along – the path of the Holy Fool instead.¹¹

At the same time, it was ritual whether authentically (or idealistically) rooted in Russia's pagan past or of the sensually rich Orthodox Church, that was an inexhaustible source of material that stimulated the creative musical imagination (think Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mlada* or *Christmas Eve*, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* or *Svadebka*, and Korndorf's *Yarilo*). The theatricality of religious ritual was the means by which the composer from the nineteenth century onwards could define himself musically and as a Russian; those ritual, gestural or sacramental elements in their culture enabled him to connect eucharistically with Russia's truly ancient heritage and the moist mother earth of the Russian land; it initiating him on his quest for faith and self identity.

The route taken to finally reach the locus of this paper has been deliberately circuitous - that is to present a new or previously unknown work: a complete setting of the Russian Orthodox Divine Liturgy by the contemporary Russian composer Nikolai Korndorf. Korndorf has been described as the best and brightest of a generation of composers born in the late 1940s and whose years of musical maturation coincided with the late 1960s and 70s. Others of his generation include Vladimir Tarnopolsky, Viktor Ekimovsky, Alexander Raskatov, Dimitri Smirnov, Elena Firsova, Yuri Butsko, and the "redoubtable" Vladimir Martynov.

A Russian *intelligent*, a member of his country's cultural elite, precocious, and certainly representative of his generation, Korndorf was blessed with enormous talent, appetites, and opinions, which according to Alexander Ivashkin, having once stated: "I don't fit to any school or direction: I am writing a "netlenka" (Russian slang for something spiritual, unusual, and therefore only fully understandable in the future).¹² Korndorf traced his stylistic heritage to Rimsky-Korsakov, Mahler, especially in terms of the size of his musical canvases, Shostakovich and Schnittke, all of whom he considered his musical and spiritual forebears.

¹⁰ See Serge Zenkovsky, ed., *Medieval Russia's Epics, Chronicles and Tales*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963, 1974), pp. 67-68.

¹¹ For an extensive discussion of Russia's intellectual development, see Francis Thomson, *The Reception of Byzantine Culture in Mediaeval Russia* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1999).

¹² Alexander Ivashkin, *Nikolaj Korndorf*, Megadisc-classics, online resource sited June 13, 2012, (<http://www.megadisc-classics.com/album/nikolaj-korndorf>).

Korndorf was no stranger to the Orthodox Church: as a boy he frequented services with his grandmother at Holy Trinity St. Sergius Monastery and as distant as Pskov. Yet an all-embracing spirituality underlying/supporting theology outside the confines of traditional Russian Orthodoxy imbued Korndorf's music and underpinned his creative process. A complex and spiritual man, in matters of faith, Korndorf was inscrutable – his was profound and lofty but not in the traditional sense; the Liturgy was his single explicit move into church music settings although sacred music composition impacted nearly every composition that followed, whether it took the form of literal quotation, as in the use of the *Pannikhida* refrain-texts as a structural element (String Quartet), mimesis (example, cantillation, “tintinnabulation” - “Yarilo” or “Hymn II”), or humorous parody (“Письмо В. Мартинову и Г. Пелецису” - “A Letter to V. Martynov and G. Pelecis”).



Example No. 2 – Korndorf’s “Letter to V. Martynov and G. Pelecis”. The opening is a humorous parody of Tone 8 of the standard melody collection used in the Russian Orthodox Liturgy.

Korndorf’s Divine Liturgy comprises a 66-page manuscript dated July 3, 1978. Composed during the nadir of conditions for the Russian Orthodox Church both within and outside of Russia, it was nonetheless also a time when many were discovering the church, which had been allotted a modicum of freedom. For all intents and purposes this was a work ‘for the drawer’. Innocuously and ambiguously titled *Симфония-сюита для 2х мужских хоров и хора мальчиков* (*Simfonia-Suite for Boys’ and two Mens’ Choirs*), the name under which it appeared in his catalogue, and only given its true designation in those work lists compiled after his death, its true identity further obscured by its scoring for two pianos. On this work, Korndorf was silent.

Why did he write it? He suffered no personal crisis to drive him toward religion. Was his turn to the canonical texts of the Orthodox Church the result of a personal revelation? Or, was he answering the call of the ancestral Russian soul, summoned by those rituals, reawakened from the deep slumber into which it had been forced by opposing external forces? Korndorf was not alone in his turn towards sacred music composition; others were doing the same. Whether

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3! $\text{♩} = 92$ Радостно, экзорцико

Х.М.
Тен
Хор I
Бас
Хор II
Тен
Бас

Recurrent Alleluia Refrain from Liturgy

Fl.
Cl.
Тр.
Тр.-к.
V.-w.

Example No. 4 – Figuration from Third Spiritual Verse, “Ioann Zlatoust”.

Example No. 5 – Opening of Primitive Music for Twelve Saxophones showing common figuration.

The musical score yields several other interesting points concerning the composer's stylistic development. Firstly, the multi-choral scoring is ironically an anachronistic throwback to the *stile concitato* style associated with Bortniansky and the St. Petersburg's *Imperial Capella*, or the even earlier baroque style of Russia's late seventeenth-century masters Vasili Titov or Nikolai Diletsky; it is unknown whether Korndorf had any knowledge of these composers.¹³ This division of musical labor within the ensemble creates an antiphonal interchange among the three forces, which is exploited for acoustical effect.

The work appears to have been conceived as a musical organic whole and intended for Orthodox worship; its sole existence is as an instrumental rather than vocal work; the two-piano version was the only way for the composer to hear his work, as a choral execution was unlikely. Either the quotation or paraphrasing of Znamenny chant is also continuously employed throughout. The example from the opening of the Liturgy, presents a single Znamenny-like motive unadorned and unsupported. One is also immediately struck by the metrical irregularity produced by the constantly shifting time signatures breaking up the bar lines to give the impression of an unbroken flowing chant line [see again **example 3**, above]. The later appearances of the chant line in different voices each occupying its own tonal or modal region are then combined in different temporal layers with different note values [**example 6**]. The use of three-voice structures, as in his setting of the Cherubic Hymn, and the juxtaposition or layering of asynchronous lines results in a pungent heterophony, recalling the Russian Church's early seventeenth-century *troestrochnoe pienie* in its display of discordant clashes [**example 7**].

¹³ On these composers, See Claudia Jensen, *Musical Cultures in Seventeenth-Century Russia*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

The image shows a musical score for two choirs, labeled 'Хор I тен.' and 'Хор II тен.'. The score is written on multiple staves for each choir, with vocal lines and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in Russian: 'слава богу и дн. ны' and 'слава богу и дн. ны'. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'pp' and 'f', and a tempo marking of '♩=40'. The music features a recurrent doxology figure.

Example No. 8 – Recurrent Doxology figure “Слава Отцу...”

The image shows a musical score for a choir, labeled 'Хор II тен. соло' and 'сочн.'. The score is written on multiple staves, with vocal lines and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in Russian: 'слава богу и дн. ны' and 'слава богу и дн. ны'. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'ff' and 'f', and a tempo marking of '♩=40'. The music features a recurrent doxology figure.

Example No. 9 – “Верую”.

By far the most notable unifying element in this work, however, is the constant use of tintinnabular effects from beginning to end, proof of the overwhelming influence of untuned Russian bells, - a passion for which the composer professed in a later interview. Those omnipresent sonic icons that infuse all Russian music – were heard for the first time since Revolution during the 1970s. His use of sustained bell-like pedal point throughout provides a modal fundament (a *blagovest*). This early experimentation with sonorous effects is a hallmark feature fully realized in later compositions like his watershed ritualistic *Yarilo* for solo-prepared piano and the choral work “Welcome” [example 10]. This brief excerpt from the end of the liturgy – “Буди имя Господне, благословенно от ныне и до века”/“Blessed be the name of the Lord, henceforth and for evermore”, in its three-fold statement, serves as an illustration. All told, Korndorf pays homage to Russia’s past by giving the work an historical foundation [example 11].

Example No. 11 (continued)

There are broader issues here. It is likely the composition of an Orthodox Divine Liturgy was not so much of an act of Christian devotion; Korndorf's *netlenka* was an act of faith rooted in that Russian love of ritual, which for him would take the form of instrumental theater with ritual, theater and drama used synonymously. Works composed in the wake of the Liturgy appear idiosyncratic of his generation; they seem to bypass the previous epochs to peer beneath the Christian beliefs that have shaped Russian culture since the tenth century, laying bare Russia's pre-Christian soul. For Korndorf and his peers, ritual/theatricality was the link to Russia's past, and they used it to forge something new rooted in something primal; it was a form of spirituality that drew on ancient Russian precepts and lay outside the institution of the Russian Orthodox Church.

More importantly, underscoring its significance for his maturation as a composer, Korndorf's Divine Liturgy was an *urtext* for his later masterpieces; it underpinned those works written immediately afterward that established him as a composer of serious contention (*Confessiones*, 1979) and continued to serve as a template for such later compositions as his *Yarilo*, the *Triptych* for cello and piano, the monumental Mahlerian *Hymns II and III* for symphony orchestra, and his String Quartet, and the above-mentioned *Primitive Music* for twelve saxophones, with their inherent ritual dramaturgy. All appear to have their genesis in this early musical essay in Orthodox sacred music composition.

We will never know what Korndorf intended with this setting; he is no longer with us to ask, and he was inscrutable to the end. If the ritual elements embodied by these masterful compositions do indeed mark that aforementioned reawakening, then Korndorf succeeded in achieving a synthesis or a balance between the Christian and the pre-Christian, replete with those all-defining Russian elements, to create something truly rooted in the Russian soil. We can thus regard the subtitle of his Hymn No. III "A New Heaven", not so much as that promised

to the Orthodox Christian believer in the Gospels but more to the transfigured Russian world of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Kitezha*. At the same time, with this setting of the Divine Liturgy and the works that followed, Korndorf made strides in reestablishing the long lost organic relationship between liturgy and music, and in doing so a tradition-based sacred composition becomes the foundation for new things to come.