Choral chant organized as homophony

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Like the titles of other conference papers, this one should express the *kernel* of the paper; however the kernel is not the *objective* of the paper: the objective concerns a way to solve a contradiction that appears in producing "modern" Christian liturgical chants, while the kernel concerns certain musical "technology" (syntax), i.e. musically formal properties that one can recommend to realize the objective. The objective is spefically to make new liturgical chants that it is really possible to sing currently in a sincere, simple and humble way as integral components of the liturgy, and sounding as representatives of music which has arisen lately after the epoch of famous authors such as Bach, Mozart, Bortniansky or Hristov. The culture (and not only culture) of the present time is generally considered as distant from Christian spirituality and so there is no true and general musical expression of this spiritually; thus to formulate any possible means for carrying out the objective seems impossible. Modern liturgical music has to respect the following demands:

(α) to retain limits which originated in conventional harmony and rhythm,

(β) to be able to satisfy the demands that originate in liturgy,

(γ) not to be absolutely against churchgoers' taste,

(δ) not to demand too much from the abilities of average singers, and

(ε) effectively to reflect (a part of) the religious contents of the sung text.

An analysis of these demands leads one to expect the following limits:

(α∗) at least some elements of the harmony, rhythm and polyphony used should not be taken from the music commonly employed in the 16th-19th century West European music; "disturbing" traditional structures not only cause the music to "sound as though modern" (of cause, such an argumentation is rather naive, lightweight and superficial) but can eliminate accepting liturgical music only for its abstract musical beauty;

(β*) the parameters of the composition have to follow those of their liturgical prototypes; these include duration, and a certain tonal relation to the components that precede and/or follow; and the flow of the composition should reflect whether the melody should express a declamation of truths (such as the Creed), or a common prayer (such as the Lord's Prayer), or the singers' service to other believers, creating ambience during their contemplation of a text they have just heard (such as the Kontakion), or something else.

(γ∗) It is graceless to make music in order to fulfill churchgoers' desires to be pleased by hearing certain sounds according to their fancy (or to encourage more churchgoers) Nevertheless a certain influence of that sort is to be respected, namely to offer the persons present music that they more or less accept as comprehensible and that does not force them out of the church.

(δ∗) The quality of the music ensembles in many churches does not qualify them to perform at an international festival of music. Even if it is sufficient for to be accepted according to the idea "better a bad band that no band", such quality fails against any composition that tries to express anything new, unaccustomed, untried… Such persons deny (or are not able) to sing and/or play certain new elements of music but they also hate hearing them. It can be met for example in complicated polyrhythms or in demands for intonation which amateur singers cannot anchor in a system that is familiar to them (microintervals, dodecaphony).

(ε∗) Today one often encounters enthusiasm for the "modernization" of liturgy, while in fact the liturgy is only made more and more trivial, more superficial and poorer; not only is God increasingly lost from, it but man's soul as well. Good and true music sounding as a liturgical component has an important role in the reversion of this process, in returning an understanding that every syllable of the text pronounced in the liturgical process has a deep content.

It is evident that there are contradictions among the demands that follow from the five aspects sketched out above. One aspect of the real art is to tackle problems. Let us try to do this.

The first idea that may flash into one's mind is that modern music is the fruit of common development that began in a wide spectrum of styles. One commonly observes the development process as bound up with the part of Europe using Latin alphabet, while the other regions are viewed as those extracting on odd occasions from that "Latin" flow. But if we leave that scheme, which has survived from the romantic era, and if we try to view development free of old-fashioned schemes, the importance of the fact that each of the Christian liturgies which arose in the early Christian era gave rose to its proper liturgical chant which makes use of a certain quantity of musical elements. But the more one studies, the more elements common to two or more liturgical/geographical types one meets (concisely: [1], [2]). Let us give an illustration:

And another illustration concerning Slavonic and even Czech musical history:

The existence of musical elements commonly occurring in several different types of liturgy and its characteristic music is an interesting and underestimated phenomenon and may be used as a starting point to seek out properties common to several different types of liturgy, to formulate relevant knowledge as simply as possible and to apply it to modern expressive means that could truly convey the profound meanings contained in every phrase of liturgical texts.

One common property is the homophonic style of liturgical music, which allows another common property, namely it leaves the melody quite free and independent not only of any real and supposed (imagined, not sounding) harmony but also of any rhythmical schema, considered in a conventional way such that "rhythm is a periodical alternating of heavy and light beats". This time structuring is called "free rhythm", coming from ancient concepts of "rhythm as organizing time" (Plato) and the "art of beautiful moving" (St Augustine). By use of modern information handling techniques, one can simply apply algebra-like formalism and describe the "phrases" (consistent rhythmical constructions) as wholes liable to a certain so-called context-free grammar [3], [4], filling the phrase hierarchically by more and more complex "clauses" up to those composed of elementary indivisible rhythmical atoms. According to common knowledge currently accessible in Western and Central Europe between 1870 and 1950, beauty has to consist in exactly abiding by the equality of the atoms' duration; after the Second World War, the importance of respecting certain rules for a special "tempo" (accelerando/ritardando) of every individual atom were increasingly accepted. In a certain witty conformity with the words of Professor Bartolommeo Di Salvo of the Pontifical Oriental Institute, the last sort of rhythm ought really to be called "really free rhythm" while for free rhythm without tempo changes we will omit the word "really"[1].

The study of melodies rooted in early Christian liturgies opens a space for ideas of transferring the above-mentioned properties into modern music and try to do this so that their aesthetic, spiritual and psychological effects known from ancient hymns are transferred with them.

Whoever knows the spiritual quality of the original compositions will probably judge such a tendency as arrogant and presumptuous, but let us apply it, in the hope that "a percentage" of the great and potent impact of the original ecclesiastical creativity transferred to the contemporary is more than something that was generated without the required inspiration.

The first step is to organize the flow of several voices in free rhythm. The musical feeling of the present time supposes that the only serious chant is that having more that one voice, and homophonic chant allows this only to a soloist. In such a situation, to conserve free rhythm traditionally known only from old homophony appears a problem in that several voices are heard. The first step in finding a solution is to organize each of the sounding voices in the same rhythm. In other – rather symbolic – words, the sounding voices should realize the same monody, while each of them differs from the other so that it intones in different pitches. It is recommended to begin to apply the free rhythm (not the really free rhythm), i.e. to structure the common time flow in pairs and triplets of atoms (in the illustrations presented below, represented as quavers) of the same duration.

Among others, the common time structuring in pairs and triplets of atoms of the same duration is also accessible for rather amateur groups. For compositions intended for such groups, it is also feasible to lay down a certain set of "allowed" pitches recalling diatonicism; however it is not necessary apply exactly the diatonicism of major or minor tonalities – e.g. tone sets corresponding to oriental scales cannot be excepted. It is important to use tone sets that the singers intone as simple elements of their cultural tradition.

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1   I met Professor Di Salvo at the Monastery of Grottaferrata in 1970. After complete cultural and religious isolation during 1939-1968, when no information on new discoveries in Christian liturgical chant were allowed to come to our country and I heard singing in that really free rhythm, I confided to Professor Di Salvo my deep enchantment and he mentioned brightly: "Of course, that is really free rhythm, every tone has its own duration!" Nowadays, "free rhythm" is identified as the "Solesmes School", the other one by as the "Semiological school".

Generally, sounding several tones at the same time is evidently a necessary phenomenon of modern music, particularly in an environment in which at least particles of Christian cultural tradition are present. Of course, composers of the 20th century discovered qualities of the melodies that arose before the existence or at least influence of harmony in music, but they applied them and their principles always in combination with "accompaniment" or with parallel melodies led in counterpoint. Both ways erase liberty, in that the free rhythm of the main melody exists. The most difficult problem is to organize the pitches (i.e. to choose from the set mentioned) in such a way that homophony might be conserved.

In this field is generally recommended what was condemned as a fatal error contrary to the main substance of voice leading: parallel movement of voices sounding together. This principle, of course, in order to be applicable, has to be completed by certain amendments:

1. The "parallel movement" of two voices means that they both ascend or both descend or at least one retains its pitch. The "parallel movement" of more voices means that any chosen pair of them moves in "parallel motion" as just mentioned.

2. The intervals of the two voices chosen to move at the same time may differ mutually.

3. If such intervals do not differ, no limitation holds; i.e. parallel fifths and octaves are not excluded but neither are parallel seconds, sevenths, ninths, etc.

4. As any rule in the art, rules 1–3 cannot be kept strictly: countermovement is acceptable especially where it is strictly expected and its negation might upset the believers in attendance.

Note that point 3 arises from the limits of conventional aesthetics and makes the compositions "modern music" but can be performed by groups of amateurs without special obstacles and, moreover, is able to express great devotion. These amendments may be demonstrated with an example (the Kyrie of my Mass, 1961, sung by the Gondrassek choir, Prague, 2015):

Illustrations of the possibility of applying the above-described technique to the Byzantine-Slavic rite is presented in the following example, part of the *Monogenes* (*Yedinorodniy Syne* – the words in Ruthenian pronunciation were given so that the Czech singers – at the given time, 1972, from the group Byzantion – had as few problems as possible in understanding them).

Another illustration of Old-Slavic chant is the first half of the "Svjat" (Sanctus):

Although the Czech lands were civilized by the Byzantine Empire, Latin musical tradition soon took root there and remained present until today, as also in the neighbouring regions. "Homophony of chords" seems to be an efficient technique and isons, and it is possible to include diatonic bases with an augmented second, as in the Byzantine *echos varys* or in some Armenian modes. In order not allow sacred music to degenerate into a certain charming folklore, it is recommended to use the ison and oriental tonalities until such time when their application is rid of any flavour of exoticism. From the musical point of view it is possible, but – after 40 years of atheist totalitarism when any aspect of religious culture was either hidden or presented just as folklore – these two aspects require considerable time for their possible integration into being accepted as prayer, as a devout elevation of the mind to God.

References

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