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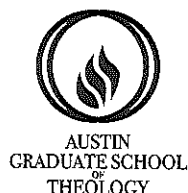
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Singing and Worship from the Perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church

Philip Camp

Throughout my life, I have worshipped with churches that have upheld the tradition of *a cappella* singing. I was given many reasons for this restriction against instrumental music, but during my early college years studying music I began to question the validity of these arguments. My discovery of the *a cappella* tradition in the Russian Orthodox Church led me to pursue a doctoral dissertation topic in the area of Russian sacred music. In selecting this subject area for my research, I also hoped to gain a deeper understanding of my own worship practices by learning from another *a cappella* tradition. After the study was completed, I not only learned from the Russian Orthodox perspective specifically about *a cappella* singing but also was left to ponder my own attitude regarding worship. I was reminded of the essence of true worship—the desire of the worshippers to please the One worshipped.

My study of the Russian Orthodox tradition started with the formal beginnings of this church in the Middle Ages. Christianity became the official religion of the Slavic peoples in the year 988, after Prince Vladimir openly accepted Christianity as practiced in the Byzantine Church of Constantinople and declared it the state religion. In his monumental book, *Choral Performance*

in *Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, Vladimir Morosan discusses two common misconceptions of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian scholars: that Russian liturgical singing originated entirely from the importation of the liturgy of the Greek Orthodox Church, and that Russian liturgical music included choral performance from its inception. Scholars generally agree that the liturgy for the Russian Orthodox Church began developing shortly after Prince Vladimir converted to Christianity, and pre-revolutionary Russian historians generally acknowledged that Russian liturgical singing originated entirely from the importation of the established liturgy from the Greek Orthodox Church. However, more recent scholarship suggests that other foreign influences also may have played a part.¹ The reason such influences were so easily overlooked, Morosan implies, is that the level of influence from these other Christian traditions paled in comparison with the enormous influence of the Byzantine tradition. He explains,

While the original chant melodies and notation may have undergone certain changes in being transferred to a different language and different ethnic musical sensibilities, the liturgical order (including the order of singing) remained Byzantine Greek, at least as long as Greek hierarchs from Constantinople headed the Russian Church.²

Thus, many aspects from the Greek Orthodox order were passed on to the Russian liturgy. Liturgical actions, such as incensations, vesting, carrying the gifts of bread and wine for communion, and the breaking of the bread, were inherited from the Greek Orthodox Church.³ And, most relevant to this essay, the *a cappella* tradition of church singing still practiced in the

¹Vladimir Morosan, *Choral Performance in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (Madison, Connecticut: Musica Russica, 1994), 3.

²Morosan, *Choral Performance*, 7.

³For a thorough discussion of the development of Eastern Orthodox worship practices, see Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy: The Development of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996). Though Wybrew makes a case for the origin of the Byzantine Liturgy dating to the first century, the development in the fourth century shows a stronger connection to the later Byzantine and Russian Orthodox liturgies.

Roman Catholic Church as late as the tenth century⁴ passed into the Russian Orthodox Church and has continued for over one thousand years.

However, another aspect of Russian Orthodox worship by the latter part of the nineteenth century was the delegation of all singing to the priests, deacons, and the choir. The role for the members of the congregation, therefore, was that of passive listeners.⁵ Though this silence from the congregation violated New Testament exhortations for all members to sing, this restriction encouraged the cultivation of an art form that by the early twentieth century was highly developed. In an overview of the history of Russian liturgical singing, Morosan adds, "For a period of approximately two decades, from 1897 to 1917, Russian [*a cappella*] sacred works were among the more innovative choral music being written anywhere in the world."⁶

Johann von Gardner's *Russian Church Singing*, from which Morosan's more recent work originates, divides the history of Russian liturgical singing into epochs and periods, from its beginnings through the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.⁷ The first epoch, from 988 until the mid-seventeenth century, consisted of monophonic singing, as the chants were

⁴Though some organs are documented to have appeared in Western European churches as early as the eighth century, their actual usage has been the subject of debate. However, by the tenth century, records confirm the usage of organs and bells as a part of regular worship in Europe. Barbara Owen, "Organ IV," in *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (ed. Don Michael Randel; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 583.

⁵Vladimir Morosan, "The Sacred Choral Works of Peter Tchaikovsky," in *Monuments of Russian Sacred Music: Peter Tchaikovsky, The Complete Sacred Choral Works*, Ser. 2, Vol. 1/2/3 (ed. Vladimir Morosan; Madison: Musica Russica, 1996), lxxxix.

⁶Vladimir Morosan, "One Thousand Years of Russian Church Music: An Introduction," in *Monuments of Russian Sacred Music: One Thousand Years of Russian Church Music*, Ser. 1, Vol. 1 (ed. Vladimir Morosan; Washington D.C.: Musica Russica, 1991), lv.

⁷Johann von Gardner, *Russian Church Singing, Volume I, Orthodox Worship and Hymnography* (trans. Vladimir Morosan; New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 143–146.

sung exclusively in unison or parallel octaves by soloists. The second epoch, from the mid-seventeenth century onward, is characterized by the development of polyphonic choral singing. Scholars generally agree on the dates and the principal stylistic qualities of the two epochs; however, the delineation of specific periods, dates, and style traits within the epochs has not been universally accepted.⁸ Still, the final period in the history of Russian liturgical singing is widely acknowledged as the culmination of nine centuries of development. This period, identified by Morosan as the “New Russian Choral School,” began with Peter Tchaikovsky’s setting of the Divine Liturgy in 1878, and continued until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Morosan reports that during this brief period of time, twenty-eight major composers contributed between nine hundred and one thousand shorter choruses, and over forty large-scale works.⁹

In certain doctrinal aspects, the Russian Orthodox Church has somewhat resembled the Roman Catholic Church, but their exclusive use of *a cappella* singing even to the present day is an intriguing difference. In the first chapter, “The Essence of Liturgical Singing,” Johann von Gardner treats the subject of instrumental music. He states that the Russian Orthodox ban on instrumental music usually is attributed to “ascetical tendencies,” and that the writings of the church fathers are often cited.¹⁰ Validating Gardner’s point even as recently as 1995, Archpriest Boris Nikolaev wrote that the church’s exclusion of instrumental music “has its ideological basis in the Orthodoxy itself.” He then described vocal music as “natural,” and instrumental music as “artificial and imitative.” After referring to both Old Testament and New Testament passages, he emphasized the admonition from scripture to “sing praises ‘with understanding’” from Psalm 47:7. Quoting

⁸Gardner, *Russian Church Singing*, 139.

⁹Morosan, *Choral Performance*, 91.

¹⁰Johann von Gardner, *Russian Church Singing*, 21–22.

from Metallov, Nikolaev concluded that the reason that instruments were excluded was because the voice alone is “able to express the most diverse, deep, and delicate movements of the human soul.”¹¹ Indeed, this line of thinking was not far from that of the early Christian thinker, St. John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407), as demonstrated from his writings near the end of the fourth century:

Here there is no need for the cithara, or for stretched strings, or for the plectrum, or for art, or for any instrument; but, if you like, you may yourself become a cithara, mortifying the members of the flesh and making a full harmony of mind and body. For when the flesh no longer lusts against the Spirit, but has submitted to its orders and has been led at length into the best and most admirable path, then you will create a spiritual melody.¹²

During the climax of the history of Russian choral music in the final period of the new Russian choral school, the ban against instrumental music in the Russian Orthodox Church became an issue for the first time. This restriction was even challenged by one of the leading composers of a *cappella* church music, Alexandre Gretchaninoff (1864–1956). In 1917, immediately after the first events of the revolution, Gretchaninoff composed his third liturgy, the *Domestic Liturgy*, opus 79, for tenor and bass solo, chorus, string orchestra, organ and harp, the first and only Russian liturgy setting to be scored with instrumental accompaniment. Perhaps this alone would have been adequate in voicing his objection to the ban; however, a relatively

¹¹*Znamennyi Raspev i krukovaia notatsia kak osnova russkogo pravoslavnogo penia* [Znamenny Chant and Hook Notation as the Heart of Russian Orthodox Church Singing] (Moscow: Nauchnaia Kniga, 1995), 29–30. Introduction ed. Philip Camp, trans. Sergei Shishkin, “Pochemu v pravoslavnom bogoslužhenii ne dopuskaetsia instrumental’naia muzyka” [Why instrumental music is not allowed in Orthodox worship], 2002.

¹²St. John Chrysostom, “From the Exposition of Psalm XLI,” in *Source Readings in Music History: Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (ed. Oliver Strunk; New York: Norton, 1965), 70. This statement is similar to others recorded by Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215), St. Basil the Great (ca. 330–379), and St. Jerome (ca. 341–420).

recent publication from the Russian Orthodox Church indicates not only that Gretchaninoff made a more formal proposal, but also that the proposal would have met strong opposition even at the end of the twentieth century, shown by the type of language used to describe Gretchaninoff and his cohorts:

In 1917, people that dared to call themselves orthodox raised the question about the use of an organ in orthodox worship at the Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. A joint session that addressed specific questions concerning church singing was held on December 8 of that year. A[leksandr] Gretchaninoff proposed the introduction of the organ for use in worship. The suggestion received the support of the director of the Synodal School, A[leksandr] Kastal'sky, as well as by D[mitri] Allemanov, a priest in the Orthodox Church whose so called choral works are still performed even today by church choirs. The proposal was rejected by a vote of eight to three.¹³

As this proposal was documented to have occurred in December of 1917, it was certainly overshadowed by the all-encompassing event of the Bolshevik Revolution only a few weeks earlier. In his dissertation on Gretchaninoff's 1936 Catholic mass setting, *Missa Oecumenica*, Bradley Holmes suggests that if the revolution in Russia had not occurred, the Russian Orthodox Church might have eventually accepted instrumental music.¹⁴

As a part of that debate one year after Gretchaninoff's proposal, A. P. Golubstov pointed to the early Christian "decrees" that made instrumental music "forbidden to each Christian." He then expounded upon Tertullian's metaphor—the "organ of the human word," describing it as "the perfect instrument by its physical design." He concluded that the human voice "is more natural, more vivid..., expresses more intimately the inner state of a soul and serves as a conductor of her movements." Golubstov once again

¹³Kutuzov, B. "Problemy russkogo znamennogo penia v sviazi s istoriei vozrozhdenia katolikami gregorianskogo khorala" [Problems of Singing Znamenny Chant in relation to the history of revival of Gregorian Chant by Catholics], *Shkola Znamennogo Penia* [School of Sign Singing], No. 1 (ed. Philip Camp; trans. Sergei Shishkin; Moscow: Spass Cathedral of Andronic Monastery, 1996 and 2002).

¹⁴Bradley Holmes, "Missa Oecumenica and the Roman Catholic Masses of Alexandre T. Grechaninov" (D.M.A. diss., Arizona State University, 1990), 42.

pointed to the history of the church in his final statement: "Due to those advantages, vocal performance or singing was universally recognized in the ancient church."¹⁵

However, Gardner's explanation seems to offer more substance than merely pointing to the arguments of early Christian fathers. He explains that the purely vocal music of the church is an inherent part of the "essence" of worship, and that those who perceive liturgical music as just another category of music, with all the "same musical-aesthetic relationships found in secular music," have misunderstood the true essence of liturgical singing.¹⁶ He then expounds upon the essence of liturgical singing, which by its nature, he argues, would exclude instrumental music:

Orthodox worship consists almost exclusively of verbal expression in its many forms: prayer, glorification, instruction, exegesis, homily, etc. Only the word is capable of precisely expressing concrete, logically formulated ideas. Instrumental music, on the other hand, by its nature is incapable of such unambiguous expression; it can only express and evoke the emotional element, which is received subjectively by each individual listener, thus giving rise to a variety of interpretations. But it is impossible to give such an emotional reaction a precise, logical definition. Concepts such as sadness, majesty, joyfulness, happiness, etc. are merely general and vague characterizations of emotional qualities and do not represent any unequivocal ideas that can be precisely expressed in words. The same musical form, whether a simple tune played on a fife, a complex piece of instrumental polyphony, or even a melody hummed without words by the human voice, can be supplied with texts of different content and character that will enable the same music to convey completely diverse ideas. Only the word can give musical sounds a definite, unambiguous meaning. And in worship only the word can clearly express the ideas contained in prayer, instruction, contemplation, etc.¹⁷

While Gardner's point seems to clearly and reasonably explain the church's

¹⁵Golubtsov, A. P. *Iz chtenii po tserkovnoi arkheologii i liturgika. Chast 2: Liturgika*, [From the readings on the Church Archaeology and Liturgics. Vol. 2: Liturgics], (Sergiev Posad: 1918), 254–257. Unpublished translation from the chapter "Instrumental'noe ispolnenie tserkovnykh pesnopenii" [Instrumental Performance of the Church Motets] (ed. Philip Camp; trans. Sergei Shishkin; 2002).

¹⁶Gardner, *Russian Church Singing*, 22.

¹⁷Gardner, *Russian Church Singing*, 22–23.

ban against purely instrumental music without “the word,” it does not adequately explain the ban against instrumental accompaniment to the vocal music. In fact, his very arguments articulated in his next statement could also effectively support the use of instruments to accompany vocal music:

Thus, wordless instrumental music by itself is not suited for conveying the concrete verbal content of worship. It can only entertain and please the ear, evoke various emotions, and, to a certain extent, reflect the emotional content of ideas expressed by words. On the other, the word taken in conjunction with musical sounds can combine logical clarity and precision of meaning with the emotional response to verbal ideas.

Herein, it seems, lies the reason why the musical element is admitted into the Orthodox liturgy only in conjunction with the word. Either the musical sounds give emotional coloration to the logically concrete contents of the liturgical texts, or the musical expression arises as an emotional reaction to the ideas expressed by the words.¹⁸

In a recently published interview from the *Choral Journal*, Vladimir Morosan’s explanation of the essence of liturgical singing seems to take Gardner’s philosophy a step further. Though the question he addresses here is not specifically about the use of instruments, his general statements about performing Russian liturgical music give a rational explanation to the restriction against the use of instruments:

Chu: Are there other aspects of study necessary for performing [Russian Orthodox choral music] well?

Morosan: When it comes to performing Russian sacred music, the greatest challenge for Western musicians seems to be the understanding that singing this music is, first and foremost, prayer. It is music of worship, not music at worship (something that ornaments or decorates, like icing on the cake). The same is essentially true of Gregorian chant—it is sung worship. Somehow, this approach needs to be central, even in a concert performance.

When Vladimir Minin of the Moscow Chamber Choir did a workshop here in 1988 with American professional singers, the one thing he tried to convey, using every means possible, was that you cannot sing Russian music simply with a well-trained throat and a curious intellect. “There’s God up there,” he said, pointing heavenward, “and then, there’s us down here, and we have to approach the music from that perspective.”

¹⁸Gardner, *Russian Church Singing*, 23.

The Western choral musician needs to understand (or perhaps, rediscover) this fundamental truth.¹⁹

The idea that all Russian liturgical music is considered to be prayer seems to carry much significance in the exclusion of instruments. The use of instrumental music to accompany vocal music would seem to qualify as “icing on a cake,” making it “music at worship” rather than “music of worship,” a notion that was recently verified by Morosan through personal correspondence.²⁰ Consequently, in Russian Orthodoxy, instrumental accompaniment might be used if the desire to please man was considered. However, in their intention to present an offering *only* to please God—the essence of Russian Orthodox liturgical singing as described above—instruments are excluded. Morosan adequately sums up the position thus: “Singing sacred music is not about entertainment or diversion; it’s about fundamental questions of humanity and divinity, and us being raised from earth to heaven.”²¹ Many aspects of a Russian Orthodox service are influenced by this type of reverence, demonstrated both in the pew-less cathedrals where congregations stand throughout the duration of long services that can last several hours, and in the sustained and contemplative style of the music itself.

Thus, in defending the practice of *a cappella* singing, Russian liturgical scholars approach the topic from a unique perspective. While advocates of *a cappella* church music in the West tend to approach the topic from a biblical perspective, arguing from the standpoint of “intended silence” from the New Testament, the external emphasis of the old covenant versus the internal focus of the new covenant, first-century pagan practices versus Christian practices, and even from the standpoint of the absence of instruments

¹⁹George S. T. Chu, “An Interview with Vladimir Morosan,” *Choral Journal* 40 (1999): 40.

²⁰Morosan, personal interview, May 19, 2002.

²¹Chu, “An Interview with Vladimir Morosan,” 40.

in the first several hundred years of church history, the advocates of *a cappella* music from the Russian Orthodox tradition raise a more philosophically based theological question, essentially, “What is the point of worship? Is it a desire to please men, or to please God?” In Russian Orthodox practice, the songs used in worship are meant *only* to please God, and adding instruments to the worship practice would originate only out of the desire to please men—another notion that is related to the thoughts expressed by early Christian writers on the subject, most notably St. Augustine in the fourth century.²²

As briefly mentioned above, this overall desire to please God through worship also infiltrated the stylistic tendencies of *a cappella* music itself. In the peak of musical creativity in the Russian Orthodox Church just prior to 1917, the expression of the text and the suitability of the music to fit the meaning of the text became an increasingly important goal for the composers of church music. This also became a topic of debate, as many traditionalists became fearful that too many style traits from the secular forms of opera and ballet would infiltrate sacred music. However, as the nature of the texts was highly reverent, and the composers generally skilled and sensitive, the few compositional devices that were imported from secular musical forms actually brought greater expression to the liturgical and non-liturgical devotional texts that were commonly sung, resulting in a richer, more meaningful worship experience for the church. To use a modern stylistic comparison from the songs out of an *a cappella* church tradition in this country, the Russian equivalent of a Stamps-Baxter quartet from fifty years ago, with its often buoyant treatment of such topics as the crucifixion, would be unthinkable. Yet the style of some of the classic hymns, such as “It Is Well with my

²²St. Augustine, “From the Confessions,” in *Source Readings in Music History: Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (ed. Oliver Strunk; trans. William Watts [1631]; New York: Norton, 1965), 73–75.

Soul,” by Horatio Spafford and Philip Bliss, or even some of the current “devotional songs” sung by church youth groups, with their effective use of well-crafted melodies, rhythms, and harmonies that are sensitively suited to accentuate the meaning of the text,²³ would be very much in line with the thinking of the advocates of *a cappella* music from the Russian Orthodox Church.

As one who supports the *a cappella* tradition in our churches today, I have gained much insight from this study of the music of the Russian Orthodox Church. First, it has been encouraging to learn that another church tradition has maintained such a strong practice of unaccompanied *a cappella* singing that the members generally have never questioned its validity, with only the exception described above. Secondly, studying the rich quantity of excellent choral music cultivated from the tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church has inspired me to seek out, to develop, and to support gifted composers of *a cappella* church music with the goal of cultivating songs and hymns that are more worshipful. In doing this, perhaps our current songs should be re-evaluated for their appropriateness in worship. In this re-evaluation, questions should be asked about each song or hymn, such as, “Does the music appropriately express the meaning of the text, or does it detract from the meaning of the text?”

Finally and most importantly, this study has reminded me of the

²³Many of the newer “devotional” songs are learned aurally at Christian youth camps, youth rallies, or other youth gatherings, making it difficult to trace the actual composer. While some of these songs are very simplistic in terms of style, such as setting the male voices on the main theme or melody, with a strict echo sung by the women a few beats or measures later, other songs contain well-crafted melodies. While the harmonies are generally improvised by the congregation and are constantly changing, the expression of the text becomes very poignant, such as in “Create in me a clean heart, O God,” a straight setting of Psalm 42:10–12, and “The Greatest Commands,” which may be found in the hymn book *Songs of Faith and Praise* (ed. and arr. Alton H. Howard; West Monroe: Howard, 1994), no. 448.

overall reason that I should attend a worship service—to participate as a worshipper to God. Music should not be the central focus of our assemblies, but rather, worship. Certainly the use of great music enhances our participation, emotionally attracting or reminding us of who God is and how we want to please him, but when the music becomes the central focus of our assemblies, we have missed the point of worship altogether. When we approach our worship assemblies with an individual and collective passion focused on presenting an offering pleasing to God, we will experience the true joy of worship as God intended.

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