

Sacred Music: The Servant of the Word
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The Liturgy is the service for the whole community, the people of God, so the music must be above the particular tastes and whims of any one segment of that community. From an Orthodox point of view, it would be just as absurd to think of a “folk liturgy,” “a jazz liturgy,” “a classical liturgy,” as to think of a “businessman’s liturgy,” “a teenage liturgy,” or an “old folk’s liturgy.”

Why?

In the early Church, sacred music was often called “the handmaid of the Liturgy,” or the “servant of the Word.” This means that the sacred text – the Biblical canticles, Psalms, Litanies, Hymns – were the primary source of inspiration in liturgical worship. Music was considered appropriate when it “served” the text and amplified the words of the sacred psalms and hymns.

Liturgical function of music

The worship services of the Orthodox Church are “liturgical,” i.e., they have a concrete form and plan which is culminated in the Divine Liturgy. The liturgy itself is comprised of litanies, prayers, hymns, readings, processions, etc. The music that is written for the Liturgy should take into account the various functions of the hymns.

For example, the hymns in the first part of the Liturgy (Antiphons, Beatitudes, Troparia) are meant to teach the faithful. St. Paul directed the Christians at Colossae to “let the word of Christ dwell in you as you teach one another...singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” Clearly then, the music that is used for these hymns should be such that the faithful can learn, can comprehend the texts.

The “Alleluia” is a hymn that clearly relates to its setting in the Liturgy. The word means “praise the Lord” and in the Hebrew, the word itself contains also the word for God. (The Hebrew words, Alleluia and Amen have never been translated into any language.) In the Orthodox Liturgy, the Alleluia is sung: 1) at the conclusion of the hymn “O Come Let Us Worship” when in the Episcopal Liturgy the bishop proceeds from the center of the church to the altar, the throne of God; 2) before the reading of the Gospel, as an announcement to the reading of the Word of God; 3) at the conclusion of the Cherubic Hymn when the Gifts are brought to the throne of God; and 4) at the conclusion of the Communion Hymn when the celebrants and then the faithful have received Communion.

This association of the Alleluia with the throne of God, the Word, and the Holy Communion was not overlooked by our early church composers. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the chants of our Church, the Alleluia Hymns are very melodic and in a musical sense, the most developed.

It is significant that the melodies for the litanies, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer are very simple, for the most part, because the whole congregation is expected to participate. "In peace let *us* pray to the Lord" and we respond "Lord have mercy." "...in wisdom let *us* attend" and *we* affirm "The Creed." "...that with boldness and without condemnation *we* may dare to call on Thee, the heavenly God as Father, and to say: "and *we* chant "The Lord's Prayer."

"Let the servant of Christ sing so that he pleases (God), not through his voice, but through the words which he pronounces," wrote St. Jerome.

This approach to an understanding of church music does not rule out the concept of beauty in music, but it does exclude "music for the sake of music." It rather introduces an additional criterion for the evaluation of church music – not only must the music "sound" good, but it must adequately give expression to the text. Church music that is considered to be good will not only sound well but, more important, it will "fill the singer with the Holy Spirit," as St. John Chrysostom once said.