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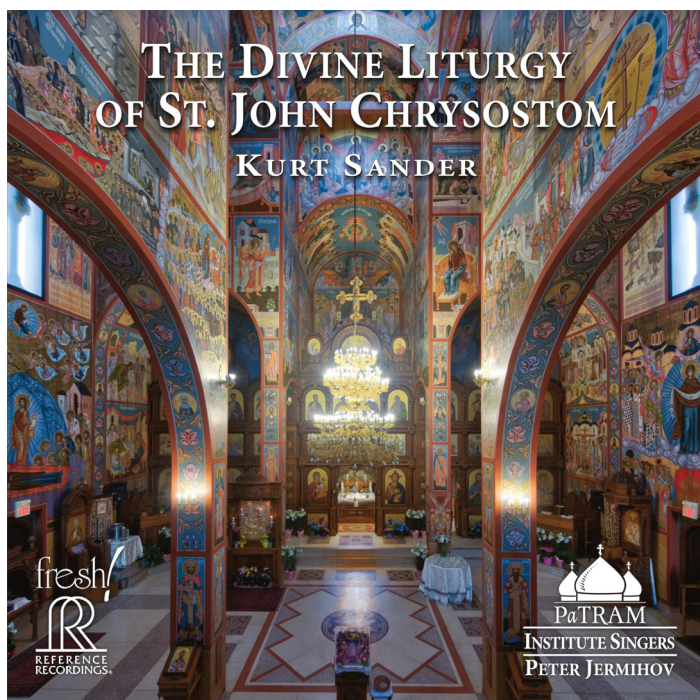
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NEW LITURGY - FAMILIAR ATMOSPHERE

Kurt Sander: The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom
PaTRAM Institute Singers/Peter Jermihov
2019
Reference Recordings FR-713

Kurt Sander's recently released setting of the Liturgy brings out the feeling of Orthodox choral music of the golden age of pre-revolutionary Russia. The composition is in general stylistically rather conventional, reflecting the history of Slavic choral tradition, which is combined closely with musical features of our time. It is obvious that this composition has been written for liturgical use in a local culture and from the very beginning one grasps the aim of creating a familiar liturgical soundscape where the history and musical features of our time meet each other. In the notes the composer sheds light on his background and how he "explored ways in which Orthodox aesthetics could be integrated into the compositional process". This also happened within non-liturgical instrumental compositions, but is clearly and logically an inseparable dimension of this process. Nevertheless, one must also recall that he has a long history of composing liturgical music for the services of the local Orthodox communities.



In the booklet notes, reference is made to several great composers such as Tchaikovsky, Grechaninov and Rachmaninov as the roots of this Liturgy. The composition is even drawn parallel to the works of these masters, which sets the bar very high. I am not sure if it does justice to the work, though I understand it as a way of expressing its quality. On the other side, I would like to note some Orthodox composers in the Western world such as Nikolay Kedrov Sr (France), Fr Sergei Glagolev (USA),

Pyotr Akimov and Leonid Bashmakov (Finland). They all lived to a great extent in a similar cultural environment. They composed new liturgical music for the use of local people knowing both the tradition and the needs of the parishes they were involved in. The similarity to this Liturgy is not necessarily directly musical but rather resides in the way of approaching Orthodox choral tradition from the local standpoint.

The compositional process and its realization are discussed in detail in the booklet. The composer confirms the liturgical aim of the setting but his idea of how to achieve this is not perhaps the usual one. He emphasizes the “litanies, responses, the short one-sentence utterances as the fiber that holds the work together”. At first a surprising emphasis of approaching the wholeness of the setting works in fact very well. It does not mean that other parts would be less important or musically too light, but rather prevents them from being overplayed in the context of the whole service. In Orthodox music there is no lack of Cherubic hymns or settings of the Eucharistic canon of good quality, but as regards many other elements of the Liturgy the situation is not necessarily the same.

This setting of the Liturgy is a complete service forming a coherent whole. The role of the previously mentioned short verses and responses as a structural fibre is very obvious. For instance, in the litanies the harmonies and their tonal tensions form a unity with the recitatives, creating a strong feeling of progress; that does not happen in the choral parts but in the deacon’s contributions. Static recitatives both give time to adopt the preceding harmonies and at the same time create expectations for the following choral sections.

Kurt Sander clearly emphasizes the harmony as a means of moving the verses and hymns forwards. This is no surprise, given his impressive professional skills. The verses are built up by long chains of harmonic tensions and their resolutions, which create a strong feeling of progress. Tonally they are very well structured and fit the text perfectly. The range of harmonic solutions begins from pre-revolutionary stylistic features that meet with contemporary features such as multi-tonal harmonies. One can find points of resemblance either in the music of Grechaninov or of Eric Whitacre.

As much as this is one of the most appreciated characteristics of the composition, it is also in a way its burden. In many of the longer hymns, the melodic elements tend to be drowned under the heavy harmonic structure. Often, a clear melodic line cannot be perceived and I cannot help but wish that there could be more space for the melody in many places, in place of the chains of constantly changing harmonic tensions. A good example is the Cherubic Hymn, in which the clear and intense melody in the beginning is buried under the harmony. I would say that a stronger melodic profile might give an anchor point for the harmonies and even reinforce the grounds of using them within the chosen compositional style. I think, for example, of the liturgical compositions of the Ukrainian Tatyana Iashvili (1980–),¹ which often have similar features in the “orchestral” use of harmony but with a stronger emphasis on the melody, which gives, I think, a more solid structure.

Of course, the whole compositional style can be regarded as (and is) intentionally chosen and historically it is not by any means unprecedented. In the so called first school of St Petersburg,² liturgical music was often based more on the harmonic structure and the melodies were formed more on the basis of how the harmonic

1 <http://ikliros.com/category/kompozitorraspev-obrabotka/yashvili-t>

2 Johann von Gardner, *Gesang der Russisch-Orthodoxen Kirche*, 1984.

functions followed each other. Also, if I think about participating myself in the service, my opinion about the compositional solutions might conceivably change. The music takes a step toward a liturgical soundscape and in that regard one perhaps does not miss this when simply listening to it.

One of the unquestionable advantages of this composition is the starting point of the commission. As it was written at the request of Peter Jermihov, it was obvious that it would be performed and recorded by a professional choir, the PaTRAM Institute singers. As Kurt Sander has a long history in the Orthodox Church of the "diaspora", he knows perhaps too well the reality of the limited local resources of singers and their random skills. Here he could forget this for a while and have free entry to a "candy store". The whole range of a mixed choir was available, ranging with Glenn Miller's *basso profondo* to the brightest sopranos. The result is truly outstanding. The choir sings under Peter Jermihov's direction as though in the most solemn cathedral services, in a simultaneously restrained but sophisticated way with a fresh and open sound. There is also no sign of the overplayed nuances or lavish vibratos of the Russian choirs of years past. Jermihov's sense of the "rhythm" of the service plays a remarkable role in the recording as a whole.

Kurt Sander's Liturgy as a whole is delightful. Only by pressing "play" does one enter into the atmosphere of a solemn service a cathedral, and the choir plays a great role in creating this feeling. Though I would not raise this composition to the level of Rachmaninov or Grechaninov, it has a justified status as a remarkable liturgical choral work of our time.

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