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MINIMALISM, MYSTICISM, AND MONASTICISM: CONCERT MUSIC INSPIRED BY BYZANTINE CHANT

PAUL BARNES

Glenn Korff School of Music at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA
pbarnes@unl.edu

My life as a concert pianist has been enriched most substantially by the musical and spiritual tradition of Byzantine chant. This paper will focus on the intersection of both my life as a pianist and my twenty years of serving as an Orthodox Christian chanter at Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. I will focus on four distinct areas that elucidate this intersection. First I will explore the piano music of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, whose music, when first encountered decades ago, began a personal aesthetic journey that led to my current fascination with the influence of Byzantine music on the classical world. I will then review my collaboration with composer and conductor Victoria Bond whose work I have championed for over twenty years. Her piano solo written for me, *Potirion Sotiriu*, represents the first piano work ever written for me utilizing Byzantine chant. Next I will discuss the work of composer Ivan Moody, Orthodox priest and former student of Sir John Tavener. Moody's work *Nocturne of Light* is the first chamber work written for me utilizing two Byzantine chants focusing on the Resurrection of Christ. Finally, I will discuss my twenty-one year collaboration with renowned composer Philip Glass. Through recording, transcribing, commissioning, and performing, his music and aesthetic have transformed my professional career. I will discuss my latest Glass commission involving the prolific composer's first compositional utilization of Byzantine chant.

I. ARVO PÄRT'S FÜR ALINA

The music of Arvo Pärt had a profound influence on my musical trajectory. I will never forget listening to the first recording of his *Te Deum* which was premiered in 1985. The work utilized Pärt's "tintinnabuli" style, which he describes as follows:

Tintinnabulation is like this. Here I am alone with silence. I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence, comfort me. I work with very few elements - with one voice, with two voices. I build with the most primitive of materials - with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I called it tintinnabulation.¹

After this aesthetic awakening, I then explored Pärt's musical offerings for solo piano and discovered *Für Alina* (1976), his first work in the tintinnabuli style. I began opening my piano recitals with this work or occasionally playing it as an encore and was deeply encouraged by

1 Robert K. Schwarz, *Minimalists* London: Phaidon Press 1996, 215.

the impact it had on my listeners. I had found the work to be such a refreshing break from the cacophony of much of contemporary music. It was unapologetically simple in an almost monastic way. Pärt writes: "When one writes music from a starting point of silence and one feels that silence is enough, ... one will only be moved to write when one has something of importance to give."²

für alina 2:00

für klavier

Peaceful, majestic,

Ruhig, erhaben, in sich hineinhorchend

arvo pärt
(* 1935)

Arvo Pärt „Für Alina | für Klavier“
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www.universaledition.com

This voluntary embrace of simplicity immediately reminded me of the monastic impulse which formed such an important part of my adopted Orthodox spirituality. St John Chrysostom writes in his characteristically musical style:

In the world there are many things obscuring the view and disturbing taste and hearing. That is why it is necessary(...) to run away from all excitement and take refuge in the desert where tranquility is total, serenity complete, noise does not exist, where eyes are fixed on God alone and ears attentive to hearing only the divine words. The ears delight to hear the symphony of the Spirit whose power over the soul is so strong that, once anyone has been touched by this music, he can no longer prefer either food or drink or sleep to it.³

In addition to this embracing of simplicity, a radically different understanding of musical time was an important component to my own transformation affected by the music of Pärt. Paul Hillier, in his 1997 biography of Pärt, writes:

Musical material is thus reduced to its elemental essence [...] The traditional narrative manner of common-practice tonality is thus absent [...] Many pieces tend through length and repetition to establish a sense of timelessness or a continual present; the use of drones reinforces this effect. [...] The use of repetitive patterns and harmonic stasis suggests an awareness of time quite different from the materiality of Western 'clock' time, though just as real to the person who experiences it.⁴

II. VICTORIA BOND AND POTIRION SOTIRIU (1999)

Ps. 116 (LXX 115)

Potirion sotiriu lípsome, ke to ónoma Kyriú epikalésome.

The cup of salvation I will receive, and call upon the name of the Lord.

I was introduced to the music of Victoria Bond when I selected her first piano concerto, *Black Light* to record on my first volume of American Piano Concertos released on the Koch International label in 1999. During one of the recording sessions for this CD, Victoria, aware of my double life as an Orthodox chanter, asked me to sing one of my favorite Byzantine hymns. I sang the communion hymn for the feasts of the Theotokos, *Potirion sotiriu*. At that moment, she said she would compose a piano piece for me based on this chant. Bond had the formidable challenge of writing a large-scale work for piano that on one hand effectively utilized the resources of the piano but at the same time preserved the unique mystical aura generated by the chant itself. After the piece was composed, we decided that the most appropriate format for the performance would be to sing the chant both before and after the work so that the spiritual world from which the piece emerged was clear. It also communicates to the audience what I have come to embrace as a champion of new music: namely that one of the most profound uses of music is to give the listener the ability to leap artificial temporal boundaries and embrace the totality of human expression in both the present and past ages. Making the past a present reality is also paramount in the liturgical theology of the Orthodox Church where through ancient ritual and art, the past is made mystically present for the twenty-first century believer.

In the last few years when programming *Potirion Sotiriu*, I have encouraged audience participation by having my unsuspecting audience sing the ison, or drone, as I chant the hymn both before and after the performance of the piano piece. It has proven a most effective tool for breaking down that seemingly impenetrable wall between performer and audience in a traditional recital setting.

Victoria Bond also expanded the solo piano work into a piano concerto entitled *Ancient Keys* which I recorded on my second volume of American Piano Concertos released in 2006 by Albany Records (TROY878).

The work is a traditional theme and variations with a clear presentation of the chant at the opening:

3 St John Chrysostom (344-407), quoted in Olivier Clément (Transl. Theodore Berkeley and Jeremy Hummerstone), *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* London: New City Press 1995, 199.

4 Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*. Oxford: OUP 1997, 17.

Potirion Sotiriu

Victoria Bond

Andante ♩ = 66 L.H.

Piano

mf *f* *f* *f*

2 *f cantabile*

3 rit.

4 A tempo

mf *ff* *mf*

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In the subsequent variations and virtuoso coda, Bond dissects the chant in a rather traditional way, exploiting the melodic shape of the chant as well as isolating some of the traditional ornaments as the basis for variation.

6

Meno mosso ♩ = 60

8^{va} 71

Let ring to 5/8 bar

pp

8^{va} accel.

A tempo mp

8^{va}

molto rit.

♩ = 84

80

mf

p

pp

p espressivo

89 (8)

8^{vb}

loco

94

99

8^{vb}

III. IVAN MOODY AND NOCTURNE OF LIGHT (2010)

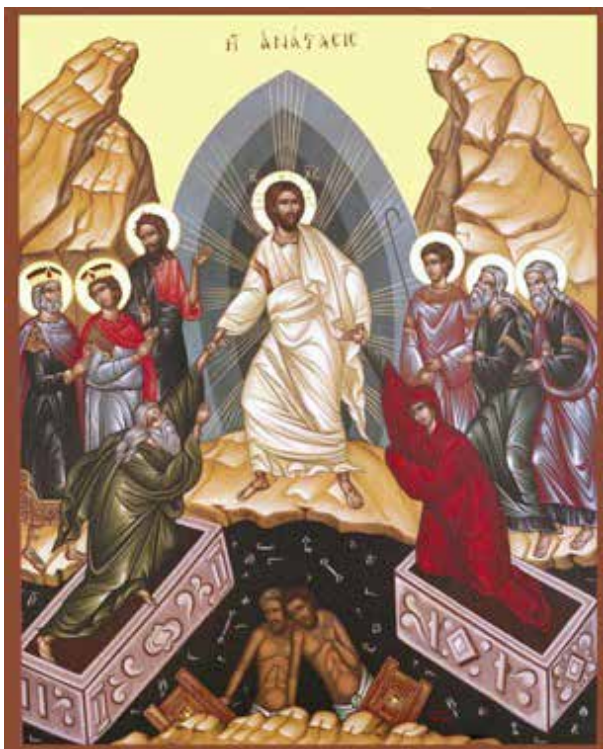
I was introduced to the music of Ivan Moody through my association with Capella Romana and their executive director Mark Powell. Known primarily for his choral music, I was most interested in commissioning Dr. Moody to write a piano quintet utilizing Byzantine chant. The world premiere of *Nocturne of Light* was given on April 26, 2010 as part of Victoria Bond's new music series Cutting Edge Concerts at Symphony Space in New York with the Chiara Quartet. I will allow the composer to speak about the work for himself by quoting from his programme notes for the première performance:

Nocturne of Light was written specifically for Paul Barnes and the Chiara Quartet. Dr Barnes had asked me for a work that would be impregnated with the spirit of Byzantine chant, a requirement with which I was more than happy to comply, given that so much of my work takes its inspiration in Byzantine Orthodox music, poetry and theology.

I had, in addition, long wanted to write a Nocturne, and here I had an opportunity to write a Nocturne for Christ - the 'three days' space' between His burial and his Resurrection. To that end, the principal thematic material of the work is the communion chant for Holy Saturday, *Exigerthi os o ypnon*, 'As One Who has slept', speaking of the ineffable mystery of the 'sleeping' God and His arising. Almost all the other material of the work derives from this chant, which is heard near the beginning of the piece, following an introductory passage, in the piano, divided into three segments. Thereafter the music deals with, as it were, human reflection on this momentous event, exploring grief, anger and, always, hope.

In the Orthodox icon of the Resurrection, Christ is depicted as trampling down the gates of Hades, while He frees Adam and Eve. Near the bottom of the icon, one can see the shattered locks and keys, and I have endeavoured to suggest this by means of a very short section which makes use of pizzicato strings and the pianist playing inside the piano. Thereafter there is an unstoppable build-up to the joy of the Resurrection, symbolized specifically by the use of another chant, *Christos anesti*, 'Christ is risen.' This is also used in combination with the first chant, resulting in a whirlwind of celebratory joy and light.

Nocturne of Light represents, then, the three days' space in the tomb both from a ceremonial and a human, affective, point of view. I wanted to portray awe and shock and bewilderment and then joy, but still without it having always the composer's ego as the driving force. It is present of course, because Christianity uniquely values the human individual, but, and even though this is not liturgical music and I have no reason or need to make comparisons with icon painters and their rigorous discipline, something of that is still there, and the music therefore has a ritual, ceremonial dimension as well as a human one.⁵



Nocturne of Light utilizes several compositional techniques that not only elucidate the meaning of the text of the chant, but also the Orthodox iconography associated with the feast of our Lord's Resurrection. Midway through the work, the pianist is called to pluck the strings inside the piano vigorously, as both an aural and visual means of communicating the breaking of the gates of Hades so powerfully depicted in the traditional icon of the Resurrection.

5 Programme notes from première performance and in the published score.

Nocturne

16

92

ff

ff

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Harm.

p

pizz.

pizz.

95

Pno.

Play inside the piano
Laisser vibrer

arco

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

mp normale

mp arco

mp arco

fff

fff

fff

mp

fff

In addition to the clear text painting utilized in this luminous score, Moody also uses traditional counterpoint as in bar 179, where the Holy Saturday communion hymn returns creating a beautiful counter melody with the *Christ is Risen* motive, a perfectly fitting musical affirmation of resurrectional joy possible even in the midst of the pain of the Cross.

34 **Raggiante** Nocturne

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Raggiante" (Nocturne). The score is arranged in two systems. The first system covers measures 176 to 178, and the second system covers measures 179 to 182. The instruments included are Piano (Pno.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.).

System 1 (Measures 176-178):

- Piano (Pno.):** Features a melodic line in the right hand and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. A dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) is present in measure 177.
- Violins (Vln. I & II):** Both parts play a sustained, melodic line with a dynamic marking of *f* (forte).
- Viola (Vla.):** Plays a sustained, melodic line with a dynamic marking of *f*.
- Violoncello (Vc.):** Plays a sustained, melodic line with a dynamic marking of *f*.

System 2 (Measures 179-182):

- Piano (Pno.):** The right hand features a complex, tremolo-like texture, while the left hand plays a sustained, melodic line. A dynamic marking of *f* is present at the beginning of the system.
- Violins (Vln. I & II):** Both parts play a sustained, melodic line with a dynamic marking of *f*.
- Viola (Vla.):** Plays a sustained, melodic line with a dynamic marking of *f*.
- Violoncello (Vc.):** Plays a sustained, melodic line with a dynamic marking of *f*.

Moody recently composed a solo piano work for me which I have recorded on my latest CD, *New Generations* (Orange Mountain Music 0107). *Fioriture* (blooming) was written for me in the spring of 2013 while the composer was recovering from recent surgery in Finland. The beautiful Italian word is packed with different layers of meaning; the hope and beauty of the new spring flowers were a tremendous boost to the composer's spirits while convalescing. I have described this piece as "a love affair with the note 'F.'" In keeping with the aesthetic of all of the music presented in this paper, Moody's work expressively and meditatively explores this beautiful and pastoral note 'F' with a sense of luxurious pacing and a hypnotic approach to musical time.

to Paul Barnes

IVAN MOODY

Fioriture

Largo, delicato ♩ = 54

Piano

p

Ped. *

* Ped.

* Ped.

Ped.

mf

*

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IV. PHILIP GLASS AND PIANO QUINTET NO.1, EVANGELISMOS ('ANNUNCIATION')

My relationship with Philip Glass began by accident in March of 1995 as we met on an aeroplane flying from Lincoln, Nebraska to Chicago. I had just undergone a gruelling three-day job interview at the University of Nebraska while Glass was in Lincoln with Alan Ginsberg doing a benefit recital for Lincoln's Buddhist community. Since that fateful day over twenty-one years ago, Glass's recording label has produced four of my recordings, I have published two volumes of my transcriptions from Glass's theatre works, and I have commissioned, premiered and recorded his Piano Concerto No. 2 (*After Lewis and Clark*). Glass and I met last year in April in New York to discuss both my latest recording of his new etudes and to discuss a future commission. One of our first discussions in a New York City cab on the way to a rehearsal was about the musical relationship between Byzantine and Buddhist chant – both sharing the musical characteristic of a harmonically static drone.

At the time of writing, the contract for our new collaboration has just been signed. Glass will write his first piano quintet based on the Greek Orthodox communion hymn for the feast of the Annunciation of the Theotokos. At his home in the east village of New York City, I sang several Orthodox hymns and we agreed that the communion hymn for the Annunciation would work beautifully as the basis for his new piano quintet. After this very productive meeting with Glass, I received an email from archeologist Richard Freund of the University of Hartford. Freund leads an archeological expedition in Nazareth that is also funded by Marguerite Scribante, the sponsor of my endowed professorship at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He called and asked if I knew of a musical work that I could use to commemorate their recent finding of the original third-century church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. When I told him of my recent visit to Glass and the Annunciation quintet, we rejoiced in our good fortune! The new work will be given its world première performance on April 17, 2018 at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln with me and the Chiara Quartet. Subsequent performances in New York, Hartford, and even Nazareth have already been planned. Glass's minimalist aesthetic will be a perfect match for this Byzantine hymn and will mark Glass's first exploration into the spiritual world of Byzantine chant.

V. CONCLUSION

The musical and spiritual world of Byzantine chant has profoundly shaped my professional aspirations and trajectory. Beginning with the stunning impact made by the music of Arvo Pärt, my exploration of the intersection of classical music with Byzantine music began in earnest. Through the contributions of Victoria Bond, Ivan Moody, and the future work of Philip Glass, the recital hall where I spend the vast majority of my professional life has been expanded into a venue where the spiritual tradition of Byzantine chant and the musical tradition of the recital are joined. To borrow St John Chrysostom's beautiful words, I hope that this spiritual convergence creates a "symphony of the Spirit whose power over the soul is so strong that, once anyone has been touched by this music, he can no longer prefer either food or drink or sleep to it."