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## Notes from the psalterion, updated and annotated — part III, dealing with that strange subspecies called the “musician”

BY RICHARD BARRETT ([HTTP://WWW.ORTHODOXARTSJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/RICHARD-BARRETT/](http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/author/richard-barrett/)) ON DECEMBER 12, 2012

This is post 3 of 6 in the series “Notes from The Psalterion”

Richard Barrett gives us practical advice for the discipline of liturgical music in a local parish context.

In part one of this series (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-i-first-principles/>), I outlined the argument that Orthodox liturgical singing, given that it is above all else an offering to God, is a privilege, a craft, and a discipline. In part two (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-ii-getting-started/>), I tried to suggest, at least in broad strokes, ways to approach building a practice of excellence within the Orthodox musical tradition.

Here in part three, I want to talk about *musicians* specifically. It very much seems to me that the role of a musician *qua* musician is poorly understood in our parishes; we sort of understand the need for composers (who are worth their own post), and we kind of understand that there should probably be somebody ostensibly singing the things that are supposed to be sung on a given day so that we know what’s going on, but the idea that at least *some* of the people singing should have *some* idea of what they’re doing is, in my experience, reflexively met with confusion at best and hostility at worst. I had a conversation with somebody once where they told me, “Well, I think the ideal should be the monks on Mt. Athos. They do what they do better than anybody else, but they just do it instinctively and naturally because it’s what they do, rather than with any kind of self-conscious attempt to do it well. As soon as it becomes a self-conscious act of skill, it becomes performance rather than worship.” I acknowledge that there’s something attractive about the romantic idea of unaffected, unpracticed, effortless authenticity, but it’s no more true on Mt. Athos than it is on the stage of Carnegie Hall, as Tore Tvarnø Lind’s fascinating book (<http://amzn.to/RHvLwK>) explores (you can read my review in *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*, Vol. 53 Nos. 1-2 (<http://www.sheptytskyinstitute.ca/?p=3045>), and some additional thoughts here (<http://leitourgeia.com/2012/06/03/my-teacher-can-beat-up-your-teacher-throughout-the-ages/>)).

There have been those who have told me with all sincerity that they ultimately don’t think a musician has much place in an Orthodox parish. A *musician* is something too professionalized, too self-conscious, too calculated, and too exclusive to work in what parishes in America are trying to achieve. I suggest this is roughly equivalent to saying an architect shouldn’t design Orthodox churches.



Somewhat parenthetically — I recently encountered a choral website recently that listed the following as “keys to success” for those who sing in church choirs:

*I. Talent*

*II. History*

*III. Respect*

*IV. Tradition*

*V. Hard work, hard work, hard work...*

I look at this list and I think to myself, *how is this any different from the characteristics of what we seek to achieve in our setting?* Perhaps there are those who might object to the first item, but it seems to me that the liturgical arts presuppose some level of talent. I have no talent for painting or drawing, therefore I don't attempt iconography or architecture, for example. II, III, and IV strike me as being fundamental components of Orthodox Christianity's self-image. Item V... well, I've heard the objection that somebody isn't a musician, therefore any kind of practice or working at it won't do them any good or they just don't need to, but from my own experience, I would say that the less of item I you have, the *more*, not less, you need item V. (But having gobs of talent doesn't rob you of the need to work at it either — in fact, then it's really your *responsibility* to put in the effort.)

All of that said —

**Principle #3:** *Musicians are your friends. They are the ones trained to think about how musical matters need to be addressed, much as how an iconographer is the one trained to know how something is supposed to work with an icon or an architect is the one trained to know how to design a building. If they hear something you can't, that's a good thing; that means that they're doing their job.*

I have been privy to a lot of arguments related to these kinds of matters over the years. There was one over the point of needing to turn the page when one got to the end of it. “Well, you're a musician, you think that way,” was the counter-argument. “You can't expect everybody to know that.” I'm familiar with a case where the choir director was talking in rehearsal about such things as the need to stand so that one could see the director and the music, and somebody walked out, saying that they couldn't handle the “obsessing over meaningless details.” Basically, there seems to be a presumption, at least in some circles, that if you're a musician, your judgment needs to be actively discounted, to say nothing, probably, of being altogether ignored, when it comes to musical matters in the Church.

This is, frankly, nonsense. Music is a Tradition of Orthodox Christianity. While one may argue that national musical repertoires constitute ethnic custom rather than “Big-T Tradition” (a categorization I don't like, for many reasons), singing is not. Our services are appointed to be mostly sung, and while talent may certainly be a factor, singing is nonetheless a *learned* ability, and regardless of the repertoire, there are ways of doing it that are better than others. You have a priest who has a certain training in spiritual and sacramental matters; you have church musicians who are trained in musical and liturgical matters. This is a good thing. You *want* musicians to be in the position of making music in the Church. These are the people who will be at every service, who will take the time to prepare what is to be sung, and who will give attention to seeing that it is as beautifully done as possible. These are the people who will teach your children to sing. These are the people who teach *you* to sing if you'll let them. If you're stuck on wanting it to be “worship and not performance”, I will tell you that that's a false dichotomy. Incense, for example, has a liturgical function *and* it smells good. It is supposed to do *both*; it is supposed to smell good *because* it has a liturgical function, and it has a liturgical function by virtue of it smelling good. If it smells bad, it is not suitable for liturgical use. It is the same with music. If we were to make the arguments about incense some make about music, we might say that it would actually be more prayerful for incense to smell like cow dung from time to time. Hopefully it's clear that such an idea is ridiculous on its face; so, why does it seem like there is so much handwringing about this when it comes to music?

- **Principle #3a:** *The best musicians will also be able to teach the non-musician how to do it properly. Let them.*

I said this earlier; musicians are going to be the ones who are able to teach your children to sing, and they will also teach the adults who want to be able to sing, if those adults are willing. While granted that musical education in this country seems to have passed a good number of people by who are 55 or younger (I am 36, but either I or my parents were actively seeking musical education out from the time I was four or five), a lot of people are convinced by modern society's musical culture that they can't sing, and just shouldn't bother trying to do it well. “Oh, I just do what I do.” “I don't really sing all that well anyway, so there's no point in trying to teach me. I'll just stand in the back and hum along.” Again I say, nonsense. Why would you want to be in the choir, then, if you're not actually going to bother trying? Most church musicians I know are eager to teach the people who want to learn — people just have to be willing to be taught, which probably means having to step out of their comfort zone a little bit. Nonetheless, this is the musician's task. Let them rise the tide, thus lifting all boats (and, in this context, all spirits); don't try to convince them that everybody will be better off if they just let it fall.

- **Principle #3b:** *In the same way that you would expect to pay an iconographer or an architect, expect to pay your cantor/choir director. The worker is worthy of his wages. If this is simply not an option, then there needs to be some way that the value of the cantor's job is expressed.*

This was something that rubbed some people the wrong way, to be sure. Well, if it's a musician's service to God, why in the world would we pay them, and why would they accept money for it in the first place?

Okay, fine. If that logic holds, why would we ever pay priests? Why would we ever pay iconographers? Why would we ever pay *anybody*? Why don't we expect to get candles and vestments for free? Why don't we expect to not have to pay our archdiocese for liturgical books? (It perhaps should be noted that under Justinian, Hagia Sophia had a paid staff of over 500, including 25 singers and 100 readers.) Now, I've actually heard an Orthodox architect — nobody associated with *Orthodox Arts Journal* — tell me that it is simply the economic reality that many Orthodox parishes *are* in fact accustomed to getting most of everything they need for a substantial discount or for nothing, and that even architects routinely wind up donating their services, either intentionally or unintentionally, simply by the nature of how some parishes operate. If you're the parish, this person tells me, you can't really afford to approach such deals assuming you will pay market price, and if you're the architect, at least it's a tax write-off when it happens. Be that as it may — is that really the model that we should be holding up for how one values the liturgical arts of the Church?

My firstborn son was baptized recently. A good friend of mine provided a particular service for the baptism, and in fact went to a lot of trouble and expense to be there so so that they could contribute this service. I made sure I included a check in this person's thank-you card for what I understand to have been the going rate for such things; as I told this person, when they protested that they weren't charging me anything, "You didn't charge me. It's simply the right thing to do." It's the same thing for our musicians. We should *want* to make sure that it's understood that there is a value associated with the service provided. Somebody who has taken the trouble to learn a craft in the service of the Church, and who is actively putting it to use in a leadership role, should not be taken advantage of; they should know that their contribution, sacrifice, time, and skill is valued. If that makes it too much like a "job" for the comfort of some of us, well, so what? Is the priest's service to a parish somehow devalued because he's paid a salary?

What I'm *not* saying in all of this is, "Everybody needs to have a Masters in Voice Performance from the Eastman School of Music to sing in the choir, and everybody who sings needs to be getting a full time salary." That's not at all what I'm saying; I'm an Indiana grad anyway; I'd never endorse Eastman.

(Although, I do think at some point it would be useful for more established parishes to ponder the notion of "endowments". Still, that will have to wait for a different discussion.)

What I *am* saying, rather, is this: musicians put in a lot of time and effort and expense to learn how to do what they do. That they have done this should not automatically mean that their judgment in musical and liturgical matters ought to be marginalized on account being "a musician" (with the implied consequence often seeming to be, "...and therefore not one of us normal people"). Most of them are seeking to make practical *and* faithful liturgical and musical choices as best as they can on musical and liturgical grounds. Most of them do a job for less than minimum wage that the equivalent person at, say, an Anglican parish would be getting at least a half-time salary for, if not better. What I'm saying, really, is simply that if the Church's music is truly valued as a liturgical craft, without which our services would be something quite different, then we should make it a goal to treat it that way, and to treat the people who serve in such ministry as though they are in fact providing a valued service to the Church.

And, yes, I'm a church musician writing all of this. One could argue that it is all very self-serving for a musician to say such things. What I have found, however, is that if nobody ever talks about these issues, many will otherwise have no idea.

Coming up in the next installment: what was that point about "hard work, hard work, hard work" again...?

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## 8 COMMENTS

**Orthodox Collective** (<http://www.orthodoxcollective.com/>)

5 years ago # (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-with-that-strange-subspecies-called-the-musician/#comment-507>)

[...] updated and annotated — part III, dealing with that strange subspecies called the “musician”  
[http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-\(http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-\)...Wednesday, Dec 12th 8:00 am](http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-(http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-)...Wednesday, Dec 12th 8:00 am)  
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**Ross Ritterman**

5 years ago # (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-with-that-strange-subspecies-called-the-musician/#comment-509>)

“we sort of understand the need for composers (who are worth their own post)”.

Indeed – would love to hear your thoughts on this piont. I would go so far as to challenge the need for “composers”. Perhaps we need at best “arrangers” or “adaptations” (which unfortunately can mean almost anything these days) since we already have musical scores for every hymn in the liturgical repertoire, including volumes of cherubic hymns, many versions of the Anaphora.

**Richard Barrett**

5 years ago # (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-with-that-strange-subspecies-called-the-musician/#comment-515>)

Oh, I don’t know — it seems to me composers are one of the indications that you’ve got a living tradition. Speaking specifically of the world of Byzantine chant, I heard a paper recently by Spyridon Antonopoulos, a doctoral student of Alexander Lingas’, in which he talks about Manuel Chrysaphes, the last lampadarios of the Great Church, and how in his compositions and theoretical treatises he goes to great pains to re-articulate the tradition, with his “composer’s voice” coming through very much as a function of that adherence to Tradition. Spiro’s dissertation is all about Chrysaphes’ life and works, and I look forward to reading the whole thing when it’s available.

Even in our own day, Ioannis Arvanitis (my first teacher, insofar as I get to claim that after having studied with him for a summer) continues to compose, in both Greek and English; so does John Michael Boyer; so does Basil Crow (<http://music.basilcrow.com>).

Outside of Byz chant, Kurt Sander (<http://www.orthodoxchoralmusic.com>) does some wonderful work of trying re-articulate a Russian polyphonic choral tradition in an English-language setting; Richard Toensing (<http://www.richardtoensing.com>) is a lovely example of what happens when a classically trained Western art music composer tries to make sense of the Orthodox musical tradition with the tools he’s been trained to use. Don’t take my word for it; it’s worth listening to what these guys have to say for themselves, too.

([http://ancientfaith.com/specials/indiana\\_university\\_orthodox\\_music\\_symposium](http://ancientfaith.com/specials/indiana_university_orthodox_music_symposium))

I’d also say that composers are evidence of a living tradition in the sense that, to the extent that the Church continues to produce saints, there will continue to be a need to produce liturgical texts to commemorate those saints, and to compose musical settings for those offices.

Those are some initial thoughts, anyway. Good question.

**Richard Barrett**

5 years ago # (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-with-that-strange-subspecies-called-the-musician/#comment-511>)

I must apologize for a couple of incidents of mangling the English language — “I recently encountered a choral website recently...” Sorry, folks, both for that and a transitive use of “rise”. That’s what I get for sneaking this in between an exam and a research paper.

**Ross Ritterman**

4 years ago # (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-with-that-strange-subspecies-called-the-musician/#comment-529>)

Richard – great points and you’re absolutely right. I suppose I really should have qualified my statement to be inclusive of those who compose within the tradition. Ioannis Arvanitis does incredible work. I went to college with John Boyer and am familiar with his talent. I am a personal friend of Basil – who I have a great deal of respect for, whose knowledge of Byzantine music is expansive. Papa Ephraim of St. Anthony’s Monastery has also done extensive compositions, and has done so with the purpose of providing to us more and more of our hymnology in English language settings, for which there is a great need. Fr. Seraphim, does the same (though is composing mostly in Western notation these days) and on a related note, his antiphonal Byzantine choir at his church in North Carolina should be a model for other Churches throughout our country. Stan and Nancy Takis have also worked hard to communicate the tradition of Byzantine Music, as far as can be done using Western notation. What I suppose upsets me is when “church musicians”, instead of looking to our tradition compose, pretty much whatever they want and just roll it out wholesale on some Sunday with elaborate rondo-style point-counterpoint organ laden melodies. In that vein, we seem to get away from this notion we have within Orthodoxy that our music is supposed to be a part of, to your point, a living tradition in which we work closely with those individuals within the Church who have mastered this art. Chanters learned from other chanters, who themselves were part of that tradition. We don’t look to jazz chord progressions, or Lutheran hymns, or the composers of Hollywood soundtracks – but that’s what our “church musicians” are doing.

If God willing we continue to produce Saints and to commemorate them, then we’ll need to compose music that emphasizes those texts in accordance with that tradition. Generally speaking we’re talking about prosomia here, if not idiomela within the scope of our tradition. Not music that sounds like the Phantom of the Opera. This living tradition has parameters, after all.

**Richard Barrett**

4 years ago # (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-with-that-strange-subspecies-called-the-musician/#comment-531>)

I don’t disagree with any of that. Nobody’s talking about Andrew Lloyd Webber when we say “composers”.

That said, this gets us very close to the question, “What makes Orthodox music Orthodox?” which is rather tricky. Even if you limit it to a particular national repertoire — e.g., what makes Byzantine chant Orthodox? — it’s difficult. Having had conversations on the topic with both of them, I suspect that, say, Stan Takis and John Michael Boyer would answer that question in ways that overlap, yes, but would nonetheless be distinctly different in some key ways that would be hard to reconcile. Some might define Byzantine chant in a way that pretty much throws out major chunks of the received tradition.

There’s a similar problem with Russian music — is the liturgical music produced by composers who studied with Italian polyphonic masters ultimately “not Orthodox”, whatever that means? Do we view Titov (to give but one example) as in continuity with a living tradition, somehow, even if he’s clearly expanding the parameters, or is he right out?

I don’t know the answers to these questions, by the way. These are far bigger questions than I think somebody like me, a practical church musician at best (όντως είμαι μονο πρακτικός, ας πούμε), can really answer on a group blog. The IU Symposium (link above) gets to some of the issues, and Vlad Morosan gave a presentation on the matter at the Antiochian Sacred Music Institute a couple of summers ago, a lecture I’ve been talking with him about possibly turning into an article for The Saint John of Damascus Society’s journal. We’ll see. If it runs, it will probably run with a response from somebody.

**Ross Ritterman**

4 years ago # (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-with-that-strange-subspecies-called-the-musician/#comment-536>)

“Some might define Byzantine chant in a way that pretty much throws out major chunks of the received tradition.”

What did you have in mind specifically here?

“Nobody’s talking about Andrew Lloyd Webber when we say “composers”.

Well that’s the thing – I’m not so sure. Maybe Weber is an extreme example (although feedback from parishioners at my church is that when they hear our choir it reminds them of Phantom, which is the origin of the remark) but when Zes composes, I don’t think he’s thinking about what’s going on at the Patriarchate, or how his composition of a certain hymn compares to the compositions within the Classical Anthologies (i.e. the Pandekte, Kypsele, etc.). There’s no way he’s going back any further than Desby and Sakellarides not to mention that his musical training can be attributed to a German-born composer of Hollywood Soundtracks from USC.

When I read this I cringe (taken from liner notes from Cappella Romana’s Lingas): “Cardiasmenos takes a popular chant by Sakellarides and replaces the Athenian’s rudimentary tonal harmonies with the sophisticated chord progressions of Jazz.”

Forgive me but I refuse to allow what Steve Cardiasmenos composes to become the standard for Orthodox Liturgical music, not to mention that what Sakellarides has done is deplorable. No one can reasonably argue that jazz chord progressions are Orthodox music. The only explanation I have for this that it’s a result of the composer’s personal take on what music “sounds good” and their attempt to, out of pride, incorporate it into liturgical music without respect for the received tradition. If not, what other explanation is there?

So the question becomes – where does it stop and where does a line get drawn? There are those who would completely strip Byzantine Chant out of our churches and replace it with music that is more reminiscent of what the protestants do out of some desire to bring about some hodgepodge known as “The American Orthodox Church”. But we’re not protestant, we’re Orthodox.

Here’s what I do know:

1) Byzantine Chant melodies are short and easy to sing along with. This includes things like the antiphons, the troparia, the concluding hymns in the liturgy etc. We can teach these melodies to our youth and educate them about their faith. This is in contrast to elaborate compositions that are distracting and difficult to follow. Byzantine Chant inherently emphasizes the text, which at the end of it all is what we pray and communicates our theology in worship.

2) The more ornate and confusing our music becomes, the more and more liturgy becomes concert performance and non-participatory. This risks disconnecting the laity from the worship and watering down our faith. The simple melodies of chant can provide the empowering effect of participation in the worship. (I don’t expect the laity to sing along with Papadic hymns, but these too have a function at certain parts of the liturgy).

The Holy Spirit will guide us ultimately and that I believe, but if we continue down this path, who will be leading the liturgy in 20 years, not to mention Orthros or Vespers?

I hope to have a conversation with my Metropolitan that addresses these very points.

Since you mentioned him, I’ve actually met Vlad Morosan (who I chanted Orthros with at St. Anthony’s Antiochian in San Diego) and while I know he’s not a big fan of Byzantine Chant, he has done an amazing job getting young people involved in the choir there.

#### **Richard Barrett**

4 years ago # (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/notes-from-the-psalterion-updated-and-annotated-part-iii-dealing-with-that-strange-subspecies-called-the-musician/#comment-540>)

Regarding Byzantine chant — depending on to whom one speaks, it seems to me there can be a very real discomfort with and embarrassment about some of the more detailed compositions, and certainly with the modern performance practice of some of those compositions.

Your other comments get us one again to the question of “What makes Orthodox music Orthodox?” which, again, I don’t think I’m going to be able to answer here, and isn’t really one of the points I’m trying to address. On the question of composers, suffice it to say *I’m* not talking about Andrew Lloyd Weber.

Who will be the protopsaltes and choir directors in 20 years? I don’t know. I’ve got my ideas (<http://leitourgeia.com/2012/02/07/some-interesting-choir-school-stuff/>) about what we should be doing to that end, and (<http://leitourgeia.com/2012/03/15/learning-to-chant-vs-learning-to-sing-or-do-you-learn-to-play-mendelssohn-or-do-you-learn-to-play-the-violin/>) I can’t say that nobody’s given me the opportunity to say what I think about exactly that matter, (<http://www.myocn.net/index.php/200907031844/CRTL-Archives/Music-and-Coffee.html>) but

neither can I say that anybody's really helped run with any of them.

(<http://leitourgeia.com/2012/05/14/a-curriculum-proposal-for-byzantine-chant/>) Which, I should say, is part of the point of The Saint John of Damascus Society. (<http://www.johnofdamascus.org>)

Vlad is a good man and a good colleague. He's talked me back from the ledge (as it were) at a couple of key points, and I will always be grateful to him for that.

Comments are closed.

← The Saint John of Damascus Society on NPR's "Harmonia Early Music" (<http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/the-saint-john-of-damascus-society-on-nprs-harmonia-early-music/>)

More Western Medieval Art →  
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# Why Don't We Pay Our Church Musicians?

Benedict Sheehan, The Sounding Blog: February 23, 2015

When, as an eighteen-year-old music student, I took my first paid choir directing job in an Orthodox church, I initially felt a little uneasy about accepting a paycheck. Not because I was overly modest—nobody who knew me then would have accused me of that—but because I thought that, since singing in church and directing the choir was something I loved so much and therefore would have happily done without pay, I didn't want to needlessly burden the parish, which had just started up a year or two earlier. I told the priest I didn't want to be paid. However, instead of thanking me and praising me for my magnanimity as I fully expected him to do (see what I mean about not being overly modest?), he gently chastised me and told me I had it all wrong. I'll never forget his explanation.

He said that he wanted me to accept the stipend—which was ample, given my age and my financial situation as a student, at \$250 a week—for two reasons. First, he said, when you pay someone to do a job, you're buying their time, not their good will. He said he knew I had all the good will in the world to do the job, but he wanted to pay me to ensure that I would be able to make enough time to the job well. "If you're not paid to do this job," he continued, "you'll have to be paid to do some other job, and that will mean that you may not have the time you need to give this job your best. I don't want that. I don't want it to be an afterthought."

The second reason he gave impressed me with its farsightedness. He said that paying me ultimately didn't have anything to do with me, but was about building up the parish. Not in spite of the fact, but precisely because the mission was so new, he said that they had to pay their choir director a meaningful stipend, because it was necessary to set the right precedent. "If people learn from the beginning that they have to pay for church music, it won't be a problem down the road." As he explained, he wanted me to accept a paycheck in order to make it easier for the parish to replace me when I decided to leave, which, he correctly assumed, was something I was likely to do before very long. He also added that he would increase my pay as soon as the budget allowed for it. He was as good as his word, and raised my pay to \$300 a week within a year and a half. No doubt he would have raised it again had I stayed longer.

If we were talking about anything other than Orthodox church music in North America, there would be nothing remarkable about this priest's approach. He would simply be thought a wise steward, a good administrator, a smart businessman. However, we are talking about Orthodox church music in North America, and anyone who has attempted to navigate these waters knows that very different winds usually prevail.

It's no secret that the average Orthodox church musician in North America is woefully underpaid, if he or she is paid at all. There was a time, and not so long ago, that many established parishes offered a house and a modest full-time salary to their choir director. The obvious result was that these jobs could attract competent musicians who would stay put for years, perhaps for an entire career. However, in the wake of the financial and demographic decline of many of the old-guard parishes during the latter half of the 20th century, all but a handful of these full-time choir director positions have disappeared. A deep decline in church singing culture could only follow suit.



Today, many church choir directors and head chanters are little more than volunteers. Some are paid a token stipend, but it is extremely rare to find a church that pays its music director enough, say, to relocate, let alone make it a career option. Many church musicians, therefore, end up being temporary employees, who have other jobs, or whose spouses have other jobs, and who serve the parish essentially out of charity. "Good for them!" we say. However, in such a scenario, it ends up being the luck of the draw whether the parish gets a competent musician or not. Many don't, and just have to make do. And even if a parish is fortunate enough to stumble across a skilled church musician who is willing to take the job, who has other means of financial support, and who has a high tolerance for the generally low level of competence and commitment that a lot of church choirs find themselves at today, there's a good chance that this skilled church musician will leave the job before long, either because she relocates, or because she burns out, or because something changes in her real job and she can't make it work, or for a host of other reasons. Then the parish has to start over again and pray for someone else to drop out of the sky, or failing that, to fill their music director position with anyone willing to do it, competent or not. Thus, the level of singing at that parish will ebb and flow depending on the skill of the director, but it will almost certainly decline in the long run due to the instability of the whole situation.

The obvious question here is, why are we behaving in such an irrational and self-defeating manner? Why aren't we just paying church musicians what they're worth? The easy answer is, "we can't afford it." But it's not that simple. Doubtless, there are struggling parishes that are in such dire financial straits that they worry about keeping the lights on. Or there are mission parishes who are just getting off the ground and aren't ready yet even to rent property. But in those cases, it's likely not just the choir director who has to volunteer his time, but the priest too. I would like to believe that this level of financial hardship is not the norm, and given that Orthodoxy in America appears to be growing again, I suspect it's not.

The Lord said, "where your treasure is, there your heart is also." I think the real reason that most American Orthodox church musicians aren't meaningfully paid is that good church music has ceased to be a value for us. Let's look for a moment at the Protestant world. In spite of declining membership among mainline Protestant denominations, a church organist, according to the American Guild of Organists' 2014 salary guide, can expect to earn anywhere from \$30,000 to \$100,000 per year, plus benefits, depending on education and experience. Many of these churches also pay a separate choir director a comparable salary, and often even pay choir "section leaders" a weekly stipend to sing. I had one of these section leader jobs myself, at \$150 per service, before I found a viable Orthodox choir directing position. Granted, Protestant churches in America tend to have significantly more members, and significantly more money, than most Orthodox churches here, but I think it's safe to assume that at least a few well-established and well-endowed Orthodox churches have annual budgets comparable to an average Protestant parish with a music staff. However, I would be shocked to learn that even one Orthodox church in North America pays its music director anything remotely close to \$100,000 a year, plus benefits, let alone paying other musicians regularly as well. (If such a church exists, I hope someone will let me know, and I'll put my resumé in the mail immediately.) I say again, good church music has ceased to be a value for American Orthodox.

We often account for the disparity between the Orthodox music world and the Protestant music world in America (if we think about it at all) by saying something like, “Western church music is all about professionalism, but Orthodox music is prayer, and therefore perfection is not important.” Or perhaps someone will tell a story about a monastery who hired a professional choir for its feast day, only to have it revealed afterwards that the saint they were honoring couldn’t even hear the service. There is a lot to unpack in this line of argument, both in terms of historical data and theological reasoning, and I’d like to deal with it in some depth, so more on that later. Let it suffice to say here that I think there is no inherent conflict between professional—that is, skilled, educated, and vocational—church music, and Orthodox spirituality. If there were inherent conflicts, church singers would never have been specially ordained (they used to be); academies of Orthodox church singing would never have existed (they have existed for a very long time); churches would rarely, if ever, have had singers on a regular payroll (they did so routinely, and still do today, in many places); and Orthodox liturgical repertoire, both ancient and modern, would be nothing but a footnote in the annals of sacred music (it’s anything but).

The fact is that, while we can couch our collective neglect of Orthodox liturgical music and musicians in spiritual terms—both those mentioned above, and many others besides—these arguments amount to little more than a smokescreen. What’s really at the heart of the matter, I fear, is a certain laxity regarding the Liturgy itself. The priest says at the end of every Liturgy, “sanctify those who love the beauty of Thy house.” What else is good church singing than the beautification of God’s house? And if actively loving the beauty of God’s house, as the prayer before the amvon says, is a path to sanctity, why would we hesitate to do it? We hesitate because we have allowed other things to occupy our attention and our treasure. To be blunt, we’ve allowed music in many of our churches to descend to a pathetically low level, both in terms of quality and dedicated commitment (see Richard Barrett’s excellent article on the subject, and we would do well to take it as a spiritual duty to offer some help. The proper course of action, as in every facet of the spiritual life, is to repent and recommit to what’s centrally important. As we begin the season of Great Lent, a time of year when music in the church becomes a more central component in the lives of Orthodox Christians than at any other time of the year—and a period where church musicians’ energies and time are taxed in the extreme—let’s take a hard look at the state of music in our churches. Is it worthy of a church that claims to be the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church? Does it show the world that we believe wholeheartedly in what we’re doing, and that we’ve dedicated everything in service to God’s Kingdom? Is it a worthy offering of our firstfruits to God, and a sacrifice of love for our neighbor? Obviously, money is not the only answer to the problem of declining musical culture in American Orthodoxy, but it is definitely part of the solution, and many other things go along with it. “Where your treasure is, there your heart is also.” It’s an oft-repeated law of life that “you get what you pay for”; so if you don’t pay for good church music, you’re probably not going to get it. Let’s start paying for church music.

—To Be Continued—

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Posted by the Orthodox Christian Network.