

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – April 17, 2007

Moderator: *Very Rev. Lawrence Margitich*

Chat room topic: **Reviewing and selecting appropriate music for liturgical services**

Father Lawrence Margitich:

How about we start with the word “appropriate”, as in, what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate Church music (and singing)?

Here are some thoughts on church singing, some being my own, and some from Kastalsky, a notable church composer of the 20th century, that I lifted from a talk given by Professor David Drillock.

In Orthodoxy we hear a great deal (especially during Great Lent) about “passionlessness”, in Greek “apatheia” which means to be free and healed of the corruption and death of the passions within us (sins, ego, slavery to created things); it does NOT mean something which is devoid of emotion or human feeling.

Question:

I am taking a voice class at my college we are supposed to use our passions.

Answer:

Bravo. More of that the better.

Question:

Please explain to me?

Answer:

“Passionlessness” is perhaps most reflected in the best Orthodox iconography—where the saint is painted in colors and shapes that transcend everything that is fleshy. Ouspensky, the icon painter wrote this: “Nothing in our Church should belong to the realm of fashion—neither the vestments of the clergy, nor the icons, nor the music. Fashion implies style, and style is governed by the principle of built-in obsolescence. What is nice today will not always be nice tomorrow. The Church should never foster mediocrity. The Church, because She is the Holy Reality of God, must be above current or past trends.”

Now, the following, from Alexander Kastalsky in "My Musical Career and My Thoughts on Church Music" published in *The Musical Quarterly* 1925): "Of late (church music) has tended to become complex, To disregard the difficulty of performance for the sake of effective sonority, to choose harmonic and melodic means without any discrimination, provided only that they be new and beautiful and if this tendency continues to develop, church music will end in becoming like any other, except that it will have a religious text. This would be extremely unfortunate."

Kastalsky has more to say on this, and I'll post my notes later.

Question:

Where is the fine line is secular singing and Church singing?

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Answer:

Maybe we can move to some more specifics by asking ourselves some questions, especially in light of the question. Is the music "at" worship, "for" worship, or "of" worship, to quote D Conomos?

Also, Kastalsky said this: "...I should like to have music that could be heard nowhere except in a church and which would be as distinct from secular music as church vestments are from the dress of the laity."

I don't think the line between secular and churchly singing is very fine. It's pretty big, just as in painting portraits and icons. And as in icon painting, one needs to learn from someone who knows about this stuff.

Question:

How does one transition? Like, for instance, I was in class singing on Holy Wednesday and then I went to church that evening.

Doesn't church music also serve its liturgical purpose as to where it is sung to fit into the liturgical functions and movements of the service itself?

Answer:

Yes. Exactly. Here's a methodology, and I use the word loosely, for choosing appropriate music: Rubrics - know them, learn them from someone. Does the music fulfill the intention of the hymn? What is the intention of the hymn? refrain, procession, response. Does the music hinder that intention of fulfill it? That is the question to start with. Well, there are a lot of questions to start with. Such as: create harmonious whole by considering transitions into and out of the hymn in question. Does it work? A basic "du" consideration: can your choir, singers do it well?

Question:

Fr Lawrence, will you please say a statement or two about the quote from Conomos? i.e., what is the difference – music – at, for, of – worship?

Answer:

Sure. Conomos gave a talk that I read in the Sourouzh journal, old now, in which he differentiates those things. Music AT worship is some kind of accompaniment, it might be beautiful, sweet, lollypops for the ears, or not. But, it is not CONNECTED to the liturgical action. That's the AT worship.

Music FOR worship is not too distant from that, being somekind of psychological emotional "flavor" for the service. Music OF worship is when the text and the melody balance. When the melody serves the text; when the hymn DOES what it is supposed to do.

Let me reference here for your review and study a couple of previous CHATS • Music Chatroom Transcript – November 9, 2006 <http://oca.org/PDF/Music/Chat/2006/11.09.06.chat.pdf> • “The Ministry and song of the Liturgical Assembly” article on line http://oca.org/PDF/Music/Chat/2006/11.09.06.ministry_song.pdf . These two articles/CHATS

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answer the question that Dave asked, in my opinion. How about some practical issues?? Any questions?

Question:

How does one transition from one kind of singing to the other? When the hymn is "balanced" and moves "the heart" how is that in relation to passionlessness?

Answer:

Two questions. Number 1: Transitions have to do with key, sound, type of chant. I would not use, for example, a minor key Byzantine chant litany (no matter how good) just before singing the Akathis melody to the Creed. It needs to flow.

2nd question, gets tricky. "Moving" the heart can be a very subjective thing, and almost ANYthing can do that for any given person. What we have to focus on is not on figuring out what moves hearts, but to sing the traditional music that we know does that in a spiritual sense. Otherwise, one can get really bogged down in sentimentality.

The heart, the spirit, the nous, what have you, is moved by the Grace of God. We can sing in such a way, using music that clarifies and lifts the text, but not in a sentimental way.

Question:

Similar question is how does one transition from singing secular music to church music...what do I do with the passions built up in me...already sung non church music...?

Answer:

We avoid sentimentality and changing styles by using music that we know works, has worked, and sung correctly will "work" again. No need for a contradiction there. You're not singing thrasher/slasher/high volume rock. Always sing everything to glorify God by rejoicing in the gift of the voice he gave you (assuming you have that gift :))

Question:

So to go back to passionlessness, what did you mean by this?

Answer:

Passionlessness is not "emotionlessness". I would be more inclined to stress the "style" or the "form" of the music that "works, did work, and continues to work. As there are several "forms" or styles of Byzantine chant, Russian Chant, etc. It is holiness, gained from prayer, ascetic striving to always be pleasing to God and new chant forms

It's a big topic. Read "Theology of the Icon" by Ouspensky for how it relates to icons and music. Perhaps, better to say "churchly" or liturgical forms rather than limit to "chant" forms. Read Fr Thomas Hopko's great paper on Asceticism and Creativity, from the Psalm conference in Chicago. It's all there, perfectly said. Both are excellent references

Styles of chant: There are many differences. Some will not work for my parish or yours at all. Some work great, yes. How to know? We should look at some samples for next time

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Let me offer another criterion for choosing appropriate music. Your Congregation: what are their expectations? What kind of singing goes on there and has gone on there? Language too. Is it all 4 part singing? Does it have to be? Sometimes you won't have all 4 parts. What do you do? What you do is to learn how to re-pitch, re-arrange, and work with what you have. Speaking of Znam., my choir here is used to singing it in a couple of different tones, and can learn a new piece quite easily because of the melodic kernals. I did conduct a choir for a summer once, long ago, in which all we could do was to practice the music they thought they knew. There was no possibility of choosing anything new at all, because essentially, we could barely sing what we had. So, in that situation, Znam. won't work, UNLESS, one or two singers are willing to learn and sing as cantors.

This brings up maybe the last point for tonight: Mark Bailey has stressed this, as has Prof. Drillock, for years: Church singing is not just a choir. There are readers, solo psalm singers, the congregation, the clergy, etc. Does the music you choose allow that to come out? Look at your Anaphoras, for example. Are they polyphonic, in other words, notes and words moving against each other in different parts? Avoid this, since there is really not much chance that a congregation and choir are going to achieve what the priest prays for here, "Let us love one another so that with one mind we may confess Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

End:

Fr Lawrence, thank you so much for your presentation which I am sure has given us much to think about. We hope that when you return in the fall, we can go over some examples, as you suggested, to demonstrate the thoughts that were presented tonight.