

An Unknown Aspect of Russian Music

By Alfred J. Swan

In most of the recent discussions and appraisals of Russian music, one aspect of it has been left completely out of consideration, namely the liturgical music of the Russian Church. The comparatively few contributions in this field by Russian composers of first rank have paled beside their more brilliant achievements in the sphere of symphonic and operatic music. Glinka's Hymn of the Cherubim is but a mild counterpart to his "Kamarinskaya" or "A Life for the Tsar"; Tchaikovsky's Liturgy is less striking than his symphonies, Rimsky-Korsakoff's few religious choruses only moderately exciting to admirers of "Sadko" and "Scheherazade," Rachmaninoff's profoundly stirring "All-night Service" (op. 37) - a rare number on choral programs. And yet all these works proceed just as much from a type of traditional music, as the secular works of the above masters from the folk-songs. And moreover we actually know far more about Russian religious chant than about the folk-songs. We can ascertain its age much more precisely than is the case with the folk-song; we are in a position to trace the various stages of its development from the Middle Ages to a time in the 17th century when the ancient religious heritage of Russia was swept away by alien influences coming from Eastern Europe. Further, we have innumerable written documents embodying the religious music, dating as far back as the end of the 11th century, while, with the folk-songs, the first rough notations were made slightly over a hundred years ago.

But in spite of such advantages the study of Russian church music has provoked but little interest outside of a small group of Russian scholars. Why so? The reasons for this neglect are certainly not inherent in the chants themselves, which can well compare in beauty and expressiveness with the best examples of Gregorian chant, or, for that matter with any body of unison chant.

We must remember that the music of the Middle Ages has only recently become an object of increasing admiration. The 19th century was quite insensitive to it; it was tacitly assumed that all music started with Bach and Handel, Palestrina and the whole exquisite fabric of medieval music leading up to him being utterly unexplored. It was only after the long and strenuous propaganda for the primitive that people began to be aware of the treasures hidden behind early notations in worm-eaten manuscripts. Here the role of the Benedictines of Solesmes for plainchant, and such men as Gastoué for France and Fellowes for England, were decisive. But Russian music had yet to bide its hour. It was so remote, springing from a source that Scholars were too prejudiced to explore (Byzantine music), or united to a text that was intelligible only to the Slav world. Hence it remained the special field of a group of Russian musicologists, who found little response to their efforts even at home. In this connection a typical story is told by the famous Russian composer Rachmaninoff.

At the Moscow Conservatory, where he studied, there had been a special choir for church music since the foundation of the Conservatory in 1866. In Rachmaninoff's time the occupant of this chair was S. V. Smolensky, whose discoveries in the field of Russian church music and skill in reading manuscripts back to the 13th century should have earned him fame throughout the whole musical world. But Smolensky could muster only Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, and two stolid Germans for his class in the study of the old

musical notation, and of these only Rachmaninoff was really interested. At the examination the students had to sing off a page of church music noted in the ancient Russian *kriuki* (hooks), an alphabet derived from the old Byzantine neumes. But in order to get a sound out of his pupils' throats Smolensky had to prompt every single line. The presidium of the Conservatory looked on placidly, being itself quite ignorant of the strange notation and finally passed the students without any ado. No wonder that even those composers, who were moved to make harmonizations of traditional chants, such as the Paschal canticle (sticheron) that resounds in Rimsky-Korsakoff's "Russian Easter Overture," ignored the rarer melodies that date back to Pre-Mongol times and are to be found chiefly among the hirmoi (*heirmos*, Greek for link or bond) of the canon.

In the daily cycle of the services of the Russian Church, music, i.e. unaccompanied chant, plays a preponderant part. The canon, which comes in the second half of matins, is in itself a gorgeous musical tableau. It consists of nine odes, and each ode has its model stanza, or hirmos, upon which the remaining stanzas are fashioned. During Lent the entire canon is sung. Usually there are even two or three canons sung alternately which results in the most fascinating interplay among them. What type and manner of music is being heard on these occasions?

For one who seeks to penetrate to the source of Russian church singing it will be hard to attain satisfaction from what he may hear in an average parish or cathedral. Here he will be a witness to a mellow, harmonious style of music sung by a mixed chorus, or by a chorus of monks in a monastery; well-constructed phrases, beautiful melodies, an original grouping of familiar chords that give it a sound all its own. But he will search in vain for a melodic line stripped of all harmony, and bearing the earmarks of great age. The classical Russian chant, called Znamenny (from the word *znamia* — Greek: *semeion*, sign) was more or less obliterated when the craze for pretty harmony, brought in by the Poles and Italians in the 17th century, swept everything before it. New chants, simpler, more pleasing to the average listener at first hearing, were introduced and were immediately set in four parts to the delight of all churchgoers. In contradistinction to the znamenny chant they bore the name of the Kiev, Greek, South Russian chants. Eighteenth and nineteenth century church composers were greatly addicted to these newer chants and produced a mass of second and third-rate church music which to this day enjoys an easy popularity among Russian choir-directors. Such men as Turchaninoff, Lvov, and Bachmeteff, harmonized the whole body of material for the daily cycle of services. In some instances they reverted to the old znamenny chant, but rendered it beyond recognition by curtailing lines in the interests of symmetry, misplacing natural accents, and generally twisting and garbling the traditional melody. It is, to some extent, still the music of the above mediocrities that is heard in Russian churches, just as the Anglican Church has yet to outlive its Stainers and Barnabys.

It is not this type of music, with all its occasional impressiveness, that the world is the poorer for not knowing. It is the unison znamenny chant (and perhaps such settings of it in parts as have come from the pens of Kastalsky, Tchesnokoff, and Rachmaninoff) that deserve to become a part of everyone's musical heritage.

Znamenny chant, being originally a Byzantine importation into Russia, is in its more developed form, nevertheless, a purely Russian product. If we are to go by the ingenious comparative tables drawn up by Smolensky for its various stages from the 17th century back to an hirmologion (collection of hirmoi) of the 13th, it had already acquired it

Russian characteristics early in the Middle Ages. We are living at a time when all sorts of stereotyped notions and theories are being rapidly disproved, thanks to the labors of scientists and archaeologists. One such utterly unfounded theory was that Russian chant was but a replica of Byzantine chant. Nothing was known about the latter, yet writers chatted about it as if they could *read* the Byzantine manuscripts. Only now, in the last few years do we have anything like authentic readings of Byzantine music. These we owe to the labors of Professor Egon Wellesz of the University of Vienna and his pupils. And what sounds emerge from their transcriptions are quite unlike anything known in Russian church music. Only the outward frame-work remains the same, e. g., identical texts used on identical occasions, the choice of the tonality (*echos*), and the approximate length of the chants.

Hence, we must assume that the Russians soon imbued the Byzantine music that came to them together with their religion, with their own spirit. This spirit they derived from the folk music, and it is often possible to draw close parallels between certain old folk-songs and the chants (see particularly chants in the 5th and 8th Russian tones). But the golden period of Russian church music set in towards the middle of the 16th century. At that time there flourished in Novgorod, a wealthy state in north-western Russia, whole schools of religious singers. They were not singers in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather creators and ornamentors of the traditional melodies. In their hands the old and rather monotonous tunes were born to a new life, were imbued with wonderful expressiveness and fluidity of contour. When Novgorod was subdued by the Moscow Tsars, many of these masters emigrated to Moscow and were held in high esteem by the Tsars Vasily III and Ivan IV.

The *znamenny* chant did not develop beyond this stage, as it was superseded in the 17th century by importations from the West, but the form and perfection given to it by the Novgorod masters should assure it of an honorable place in the musical heritage of the world. It is embodied in innumerable manuscripts scattered all over Russia in libraries, museums, monasteries, theological seminaries, etc. Many of these manuscripts are now in a deplorable state. But even if nothing more is extricated from Russia, the five books of it that were published by order of the Holy Synod in 1772 and later, offer us sufficient treasures. In these books the chant is rendered in an easily accessible notation. What is needed is a penetration into the spirit of this music, that has inspired the Russian people for well-nigh seven centuries. That it was abandoned in favor of a more facile, flippant sort of music, at a time when the whole world went crazy over Italian opera, need not surprise us. But that it is more or less unknown at a time when the most minute study is bestowed upon plainchant and when the religious music of all ages is exerting an ever deeper influence on humanity, is, after all, to be deplored. Let us hope that scientific interest in Russian church music will follow in the trail of the Byzantine discoveries, while a musical interest in it will arise as a consequence of the enthusiasm now shown for the masterpieces of Russian musical art, of which it remains one of the most direct prototypes.

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