

SACRED MUSIC IN THE ORTHODOX DIASPORA : A CASE FOR GEORGIAN HYMNS IN ENGLISH

Introduction

At the Cathedral of the Holy Virgin Protection in New York City, Georgian migrants account for 33% of the parish membership. Since the collapse of the USSR, Orthodox churches throughout North America have become primary sites of community solidarity and cultural identification for thousands of new Georgian migrants. While many Georgian migrants find consolation and a sense of belonging in the life of the church, the Orthodox Christian diaspora finds itself increasingly diversified and enriched by the spiritual and cultural traditions the Georgians are bringing with them. Indeed, ease of access to the traditions of many ancient Christian cultures is among the greatest assets of the diasporic Orthodox church. Among the liturgical traditions that each migrant group brings to the diaspora, sacred music is one of the most readily and commonly shared. In this paper I will make a case in support of the systematic adaptation of Georgian polyphonic hymns in the English language for use in American, and other English-speaking, Orthodox churches throughout the world. I will discuss the historical precedents and theological justifications for this important spiritual-creative undertaking, as well as the technical and spiritual challenges it poses.

Why English?

There are significant historical precedents for the use of the local vernacular as the operational language of the Orthodox Church, beginning from the Apostles' preaching among the Greeks and other Gentiles. In the ninth century, Sts. Cyril and Methodius translated the service books into Slavonic in what was one of the most significant missionary events in the history of the church (Ware, 1986: 83). Closer to our own era, the first missionaries in present-day America learned the language of the Aleut people of Alaska in order to instruct them in a language they would understand. They accompanied St. Herman from Valaam Monastery on Russia's Lake Ladoga, arriving in the Alaskan lands in 1794. Saint Innocent (Veniaminov), who labored in Alaska and eastern Siberia from 1823 to 1868, translated Saint Matthew's gospel, the Divine Liturgy, and a catechism into Aleutian (ibid: 187-88). There are Orthodox communities in Western Europe that celebrate the Byzantine-style liturgy in German, Dutch, Spanish and Italian (Ware, 1986: 192). As Bishop Kallistos (Ware) writes, "In its services the Orthodox Church uses the language of the people: Arabic at Antioch, Finnish at Helsinki, Japanese at Tokyo, English (when required) at New York" (ibid: 273).

The two largest archdioceses in North America, the Antiochian Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America, have made English the principle, if not always exclusive, language of the liturgical services. When celebrated in a language the average American can understand, the services function as a primary node in the relationship between Orthodox and non-Orthodox. While an elite, learned few may understand church Slavonic or ancient Greek, everyone—including American-born converts and unbaptized inquirers—can understand, and thus fully participate in, services that are celebrated in English. The English-language service is critical to the Church's missionary goals in an overwhelmingly secular society. Given the eclectic, multi-cultural identity of the parishes in these two archdioceses in particular, the English service is also essential for fostering a sense of pan-Orthodox community among faithful with roots in all corners of the globe.

The practice of borrowing, so to speak, the hymnography of an established tradition for use in a relatively young Orthodox community also has important precedents. For example, while Christianity was preached in Georgia in the days of the apostles and enlightened by the Cappadocian Nino some three centuries later, the liturgical culture of the early Georgian church was developed according to Byzantine models. According to historian Ivane Javakhishvili, the earliest hymns in the Georgian church were chanted in the Greek language, and the music was based on the Byzantine monophonic tradition (in Tsitsishvili, 2005: 49). The International Research Center for Traditional Polyphony writes that "After the canonization of the eight-tone system, musician-hymnographers called *mekhelebi* translated hymnographic canons from the Greek [into Georgian] and set texts to canonical tunes" (www.polyphony.ge). While there is evidence that a distinctly Georgian school of hymnography began to develop as early as the 7th century (*ibid.*), it was not until the 10th-12th centuries that monophonic Byzantine chant was finally superseded by three-part polyphony in the Georgian Orthodox Church. In short, nearly a millennium passed between the Apostles' arrival to preach Christianity in Georgia and the final consolidation of three-part sacred polyphony as the hymnographic rule of the Georgian Church. But the Georgian case is by no means unique. When the Slavs converted to Orthodox Christianity, "they received the Byzantine patrimony, including the music that had developed in the Byzantine Church. They embraced it, learned it, and then transformed it in line with the demands of their own cultural context and time" (Pulcini, 2004: 29). Orthodox cultural tradition is not static, but ever-emergent and amenable to change. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which until recently insisted on the universal use of Latin, the policy of the Orthodox Church has always been to celebrate services in the language of the people (Ware, 1986: 83, 273). This is the unique privilege of the Orthodox faithful.

Why Georgian Polyphony?

Like America itself, the American Orthodox Church is exceptional for its multi-ethnic, multi-cultural composition. The need to accommodate the experiences of each group represented while faithfully obeying the canons of the church places a very real demand on clergy, choir directors and choirs. Incorporating hymns from the repertoires of ancient Christian traditions is one of the principle ways the American Orthodox Church has gone about forging a sense of community among believers outside the borders of historically Orthodox Christian nations. For example, while choirs in the Antiochian Archdiocese chant primarily in the Byzantine monophonic style, most are also familiar with at least a handful of works in the Russian, Ukrainian, Serbian, and Romanian traditions. Likewise, while a visitor to a member parish of the Orthodox Church of America will hear mostly Russian-style chant during the divine services, s/he may also hear a litany, a communion hymn, and/or a processional in the style of a different tradition. Given the very young age of the church in North America (compared to the Georgian Church especially), and its unmatched eclecticism, it is appropriate at this stage that existing chants from long-established Orthodox traditions continue to be adapted in the English language. The development of a new, “indigenous” musical style for use in the Orthodox churches of English-speaking North America is a much larger and longer-term project than I have the interest or time to address here.

In the brief history of the American Orthodox Church, liturgical hymns have been adapted from the Russian, Ukrainian, Serbian, Romanian, and Greek (Byzantine) traditions, but sacred music in the Georgian tradition is only beginning to appear in the English language. Those hymns which are available are frequently of poor quality, adapted by novices with a very limited knowledge of Georgian sacred chant. In what is perhaps the best-known case, the musical material of the hymn to the Mother of God *shen khar venakhi* [Thou art a vineyard] has been adapted for use in English as a Cherubic hymn, circulated and sung in liturgies in many Orthodox churches throughout the United States. While *shen khar venakhi* is appropriate for use in church as a processional, or on the feast of the namesake icon, the melody has been used not only as a Cherubic hymn, but as a wedding hymn with text from the psalms. A quick Google™ search is all one needs to prove that *shen khar venakhi* has nearly achieved pop-song status among Orthodox, and even non-Orthodox adherents of “new-age” spirituality, throughout the world.

What can we learn from the proliferation of *shen khar venakhi* variations across the globe? Many individuals—including ethnic Georgians—have taken it upon themselves to adapt Georgian hymns for personal use, or use in the church, without knowledge of the prescribed function of these hymns in the divine services. But chants are constructed in a particular way because they serve a specific function in the liturgical services. As the venerable Russian-American priest and composer Father Sergei Glagolev writes, “The sacred function determines the style” (1997). While it is certainly encouraging that so many people have been drawn to Georgian sacred po-

lyphony purely for its aesthetic value, more outreach to amateurs and connoisseurs is needed to ensure that these hymns are not exploited for purposes other than those intended by the church.

Foreseeing and Meeting the Challenges

In the summer of 2004 I shared my ideas for a systematic adaptation of Georgian chant into English with Patriarch Ilia of the Georgian Orthodox Church, and received his blessing to go forward with the project. Nevertheless, there are a number of potential challenges, both spiritual-ideological and technical, that will need to be addressed throughout the course of the project. I begin here from the former category, or that of spiritual-ideological objection.

Many knowledgeable individuals have expressed to me a concern that there is something inherently destructive about the adaptation of sacred Georgian polyphony into the English language. There is also concern that to celebrate the ancient liturgical services in a modern vernacular tongue is somehow “inauthentic.” While this may be true from a purist’s perspective, I have just demonstrated how Orthodox cultural traditions have historically accommodated change. This very willingness to change and adapt in order to increase the fullness of the church is itself a characteristic of “authentic” Orthodox Christian tradition. Further, it is worthwhile to think ahead to the not-too-distant future and the spiritual life of the first generation born in the Georgian diaspora. Unlike the contemporary generation most concerned with cultural authenticity, these Georgian-Americans may actually feel alienated by a church that operates in a language they hear at home but nowhere else.

The project I am advocating here is feasible thanks largely to an internationally shared literacy in Western music notation. This brings me to my second concern: while a shared notational language can facilitate the circulation of sacred Georgian polyphony on a global scale, it can also have the less desirable effect of fixing one particular version of a chant for posterity. A notated chant can effectively codify one of an infinite variety of ways of executing that chant. As Dimitri Conomos writes regarding the development of neumatic notation in the 9th century, “On the positive side, it meant that an authoritative version of a...melody could be transmitted, without alteration or deterioration, to other singers in distant places that were unfamiliar with the tradition. On the negative side, it meant that plainchant melodies had in effect become fixed once and for all” (2004: 2). But wasn’t the same process initiated here in Georgia when Pilimon Koridze began transcribing Georgian polyphonic songs in the 19th century? Indeed, those songs were preserved for posterity, but a living oral tradition was flattened to the printed page at the same time. Are contemporary transcriptions of Georgian chant in their original language any less implicated in the stifling of improvisation entailed when an oral tradition is translated to paper?

The most important element of music in the Orthodox Church is not the music itself, but the texts the music helps to deliver. This leads me to the third challenge—and the first real technical challenge—I will address here: the importance of maintaining the clarity of the English text while remaining faithful to the intri-

cate textures of the Georgian polyphony. Given that the rhythms of Orthodox chant must follow the natural patterns of the language in which they are sung, the adaptation of one chant tradition for use in a different language presents a special set of problems. For this reason subtle changes in the rhythmic content of the original chant may be required; changes in the pitch content of the original melody may also be necessary. No change, however, should go so far as to render the original chant unidentifiable. Adaptations from Georgian to English thus require a sophisticated understanding of the logic of the original Georgian chant, and the competency to judge which musical details are and are not dispensable. Further, they call for a thorough understanding of the grammar and syntactic structures of the Georgian language, and a native or near-native fluency in English.

Given that the word order of the text will be different in English than it is in Georgian, it is also essential to ensure that the English adaptation of a hymn does not sacrifice the meaning of the text to the desire for an aesthetically attractive melody. As a rule, the English text set to the Georgian melody must sound as organic as the original Georgian version. That is, the text must not become unwedded from the melody as a consequence of the adaptation. A well-constructed melody appropriately suited to the text it carries will function as a vehicle for the memory of that text. This, in fact, is the ultimate justification for the use of music to accompany prayer in the Orthodox Church.

Where do We Go from Here?

Given the newness of Georgian chant to American Orthodox churches and the challenges I have just outlined, I wish to underscore that this project must begin from the very simplest of chants. From the beginning, the Georgian chants that English-speaking communities begin to learn and incorporate into their repertoire should be those most regularly used, and thus well-known, in the liturgical services. For example, the Trisagion Hymn, or “Holy God,” the Communion Hymn, or “Receive the Body of Christ,” and St. Simeon’s Prayer, or “Lord Now Let Thy Servant Depart,” are appropriate to incorporate from the beginning. Since the texts of these hymns will be very familiar to all in the congregation, the meaning of the texts should not be overshadowed by the unfamiliar music. Chants in the Georgian “simple mode” should serve as the primary musical material for adaptation, and the use of ornamentation and elaborate melismas should be kept to a minimum.

The cooperation of Georgian professionals is absolutely essential to the realization of this project. The adaptation of traditional Georgian chants into the English language must be carried out in consultation with musicologists, chanters, folklorists, and others intimately familiar with the Georgian chant tradition in a spirit of professional cooperation and Orthodox Christian unity. To facilitate this project, I would propose the establishment of a formal consulting body comprised of Georgian profes-

sionals, and perhaps a formal affiliation with the Tbilisi Conservatoire or the Georgian Patriarchate's Chanting Center. I might also suggest that the Antiochian Archdiocese's "Byzantine Project," according to which Byzantine chants for the entire liturgical year were transcribed into Western notation and compiled in English for use in American churches, be taken as a model. While the scope of the Georgian-to-English chant project need not be so large, there is certainly much that can be learned from the Byzantine-English precedent. For those of you who are interested, I hope you will share your ideas for, and potential contributions to, the project while we are all gathered here for the Symposium.

In Conclusion

Among Orthodox Christians in North America there is a great deal of enthusiasm surrounding Georgian sacred music. It is important to channel this newfound euphoria in ways that are ultimately beneficial for the church. I have already described how haphazard arrangements of Georgian chant in English have begun to proliferate in recent years, and it is appropriate that steps be taken in the community of experts to address this issue. With concerted attention and guidance, Georgian sacred polyphony can be integrated into the life of the Orthodox diaspora and simultaneously help to accommodate Georgian migrants in their adopted homelands. Bishop Kallistos (Ware) has posed a provocative question concerning the ideal balance of ethnic specificity and cultural universality in the Orthodox Church that I will reiterate here: Can the good elements in the national traditions be preserved, without at the same time obscuring the universality of Orthodoxy? (1986:190).

Finally, I would like to underscore that the project I am advocating here need not draw attention or resources away from Tbilisi-based efforts to study and revive traditional polyphony; rather, the two projects should inform one another and prove mutually beneficial. Georgian sacred polyphony in English will significantly increase the accessibility of the music to non-Georgians and likely generate international support for its research and revival. While interest in Georgian chant outside of Georgia has grown exponentially in recent years, access to the music and reliable information about it has remained quite limited. The availability of Georgian chants in English will further increase interest in the tradition and guide it in directions most profitable for the church. Following a long line of historical precedents and remaining faithful to apostolic tradition, the effort to adapt simple Georgian chant in the English language has the potential to bring greater unity in and through an ancient faith increasingly dispersed throughout the world.

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