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THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF A CHURCH MUSICIAN

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Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Col 3:16-17)

In the Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Colossians, we may find "word and deed", but also "singing". Why is singing, why is music, so important in the Church?

"Music does something that words cannot. It goes to the deepest point of who we are, the centre of our person. It is a quintessential part of what it means to worship God, to be able to sing to God", says Archimandrite Sergius of St Tikhon's monastery. Metropolitan Hilarion of Eastern America and New York (ROCOR) reminds us of a unique historical event: "Through music, through beauty many people come to the church, come to the faith. This is what happened more than 1000 years ago, with the envoys of Prince Vladimir of Kiev. They attended services in the St Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople, and they were overwhelmed by the beauty and grandeur of the divine services." These pagans, having seen the glorious temple, the multitude of priests and deacons with all their movements and sizeable choirs chanting at the divine service, returned then to Kiev and told Prince Vladimir, "we no longer knew whether we were in heaven or on earth."

This played an important role in bringing Rus into the Orthodox Christian faith. And church music today also plays an important missionary role in converting many people to Orthodoxy.

In Serbia, after a long period of communism, from the late 1980s and 90s, church choirs became more and more popular, especially among young people. In my choir founded in 1987, St Stephen of Dečani (Novi Sad), more than 400 mostly young people joined throughout the years; one third of them were baptized after joining the choir. That says a lot about the important mission of church music in today's Serbia. We had the Bishop's blessing to let unbaptized people sing in church choir at the liturgy and other services (as long as they were preparing for baptism).

"Music was the first consolation that Heaven sent to Man after the Fall", wrote the Serbian Bishop St Varnava (Nastić)¹. It brings the importance of music even further as it becomes a means on our path to Salvation.

¹ Russian text available: "О музыке" ("About Music"), writings of St Varnava, accessed September 29, 2020, <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/29886.html>



Figure 1. A fresco depicting church choir leaders.
(Photograph supplied by author.)

There are examples of church art that illustrate the importance of church musicians in the early ages. In beautiful frescos in fourteenth century Serbian monasteries (Patriarchate of Peć in Kosovo and St Mark's monastery in North Macedonia) we see how the church choir leaders (protopsaltes) wear special head coverings that differentiate them from the rest of the congregation.



Figures 2 and 3. A fresco and its detail depicting church choir leaders.
(Photographs supplied by author.)

Bishop Basil of Wichita and Mid-America (Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America) reminds us that "there are few ministries of the Church that require the devotion and the dedication that church singing does. The church conductors and church singers are as important to the parish as is the holy table itself. As there can be no liturgy without the holy table, there can be no liturgy without them." In his opinion it is sinful for someone not to sing who has been given the gift to sing. Singing in the church is a ministry, a kind of ordination. Canon 15, from the Council of Nicaea, the Council of the fourth century, makes it clear that only canonical singers should be appointed for that kind of ministry in the Church.

That ordination, even if it is not a question of ordained clergy, implies a great responsibility, a great sense of duty and a privilege that is given to a church singer. Bishop Basil reminds the singers that they physically jump into something that goes on perpetually.

We jump in and join with the angels for a couple of hours, and then we jump back out. The liturgy does not begin with ‘Blessed is the Kingdom’ and your ‘Amen’, and it does not end with ‘Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers’ and your ‘Amen’. Those phrases only define the time that we participate in the liturgy which goes on perpetually before the throne of God.

Standing before the throne of God humbles, I hope, all of us church musicians. It is a humiliation, that in the end, should be something that elevates us, that exalts us, something that gives us wing. The choir leads the congregation in prayer. The invitation to prayer is put out by the deacon or archdeacon. The deacon invites prayer, but the choir leads the congregation in the prayer itself. “Choir leading requires self-motivation and humility, a delicate, yet crucial balance. Humility is a life-long process of learning! As with many people in other professions, they don’t always go together”, says Father Sergei Glagolev.

A church choir leader should be competent and have a great knowledge (not just essentials) of music, but also know well the order of church services. Being well organized in order to prepare music settings for each service is just one of the qualities that is required from a church conductor. Apart from many professional music tasks, a church conductor must not forget about his/her spiritual dimension, even if not much time is left for personal prayer. The Fathers say that there are many prayers suitable for the preparation for a service, but “now lay aside all earthly cares” is especially recommended. It is important that a conductor is an example for the singers, in many aspects. An ideal example is St John of Damascus, who was a trained poet, musician and theologian.



Figure 4. Old Church book illustration. (Photograph supplied by author.)

Bishop Basil warns us that “we cannot buy humility; we cannot merely appear to be contrite. Humility and contrition are states of the heart and soul that then manifest themselves in the behaviour of body and attitude, and words, and psalmody. But, there is no choir practice to rehearse humility. They are things that we need to work on individually. Then, we join our individual humility and contriteness in the beauty of singing, that comes to the listeners/congregation, in a most beautiful and mysterious way. When God accepts your offering, He does not keep it. He will take it, transform it, and send it back to touch the hearts, and the minds and the souls of

you and your congregants." The object of our worship is not the congregation but God Himself, and we do things well for Him. Everyone else may benefit, but they cannot be and must not be our consideration. Our consideration is that we offer God our best. That means the best in sound, the best in taste.

It is beautifully explained by Bishop Basil: "...for the church singer it is not (only) the tenor, alto, or soprano who stands next to you we need to listen to, but the angels who lead us in our singing. Those are the voices we need to hear and with which we blend our voices." Music is not enough, without faith and Liturgy it's nothing. Orthodox life is, by definition, a liturgical life. "The key is the turning of the heart to Christ, no matter what we are doing and where we are. The Liturgy provides the model", says Father Sergei Glagolev.

A short quotation from the Serbian Bishop Atanasije (Jevtić), "theology is at the kliros", indicates how important and meaningful text is in church music, and therefore also singing those texts.

The devotion of church musician should be appreciated and encouraged by priests and congregation, and sometimes it is. I remember from personal experience how the late Bishop Sava (Vuković) of Šumadija (Serbian Orthodox Church) did not want to sit at table for lunch after a liturgy before the church choir had been seated. That gesture was precisely a way to mark the special place and importance of church musicians.

Musical knowledge, promptness and dedication, blending of voices etc. are important, but we need also to speak about humility and contrition. The holy fathers do not write about beautiful voices, but about humility and contrition.

St John Chrysostom teaches that we "ought to offer up doxologies to God with fear and a contrite heart, in order that they may be welcome, like fragrant incense." Either humility or contrition has come up in almost every quotation from the canons. Most parts of the Canons that deal with singing in church, refer to "forcing nature", i.e. the loudness and manner of singing. St Meletios the Confessor says: "Prayer with musical chants and melodies, loudly voiced tumult and shouting is heard by men; but before God our Maker, the prayer which proceeds from a man's conscience and God-imbued intellect stands before God as a welcome guest, while the former is cast out." There are choirs which make "loudly voiced tumult and shouting." This quotation from St Meletios does not imply that aesthetic beauty is the only criterion for chanting. A choir needs be as aesthetically perfect as it is able, because God not only expects, but He accepts only our best. If our best sounds like "a loudly voiced tumult and shouting." but it is indeed our best, then God hears us. It is a matter of ability, but sometimes a matter of taste, which is difficult, even impossible to discuss.

St Simon, the founder of Simonos Petra Monastery on Mount Athos says that "at church services we should chant with solemnity and devoutness, and not with disorderly vociferation." If we listen to various types of praising God through singing, we may find some "loud" performances, which are very deep and close to God in their own manner. Such is the singing of the Don Cossack choir, led by Serge Jaroff. There is a certain "émigré sentimentality" in their interpretation, with acceptable and understandable "loudness", coming from the great tragedy of being expelled from their own country and the sadness that it produced. Another acoustic level of that same emotion might be heard in the recordings of the St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral Choir in Paris. It is not loud, but at some moments there is a sound close to weeping in their performance. But even with this excessive

emotionality in sound and expression, it is understandable and produces more than a suitable interpretation for a church service.

In the singing of the famous St Sergius Trinity Lavra male choir, led by the famous Archimandrite Matfey Mormyl we may notice certain tendencies, such as sudden changes in dynamics. But, in the words of one of his students, conductor-regent Vladimir Gorbik, it is well explained: "When you listen to this choir, only one thing comes to mind: the triumph of Orthodoxy. He demanded of his singers a combination of professionalism and spirituality. It is specifically because of this that you got a completely stunning effect." One of today's most appreciated church choirs, the male choir of Sretensky monastery in Moscow, has a somewhat different style of performance, more balanced, but also rich in musical expression. Ways of performance change through time and circumstances, even in the sacred art which is outlined by the canons of the Church.

I have experienced an unpleasant sound from some church choirs, though they were singing quite suitable settings at services; and I have also heard prayerful and spiritually uplifting performances of sacred music in concert halls, where the spirituality could be heard and felt in the most complex concert settings. It is not the music itself, the setting, the arrangement or the type of music (unison or four-part) that uplifts the spirit: it is the interpretation. How skilled and yet how humble the performer is.

How to sing, how to choose the repertoire for the service? What is suitable, liturgical, and may it be beautiful at the same time? We may find answers in the Canons that speak about sacred images (the Council in Nicaea in the eighth century, which dealt with the iconoclasts, has 22 Canons, and three of them speak about sacred images). "The composition of religious imagery is not left to the initiative of the artist, but is formed upon principles laid down by the Catholic Church and by religious tradition... The execution alone belongs to the painter, the selection and arrangement of subject belongs to the Fathers." The Seventh Ecumenical Council, Nicaea II, set an historic precedent by validating the use of sacred images in our churches and our homes. But the Church has never established an "official" style of sacred art. While there have been manuals written for artists by other artists to guide them in creating sacred art, there is, as far as we know, no written instruction with the authority of the Church, that dictates how an artist is to create sacred imagery. The same is true of church music, whose performance too, belongs to the artist.

It is, therefore, all the more important that the artist who dedicates his or her gifts to the creation of sacred art, be thoroughly grounded in the faith and the artistic traditions of the past. It is a mystery, art in the Church. The esteemed movie director Andrey Tarkovski expressed many times his thoughts about responsibility, sacrifice and importance of the artist in this world: "The crucial question of man's existence is his consciousness of himself as a spiritual being"; or "An artist who has no faith is like a painter who was born blind"; or "The idea of infinity cannot be expressed in words or even described, but it can be apprehended through art, which makes infinity tangible. The absolute is only attainable through faith and in the creative act"...

Let us remind ourselves of an astounding mosaic from a mediaeval church in Ravenna (sixth century), where the presentation of Our Lord's Transfiguration is quite unusual.

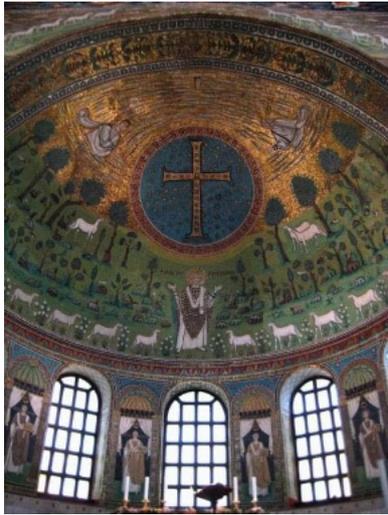


Figure 5. Ravenna mosaics.
(Photograph supplied by author.)

In some commentaries on the Canons we may find that “trills and an excessive variation or modulation in melodies” are not suitable for church services. The misunderstanding starts when we try to understand these words literally and without exception.

St John Koukouzelis, the reformer of Byzantine chant, whose renewed way of chanting endured until the beginning of the nineteenth century, enriched and refreshed Byzantine music with the “papadic” style. It is characterized by its wide melodic scope, described and explained in his book “The Great Ison of Papadic Chant. This famous textbook from the fifteenth century was called the “whip for singers”, because many novelties in singing and in modulations were difficult to execute as they required virtuosity. However,

it was suitable for church services, without any doubt, even with ornaments and modulations. The interpretation is what is important, not the presence of modulations or ornaments, not the way a chant was composed, whether it is unison or four-part, or sung by “loud” male choirs. It is about the presence of contrition and humility in the performance of church music, not about its form or style.

A wholeness that comes from humility and contrition in harmony with considerable musical knowledge is what makes a good church conductor, as vividly described in an anecdote: the Serbian Patriarch Pavle, once after a liturgy said to a young boy at the kliros: You are not a good chanter. The boy replied, self-confidently: Your Holiness, every bird sings with its own voice. Then the Patriarch answered: Yes, but in the forest, not in the church.

Father John Meyendorff writes: “In Orthodoxy, theology and art are inseparable”, and also: “The words and the music together form a whole which is greater than the sum of the parts in our music”. Therefore, some expressive elements of music, like dynamics, are not only suitable, but also desirable, if they are done according to the text and not merely to express someone’s own personal taste. Chanting with understanding and contrition and submitting ourselves to the text. Choir singers should submit themselves to the director and directors submit themselves and the choir to the text.

Should we encourage more participation by the congregation, and if so, how might this best be accomplished? We understand the reality that some people prefer to stand in silence while the clergy and choir engage in dialogue. In some churches it is forbidden to sing with the choir, while in some the whole congregation sings plainchant. Church conductors sometimes find themselves with a problem, which is, more or less, a result of the lack of communication with the parish priest. The priest wants to include more people in the parish life and engage non-singers in services. He even sometimes invites people to sing who will never come to a rehearsal. They just show up. That is a nightmare for any conductor. It would be ideal for church services that those who know the music sing louder and those who do not sing softer and listen more, so that everyone takes part. But in reality, it is not easy at all to accomplish. Father Sergei Glagolev says there are three liturgical sounds: Trained choir (must be rehearsed); entire congregation; and the cantors.

There is room for everyone, but they must be balanced. Good organization and good communication between conductor and a priest is needed.

In the past, church music was performed only as a part of a church service. In modern times, it is also performed at concerts very often. There are pros and cons with this practice and there are suggestions that I, as a conductor, have also heard from the clergy, as to which hymns could be sung at concerts and which hymns should not.

In my opinion, performing sacred music in concerts is an invitation to the divine service which we send to the audience. At concerts we invite people to church. A divine service is the only suitable frame for church music. On the other hand: how can concerts of sacred music serve as real missionary work? Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev), who is also a composer and author of several oratorios on Orthodox texts, says that he writes concert settings on the texts from the Holy Week services, because it is necessary to explain in all possible ways the complex meaning of Holy Week to modern man. Such concerts are real missionary work. And yet, liturgy and subsequently singing at the liturgy is the centre of a church musician's life. "Every service in the Church and every word of liturgical prayer has the potential to become an encounter with God", says Metropolitan Hilarion. It is the task of us in the Church to reveal this to others.

It is not easy to endure being a highly competent musician and a humble person at the same time, and that exactly is what is required of a church conductor. May this wise thought – a question asked by Father Miloš Vesin from the Serbian Church in Chicago – be guidance for every church conductor in acquiring spiritual dimension: "Do you have the strength to be but a link in a chain?"