

The Orthodox Church and the Paradoxes of Russian Music History

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Abstract: Thousand years of the Russian Orthodox Church present the dramatic history of its music, crucially affecting Russian musical culture in general. This history is full of sore inter- and intra- collisions due to the defensive policy of the Russian Church to two rivaling religions: Roman Catholicism from the West (“inter-” conflict) and Slavic paganism from within the country (“intra-” conflict). The main vectors accompanying these collisions were chant versus polyphony and modality versus functionality. However, what united these two highly different inter- and intra- musical threats to the Orthodox Church was using instruments, which were, and still are, strictly prohibited in Orthodox music. Moreover, the Church used all its influence for centuries to oppress instrumental music in secular culture. This explains why Russia and other Orthodox East-European countries were far behind the West-European ones concerning instrumental music, which developed under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church. Even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Russian instrumental music reached its world level, the influence of old Orthodox doctrine can be traced in its nationalist/modernist aesthetics.

The article focuses on the fascinating story of Russian paraliturgical music, which, overcoming many limitations and prohibitions, found its way into the operatic and symphonic genres allowing the use of allusions and subtextual messages in compositions by Tchaikovsky, Taneyev, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich, Sergei Slonimsky, and others.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox chant, paraliturgical music, Glinka, Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky, Pathétique, passion-symphony, Taneyev, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Sergei Slonimsky.

Introduction

Russian religious music has a rich and dramatic thousand-year history. Russian secular music could have also had an old tradition, were their coexistence peaceful. But it was not. In its history, secular music culture lost significant periods in its development, experiencing suppression by the Russian Orthodox Church – only to take its revenge later. The war affected both, and Church music also experienced internal conflicts and complex interrelations with secular musical culture. Guarding its canon and sovereignty against external influences, the Church nevertheless yielded to general historical changes, proving the universal principle of adaptability necessary for complex systems’ survival. These changes occurred painfully at some times and benevolently at others, depending on political situations.

Paradoxically, however, while the Church was mostly defensive toward secular culture, it made a deep imprint in aesthetical views, styles, and genre preferences of

nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian art-music composers. An extraordinary role in this impact is the Orthodox policy regarding paraliturgical genre that could reconcile both sides. Natural for monotheistic religions *presence* of paraliturgical music or its unnatural *absence* presumably defined some unique turns in Russian secular culture, which I hypothesize in this article.

It is taken for granted that the golden-era Russian music of the last two centuries is all secular, while Russian sacred music of the same period had a humiliatingly low profile. This modern-times approach (and reality) also influenced the historiography of the preceding eighteenth century. The Enlightenment era, however, was unique in Russian history when both sacred and secular music coexisted liberally, and paraliturgical music flourished as never before or after. However, overshadowed by later outstanding achievements, eighteenth-century music was viewed through a secular lens. Hence, the social role of sacred music represented by the vast legacy has not always been considered in general studies on Russian musical culture.¹

Religious Music in Soviet Russia

No wonder the established in the nineteenth century descending relation to sacred music was embraced and militated by imposing atheistic views of Soviet ideology. In fact, as Alexander Rosenblatt notes,

[...] the Soviet regime never officially outlawed religious beliefs. Moreover, various Soviet constitutions have always guaranteed the right to believe. Being rather a hypocrisy, this greatly helped the state to use the church during the war to encourage patriotism. However, since the Marxist ideology [...], viewed religion as an obstacle to building a Communist society, the consistent destruction of all religions (and their replacement by atheism) became a fundamentally important ideological goal of the Soviet state.²

Not all religious music, however, was forbidden in Soviet Russia. Western repertoire: requiems by Mozart or Verdi, or Handel's oratorios, various masses, and passions were a part of educational curricula and basic classical programs. Choir-conducting students of the St. Petersburg Conservatory had to know the Latin mass text by heart. This was not the case, however, with Russian Orthodox music. While Soviet ideology proudly proclaimed its openness to world cultural heritage, they vigilantly guarded the atheistic façade of Soviet society. The Orthodox liturgy was not studied at all; the division of sacred music into liturgical and paraliturgical was never voiced. So, when the public performance of

¹ On paraliturgical music in eighteenth-century Russia see Marina Ritzarev, *Eighteenth-Century Russian Music*. Ashgate/(Routledge), 2006, chapters 5, 8, 10, 12-14.

² Alexander Rosenblatt, "Church Music and Atheistic Ideology in the Last Decade of the USSR," *Philosophy* 12, no. 10 (2022): 546.

Orthodox paraliturgical music finally took place during the mid-1960s “thaw”, it was a bombshell, an unbelievable and immense breakthrough.

Ironically, the ignorance of Soviet censorship led it to almost literally imitate (or plagiarise) the Russian Synodic censorship of the nineteenth-century, which also prohibited the performance of Orthodox spiritual music in public concerts, but for a different, opposite reason. If the Soviet ideology considered even the musical pronunciation of sacred text in a secular public space as *religious propaganda*,³ then the tsarist religious authorities of the nineteenth century regarded the performance of sacred music at a concert along with a secular composition as *blasphemy*. The censorship of tsarist Russia smoothly transitioned to the censorship of socialist Russia, flexibly adapting to a fundamentally different ideological agenda.

The musicians, however, have found creative ways to sing this beautiful music while avoiding the original Orthodox texts. In the nineteenth century, they Latinized the psalmodic verses. Fooling the Synod censors with such a masquerade, as Rimsky-Korsakov wrote in his *Chronicle*⁴, they made public concert performances possible. Soviet choirmasters used another tactic: replacing the texts of psalms with Soviet patriotic or neutral verses.⁵ One way or another, both generations of musicians have preserved this precious heritage.

During the Cultural Revolution, scores with Latin text were more likely to survive ideologically and physically. Of the entire collection of eighteenth-century manuscripts in the glorious Imperial Court Chapel I visited in 1968, only one score of Giuseppe Sarti’s *Miserere* was kept in a magnificent empty cabinet. The major scholar of Russian Orthodox chant, Doctor of Theology, Nikolai Dmitrievich Uspensky (1900-1987), then just recently “legalized” among secular scholars, told me that in 1927, the collection was burned down in a fire on the bridge connecting the Chapel building with the Winter Palace. As I understood much later, it was the Latin title on the marble-paper cover of Sarti’s score that saved it from the fire – there was nothing suspicious for the vandals.

Russian Music Historiography and Nineteenth-Century Russian Nationalism

It is understandable that this legacy of sacred music was hardly explored during the Soviet era. But why was it neglected in the nineteenth century? Well, not entirely. Research into

³ Liturgical music was allowed in church services, which limitedly existed in the USSR (controlled by the KGB) in accordance with the Soviet Constitution.

⁴ Nikolay A. Rimsky-Korsakoff, *My Musical Life*. Transl. from the revised second Russian edition by Judah A. Joffe. Ed. with an introduction by Carl van Vechten. NY: Tudor Publishing, 1936, pp. 82-3.

⁵ For example, Bortniansky’s and Berezovsky’s concertos were published and performed with the texts by Alexei Mashistov.

church music did exist and laid a good foundation for future studies, but autonomously from the general musical culture.⁶

At least four cultural aspects prevented this repertoire from being included in the Russian cultural legacy in the second half of the nineteenth century when critical thought was the most outspoken.

First, Russian nationalism of the time was mainly secular,⁷ and devotional music added little pride to cultural history in the views of both critics and composers. The reigning notion was that genuine Russian music began from Glinka. All his and his followers' achievements lay in the secular sphere. True, Glinka, Balakirev, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and some amateur composers wrote liturgical pieces, single or in cycles, but they strictly adhered to the canon of contemporary church music, excluded any stylistic individuality, and differed little from the now forgotten purely church composers. No wonder that conceptualized in this way Glinka-centered history of secular Russian music was fully embraced by the Soviet official doctrine.

The second and the “worse” issue was that the legacy of preceding eighteenth-century Russian music, particularly religious, was compromised by its “Italian” sound. In long-nineteenth-century Russia, “Italian” was a swear and offensive concept regarding music.⁸ To what extent the quotation marks are appropriate here is not a simple question. There was little eighteenth-century European music that did not sound Italian. The problem was that nineteenth-century knowledge of eighteenth-century common-practice idiom was much vaguer than ours. In addition, the concepts of “national” and “foreign” were understood anti-historically and often wrongly confused with (or substituted by) the ideas of “old” and “new”. Two pairs of oppositions – Russian vs “Italian” and secular vs sacred – made eighteenth-century national religious music with its best-known authority and symbol Dmitry Bortniansky (1751-1825), unacceptable for secular-nationalistic aspirations of the nineteenth-century thinkers. A disparaging relation to this sphere was firmly established as an unimportant, if not shameful, chapter of Russian culture.

There were many discussions about what national church music should be like, how to tactfully harmonize the ancient modal chant, etc., but they were all within the framework of the liturgy. Creative solutions arrived only with the new generation, toward the more

⁶ To name but the most authoritative studies: Dmitry Razumovsky, *Tserkovnoe penie v Rossii* [Church chant in Russia]. Moscow, 1867; Antonin Preobrazhensky, *Ocherk istorii tserkovnogo penia v Rossii* [Essay on history of church chant in Russia]. St. Petersburg: 1910; Vasily Metallov, *Ocherk istorii pravoslavnogo tserkovnogo penia v Rossii* [Essay on history of Orthodox Church chant in Russia] (4th ed.). Moscow, 1915.

⁷ Occasional quotations or imitations of ancient Russian chant in Russian operas of the 1860-the 80s served as super-icons of Russian identity alongside pagan folklore. Later, in the twentieth century, Rachmaninoff treated it similarly to how *The Five* composers did with the folk song. This will be discussed later.

⁸ See Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, Chapter 10 “Ital’yanshchina”, pp. 186-235.

religiously liberal twentieth century, in the works of Alexander Kastal'sky and Sergei Rachmaninoff.⁹

The third and seemingly bizarre factor influencing nineteenth-century musicians during their formative decades was Russia's *absence of paraliturgical music*. Their idea of national spiritual music was as narrow and dull as the ascetic church liturgy. They used to live without paraliturgical music and to be indifferent to its once vibrant existence in their Orthodox culture. Such remnants of a bygone era as Bortniansky's concertos performed at Imperial court services,¹⁰ which drove visiting Hector Berlioz to ecstatic rapture, up to the meeting with the numinous,¹¹ made little impression on the Russians of the great generation.

It should be understood in context, however. Berlioz, who, like no one else in Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century, had unlimited access to and use of symphonic instruments in his work and study, could be struck by the divine beauty of the eight-part *a cappella* polyphony sounding with enchanting *East-European* flavor. At the same time, young Russians, annoyed by poorly developed symphonic culture and bored with everyday church choral music, were thirsty and hungry for wondrous *West-European* symphonic-instrumental possibilities. They longed for other sounds.

This contradiction constituted the fourth factor associated with the dramatic history of instrumental music in Russia. The issue has deep roots and demands a detailed clarification.

⁹ Nataliia Kornetova contributed an interesting take on this subject in her "Russian Sacred Music of the Late Nineteenth Century: Differences and Similarities of the Moscow and St. Petersburg Schools in Theory and Practice in an Age of Reform". PhD Dissertation, The University of Queensland, Australia, School of Music, Voronezh State Pedagogical University, 2017.

¹⁰ Some cathedrals possessing good choirs and regents kept Bortniansky and his contemporaries in their repertoire.

¹¹ Berlioz wrote: "Motionless, with downcast eyes, they all waited in profound silence for the time to begin, and at a sign doubtless made by one of the leading singers – imperceptible, however, to the spectator – and without anyone's having given the pitch or indicated the tempo, they intoned one of Bortniansky's biggest eight-part concertos. In this harmonic web there were complications of part-writing that seemed impossible, there were sighs, vague murmurs such as one sometimes hears in dreams, and from time to time accents that in their intensity resembled cries, gripping the heart unawares, oppressing the breast, and catching the breath. Then it all died away in an incommensurable, misty, celestial decrescendo; one would have said it was a choir of angels rising from the earth and gradually vanishing into the empyrean..."

In all these works [by Bortniansky] true religious feeling obtains, which frequently becomes a kind of mysticism that plunges the hearer into a profound ecstasy. He shows rare skill in the grouping of vocal masses, a miraculous sense of nuance and resonant harmony, and – still more surprising – an incredible freedom in the handling of the parts, a sovereign contempt for the rules respected by both his predecessors and his contemporaries, especially by the Italians whose disciple he is supposed to be." (Hector Berlioz, *Evenings with the Orchestra*. Trans. and ed., with Introduction by Jacques Barzun at the request of the Berlioz Society. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956, p. 240).

Orthodox Religion and Musical Instruments

The Russian Orthodox Church was formally established in Kievan Rus' in 988 following the latter's political choice of Byzantine support/patronage. Being not an easy decision, it put the Russian Church in a difficult position having two powerful rivals: internal Slavic paganism and external Catholicism. Music comprised one of the critical ecclesiological differences between Orthodoxy and the two other faiths. Both pagans and Western Christianity used musical instruments, which gave them an enormous advantage in attractiveness. In contrast, keeping with the Byzantine tradition, Greek-Orthodox Church had to follow Judaic convention, which prohibited instrumental music in sorrowful memory of the destruction of the Second Temple.

Instruments in Orthodox Church have been one of its strictest taboos to this day. In the struggle for its congregation, Orthodoxy politicized this issue and applied a heavy influence on secular authorities, ideology, propaganda, and suppression.

In the earlier centuries of Orthodoxy, instrumental music was a principal marker of “enemy”. As far as pagan culture is concerned, the Church did not refrain from condemning and cursing instruments, which were an organic element of the ancient shamanistic tradition. Associated with pagan ritual dances and using various idiophones, *rusalii* (Slavic pagan predecessor of Whitsuntide)¹², among other rituals, were strongly judged as “demonic games”.¹³ The more novel institution of Russian minstrels, so-called *skomorokhi*, was also based on pagan tradition. Not only were they bearers of instrumental music. They competed with the Church to maintain weddings and other rituals and enjoyed wide popularity in Rus'ian society. Orthodoxy tolerated them for quite a long time until their freethinking attitude began to be felt as a threat to the tsar Alexei Mikhailovich (Alexis, 1629-76, reigned 1645-76). By the mid-century, the tsar's and the Church's interests coincided, and Alexis twice (1648 and 1657) issued edicts suppressing the entire institution of *skomorokhi*. They were exiled to the Northern extremities of Russia, and their instruments were burned. Thus, the ban on instruments in the Church and the destruction of secular/pagan *skomorokhi* culture constituted mutually complementary factors in Russia's belated development of secular instrumental genres. Consequently, the old national instrumental dance music ceased to exist. Such iconic Russian folk dance as *Kamarinskaya* seems to be of eighteenth-century origins. It could be influenced by Western baroque idiom reaching Russia via more Westernized Ukraine and Belorussia.¹⁴

¹² <https://rezansky.com/pagan-elements-in-the-decorative-art-of-medieval-rus-rusalia-simargl-and-pereplut/> (accessed on March 28, 2022).

¹³ Paganism, nevertheless, had never been fully eradicated, and, for centuries, there existed a specific Russian phenomenon *dvoeverie* (“double-belief” or “dual faith”), combining elements of Orthodoxy and paganism. Its traces can still be found in ancient ritual folklore.

¹⁴ I thank Margarita Mazo for the discussion of this matter.

As for the representation of Catholicism, “organs” – whatever kind of instruments using this biblical name were implied in early Russian Orthodox sources¹⁵ – they symbolized the Western enemy. “Latin heresy”, especially from the mid-eleventh century (1054), when, after several failed attempts at reconciliation of Western and Eastern Christendoms, the irreversibility of “a final break between Rome and Constantinople” became evident.¹⁶ The West forever remained “an affirmed or subverted ideal”, as wrote Yuriy Lotman and Boris Uspensky,¹⁷ but, never reachable. Consistently and for centuries, the Orthodox Church propagated the West as evil. Love/hate relation to and willing/unwilling cultural borrowings from the West still define Russian life in every aspect.

In the early centuries of Christianity, the Russian public notion of Catholic instrumental music remained an abstract adversary until the explosive events of the Time of Troubles at the beginning of the seventeenth century. As Claudia R. Jensen shows,¹⁸ these events brought an unheard-of provocation. Both political and ideological, this provocation impinged the very foundations of Russian Orthodoxy and the legality of the Russian throne’s inheritance simultaneously. In case of success, there would be a political threat to Orthodox Rus’ becoming a colony of Catholic Poland.

Known as a purely political intrigue of the impostor False Dimitry I (1582-1606, reigned in Russia 1605-06), who tried to seize the Russian throne with the help of the Polish *szlachta*, probably had a chance of success if it were not for an aggressive purely *musical intrusion* into the Muscovite soundscape. This was a rare historical case where music appeared to be a decisive factor in a political coup.

The entire historical event of 1605-06 included the invasion, Dimitry’s wedding to a devout Catholic Polish Noblewoman, Marina Mniszech, and their coronation. Many ceremonies and long festivities took place – all accompanied by sweet-sounding Western *instrumental* music. Not only Latin liturgical pieces were supported by instruments, but many loud nights with table music and Polish dances resounded in patriarchal Moscow, causing the highest anger of the local public. As a result, not only was False Dimitry killed when the Russian elite realized the consequences but “dozens of Polish musicians – one source claims up to one hundred – were killed”.¹⁹

¹⁵ Quite conflicting descriptions of the organ can be found in seventeenth-century alphabetic glossaries quoted by Nikolai Findeizen in his *History of Russian Music from Antiquity to 1800*. Vol. 1. Translated by Samuel William Pring, edited and annotated by Miloš Velimirović and Claudia R. Jensen with the assistance of Malcolm Hamrick Brown and Daniel C. Waugh. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 149.

¹⁶ John Meyendorff, *Rome, Constantinople, Moscow: Historical and Theological Studies*. St Vladimir’s Seminary Press: Crestwood (NY), 2003, p. 46.

¹⁷ Yuriy Lotman and Boris Uspensky, “K semioticheskoy tipologii russkoy kul’tury XVIII veka”, in I.E. Danilova (ed.), *Khudozhestvennaya kul’tura XVIII veka* [Eighteenth-century artistic culture]. Moscow: Institut Istorii Iskusstv, 1974, pp. 259–282.

¹⁸ Claudia R. Jensen, *Musical Cultures in Seventeenth-Century Russia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009, Chapter 1 “The True False Dmitrii and the Death of Music in Moscow,” pp. 10-24.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.11.

The acuteness of this musical aggression was manifested in the combination of the two strongest opponents of the Russian Orthodox Church: the *Latin heresy* in the Divine Liturgy itself and *skomorokh*-wise (secular instrumental) music in entertainment – and all within the walls of the Kremlin.

The whole event was extremely bizarre, perhaps comparable only to the unauthorized landing of German pilot Mathias Rust on Red Square in front of the Kremlin (May 28, 1987), conceived as a peaceful gesture to mark a new era and test Gorbachev.

This historical episode of the invasion of the enemy musical sound and the Russian reaction based on Orthodox values should be regarded as a kind of historical and semiotic key to Russian art music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To give just a few world-famous examples, let's start with Shostakovich's *The Seventh* (1941), which clearly embodies the conflictual dichotomy of a positive image of Russian nationality (expressed by the *cantilena* character of both main and second subjects) as opposed to the negative one, the image of the invasion of the Nazi aggressors (expressed as a purely *instrumental* march-like “theme of invasion”).²⁰ Shostakovich, though, based not on historical chronicles but on much closer tradition, founded by Mikhail Glinka in his opera *A Life for the Tsar* (1836) featuring the same Polish campaign of Time of Troubles, though in different historical-political perspective. Glinka told the story of the Russian patriot taking the Polish squad away from Moscow. Ivan Susanin and all his household – his daughter Antonida, her groom Bogdan Sobinin and his adopted son Vanya – all are characterized individually but exclusively by cantilena music. Polish *szlachta*, on the contrary, is generally characterized non-personally by a suite of mostly Polish dances: waltz, mazurka, polonaise, and krakowiak. Mazurka leitrythm symbolizes the enemy throughout the entire opera.

This *vocal vs instrumental* dichotomy as a paradigm of *patriotism vs enemy*, thus, was formed and kept living in Russian artistic conscience during most of the twentieth century.

Using Resources of a *cappella* Sound on the Way to Westernization

While the instruments were out of the question, even purely vocal liturgical music with its minimal sound resources appeared capable of developing from Byzantine modal monody (as a plainchant, it remained, though slowly modified) to functional-harmonic European polyphony. The way was long and hard, and two factors worked sequentially.

The first was the Russian natural ethnic inclination to polyphony in folk singing. A huge part of folk songs consists of the so-called *protyazhnye* songs (translated by

²⁰ After Russian invasion of the Ukraine on February 24, 2022, this rhetoric received an ambiguous association, and anti-aggression Russian intellectuals cancelled the planned event for 80th anniversary of its premiere.

Taruskin²¹ as *drawn-out songs*. They are polyphonic, performed soloistically or chorally, and their two or three voices diverge in heterophony. This caused changes in the chant: monodic chant melodies had gradually overgrown/enriched with lower and upper voices. It does not mean that polyphonized chant became similar to folk singing. On the contrary, they differed dramatically in sound.

While *protyazhnye* songs are full of harsh assonances, they are generally subject to modal acoustic foundations. In contrast, polyphonized chant known as *strochnoe penie* (written as a “score” – two or three lines in neumatic notation) was characterized by complete linearity. It is still not fully clear how it sounded,²² but it can be cautiously assumed that the musical thinking of specialist singers formed by canonized monophonic formulaic motives (centonization), and their ability to hear vertical assonances of acoustically modal nature had yet to develop. Naturally, their polyphonic sound resulted in prevailing dissonancy. Thus, purely linear and highly dissonant polyphony of Orthodox *strochnoe* singing of the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries remained a tolerated acoustic norm until Western harmonic polyphony began to spread in Russian lands, mainly through Polish-Ukrainian *kanty*, and *kanty* became much more than merely a genre: they developed in a vast culture defining the future of Russian music.

Kant (from Latin *cantus*) is a three-part popular song, both secular and paraliturgical (then it was named *psal'm*), which acquired enormous popularity in urban Russia. The introduction of *kanty* was crucially important, beyond their social function. They implemented irreversible Westernization of Russian urban musical culture, converting its modal musical mentality into functionally-harmonic one.

Westernization of Russian musical idiom came from Italy via Poland (including later Belorussia), and Ukraine, which naturally inclined towards functional harmony. This pure music property came not from nowhere. The ethnic composition of the Ukrainian population, while generally Slavic (Belarusians, Bulgarians, Poles), includes such groups as Hungarians, Moldovans, Romanians, Roma (Gypsies), and various Carpathian peoples: Rusyns, Lemko, Boyko, Hutsuls and others. In addition to ethnic commonalities, the accepted in Ukraine and Belarus' Uniate Church brought strong Roman influence in culture in general.

The reunification of Ukraine and Russia in 1654 facilitated the flow of educated Ukrainian people, including singers, to Moscow, which provided Ukrainization and Westernization of its culture in the second half of the seventeenth century. This process brought the influence of the Uniate Church. The latter introduced “Latin methods and

²¹ Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, p. 7.

²² Johann von Gardner (referring to Nikolai Uspensky), *Russian Church Singing*, vol. 2: “History from the Origins to the Mid-Seventeenth Century,” translated and edited by Vladimir Morozan. Chestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000, pp. 315-17.

instruction and Latin ways of thought, which had a lasting effect on Russian theology”²³ and consequently on different intellectual spheres. Two prominent figures: Belorussian writer, theologian, and poet Simeon Polotsky (1629-1680) and Ukrainian composer and theoretician Nikolai Diletsky (1630-after 1680) contributed to the widespread development of *kanty* culture and the irreversible Westernization of Russian spiritual music.

The more *kanty* culture spread, the more annoying spiritual *troestrochnoe* singing was perceived – if not by singers themselves, then by listeners. The crisis was solved by patriarch Nikon, who, with the agreement of the Orthodox Church authorities and tsar Alexei Mikhailovich introduced choral *partes-concerto*. This was a *concertanto* polychoral motet style of Venetian origin, conceived in the 1580-the 90s by Andrea Gabrieli and later developed by his nephew Giovanni Gabrieli. Choral concerto had an instrumental accompaniment, and in this form, it spread in Catholic Poland. Adopted in Orthodox Ukraine, however, it left instruments behind. In a *cappella* form, it made its way Northward to Muscovite Rus’.

The introduction of this entirely new and entirely Western genre – and sound – into Russian ecclesiology was a dramatic, truly reformatory event. It firmly established polyphony of harmonic nature. The harmony, however, remained modal, Renaissance-like, for about a century, until the 1760s, when functional harmony took over.

The imposition of the Western style in Orthodox sacred singing ruined one of its basic ideological foundations. By doing this, Orthodoxy yielded to its Catholic rival. This apparent controversy caused a great historical split among Russian believers.²⁴ For part of them, the novelties of this kind signified Antichrist. They caused a powerful dissent movement of Old Believers who ran from the central regions and settled in the Northern and Eastern extremities of the country and eventually outside Russia. On their way to religious freedom, many Old Believers ended up self-burning when surrounded by persecutors. Historiographically, thanks to the Old Believers, the relatively old style of the ancient chant, at least close to what it was in the second half of the seventeenth century, has been preserved and could be studied starting from the same Soviet “thaw”.²⁵

Orthodoxy and Autocracy

However, rivalry with other confessions was only part of the problems of the Orthodox Church. The other factor was, and still is, the relationship with state power, be it a

²³ John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and Its Role in the World Today*. With selected revisions by Nickolas Lossky. 4th Revised Edition. Chestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996, pp. 102-3.

²⁴ Music was only part of pro-Western measures; for instance, printing the Orthodox church books in Venice(!) to unify and canonize endless handwritten variants was even greater evil for many believers.

²⁵ Tatiana Vladyshevskaya, *Muzykal’naya kul’tura Drevney Rusi* [Musical culture of Ancient Rus’]. Moscow: Znack, 2006. Part 4.

monarchy or other forms of government. Secular power has always dominated the Church, but the degree of influence of the Church on power has varied considerably from very strong, as it was before the end of the seventeenth century, to zero, as happened in the eighteenth century, when Peter the Great established secular control of the Church authorities and Catherine the Great secularized its lands. These changes were clearly reflected in the history of Russian musical culture.

As seen throughout history, the pattern of the Church-State relationship is defined by two opposite political tendencies. The first is convergence with the West, which is usually expressed in cultural Westernization and/or certain degrees of social liberalization and secularization promoted and achieved by the most influential Russian rulers. During these periods, the Church significantly lost its wealth and social impact and had to consider the new cultural norms. When the pendulum swung in reactionary periods, characterized by isolationism and limitations of freedoms, Church's influence elevated.

Music thus only followed and reflected general changes in Russia's history toward Westernization and secularization.

Westernization, Secularization, and Spiritual Music in Eighteenth-Century Russia

As Constantinople weakened under the empowerment of the Ottoman Empire and finally fell in 1453, Russia sought to choose the European path and achieve a long-awaited liberation from Byzantine dependence. The constant flow of Russian gold to Constantinople greatly burdened the state. For many centuries Russian tsars fought to redirect church resources to state building. Thus, the secularization of the Church's lands – this was the primary meaning of the term “secularization” in Russia – went hand in hand with Westernization, and they syn-energetically weakened the political power of the Church and strengthened the State. Secularization in the common meaning of the word also took place, and it reflected the influence of the European Enlightenment, thus becoming almost a synonym of Westernization.

Peter the Great (1672-1725, reigned 1682-1725) irreversibly transformed the country from Byzantine Muscovy to a somewhat Europeanized Russia with a new, west-facing capital St. Petersburg. The Petrine revolution hardly left any sphere of social life unchanged. Naturally, music acquired several new roles. Instrumental music for state ceremonies and entertainment became a highly desirable new norm. However, it was completely undeveloped for the above-described reasons. Both instruments and musicians were virtually single in the first decades of the eighteenth century until German and later Italian specialists were invited. All the institutions of European-model musical culture began to develop. It suffices to compare the murder of Polish musicians in Moscow in 1606 with the capture of Swedish wind instruments as precious trophies in the Poltava battle of 1709, which was victorious for the Petrine army, to show how diametrically Russian attitudes towards instrumental music have changed.

The unsatisfied need for instrumental music was compensated by the expansion of the social functions of paraliturgical *partes*-concerto. Indeed, the scale of *partes*-singing culture was massive. Fortunately, the surviving hundreds and hundreds of book-parts (scores were not practiced) in square notation from the end of the seventeenth century to the first half of the eighteenth century, are pretty strong evidence. *Partes*-singing developed intensively, giving birth to its composers and theoreticians, as well as performing perfection.²⁶ The complexity of polyphony and the number of choral parts have grown. Beginning from the basic four-part polyphony, it blossomed to six, eight, twelve, and twenty-four voices. There were even two forty-eight-part concertos.²⁷

Thus, *partes*-concertos and the popular three-part *kanty* mentioned above (which greatly influenced, if not defined the style of *partes*-concertos) formed an enormous repertoire and culture in general, serving the social life of the new era. State ceremonies, celebrations of military victories, and other occasions were accompanied by *kanty-vivaty* and *partes*-singing, sometimes with cannon fire in events of particular significance.

Partes-concerto remained in practice for more than a century, roughly from 1650 to 1770, and its style changed in various dimensions. In addition to the increasing number of parts and texture complexity, concertos' thematicism developed references to three popular genres: *kanty*, march, and lyrical songs. For the lack of other genres, *partes*-concerto became the primary expressive medium for vital social responses. As for the initially plain modal harmony – the simplest echo of the Renaissance style – it remained modal until the middle of the eighteenth century. Then the court choristers began participating in the newly introduced Italian opera productions. Exposed to the contemporary European sound, they grasped the new taste, which gradually found its way into their repertoire. They began to use Italian notation and undertook such clumsy attempts as an introduction of occasional functional harmony sequences and opera-*seria* rhetoric formulas.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the stylistic renewal of the genre proceeded slowly and inconsistently for more than two decades. The singers' lack of education in functional harmony was, of course, a problem. Although this difficulty could be easily overcome by hiring Italian tutors, the real problem was the policy of Empress Elizabeth (daughter of Peter I's, 1709-1762, ruled 1741-1762). She loved to sing "*partesy*", but was too religiously conservative to allow them to be stylistically modified in a Western/secular

²⁶ In addition to Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Russian composers Nikolai Diletsky and Vasily Titov, there were other composers: S. Pekalitsky, Davidovich, Nikolai Bavykin, and Nikolai Kalashnikov, Vasily Redrikov, Ioann Domaratsky, and others.

²⁷E. Gatovskaya and N. Plotnikova, "Partesny kontsert XVIII veka (na primere rukopisnykh pamyatnikov g. Yaroslavlya)" [*Partes*-concerto of the 18th century (based on Yaroslavl manuscript)]. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/partesnyy-kontsert-xviii-veka-na-primere-rukopisnyh-pamyatnikov-g-yaroslavlya/viewer> (accessed on October 23, 2022).

way. This was another illustration of the influence of power, but the next ruler would soon change it.

Catherine the Great (1729-1796, reigned 1762-1796), an atheist and Voltairianist, was indifferent to stylistic nuances of sacred music. Her era opened gateways for the stream of new tastes. It changed the genre of *partes*-concerto so much that, while remaining a polyphonic *a cappella* concerto with the same function, religious content, and basic structural features, it became so stylistically different that it began to be perceived as a different genre. Its name has lost the first part *partes* and for the half-a-century of existence, it has become simply known as *concerto*. Later, when it became history, it was called a “spiritual concerto” or “choral concerto,” or more precisely, academically, “Russian spiritual choral concerto of the second half of the eighteenth century – the beginning of the nineteenth century”.

The era of minuet rhythm defined the prevailing *gallant* style, though *kant* and march remained among its essential genre elements. Set in the 1760s by Baltassaro Galuppi (1706-1785, served at the Russian court in 1765-68) and Maxim Berezovsky (174?-1777), initially more baroque, choral concerto of the 1780s was already classicist in work of leading Galuppi-trained, “court director of vocal music”, Dmitry Bortniansky and Giuseppe Sarti (1729-1802, served at the Russian court in 1784-1801), moving toward a more operatic-sentimental expression of the famous serf composer Stepan Degtyarev (1766-1813) and melancholic-pathetic style of Ukrainian Artemy Vedel (1767-1808) – to mention just its foremost composers. The destroyed collection of the Court Chapel contained only works by the court composers. Fortunately, in the period from the 1780s (after the disastrous peasant war, plague epidemic, and Russian-Turkish war in the late 1760 – early 1770s), there was a flourishing of serf choirs (and theaters) at the estates of educated aristocrats. This period lasted until the 1800s-the 10s when wars with Napoleon devastated the aristocracy and mostly ended the serf musical culture. It is due to some preserved estate choirs’ libraries surviving in some museums and archives that allow us to comprehend this culture’s scale and stylistic trends.

A Bridge to Nowhere

By the end of the eighteenth century, the rapid development of European-style secular music institutions at the imperial court and wide aristocratic society gave instrumental music significant impetus. At the same time, a specific socio-religious and cultural movement of Catholicization, mainly in the noble sphere, took place. This was reflected in some cases of conversion and the arts: church architecture, painting, and music. Such a constellation opened the way to using instruments in paraliturgical genres.

At that time, a secular ceremonial cantata with instrumental accompaniment functionally replaced panegyric vivat or spiritual concerto as occasional music. In the late 1770s, Louis Henry Paisible organized *Concerts Spirituels* during the Lent period

presenting oratorios by Hasse, Graun, Jomelli, and more. In the 1780s, serving at Catherine's court, Giovanni Paisiello wrote cantata *Efraim* (1783) and *Passione di Gesù Cristo* (1784). Soon after, in 1785, his successor at the Russian court Giuseppe Sarti wrote numerous choral-orchestral works. Among them was the first Russian-text paraliturgical composition, oratorio *Gospodi, vozvakh k Tebe* (O Lord, to you I call, commissioned by Prince Potemkin). It was followed by *Te Deum* and victorious cantatas celebrating Russian victories in the Russo-Turkish war of 1787-1792, requiems for Louis XVI and Grand Duke of Württemberg. Sarti's *Miserere* (1785) became very popular in Russia, and its style somewhat echoed in early nineteenth-century music. During that period, even Bortniansky's *a cappella* concertos were sometimes accompanied by an orchestra and/or horn band. The composer also wrote secular cantatas for various occasions and patriotic songs for choir and orchestra during the Napoleonic war. Józef Kozłowski, a Polish officer, made another noticeable contribution in this line. He wrote many choral-orchestral polonaises, and the *Requiem*, known in two versions: for Stanislav II August (1798) and Alexander I (1825).

To conclude, for three-four decades, around 1800, choral-orchestral music flourished. The high genre of major compositions of devotional or patriotic content showed all signs of being established and in high demand in Russian society. In 1802, Saint-Petersburg Philharmonic Society, closely associated with masonry, was founded and began to perform world masterpieces: Haydn's *The Creation* and *The Seasons*, Mozart's and Cherubini's *Requiems*, Handel's *Messiah*. Later, in 1824, there was the world premiere of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*.

So, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, all was set: both society and musical specialists began to mature for active development of national creative work; genres interacted and enriched each other promising the bright future of multifaceted national musical culture, including paraliturgical genre.

Suddenly, however, this movement abruptly stopped, causing the cultural paradox that defined the further development of Russian music. A strange state of mind possessed Emperor Alexander I upon his return from the Viennese Congress in 1815. Whatever the reasons, the last decade of his life was characterized by mystic moods. This time marked the end of the Enlightenment, and the era of Ethos (using Curt Sax's cultural-historical construct), exemplified by the highly secularized long eighteenth century. With the beginning of the age of Pathos, Orthodoxy regained its ideological power. The Nikolaian time characterized by the famous ideological triad *Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality*, came for three long decades. Orthodoxy became a part of educational curricula. Paradoxically, this strongly ideologized trend directly affected Russian sacred music, from which its paraliturgical part, capable of intensifying religious moods, was eliminated.

At the same time, Russian secular music of all genres, including instrumental ones, could develop freely. Western paraliturgical music also sounded at liberty. Bach's *Mass in B minor* was well known, and *Crucifixus* was a popular piece. The cults of great classics

were firmly established. Episodes from the Old Testament were also uncensored and allowed for operatic librettos. However, the Church protected gospel themes from secular composers, not ready to share with them the human-divine duality of the image of Jesus, not to mention his appearance on any stage. In purely liturgical music, there were no problems with the divinity of Jesus. Yet, paraliturgical sounding claimed compassion for his human image.

Paraliturgical Music in Exile

It is rarely mentioned in studies of nineteenth-century Russian music that Russian composers capable of creating European-style paraliturgical music, could be drawn to this genre. True, there is little evidence of their intentions. Still, some well-known facts from the life of Glinka, Rubinstein, and Tchaikovsky deserve attention from this point of view.

Glinka

In 1856, at fifty-two, Mikhail Glinka, recognized at home and abroad, went to Berlin with a clearly expressed intention of thoroughly studying fugue with the world authority Siegfried Dehn. It was a kind of resumption of lessons after two decades, during which the composer wrote two great operas *A Life for the Tsar* (1836) and *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842).

Glinka's famous phrase, written shortly after his arrival to his friend: "I am almost convinced that it is possible to tie Western fugue to conditions of our music by bonds of a legal marriage",²⁸ clarified the purpose that his enhanced contrapuntal skills were to serve. The context of Glinka's letters leaves no doubt that "our music" meant sacred music, in particular, what was understood then as ancient Orthodox liturgical chant.

The above phrase, however, remains open to interpretation because of its covered contradiction. Ancient chant, as harmonized in strictly chorale settings, relates to canonic liturgy, but Russian Orthodox canonic liturgy does not need fugue.

A fugue is needed for paraliturgical music on a scale from the sacred *a cappella* concerto as practiced by Galuppi, Berezovsky, Bortniansky, and Sarti – to the short-lived choral-symphonic cycles begun sometime in Russia by Paisiello, Sarti and Kozłowski. Musically, both these high paraliturgical genres used a secular common-practice idiom of their decades influenced by opera *seria*. Their thematic material by any means was not the ancient Orthodox chant or any references to it. This apparent contradiction makes one think that Glinka was inspired by the idea of combining ancient Orthodox thematicism with

²⁸ "Ya pochti ubezhdyon, chto možhno svyazat' fugu zapadnuyu s usloviyami nashey muzyki uzami zakonnoogo braka". (Glinka's letter to K.A. Bulgakov, Berlin November 3, 1856 (Mikhail Glinka, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy: Literaturnye proizvedeniya i perezpiska*, Full collection of works: literary works) vol. 2b, 1977, p. 180).

polyphonic and perhaps orchestral resources of Western-model paraliturgical genre. This could indeed be an attractive, fresh, and daring stylistic solution for which he sought help. Culturally and historically, this would correspond to the achievements of Glinka: his *A Life for the Tsar* has already laid a foundation for a national heroic opera that combines *autocracy* and *nationality* from the Nikolaian triad. He could well lay a similar foundation for national sacred music completing the triad with *Orthodoxy*.

Heading the Court Chapel for some period, Glinka was well aware of Bortniansky-era concerto legacy. Still, he was unhappy with Bortniansky's classicist style, which he found too sweet. Then, the common knowledge was that Bortniansky wrote his concertos in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, serving as the director of the Imperial Court Chapel. This appeared untrue: he did so much earlier, in the 1780s, hence their *gallant* style. Glinka could reasonably presume that Bortniansky's paraliturgical line was worth developing in style corresponding to the new era. So, suppose Glinka was going abroad with this idea in mind, it could be circumstantial evidence that he meant some paraliturgical Orthodox genre. We cannot know his thoughts about including orchestra, but the West certainly would make it possible.

Germany was Glinka's natural destination from a young age. Berlin beckoned him not only by Siegfried Dehn but also by its vibrant European musical life. Friendly with Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer, Liszt, and Berlioz, Glinka felt more international than any other Russian composer before or after. Europe was the entity of creative freedom and inspiring experience, where he could develop his potential in a new direction and bring his elaboration of Russian Orthodox chant to the European treasure.

He could watch paraliturgical works of his European friends, and most likely, he knew about Mendelssohn's Christian compositions. As for Berlioz, whom Glinka knew since their meetings in 1844-45, ten years later, he stayed in Paris again when Berlioz worked on his *L'enfance du Christ*. Although they did not meet during that vacation, it is hardly possible that he would not have heard of what Berlioz worked on.²⁹

Glinka died before he could implement this idea of a "legal marriage" of Orthodox chant and Western fugue. Still, being well-known among Russian musicians of all generations, this phrase remained a testament. It was first fulfilled by Sergei Taneyev (1856-1915) two generations later.

Anton Rubinstein

While all regarding Glinka's inclinations remain hypothetical, what is not speculative is Rubinstein's accomplishment toward the end of his life.

For many years occupied with biblical operas, Rubinstein cherished the desire to contribute to musical Christology. He conducted the premiere of Liszt's *Christ* (in Vienna,

²⁹ Glinka had to leave in April 1854, well before *L'enfance du Christ* premiered on December 10, 1854.

1871) and learned many devotional oratorios. Rubinstein did implement his dream much later when, like Glinka, leaving Russia forever, he settled in Germany and wrote his opera *Christus* (Stuttgart, 1893). Almost missing in historiographical discussions, this work is not considered a fact of Russian God-seeking. However, ironically, this particular composition was the only one open about its intentions.

Incidentally or not, the chronological simultaneousness of two swan songs by mentor and the pupil: Rubinstein's *Christus* and Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* (1893), is one of my arguments for *Pathétique*'s hidden belonging to Russian paraliturgical music, and its unique role in further development of Russian music in general.

Tchaikovsky

More than any other Russian composer, Tchaikovsky documented his keen interest in and love for Christ: in his diary, letters, and the marginalia of the New Testament. It is probable that his Sixth symphony, the *Pathétique*, which he deliberately announced as having a secret program but never disclosed or hinted at, was meant as a hitherto unknown genre of the Passion symphony.³⁰ For its creation, Tchaikovsky did not exile himself from Russia to Germany like Glinka and Anton Rubinstein. However, he transferred the textual-musical Passion genre into the wordless, purely instrumental symphony. Equally commanding all the possible genres and effortlessly hybridizing them, the composer could write the story of Jesus in any genre: opera, ballet, or oratorio, but they all remained out of the question in Russia. Writing it in a symphony, he escaped censorship and created a secret paraliturgical drama. He assembled quotations, topics, and dramaturgical artifices from Russian Orthodox, German Lutheran, German Catholic traditions, and even French Catholic-becoming-atheist scholar Ernest Renan.

In decades when Tchaikovsky's generation matured, Russian culture was permeated with the cult of Christ as a culture hero. Under the enormous influence of Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, forbidden in Russia but widely read among educated society, Christ's image in their thoughts was more human than divine. The primary medium of expression was secular painting, openly and stormily discussed by Russian intellectuals, including Vladimir Stasov and Leo Tolstoy. At the same time, composers, as this article describes above, were deprived of giving their artistic response to the image of Christ in free-style spiritual compositions. Tchaikovsky, experiencing intense feelings and thoughts for his hero, saw him as a protagonist of a composition he could create and needed to fulfill as his chief life accomplishment.

Looking at the score of this symphony with this idea in mind, one can notice some details corresponding with such an interpretation.

³⁰ I base on my hypothesis developed in *Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture* (Ashgate/Routledge, 2014).

1. The eighteen-bar Introduction to the first movement almost cites the opening chorus of *The St Matthew Passion* in the upper voice and, even closer to the original, quotes *basso ostinato* figure of *passus duriusculus* from Crucifixus (from the *Mass in B Minor*) – both in Bach’s key E minor.
2. The sequence of episodes in the first movement remarkably closely illustrates the last passage of Renan’s Chapter XXIII “Last Week Of Jesus” conveying possible Jesus’ reflections during his Gethsemane night, the Prayer of the Cup (the Agony in the Garden). It even contains a quote from the Russian chorale, “With Thy saints, Christ, pacify the soul of Thy servant”, sung at memorial service, whose melodic contour noticeably resembles both *Dies irae* and *Kyrie eleison*, making the message ecumenical.
3. The third movement, Scherzo, is famously known for its emotional ambivalence noticed by musicians and scholars of different generations and cultures. It may well present an expressive ‘soundtrack’ to the crowded public events of the last Jerusalem week – from Triumphal entry into Jerusalem to Mockery.
4. As the sketches of the symphony show, Tchaikovsky drafted the Introduction with allusions to the Cavalry immediately after the Scherzo-march. Thus, initially following the sequence of events in the Passion, he decided to refer to the Cavalry in the Introduction, as a flashback. Coincidentally or not, he followed the text of Bach’s opening chorus “Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen!” which suggests that everybody knows the end of the story.³¹
5. For the first time in the history of the symphony, its finale is a slow movement, as if interchanging with the Scherzo-march, which possesses many properties of a finale and is often perceived as such. The most tragic in world music, the finale movement can be interpreted as both conveying ultimate suffering and universal requiem.
6. Despite the triviality of the title *Pathétique* by the end of the nineteenth century, it could be chosen nevertheless for its etymological connection to *passion*.

Surveying Russian music studies both in and outside Russia, one can notice that the *Pathétique* stands alone, out of context, like a single trump ace among many high-value cards of other suits. This situation can be explained by a particular historiographical bias of nationalism, which this symphony does not fit. Inertia to look at Russian music from the point of its otherness, to seek its national features by all means, often makes scholars ignore it in Russian music discussions. However, this symphony embodied an exceedingly significant, if not boiling in the nineteenth century, but historiographically negligible in Russian studies, socio-cultural stream of God-seeking. The explicitly cosmopolitan

³¹ Karol Berger, *Bach’s Cycle, Mozart’s Arrow: An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), p. 108.

musical lexicon of the *Pathétique* (though like in his late work in general) separates or distinguishes it from the well-known Russian *Russian* repertoire. At the same time, its paraliturgical nature remained unrecognized (though felt).³² But without this giant tower organically built in Russian culture, the landscape of nineteenth-century Russian music is deprived of its more complete understanding. If we accept this version of *The Sixth*'s program, it would be ironic and paradoxical that one of the world's peaks of paraliturgical music was created employing forbidden by Orthodoxy instrumental music.

Pathétique by Tchaikovsky forever changed the genre of symphony. First, it socially influenced concert etiquette, bringing public behavior at symphony concerts closer to listening to paraliturgical music than to the noble secular pastime of pre-1893. Secondly, the openly declared *existence* of a hidden program expanded the scope of the symphonic genre, theatricalizing it and allowing it to transmit secret messages. The latter appeared vitally crucial for classical music much later, in the Soviet period.

Meanwhile, the story of these *fin-de-siècle* efforts in paraliturgical music would not be complete without the new generation.

After Tchaikovsky

Taneyev

Tchaikovsky's student, renowned composer, and scholar contrapuntist, Sergei Taneyev (1856-1915) composed the cantata *John of Damascus* (1884) on the poem by Alexei Tolstoy. Secular poet as an author and the protagonist John Damascene – Christian monk, priest, hymnographer, and apologist – made this work only tangentially paraliturgical and away from the focus of the Synod censure. This allowed Taneyev to use the orchestra and thematic experiments with Orthodox *znamennyi* chant, adjusting it to the rich contrapuntal technique – precisely what Glinka dreamed about.³³

Composing the cantata in memoriam of Nikolay Rubinshtein, Taneyev quoted the chorale “With Thy saints, O Christ, give peace to the soul of Thy servant”. This finding probably prompted Tchaikovsky to cite it in the development section of the *Pathétique*'s *Allegro non troppo*.

Among Russian music critics, *John of Damascus* received an unofficial name – “Russian requiem”. This only shows how much the Russian public craved full-fledged modern European paraliturgical Russian music.

³² My thanks to Prof. David B. Myska from the University of Western Ontario for his comment about the performance and the audience's perception of this symphony at one of the cathedrals in Germany in the 1970s.

³³ Lyudmila Korabelnikova, “Taneyev, cantata *John of Damascus*” <https://www.belcanto.ru/or-taneev-damaskin.html>, accessed on March 16, 2022.

Rachmaninoff

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sergei Rachmaninoff found unique solutions in addressing Orthodox chant in his symphonic and choral Orthodox music. The thematicism of his *First symphony* (1897) and the main subjects of *The Second* (1902) and *The Third* (1913) piano concertos – in the latter up to quotation – were deeply inspired by the Orthodox chant.

In parallel, he sought a new style of Orthodox liturgy. The first attempt was the *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*, Op. 31, 1910, noticeably influenced by choruses from Mussorgsky's and Rimsky-Korsakov's operas. The Synod, however, considered that Rachmaninoff went too far in his "spirit of modernism". The censure did not endorse its performance at the churches, and the *Liturgy* became paraliturgical by default.³⁴ This oxymoron was unsurprising among the paradoxes of Russian music.

His subsequent spiritual work was *All-Night Vigil* (often incorrectly translated as *Vespers*, early 1915, Op. 37), not without thoughts on Tchaikovsky's opus in this genre.³⁵ The timing suggests the commemoration of soldiers who departed in WWI. Following his experience with the *Liturgy*'s censure, Rachmaninoff was even freer in his artistic fantasy, designing a new composition for secular concert halls. It has sometimes been sung at cathedrals hosting public concerts, not at the service. Like the *Liturgy*, the *All-Night Vigil* combines liturgical (text, the Orthodox chant thematicism, and *a cappella*) and paraliturgical features. Its rich melodic development combines centonization with free motivic development within a much broader vocal range than acceptable in canonic chant. The highly elaborated texture with many *divisi* reminds that of *partes*-concertos, and *Basso profundis* effectively enriches the sound.

Rachmaninoff's idea of instrumental implementation of Orthodox chant idiom received its development, but much later, only after Russia's liberation from its Cultural Revolution. In the meantime, the high, human, and soul-seeking creative aspirations of Russian composers went underground.

Shostakovich

Whether Tchaikovsky, the royalist, took Dostoevsky's warnings about the Marxist revolution seriously, he would hardly believe in the horrors of its terror, which followed about five decades later. This forced the Russians to take up his invention of a wordless medium when they felt the utmost spiritual need to express in instrumental music that

³⁴ Ivan Moody, *Rachmaninov's Setting*, 1994, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dc.asp?dc=D_CDH55318. Accessed on March 17, 2022.

³⁵ Vladimir Morosan, "Russian Choral Repertoire". In Di Grazia, Donna M. (ed.). *Nineteenth-Century Choral Music*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 435-48.

which could not be expressed in any other way. The first publicly performed was congenial to Tchaikovsky Dmitry Shostakovich's *The Fifth* (1937). Owing Tchaikovsky even more than Mahler, who himself was influenced by Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich wrote "his *Pathétique*" in a long moment of being a hair's breadth away from a catastrophe. Literally between life and death, he was surviving after being spiritually crucified/anathematized during the surge of the Stalinist Great Terror years. He paid hard for his unbelievably huge success with the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1934; anti-Shostakovich campaign was deployed in 1936). Not borrowing a note from Tchaikovsky, moreover, using not cosmopolitan but quite official Soviet musical rhetoric (disguised in Soviet *sotsialisticheskiy realism*), he made the audience co-experience the deepest, far beyond merely personal, tragedy. Richard Taruskin offered the most convincing semiotic subtextual interpretation of the score.³⁶

Two remarkable properties make these Tchaikovsky's and Shostakovich's symphonies resemble each other: subtext and context. Their subtext expresses itself primarily in the ambivalent perception of their pseudo-finales – the third movement in *Pathétique* and the pseudo-optimistic "true" finale in *The Fifth*. We do not believe either of them. Their victorious G major and D major have some uncatchable but perceivable false.

The context around both symphonies also played a decisive role. While at the premiere of *Pathétique*, the public was rather bewildered (Tchaikovsky's expression) than impressed and touched, people fully embraced its unique emotional value and tragic beauty three weeks later. It was the unscheduled mourning performance in memoriam of the great composer. The audience was deeply shocked by his sudden death nine days after the premiere. Stirred by conspiracy rumors about inadequate medical treatment and demanding reports of the court doctors made public, the feeling of national tragedy braced people.

National shock, though, of another nature, is probably the essential expression of the background for Shostakovich's *The Fifth*'s perception. Describing the premiere, Taruskin shows how the score's prayerful features corresponded to the concert's whole atmosphere, reminiscent of an Orthodox *panikhida* (memorial service), making it an event of paraliturgical nature.³⁷

I mentioned Shostakovich's symphony here without any connection to the Russian Orthodox Church, but as an example of *Pathétique*'s influence – amplified by Mahler – on Russian symphonism distinguished by the intensity of otherwise hidden emotions. Similarly to Tchaikovsky, who found a way to express his spiritual and creative response to prohibitions, Soviet composers gave their creative response to unfreedom in the society of "dictatorship of the proletariat", incomparably more severe than tsarist Russia.

³⁶ Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, Chapter 14 "Shostakovich and the Inhuman".

³⁷ Ibid, subsection "Public lies and unspeakable truth: interpreting the Fifth symphony", pp. 511-44.

While Tchaikovsky's deed could have little chance of political overtones, for Shostakovich, *The Fifth* was a barely hidden addressing the tyrant. This masterpiece opened the new history of the Russian-Soviet symphony as an under-radar of the censorship genre.

Prokofiev

Shostakovich's precedent (in fact, the real precedent was created in his unperformed at its time *Fourth* symphony, 1935-6) received development in the following instrumental opuses and soon after in Prokofiev's *The Fifth* (1944) and *The Sixth* (1947) symphonies. *The Fifth* was written in one month in the summer of 1944 when the turning point toward the victory over the German fascist aggressor was already apparent. After the war, it became perceived as a panegyric to the great victory, mostly because of its epic first movement. However, that which can be heard in its finale after the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine was startlingly frightening. At least I heard (in Vasily Petrenko's 2018 conducting) Soviet-in-its-core Russian offensive rhythm in horrendous timbres imitating the clatter of horse hooves. The effect was unexpectedly stronger than Shostakovich's "Invasion Episode" from the *Seventh (Leningradian)* symphony. Today, when I am finishing this chapter in March 2022, seeing the reports from Ukraine after Putin's full-scale invasion on February 24, I think that the *Fifth*'s finale would be a great soundtrack to the documentary of this senseless nightmare.

Prokofiev's *The Sixth* is a symphony of devastation and remorse, as heard in André Previn's interpretation. Both these symphonies have soul-freezing episodes of intimidation. In both, like in his *Alexander Nevsky* (1938 film, 1939 cantata), the composer based on already mentioned Orthodox and Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* antinomy: invaders represented by instrumental idiom and victims/defenders – by vocal.

Of course, the four great symphonies mentioned have as many interpretations as the conductors offer (at every performance), and we listen (in different circumstances). I apologize for the truism. My perception is that of a long-time insider and long-time outsider of Russian realities.

Crowning the Tradition: Sergei Slonimsky in the 1960-the 80s

Instrumental music as a refuge from censorship was organically inherited and fully exploited by the rebelling part of the next generation, born in the 1930s. The protest expressed in their scores was already not to terror but to ideological pressure and unfreedom used by the officials as tools for nothing else but power in rivalry for the rank in the hierarchy of Soviet composers and, accordingly, distribution of such goodies as state awards and access to the audience in appointed performances at theaters and philharmonic halls.

Matured in the “thaw” of the late 1950s-the 60s, surprisingly or not, they maintained similar to Russians of the 1860s conglomerate of ethical values as their response to unfreedom: realism, nihilism, modernism, nationalism, God-seeking, and sometimes surrender to official ideology.

Of his generation’s many talented and skillful composers, Slonimsky (1932-2020) was the only one with a bright and melodically distinguished individual style. Highly recognized in his native St Petersburg, his music is often played across Russia purely for the merits of his scores. However, it remains little known in the West. Once, in late 1950, together with Alfred Schittke, Edison Denisov, and Sofia Gubaidulina, they learned Western compositional techniques (then still forbidden in the USSR as “formalism”), but later their paths split. The images of the three Moscow composers acquired a veil of dissent and/or otherness – the qualities more attractive to Western audiences in the 1970s than Slonimsky’s obsolete nationalism (though he worked in many styles and genres). With the ground well prepared, all three eventually moved to the West in the 1990s.

Slonimsky stayed. This was his choice to remain on and to belong to Russian soil. He tried to be at peace with the power knowing from his uncle Nikolas Slonimsky (1894-1995) that nowhere in the world would a composer have such favorable conditions for creative work. Freedom to work calmly was his priority despite censure, prohibitions, and unfairly low status in the Soviet composers’ hierarchy. During his later years in post-Soviet Russia, he became the unrivaled head and authority of St. Petersburg musical life – quite similar to Rimsky-Korsakov in the 1890s-the 1900s. Festivities dedicated to his 80th anniversary (2012), by their scale and pomp, could be compared with those honoring the 60th anniversary of Anton Rubinstein (1889).

Two prominent and clearly heard roots of Slonimsky’s early style were Prokofiev, with ‘diatonic’ sincerity of his melodicism, youngish temperament, and daringly independent combination of classicism and modernity, and Mussorgsky, who, with his nationalism and modernism, was a real cult in the twentieth-century St. Petersburg. Mussorgsky’s influence is expressed in his treatment of peasant vocal folklore, and folklore was the third and equal in significance, if not dominating, element of Slonimsky’s style – essentially vocal by nature of its intonation. Not surprisingly, Sergei Slonimsky’s music, aesthetics, and literary writings reflected values from both Russian decades of “thaw”: the nineteenth-century ‘60s and the twentieth-century ‘60s.

On the surface, the outlined here Slonimsky’s portrait seems not to leave place either for protest pushing him to subtextual expression, or for the paraliturgical sphere. But relative freedoms granted Russians in the post-Stalinism period did not include total religious freedom. Not that Slonimsky needed it, being perhaps less religious than some people who could have their party-member card in the chest pocket but underneath a silver cross hung on their necks. The ban on religiosity was not as rigid as at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. It was significantly loosened during the WWII, but for intellectuals, “workers of the ideological front”, religion remained underground, and underground

symbols acquired special significance. Thus, a century after Glinka, references to Orthodox chant again became the second (after folklore) super-icon of nationalist Russian music. As Elena Dubinets writes,

Near the end of the Soviet era, when prohibitions on religion began to subside at the state level even further, Orthodoxy -- if not faith, per se, then at least some knowledge about it -- became one of the driving forces motivating stylistic changes for many composers. Among them were Georgy Sviridov (1915-1998), Galina Ustvolskaya (1919-2006), Nikolai Karetnikov (1930-1994), Sofia Gubaidulina, Sergei Slonimsky (1932-2020), Alfred Schnittke, Alemdar Karamanov (1934-2007), Arvo Pärt, Nikolai Korndorf, Andrei Golovin (b. 1950), Mikhail Kollontay (b. 1952), and Vladimir Martynov. One way or another, all of these composers used religious aspects in their art from the mid-1960s on, often adding a mystical, spiritual intersection to their avant-garde worldview rather than taking traditional Orthodoxy at face value. Despite their very differing creative methods, all of them came to adhere to a similar spiritual tendency: they saw the contemporary world through the prism of philosophical contemplation and religious belief.³⁸

So, this post-Rachmaninoff use of Orthodox chant idiomatic material in extensive instrumental forms was picked up by the generation of the sixties. This was their kind of protest, a reaction to the underground status of religion.

Slonimsky, however, went farther than others and in two directions.

First, he developed Glinka-Shostakovich-Prokofiev opposition between two basic symbols: good (native and vocal) and evil (foreign and instrumental). He implemented it in his first two symphonies, without textual or program references, as well as in his ballet *Icarus* (1971), where two types of musical images unmistakably correspond to one or another character. In his *First* symphony (1959) the ‘good’ was represented by an abstract, though vocal, theme, and the ‘evil’ – by rumba and Rio-Rita rhythms. In *The Second* (1978), ‘good’ was symbolized by a minor-mode pentatonic free-meter vocal theme of the North-Russian folk character, and the ‘evil’ – by a seething jazz figuration. The dramaturgy in both symphonies, where subjects-characters develop and undergo various changes, is always theatrically dynamic, leaving no doubt about what symbolizes what. Thus, the oldest Orthodox postulate demonizing instrumental/dance music shines through layers of Rousseauism, agrarianism, Slavophilism, Nietzsche’s Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy, and belief in the purity of folk character in Slonimsky’s work of the late 1970s.

Second, Slonimsky composed what could be, with some stretch, associated with paraliturgical genre, the opera *The Master and Margarita*, based on Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel. Although *The Master and Margarita* is not a gospel, the parallels between the two pairs of confronting subjects – the Master vs Stalinism and Yeshua vs Pontius Pilate – are

³⁸ Elena Dubinets, *Russian Composers Abroad: How They Left, Stayed, Returned*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021, pp. 45-46, with reference to Peter J. Schmelz, *Such Freedom, If Only Musical: Unofficial Soviet Music during the Thaw*. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2009, p. 268.

apparent. Needless to say, the Satanist world of Woland was expressed by orgiastic Dionysian popular styles.³⁹

The composer created a masterpiece banned for eighteen years upon its half-official premiere in 1972 (Leningrad, House of Composers, under the baton of Gennady Rozhdestvensky). Only in the late perestroika year 1989, the opera was presented at the concert performance conducted by Mikhail Yurovsky.

Conclusion and Postscriptum

I chose Sergei Slonimsky's creative work of the 1960s-the 80s for concluding this essay because it displays his adherence to Russian tradition in the broadest spectrum of its facets. His music, with a solid inclination for nationalism as part of Russian tradition, contains the quintessence of its elements.

To summarize, the impact of Orthodoxy on Russian music was controversial, and their interaction was competing. Its ecclesiological limitations and prohibitions defined the history of art music for centuries. Paradoxically, however, precisely, these prohibitions and constraints could lead to the most positive and exciting artistic results in two planes. First, losing to Orthodoxy for a long time, art music composers learned to overcome these difficulties and develop a rich subtextuality in instrumental music. Secondly, they absorbed, maybe even subconsciously, the binary opposition from the Orthodoxy doctrine: "vocal-good vs instrumental-evil". They won, again, developing rich musical imagery and clearly outlined dramaturgy.

As Slonimsky's MA and PhD student (at the then Leningrad Conservatory, 1968-73) and later the author of articles and a monograph on him,⁴⁰ I know firsthand some things from the composer. It was he who explained to me that instrumental music was the best medium for a composer, liberating him from censure (although he suffered severe reprimands for some of his instrumental works, including the *First* symphony). And it was he who defined my scholarly career, suggesting to study Bortniansky and Berezovsky and pointing to the paradox of Soviet censure welcoming Western spiritual music and banning Orthodox compositions. Now, more than half a century later, when I've learned about Russian music more, the dots have been connected.

³⁹ More than a decade later, Alfred Schnittke, who, like Slonimsky, implemented a wide range of stylistic ideas, wrote the cantata *Doctor Faustus* (1983). Unsurprisingly, he used tango music to feature Mephistopheles' sphere, planning to invite the Soviet pop megastar Alla Pugacheva.

⁴⁰ Marina Ritzarev (Ritsareva), *Kompozitor Sergei Slonimskiy* [A composer Sergei Slonimsky]. Leningrad: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1991.