

Words and Music

Thoughts on the singing of Orthodox liturgical texts in English to Russian chants.

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I have been involved in singing Orthodox services in English using Russian music for more than 40 years. During that time I have become familiar with a variety of chant traditions and have worked on the adaptation of those chants to English texts. The product of some of my more recent work can be found at <http://www.mynachdy-sant-elias.org.uk>. In this article I reflect on what I have learnt, particularly about providing good music for places with numerically limited musical resources.

I have come to a realisation that there should be three main principles underlying this work: (1) having English translations that are accurate, intelligible and singable; (2) making good adaptations of appropriate chants that are sympathetic to the original melody but also well fitted to the rhythm of the English text; and (3) making provision for the antiphonal singing that is prescribed for much of the sung parts of the various services. Only when these three are all in place should one even begin to think about singing in harmony. Let us look in more detail at the application of these three principles.

(1) Translation

It is a sad fact that a close study of existing English translations of Orthodox liturgical texts for the variable parts of the services shows the overwhelming majority of them to be deficient in terms of simple accuracy. My experience is that even with some of the better (or at least better known) translations around, something like a third (or just over) of verses translated have some minor errors, e.g. typographical errors or missing words; a further third (or just over) have one or more major errors in translation; and the rest seem to be wildly off and bear only a slight relationship to the original. An additional problem with some translators is their habit of inserting explanatory phrases into the translation that are not in the original and properly belong in a footnote in a scholarly edition but have no place in a practical edition. With the small number of translations that are reasonably accurate there is still a necessity to check for typos and other simple errors as well as to modify occasionally for consistency of style.

So how should one set about correcting and improving these versions? If one is trying to produce a text for singing it is not enough just to go for accuracy - one needs to take account of intelligibility and singability. In taking account of intelligibility one needs to work in terms of the text as heard being sung and not in terms of the text as read on the page by way of study. For singability one needs to look at the appropriate music (which will be considered in the next section). For the moment these seem to be major factors that should guide one in making choices as to how to translate a given text: choices of vocabulary, choices of word and phrase order, and so on. What will it sound like? Will the hearer get the full sense of the text and understand it correctly?

Applying these principles with music of Russian tradition is likely to lead to an English text that is different from what would come by applying them with music of Byzantine tradition. Does this matter? Given that Greek and Slavonic texts differ in places then this can be tolerated. Where the texts are identical, one should, perhaps, work towards a convergence. One should note that there are in many places either minor or major differences between the Greek and Slavonic texts. The major differences seem to be in the main where the Slavonic represents a different, possibly older, text, which has been completely replaced in Greek use. Minor differences are more interesting, and one needs to look carefully to see whether both versions are legitimate or whether one has been subject to corruption in transmission. (One phrase that sticks in my memory is the description of a Saint as a "river of the world" in Slavonic (a phrase that makes no sense in its context), rather than as a "river of peace" as given in the Greek - here the Greek must be used to correct a rather obvious spelling mistake in the Slavonic.) Sometimes the Slavonic gives a useful guide towards a particular nuance in the interpretation of a Greek word where there may be several choices. In all of this we have also to take account of the provisional nature of any English translation, which will in any case need revising every 30-50 years to take account of changes in language.

The main conclusion that I wish to draw is that if we are to produce texts and music for use in worship then translation and musical arrangement should be seen as one integrated activity rather than as two activities pursued in isolation from each other.

(2) Music

I am aware that my views in this area are seen by many as being somewhat controversial. It is my considered opinion that most of what has been done in the last hundred years by way of providing music in the Russian tradition with English texts does not represent the best of the Russian tradition of liturgical chant.

Putting it simply, if perhaps a little crudely, what has happened is that one form of chant, namely the harmonised chant derived from the use of the Russian Imperial Chapel during the nineteenth century has been taken as the only way of singing "Russian" church music for the variable parts of the services. If we look at the basis of this chant and compare it with the alternatives we may see that there are other possibilities which will lead to a liturgically preferable way of singing.

Historically there were only two sorts of melodies in use: melodies composed specifically to go with a particular text and standard melodies where the text was composed to fit the melody. We have a legacy of the former in the znamenny "great chant" tradition. In Russian usage the latter are referred to as "podobny" (the individual melody being a "podoben").

Where singers lacked the skills needed to sing "great chant" music simplified pattern chants (sometimes referred to as "lesser chant") were developed, with most of the text being recited on one note with inflexions at the end (and sometimes at the beginning) of each line. These are now found in a variety of forms - Kievan chant, Greek chant, lesser znamenny chant, etc. Podobny survived in Western Rus (i.e. outside the Russian Empire) as a basic form of congregational singing well into the twentieth century.

Harmonized singing based on these lesser chants seems to have had its origins outside Russia, with one source being specifically in the Psalm chanting practised in English cathedrals in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (not to be confused with contemporary "Anglican chant", which is a nineteenth century invention derived from the same source). I find this sort of music problematic for two main reasons.

First, the melodies have often been distorted to fit nineteenth century styles of harmonization. The most obvious example of this is the Kievan sticheron chant in Tone 6. The older versions of this start and finish on the second note of the diatonic (major) scale, but most harmonizations take this note as the first note of a minor scale, with the note below being sharpened, and the whole thing harmonized as if it were in a minor key. This can produce a harmonized setting which is not only inconsistent with the original melody but also, perhaps more importantly, in conflict with the words that are set. Think of the first sticheron of the Aposticha of the Resurrection (which is sung in the procession before Paschal Matins). Is it really appropriate to sing this text in a mournful minor key? Other problems come from the layout of the harmonized forms, with the melody often disappearing into an inner part, with the top voice singing a descant rather than the melody. This makes it difficult for the less musically instructed to join in with singing the melody. (As an aside, I am aware of some moves in the late twentieth century to provide harmonizations that are more sympathetic to the older forms of the chants, but the use of these is far from universal.)

The second problem is that this form of choral recitative is actually very difficult to do well. Compare the work of an Anglican Cathedral (with a professional choir singing in this way almost every day) with a small village church with few singers. With limited resources it seems to me to be pointless to try to imitate the style of a professional choir when one could do things that are musically much more interesting and liturgically more satisfactory.

Substantial parts of the "great chant" tradition were transcribed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries into simple staff notation. These do not preserve all the indications that were present in the older notation (e.g. about how to sing a phrase in terms of tone of voice as well as what notes to sing), but they provide an acceptable basis for work in producing music for English texts. Some of these were published in the official chants books produced by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church at various times down to the eve of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Others survived only in manuscript. These resources are increasingly becoming easily available on internet websites. Other manuscripts in the older "kryuki" notation are also being transcribed and published. So we have here a source for traditional melodies for the variable parts of the services for Sundays, the Great Feasts, Holy Week, etc..

Other work has gone on in recent years in identifying podobny and publishing various versions of the model melodies. These give a basis for singing many of the stichera from the Menaion, where the particular melodies are indicated. In some translations these will be found labelled as "Special Melody". This is a misnomer. They are standard melodies, and in the past were known by all members of the congregation. For the stichera there are around 60 such melodies, although a few are so rarely used that the melodies have disappeared. Is it really too much to expect at least the singers to learn such a set of melodies? (Compare the number of hymn tunes which an average Protestant would know.)

If we wish to follow and build on the fullness of the musical inheritance of the Russian tradition then for stichera where "great chant" melodies are available they should be used, where "podobny" are specified and available they should be used, with the "lesser chant" as a fallback and only used to fill in the gaps.

Adapting any of these chant systems to English text needs care, skill and experience of singing the melodies in Slavonic. It is vitally important to get the feel of how the melodies fit round different patterns of accented and unaccented syllables. Only then can one set about fitting the melodies to English texts. For "great chant" melodies this will at times involve considerable adaptation of the original melody. The number of syllables and position of accents in a given phrase of the text can vary widely between English and Slavonic. To make a good adaptation in these instances one needs some understanding of how the different melodic fragments go together in the different Tones, and then one can leave bits out or insert extra bits of melody in a way that is consistent with the original. Sometimes the adaptation needed is fairly minimal, and the realisation that these melodies have often already been adapted from pre-Nikonian to post-Nikonian Slavonic texts makes that a fairly straightforward exercise (usually things like repeating a note or omitting a repeated note or joining two musical phrases over a single syllable).

For the "podobny" the Slavonic texts often (but not quite always) show how the text may be split up into the phrases of the melody. One needs to exercise some care in using these as a guide to arranging the melody to English words, but they are a useful starting point.

What is vital for any of these chant systems is to understand at an instinctive level the structure of the phrases of the melody and to adhere to the rules about using only one syllable on those musical phrases that are never broken up in the original.

(3) Antiphonal singing

A Russian Abbess known to me would pose the question: "Why is it that when two Russian singers get together they think they have to sing in four-part harmony?" When you have two singers you have enough to follow the ancient practice of antiphonal singing which is specified in the texts.

As well as being part of the tradition of the Church, antiphonal singing has other benefits. It reduces the workload of the singers by half. It reduces their stress levels even more, as one has time to find one's next verse while the other choir is singing. Singing in smaller groups (particularly if they are only singing the melody) makes the words come through more clearly.

The words, and the structure of the service into which those words are fitted, are the important things. Our fathers down the ages have built up our current pattern of services, and when one attends a particular service one ought to have some idea of what to expect. My suggestions posit that services will be done fairly fully. Repeated stichera, for instance, make sense when the singing is done antiphonally. The number of stichera sung at Vespers on "Lord, I have cried" reflects the liturgical level of the day. These stichera are not simply inserted to fill in time while the censuring of the church takes place: they are an integral part of the whole service, and they do really need to be sung in an appropriate manner to distinguish them from Psalm reading.

Conclusion

Church singing is an ascetic task. The singer needs to conform to the discipline of the Church. Harmonized singing takes many singers away from the melodies which the Church has given us and too often has the effect of making them focus on their "part" and showing off their skill in singing that part. When asked to switch from a part to the melody they have no

idea of what to do. Listening to a piece with three parts singing in harmony but the melody missing is something that I find painful. Yes, people can learn to sing harmonies in a flexible manner depending on who is present, but they have to start by learning the melody. This is something that has been missed too often in the past. Who has not heard a priest singing his solo version of the Paschal Troparion ("Christ is risen from the dead, ...") where he sings the bass line and not the melody? Who has not encountered members of a congregation occasionally feeling inspired to join in the singing, but following the top voices in singing a descant rather than singing the melody which is hidden in an inner voice?

So let us work to recover the basics. Get good English translations, adapt them well to good versions of the melodies, fit these into services that are done in accordance with the traditions of the Church, and so let us absorb the teachings enshrined in the texts and use them to help us grow in faith and love and the knowledge of God (and then if you must harmonize, do it in a way that allows the melody to come through clearly and that is not in conflict with the words or the melody).