

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – June 19, 2007

Moderator: *Dr. Nicholas Schidlovsky*

Chat room topic: **Music of the Old Believers**

[Dr. Nicholas Schidlovsky is a chant historian and author of leading publications on the study of early Christian music. He holds a graduate degree from Princeton University in Historical Musicology. Specializing in a broad spectrum of liturgical traditions from medieval Latin to Byzantine-Greek and early Slavic, he is published in academic journals and is an advocate of new research in the music of the Old Believers and Russian chant. His most recent contribution is the publication of an early Slavic Sticherarion as Volume 12 of the Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae series of manuscript editions (Copenhagen: 2000). As an active church singer and musician, he was the founding director of "The Chant and Choral Arts Seminar" (Princeton, New Jersey, 2000) and has spearheaded other initiatives on behalf of music and worship in modern-day Orthodox usage, with emphasis on the traditions of canonical chant.]

Professor David Drillock, Chair of the OCA Department of Liturgical Music and Translations

It is my pleasure to welcome Dr Nicolas Schidlovsky as our presenter and moderator for this evening. Dr Schidlovsky is a chant historian who will speak on the Music of the Old Believers.

Dr. Nicholas Schidlovsky

Thank you, Dave. What I would like to propose is that the music of the Old Believers is among our invaluable resources in the study of liturgical music.

I've deliberately kept my "thesis" brief and broad. Please look at my visual examples available on the OCA web site, and listen to the recorded example. I make my proposal that the music of the Old Believers is an invaluable resource in the study of liturgical music.

There are some facts: Some differences that separate the Old Believers from the main group of Russian Orthodox are...the number of fingers used when making the sign of the cross (the Old Believers use only 2 fingers), and the spelling of the name Jesus (*Isus* versus *Iisus*). Such amazing details of the literate culture!

Of course, all of this also implied a conservation of ritual practice including the liturgical chant. SO, this is where we can begin tonight. Let me continue by saying that a liturgical musician's interest in the Old Believer chant need not be exclusively antiquarian. That is NOT what we look for in this practice. The Old Believer chant offers a 'model' of practice – just as a Rublev icon can serve as a model for new icon painting today.

The question is what does this model teach us? What are its practical applications? Should a choir musician in an American parish today seek to inform her or him self about such matters as Old Believer chant?

Question:

It seems to me that most choir directors do not even think about Old Believer chant. It seems like something so alien to what we are used to, it almost seems irrelevant.

Answer:

The basis of this model is a retention of neumatic (staffless) notation. As far as music goes, that is the point of distinction. Our job is to understand what this became the decisive point of contention.

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – June 19, 2007

WHY this became the decisive point of contention... it's not just blind conservatism or ignorance of alternatives.

Does anyone have occasion to sing znamenny chant melodies in their church services?

Comment:

Occasionally, but they are always harmonized.

Dr Schidlovsky:

The music of the Old Believer is the znamenny chant, even if it must be seen as being in a decisively Old Believer rendition. And, they always sing in unison. Some voices occasionally depart into momentary heterophony, but on the whole it is entirely unison.

Question:

What do you mean by “decisively Old Believer rendition”? Is it so different from the Znamenny chant that we are familiar with?

Answer:

Decisively “Old Believer” means retaining a certain fluidity of approach, which is tradition in this music. To seek “regularity” in the sense that we may like it is futile in this music. It misses the point.

Question:

What is the difference between the two examples you gave us of notation?

Answer:

The examples illustrate two written versions of the same chant melody. One is in traditional neumatic chant notation (in *campo aperto* – signifying ‘an open field’ in Latin, related to musical pitch.) The other uses the five lines we are accustomed to in our general music practice.

Question:

Does this mean the cantor can start on any pitch they like?

Answer:

Yes, the cantor can start on any pitch. There ARE general realms of pitch that seem operative.

So, what's the big deal about notation in all of this? Why did these people lay down their lives on this account? We have significant groups of Old Believers living in the U.S.

Question:

Why DID they die for this? What motivated them to that?

Answer:

They are the subject of considerable interest among historians and anthropologists. The Old Believer schism is the result of a fundamental clash of cultures, differences of outlook on Christian practice.

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – June 19, 2007

Question:

What does this model teach us and what are the practical implications?

Answer:

In my view, the practical implications are that we teach liturgical music NOT through RULES (such as the 5-line staff notation). Church practice has nothing to do with REDUPLICATION of pre-existing practice. We teach through paradigms... or models, that provide for a meeting grounds between personal expression in musical prayer and the universal (ecumenical) truth expressed in that prayer.

Comment:

That, I think, would be difficult to do in our church culture. To try to teach something to a choir in such a different way would be difficult, if not impossible.

Response:

What is so difficult about teaching through modeling?

Follow-up comment:

Our choirs are geared towards reading music in a 5-line staff. It's a totally different way of thinking.

Follow-up response:

Listen to me sing... (you sing it)...and now YOU sing it! That all!

Additional follow-up comment:

And if I did that I would be asked for music. In my choir, it would be tough.

Additional follow-up response:

Indeed, that's the problem... our choirs are geared to singing in 5 line staff.

That is the source of all our "liturgical music" challenges.

Comment:

I would also suggest that singing in unison would cause some choir members to faint. We are too attached to harmony.

Response:

You can still sing in "harmony" without the use of notation. Most cultures that use harmony sing that way.

The Old Believer tradition is simply a marker on the landscape of historical development. I'm not saying we need to sing znamenny chant or to reconstruct what they do musically.

The recording provided on the OCA web site as an example of Old Believer chant was sent to me from Moscow by an Old Believer choir organized by a certain N.N. Agafoniikov. The choir was organized for the express purposes of producing the recording you heard. Additional Old

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – June 19, 2007

Believer chant resources are available through the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Comment:

They seem remarkably “smooth” compared to other Old Believer recordings I’ve heard.

Response:

Recordings of Old Believer chant are fascinating in their variety and what they can teach us about our own practice.

Question:

I’m curious, is this how the Old Believers typically read, the way it is on this recording?

Answer:

Yes, you know that general practice on the Old Believer kliros can be about as rough-hewn as any other practice on the kliros whether Russian, Greek, Syriac, Aleut or what have you. This is a recording intended for broad consumption.

Comment:

So these must be “trained singers”, whether in the conventional Western sense... or as Old Believer singers....which means WE can sing like Old Believers! :-)

Response:

Some of them may have formal training in the conventional Western sense. Yes.

Comment:

They certainly enunciate their “O’s” without ‘reducing’ them, as modern Russians do. There also is a sense of calm and ‘dispassionateness’, although that can be a highly subjective perception.

Response:

Well, why should Old Believer align themselves with contemporary Radio Moscow?

Follow-up comment:

I was pointing that out as a model of what I always understood to be good Slavonic pronunciation.

Question:

Do any Old Believer groups sing in any languages other than Slavonic?

Answer:

Yes, the Old Believers sing in English here in the US, and the Old Believer parish in Erie, PA has published the chants set to English. The transition has not been an easy one, but there ARE significant groups who do this.

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – June 19, 2007

Professor Drillock:

Thank you, very much, Nicolas, for a very interesting session and discussion. We all appreciate your willingness to be with us tonight and hope that you will return again next year.

Dr. Nicholas Schidlovsky

Okay. I'm glad to have been with you tonight.

Professor Drillock:

This will be the last chat room session until September, please watch the OCA web site for the fall schedule posted in August. Thank you for joining us tonight.

Good night.