

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – May 22, 2007

Moderator: *Ivan Moody*

Chat room topic: **Composing Methodology**

Professor David Drillock, Chair of the OCA Department of Liturgical Music and Translations

It is a great honor to welcome the world renowned composer, Ivan Moody, as our guest moderator for this evening's chat session. Ivan, in addition to being a composer, is a researcher, conductor, and lecturer. Many of us heard him last August at the Psalm conference. Ivan is the Chairman of the International Society for Orthodox Church Music.

Ivan Moody

And it's a pleasure for me to be here. All those activities you list are, of course, that these are all aspects of the same activity...

Professor David Drillock

Ivan, you might begin with your topic, "Composing Methodology" and we will hopefully have some time for questions.

Ivan Moody

"Methodology" is a challenging word, particularly since we are so used in discussing Orthodox liturgical art to think more about inspiration from on high. But method of course is the way that such inspiration is directed and moulded.

The real challenge for a composer of liturgical music is that balance between tradition and innovation (that is, what one would like to do as a composer).

Question:

In Byzantine iconography there is a highly articulated methodology in writing spiritual icons.

Answer:

Yes indeed, but for a composer it is not nearly so clear. The two disciplines are often compared, but it's difficult to do so very exactly. I think that the composer is much more at sea than the iconographer, even a composer of Byzantine chant.

Question:

Are you saying that a composer has fewer "guidelines"?

Answer:

Yes, that's precisely it. I'm not saying that there are none, of course.

Question:

So where do you start?

Answer:

I start by looking at chant. Of course, if you are writing *within* a chant tradition, such as Byzantine, then you have parameters, but those can also be broken.

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If you are a polyphonic composer, the thing is much more complex. For me, polyphony must be linked to chant in some way.

Question:

On the piece you wrote for the Spirit of Orthodoxy Choir, "Behold, the Bridegroom," did you start with Znamenny?

Answer:

Is it chant-based or not? You tell me!

Response:

I say yes.

Follow-up:

If you can't tell, then I've done something right.

In many pieces I move *in and out* of chant. Many Kastalsky pieces do this, "faking" a Znamenny or other kind of chant.

Comment:

It seems not quite Byzantine and not quite "Russian"

Follow-up:

But you can feel something Byzantine and Russian in it?

Comment:

Yes. There's an ison. But it's at the fifth!

Response:

Indeed, though of course many revivers of Znamenny also favor isons. And double isons happen in Byzantine chant too!

Question:

After receiving the text, how did you begin?

Answer:

I thought about the context – in this case it was for a concert, but by a choir which knows about Liturgy, and I wanted it to be useable liturgically.

If it were more obviously a concert piece, I might be more radical, as I have indeed just been with a new piece for a non-liturgical ensemble. It's quite a different thing to write for singers with a sense of context.

Question:

When you read the text, did the Byzantine motif immediately come to mind?

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Answer:

No, not exactly. I had already set this text (though in a different translation) in *Passion & Resurrection* back in the 1980's. So that setting is actually also quoted in it. The thing is that various motifs can occur to me because I have always worked in a multi-traditional liturgical context.

Question:

Can you explain why it's different when a group has a sense of context?

Answer:

If a group has a sense of context, then I know it will pick up on liturgical details (such as x3 repetitions or quotations of chant) where a concert choir would not know what the piece is *for.*

I was just thinking of a set of pieces I wrote for a Serbian choir, in which I mixed movements very obviously based on Serbian chant and freely-composed ones. The context dictated that such a mix would work, because it was a concert by liturgically-informed musicians, who knew Serbian chant, but you would have picked it up if you hadn't been Serbian. It's more that there was chant – in this case Serbian – audibly present.

Serbian chant is very rich, with a clearly Byzantine background, but filtered through oral traditions. There are moves to move to Byzantine chant, and it's quite polemical in Serbia.

Question:

Ivan, I guess that makes me wonder what "audience" forgive the term you are thinking of when you write.

Answer:

I have to say that I never think of one; I think of the performers!

Follow-up question:

So you write for the singers?

Follow-up answer:

Of course, if I am writing a liturgical piece, I know that there will be a particular kind of "audience." I am aware of the audience, but I can't let it order the piece, as it were.

Question:

When you begin a composition, do you write the melody first and then fill in harmony, or does it come to you as one 'package' so to speak?

Answer:

Very much as a "package." I aim to have the harmony arise from the melody, which means modal harmony of some sort. Having said what I did above, in that ensemble piece for a concert, I quote extensively from Byzantine chant. I don't believe in hiding the light of Orthodoxy under a bushel.

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Question:

Ivan, I struggle with harmony for chant. I use mostly modal harmony but also extended harmonies to serve the non-western chant I write. Could you say more about harmony and chant?

Answer:

I begin modally, but am quite prepared to go outside an orthodox (small o) harmonic framework.) If you look at "Behold the Bridegroom," for example, there are unprepared suspensions, parallel octaves and fifths, added chords. But for me all this came out of a long period of trying to write a more purely modal music. It wasn't something I merely invented out of nowhere.

Follow-up comment:

"Invented it" that has been my experience.

Response:

If you want to avoid inventing from nothing, the solution is to immerse yourself in tradition(s) of Orthodox church music. I don't mean so that you can fake it, but so that you can absorb it. Then you can begin walking the tightrope of tradition/innovation.

I was recently asked to write some music for a new book for the Finnish Church. There they have a very strong "Obikhod" tradition, with which many parishes are fed up. So I used Byzantine chants – in four-part harmony – in the Finnish language. Apparently they have been well-received!

Comment:

Harmonic tightrope – where do you think the limits are of veering harmonically beyond what we have invented to where the harmonic becomes "contemporary, academic, sounds like Part," etc.

Response:

I can't really say without giving concrete musical examples! Do you know my setting of the Akathistos? Well, there are chains of added 9th and 11th chords in it, for example. Parallel dissonance which in fact *I* decided would work, but on the basis of many years of a much simpler kind of writing to give me that confidence.

Comment:

Parallel intervals – octaves, parallel 5th's, 7th's, 9th's – are very classical for this type of Orthodox polyphony. If it's good in style – do it! And it (dissonance) absolutely is natural in Russian medieval polyphony with 7th's and 9th's...

Response:

Yes, absolutely, in my Akathistos, by the way, I also make reference to Russian mediaeval polyphony...dissonance is such a relative concept!

Comment:

And that's true of the rules of composition, too, isn't it? I remember my theory teacher says you have to know the rule in order to break them successfully.

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Response:

Yes, the rules enable you to break them.

Comment:

Russian medieval polyphony, you mean like that Ivan the Terrible piece on the Tallis Scholars recording?

Response:

Much more like the motets on that disc, tracks 3-8.

Comment:

To the Russian medieval "composer", the parallel 5ths undoubtedly were not considered to be dissonant.

Response:

The more I hear that polyphony, the more I am sure it's right, though I know some have reservations.

Question:

Ivan, have you reached into Georgian polyphony for inspiration. Even if not, what do you see and hear there?

Answer:

No I haven't, basically because until I heard John Graham talk about it, I could not understand its structure at all. And I didn't want to imitate it aesthetically without being inside it. It is, of course, astoundingly beautiful.

Comment:

That in itself is a very important statement you just made, "Didn't want to imitate it aesthetically without being inside it [without understanding its structure/mechanics]." I think we generally do that way too much in the realm of Slavic-tradition choral music. We are quick to imitate, without understanding.

Further comment:

It's foundational: you need to be inside before you can do anything.

Response:

Yes. What would it mean? What use would it have?

Even Giya Kancheli, who is Georgian, feels this. On the other hand, how do you learn if you don't imitate to some extent? The whole idea of the master and the pupil (and here we return to the iconography parallel) leads to this.

I use various traditions (or they use me) but they are traditions within which I have worked. Though I haven't used much mediaeval Russian music, it is true. There should be a symbiosis between composer and tradition.

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Question:

Do you ever get "writer's block" and what do you do to break it?

Answer:

If I get writer's block, it's because I'm trying too hard intellectually and I haven't thought about the piece enough beforehand.

I don't mean that I sit around waiting for inspiration, but I do mull over a piece before a note is written waiting to see if I know what it's **about.**

This applies to concert or secular choral music as well.

Comment:

As a composer I do separations in my mind between feeling and imagination when I try to write Church music.

Response:

Ah yes, the whole question of imagination is very difficult. The Fathers tell us that it is dangerous. But how we distinguish between imagination and liturgical inspiration brings us back again to modes, and the absence of canons for writing music. Because there are **no** canons that tell us how to do it!

Comment:

In Russian Church music history there were Church and secular composers as separate institutions; very seldom did they do a good job in both fields.

Response:

I agree, but I don't think it's impossible. (I say that as a church and concert composer!)

Comment:

But you are sensitive to the differences inherent in both. They can't be approached the same way, right?

Response:

Well, of course, I cheat, because I bring a lot of my spiritual experience, so to speak, into the concert field, but technically, of course, I don't write a concerto in the same way as a troparion. The same separation amongst composer is true in other countries - Serbia, Romania, etc.

And then there are composers who do in fact do both. I see no reason at all why not. In fact, I think it's a great limitation for a composer of Church music not to have a broader knowledge in terms of technique, style, etc.

Which brings me neatly back to my Akathistos, in which I felt simultaneously that I was writing something universal and at the same time directly addressed to the Mother of God, though of course, it would be difficult to bring off liturgically...

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Question:

Did you write it with the *expectation* of being para-liturgical?

Answer:

Yes I did. Actually, the singers at the premiere immediately wanted to set up a liturgical performance... huge chunks of it are merely recited in modern liturgical practice. I set the *entire* text musically – 90 minutes.

Comment:

Everything that we do – according to the Holy Fathers – is paraliturgical, but the important thing is that we do not write secular music adapted to the Church, IMHO...

Answer:

I don't adapt secular music for the Church. I might, though, take Church music to the concert hall.

Professor Drillock:

Ivan, we are quite aware of the time and want to thank you very much for a very interesting, enlightening, and inspiring chat session. We are indeed grateful to you and hope that you will be able to visit us again next year.

And, in case anyone is interested or in the area, the Spirit of Orthodoxy choir will be singing Ivan's composition "Behold the Bridegroom" on June 24, 2007 in Whippany, NJ and it will be the world premier of Ivan's piece. Check out their web site (<http://www.spiritoforthodoxy.com>) Best wishes for a good conference in Finland.

Ivan Moody

Thank you, Dave! We have a tremendous line-up for the Conference – for more information visit us at www.isocm.com.

Professor Drillock:

On Tuesday, June 19, 2007 Dr. Nicolas Schidlovsky will offer a unique presentation on the Old Believer musical tradition. We hope you can join us!

Good night.