

"Liturgical Harmony: The Communicative Role of Music in Orthodox Worship" by Kurt Sander

The following is a transcript of a lecture given at the Russian Orthodox Church Musicians Conference in Washington D.C., October 1999

When I began to prepare for this lecture, my initial plan was to talk about the delicate balance that exists between music and text and how these elements unite to communicate a central spiritual idea. This is an obvious concern for those of us who sing or conduct church choirs and certainly an understanding of this is essential if we are to fulfill our roles faithfully. But, during the course of my preparation, I found my focus changing--gradually growing beyond the confines of this one relationship and more toward the interaction that occurs between all of the liturgical arts. (the icons, the architecture, the hymnography, and so forth.). If we examine the way in which these elements are created and utilized, we see that they all embody similar underlying principles rooted in the Orthodox faith. Whether the medium is paint or pitches the fundamental starting points are essentially the same, and thus they are unified in their expressions. So I decided to talk about this phenomenon which I call "liturgical harmony" that is, that harmonious communication which takes place during our services when we experience these arts together.

St. Paul tells us to be "filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19)." Most assuredly, he understood the reciprocal relationship between music and liturgy, and the ability for music to convey what cannot be experienced through the spoken word alone. In reading St. Paul's directive with contemporary eyes, however, we might be troubled in that we find few accepted paradigms within the category we call "sacred music." Is it really possible, for example, to speak to one another musically when language, style, and function are so broadly applied? Can we express a common spiritual idea when one church's praise might be another's profanity? The differences run deep. A study of the music of both Eastern and Western liturgical traditions reveals more than simple dialectical variations within a single aesthetic principle. Fundamental differences exist, not only in what kind of music is called "sacred," but more importantly, in how music functions in the context of worship.

So rather than simply talking about music and text, I will instead talk a little bit

about the underlying features of liturgical harmony and how music plays its part in the process. I will also show how the misuse or misunderstanding of this relationship, as it has occurred in the West, can undermine the very nature of worship and the true understanding of the faith.

As Orthodox musicians we do not need to be convinced that Music is a necessary component of Christian worship. References to sacred chant in the early Christian experience provide important testimony to the perceived role of music as the communicator of a spiritual message. Even in the infancy of the Church St. Paul tells us to be "filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19)." Evidently, he understood the superiority of the chanted over the spoken word. In reading St. Paul's directive with contemporary eyes, however, we might be troubled in that we find few accepted paradigms within the category we call "sacred music." Is it really possible, for example, to speak to one another musically when language, style, and function are so broadly applied? Can we express a common spiritual idea when one church's praise might be another's profanity? The differences run deep. A study of the music of both Eastern and Western liturgical traditions reveals more than simple dialectical variations within a single aesthetic principle. Fundamental differences exist, not only in what kind of music is called "sacred," but more importantly, in how music functions in the context of worship. The artistic condition of today's heterodox denominations is barely a reflection of St. Paul's idea of sacred music. The liturgical harmony that it once possessed has today deteriorated into a kind of liturgical isolation in that art and music exist in autonomous states-often functioning only as decorations or interludes within the spoken parts of the service.

This kind of an approach is foreign to Orthodox worship where art and music must never be self-referential or self-serving, but rather must constitute a part of the liturgical whole. Good Orthodox music is not simply music which by itself enriches the senses, but rather is that music that, together with the other elements of the service, enriches the spirit not only through the senses, but also through the mind and the heart. This is the nature of liturgical harmony and unless we understand how these arts come together as a single function, we are prone to commit the same errors that have and continually afflict the West.

Now before we can understand the nature of liturgical harmony, we must be clear about the terms we use to describe it, for our words are the communicators

of our traditions. I think one of the problems that we face as English-speaking Orthodox is that we are dependent on a language that continues to develop outside of our our faith. Consequently, when we are describing the attributes of our unchanging faith, we are dependent on a changing language and thus vulnerable to possible misperceptions and misinterpretations.

Take the word beauty, for example. We often use this word to describe the splendor our church services. But if we look carefully at the word "beauty" as it is employed today, we find that by itself, it says very little. It can just as easily be used to describe a Monet painting, a Verdi aria, or even a sunny afternoon at the park. So when we say that our Orthodox choral music or our iconography is beautiful, are we really saying anything specific about it beyond the fact that it pleases our senses? .Of course, we internally recognize the differences between a Monet painting and an icon, but when we try to describe them, our words often fail us-since their meanings are not clear.

With the use of the word beauty, I think it's best to go back to its Classical definition. Philosophers used to interpret the word beauty to mean an appreciation of an object's conformity to natural and harmonious proportions-in other words, it reflects the features of the natural world--things like balance, symmetry, grace, light and dark contrasts, and so forth. The natural look of the Mona Lisa, for example, is unquestionably beautiful, the symmetrical phrases of a Haydn string quartet are also quite beautiful, mathematicians say that they can even see the beauty of a complex equation or formula. In all of these cases, beauty derives from conditioned paradigms as we experience them in nature-- beauty is something we can understand. We can recognize it, we can make sense of it, and we find its attributes familiar and sensually pleasing.

When describing Orthodox art and music, however, we cannot look at beauty alone for the Church considers 'beauty' as only one aspect of its aesthetic. More important is what Orthodox scholars call the sublime. Unlike beauty, the sublime deals not with the natural charm of this world, but rather with the mystery of the spiritual world. Where beauty is rooted in this world and makes an immediate impact on our senses, sublimity looks to convey those things which are a mystery to us by using elements that run contrary to our reason-contrary to natural phenomena.

We most clearly find this expression in icons where saints and holy events are

not depicted with the natural and humanistic perspective found the West. Instead, the painter of an icon might intentionally distort the attributes of natural beauty -the perspective, the color, the bodily features--all in order to direct the viewer's thoughts away from this world and more toward the spiritual world. In such cases, these distortions act to repel us momentarily, then allow us to engage the more important elements within the image, free from a critical preoccupation of a works conformity to natural or realistic depiction. In other words, we experience in the sublime an emotional resignation to that which we can not reason out.

Now how is this kind of experience depicted musically? Well the clearest way to answer this question is to remember that beauty is often a measure of balance, symmetry, found in perceivable patterns and proportions. This symmetry is quite common in Western music. As in art, the West, became fascinated with symmetry as an organizational principle in music shortly after the Renaissance. The reforms of Northern Europe brought about appearance of the Protestant hymn --a simple, four part, chorale designed for congregational singing. Hymns, as most of us know, exhibit symmetrical phrase lengths with balanced harmonic relationships all of which reflect the inherent metrical structure and rhyme scheme of the poetic text. Because they are so symmetrical, they are easy to sing, easy to interpret, and often quite beautiful.

Play example of Schubert's "Son of God Most Holy"

We can easily hear the symmetry of this work. We can also hear the balance of phrases and rhyme scheme. If you're anything like me, you probably felt a bit of discomfort when I faded the final phrase away too soon. This feeling reveals our mind's natural desire to hear the internal pattern fulfilled. Now we can certainly admit that this chorale is beautiful, but as beautiful it is, it does not evoke the same kind of spiritual feelings as does an Orthodox choral work--primarily because everything in this hymn adheres to natural proportions, balance, and grace.

Now I would like to play an example of the sublimity that is found in Orthodox music. This is a recording of a 17th century chant setting of "Svete Tikhi" or "Gladsome Light" from the Vespers service. Notice that, unlike the Schubert chorale, this work has no symmetrical phrases, no harmonic balance, and no poetic meter. Even the phrases themselves are carried over (one to another) to

produce a seamless and sublime effect.

PLAY Sviete Tikhi

Many people wonder how we as Orthodox feel joy in hymns like this that are so solemn and dark. If we were to tell them that this hymn begins with the words "O Gladsome Light" they might feel even more bewildered. That is because to the Western mind, there is a natural relationship between joyful feelings and joyful music. Inevitably, we must remember that sublime responses, by definition, are unnatural--they do conform to worldly logic. Beauty can never express the unnatural and sublime joy that emerges from musical solemnity. St. John Climacus writes of this experience in his Ladder of Divine Ascent saying, "I find myself amazed by the way in which inward joy and gladness mingle with what we call mourning and grief. . .[in this] there is a real pleasure in the soul, since God secretly brings consolation to those who in their heart of hearts are repentant. "

Here in these words do we find an answer to the use of sublimity in Orthodox music. The joy is not of this world, but of the next--a reflection of the Grace of God communicated through sublimity. Where beauty entices us and delights our senses, sublimity evokes contrition. Many of us understand this feeling primarily because it is an essential part of our faith. So when we hear the resounding minor chords of a Cherubic Hymn, for example, we do not feel earthly despondency or despair, but rather we look beyond natural reactions and instead sense a bittersweet knowledge of our redemption from sin.

So we see that the sublime in music can occur when a work does not conform to natural balance and proportional phrase lengths, and also in the meeting of joy and sadness-emotional polarities that combine to elicit a sense of the spiritual.

One final aspect of sublimity that I wish to mention concerns the way our Divine services minimize our sense of natural or worldly time. We, as Orthodox see time as part of the natural world, something created by God. Since worship is not "of this world" but rather a model of the eternal world, the various components within the liturgy strive to convey this sense of timelessness. You may have heard the terms "liturgical time" or "eternal present"

used to describe this perceptual phenomenon which we all most likely have experienced to some degree over the course of our services. It is something inherently Orthodox.

In the West this concept has been lost from centuries of artistic negligence and misuse. Many Protestants or Roman Catholics, for example, would pause at the prospect of attending a four-hour service. Yet, the Orthodox are able to stand through a Paschal celebration without being overly preoccupied with its temporal length. How is this done? Well, Primarily it is again a product of liturgical harmony-that is, the result of each element working toward a mutual atemporal goal.

Even upon entering an Orthodox church, for example, one senses this "eternal present" in the relative squareness of its interior. Unlike the long linear designs of Western gothic cathedrals, the geometric equilibrium inherent in many of our churches evokes a sense of immediacy and direct involvement with the essence of the service. When we listen to the texts of our hymns we find that they also convey the concept of the eternal in that they are usually set in the present tense. Because of this, we interpret our feast days not as historical occurrences that happened once many centuries ago, but rather we treat them as living events which are just as relevant today as they were when they first occurred.

Just to give you an example of the differences between the two approaches. . . I'd like to compare two musical texts from an typical Nativity service-one which might be found in a Western Christmas service, the other which is sung at all Orthodox celebrations of the Nativity.

The first text is taken from a well-known carol "The First Noel" which often appears as a congregational anthem in Protestant services. In this carol, you will notice that the entire first stanza exhibits a third-person narrative of the Nativity event. Furthermore, all of the verbs in this stanza are in the past tense describing the Nativity as an event of the past. Only in the last phrase of the chorus do we finally hear of Christ's birth as having a present and immediate significance.

Now if we look to the other text (the Kontakion to the Nativity), we find a much

different perspective. All of the words in this text are in the present tense. The Kontakion even begins with the word 'today' to further emphasize our perceptions of an eternal present.

Now I am not here to condemn some of our favorite Christmas carols. I, like many of you, happen to love singing them. Yet as much as we may enjoy this particular carol, I think it is important to understand why they do not carry the same theological and liturgical weight as the Nativity kontakion of Orthodox Church. The carol is essentially a commentary whereas the kontakion is an active participation, bringing us into the event as participators, not observers.

So we see that both architecture and text promote feelings of liturgical time. But as mentioned earlier, all of the elements in the service facilitate this perception. Icons, for example, evoke a sense of eternity in how they appear in partial abstraction-removed from excessive environmental detail which denotes a particular place and time, and free from a heightened sense of movement which also elicits thoughts of future and past events. By portraying these figures and events simply and statically, the observer of the icon is essentially free from distracting and temporal reference points.

If we look carefully at this first painting by an anonymous Dutch painter of the late 15th century, we can see the many features that contribute to our perception of time. First of all, we see that the environment is quite detailed with hills, a forest, and even a European-style castle in the background. If that weren't enough to promote a specific time and place, we also find a great deal of implied activity which causes our perception to focus on prior and future events.

1. For example, the unscriptural portrayal of the Virgin Mary collapsed from the trauma of the Crucifixion, we are prone to project the prior moments that may have contributed to this, and we may anticipate future events that may come about in the moments following this portrayal.

2. Another example which promotes temporal perception is found in the pockets of activity that are found throughout the painting (men in the trees, the men in horses, the women beyond the hill). These are all distractions which causes one to create independent scenarios as to what is happening and what might happen in the future.

If we look at an icon of the same scene, we can see how very different it is. Unlike the previous painting, the surrounding environment in this icon is quite sparse requiring our attention to be on the event itself. The figures here are also static--that is to say, they are not painted in a course of motion which would hint at linear time. Contrary to what some might believe, the simplicity and flatness of the icon is not the result of poor or undeveloped technique. Rather it is a deliberately sublime depiction of the stillness and timelessness of eternity--something that runs contrary to the natural beauty of this world.

So we see that both hymnography and iconography evoke a sublime sense of timelessness. But what about music? How is timelessness conveyed musically?

Of all the liturgical arts, music is the most time dependent. While there is no way not to rely on time as a musician, there are ways in which time can be deemphasized in our singing. Russian Orthodox music historian Olga Dolskaya-Ackerly correctly comments that there is no such thing as beat in our choral music, only pulse. In other words, beat in music is often wedded to its meter. In Western music we have strong beats, weak beats, upbeats, down beats, syncopated beats and so forth. All of these categorizations are derived from a beat's placement within a particular meter, usually triple meter or duple meter. Meter, to our senses, is nothing more than a logical pattern of organized time and we experience it as we do the passing of seconds and minutes. Currently the majority of music in Western denominations is metrical. And as pleasing as it may be, sadly it represents a loss of mystery in their services.

I'd like to play for you an example of a typical anthem that might appear in a Sunday morning service. This is a choral work entitled Sing Alleluia Sing. Pay close attention to the meter of the work and how it influences your perceptions.

PLAY EXAMPLE ONE

Because time is a naturally occurring phenomenon, we can consider meter, like the meter of this particular work, to be a manifestation of natural beauty in music. But as beautiful as this work might be, it cannot convey the sublime aspect of timelessness like what you might find in the choral music of Orthodoxy.

I would like you now to listen to the simple and free moving text of the Tone 2 "Lord I Have Cried" from the Vespers service. In this chant, you will hear that there is no meter, only pulse. The result is a sense of timelessness and the eternal.

PLAY EXAMPLE TWO

Like this chant, much of our music is not regulated by beat or meter, but rather by the intrinsic pulse of the text. If a chant-based composition is notated in a meter, it is usually done out of practical reasons--a way for keeping the choir together--most conductors will not let the meter control the music, but rather the underlying text. We as church musicians should also be careful that we do not emphasize meter for when we do, we are expressing worldly aspects of time.

This brings me to my last point about liturgical harmony which concerns the role of us as individuals in the choir and how we can convey these sublime expressions without interference--for liturgical harmony is grounded in function--and this function must never be altered. The best way that we can preserve liturgical harmony is by approaching our art with selflessness, that is with humility and caring. Despite the fact that our icons are painted by individuals and our choral works are written and sung by individuals, there is no place for personalized expression in our Orthodox services. Liturgical harmony does not depend on worldly feelings. Time and time again we are told by the saints to beware of placing too much weight in such feelings, our own desires and moods, for they can consume us if we are not careful.

And certainly we find that this warning has been heeded in our Orthodox artistic traditions. If we look at the tradition of iconography, for example, we find that great steps have been taken to shelter the art from the personal whims and desires of the painter. The iconographer trains for many years and takes many precautions so that his icons do not represent his own interpretation of a biblical event, but rather that of the Church.

Also, in music, early Byzantine and Slavonic chant was composed using melodic formulae as a means of setting text. In doing this, composers could set text without a great deal of romantic or personal sentiment--the formulas acting as filters of the ego. In Holy Russia, many composers controlled the ego by

harmonizing the ancient chants of the Church. By doing this, the multitude of choices that the composer had to make was limited. So we see that the creative arts of Orthodoxy have to a certain degree, been protected by self-imposed restrictions of personal feeling.

In the West, these restrictions were not as rigidly maintained. By the 19th century, the artistic movement known as Romanticism, purged what little remained of tradition in Western sacred music. Sadly, many heterodox worship services today are catered purely to individual tastes and feelings--producing such atrocities as polka masses, folk masses, and revival services that are more akin to staged musicals than actual experiences of worship.

To the credit of some, this gradual appearance of the ego in Western Church music has not gone unchallenged. The renowned western church scholar Erik Routley laments the modern penchant for Romanticism (that artistic movement which deals primarily with subjective feelings and desires), "Romanticism (he writes) is an anarchic and disobedient consequence of faithlessness." Routley couldn't be more correct in his assessment. Romanticism is indeed anarchic in that each individual seeks to express a transitory and personal response to the truth, rather than expressing the unchanging truth itself. Romanticism is also disobedient in that the Church calls for us to be selflessness, not self-accommodating. Finally, taken to its extreme, Romanticism is indeed faithless for when we choose to express our own interpretations and desires, we transfer our focus away from God inward, toward ourselves and essentially we become worshippers of feeling rather than followers of faith.

So how can we, as Orthodox Christians, maintain the egolessness of our music? Well it starts by an understanding of what constitutes the ego in our singing or conducting. Our primary concern for choir is to combine the many individual voices of a choir into a single unified voice of the Church. Dynamically and sonically the choir should be one. Whenever an individual performs an action or sings in a way that does not conform to the choral texture, it is essentially going against the function of liturgical harmony. Whenever a choral director distorts the balance between music and text by adding too much or too little to the music, he or she is going against the function of liturgical harmony.

Before I conclude my talk, I would like to play for you an example of the ego in

Orthodox choral music. The following recording is taken from an LP of a Western choir performing Rachmaninoff's Blessed is the Man. In it, you will hear what I mean about the presence of the individual in the choral sound. This particular recording is not a true Orthodox interpretation of the work in that one hears numerous voices sticking out of the texture, and also the director has injected far too much interpretation in what should be an essentially self-expressing work.

PLAY EXAMPLE 1

Now compare this to an Orthodox interpretation of the same selection and you can clearly hear the difference.

PLAY EXAMPLE 2

CONCLUSIONS

We must take special care not to neglect the aesthetic foundations of Orthodox art and the means by which it conveys the principles of our faith. In closing I would like to read two quotes for you which exemplify the sorrowful chasm that has grown between Western and Eastern positions on sacred music and its function in worship. The first is taken from a book entitled "Music Through the Eyes of Faith" by Harold Best who is currently the Dean of the School of Music at Wheaton College, and evangelical institution of higher learning in Illinois. Dr. Best writes,

We must overcome the temptation to make art and music so large. . .so otherworldly, so mystical, that they become more than us, wielding certain powers that they never intended to have and giving more value than they ever could intrinsically possess.

Now compare this lamentable outlook with the celebrated words of St. Theophan the Recluse who writes:

The purpose of church hymns is precisely to make the spark of grace that is hidden within us burn brighter and with greater warmth. This spark is given by the sacraments. Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are introduced to fan the spark and transform it into a flame. . . .

Perhaps there is no better description of liturgical harmony than that which is conveyed in these words, and no clearer distinction between how the East and West views sacred music. Where Dr. Best sees Music through the eyes of faith, the Orthodox Church sees faith through the eyes of music. In other words, music is not to be looked at as an object attached to worship, to the Orthodox, it is worship. It is the communicator of that spark of grace which St. Theophan so eloquently described. If we know this, then we realize the great responsibility we have as church musicians. For if we fail to nourish the arts in the traditions that have been passed down to us, then we essentially stand in the way of this grace.

So, in closing I would like to stress the importance of seeing music, not simply as a beautiful part of our services, or as a only servant to the text. Instead, we should consider each choral work, each note that we sing as an indispensable part of Orthodox worship for music, along with icons, architecture, hymnography is a communicator of God's ever-present grace and truth. When we interpret music in this way, we are indeed, as St. Paul says, speaking to one another in psalms hymns and spiritual songs. When we interpret music this way we will indeed feel the sublimity of our liturgical harmony. And finally, when we look upon our choral heritage, we will indeed be reminded that these things have been given to us as a gift from God in order to draw us closer to the eternal mysteries of His Kingdom.

©1999 Kurt Sander All rights reserved