

...from Fr. Anthony

The following article is written for the occasion of Church Music Sunday, the first Sunday of October, on which day the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese honors the choirs of the Archdiocese

Dear Parishioners,

I have been greatly blessed in the two months that I have spent with you by the efforts of the choir and chanters here. It is perhaps no secret that there has always been something of a distinction and conflict in style between the music of Orthros, sung by the chanters, and that of the Liturgy, sung by the choir. And it is a wonderful thing to see here an effort to bring the two into harmony with one another. Therefore, on this occasion of Church Music Sunday, I would like to express my appreciation to our musicians for all their hard work in that direction, and to draw your attention both to the difficulty and to the importance of what they are doing.



But first, I would like to draw your attention to the two examples of religious art above. The first is a typical example of an Orthodox Icon of Christ the Bridegroom, venerated in our churches for the first half of Holy Week. The second is a typical example of the Western depiction of the same scene, that of Christ after his scourging, as he is mocked by the Roman soldiers. Both pieces depict the crown of thorns, the robe of mocking, the pain of the moment.

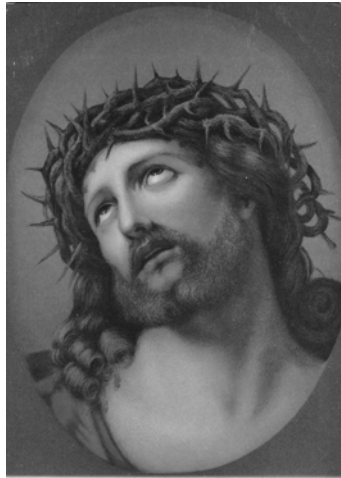
But consider with me, not the similarities, but the differences. What is the message of each? The Western image is intended to depict and evoke deep pain and emotion--the thorns are huge, the expression on Christ's face desperate and almost pathetic. The intent is to evoke a feeling of horror at the suffering which Christ experienced, to show how great was his pain and agony, and to inspire participation in that pain.

Now, look at the Orthodox icon. What does it depict? The expression on Christ's face is sad, but peaceful. The lines and shadings are stark and clear. The image is remarkable in the absence of emotion. Rather, the intent of the depiction is clarified by the title: Ο ΝΥΜΦΙΟΣ, The Bridegroom. The depiction is not of Christ's suffering per se, but rather of the intimate union with our humanity into which He entered by his Incarnation, His suffering, and His death, the union, ultimately, of which he had spoken multiple times in parables of wedding feasts. The lesson is therefore that, despite all appearances to the contrary, on a far deeper level of reality, Christ's Passion was itself the very marriage between the Incarnate Word of God and this fallen creation, the restoration of harmony and love between the Creator and His estranged creation. And the corollary,

celebrated with great joy a few days later at the great feast of Pascha, is that, when Christ rose, all creation, and we ourselves, rise with Him to newness of life.

It is this basic distinction which separates Eastern and Western religious art. Western art focuses on the emotion, as here, on the pain of Christ's passion. Orthodox iconography seeks to express a deeper truth, a theological reality far more meaningful and eloquent.

In fact, it is more useful to look at these two pieces of art, not as representative of distinct artistic traditions, but rather as an



example of how one tradition diverged from the other. For the Bridegroom icon is an ancient and well-attested icon--and as in all iconography, while icons drawn by different hands will be distinct, the same essential elements will be present in all. And indeed, viewed in that way the Western depiction seems clearly descended from a common prototype. The pose is almost the same; the crown of thorns and the robe of mockery are both present. But the meaning, the didactic value of the piece is almost completely lost, abandoned

in favor of more realism, more emotion, more pathos. Meditation on the Orthodox icon leads to a deeper understanding of the most essential theological truths of our Faith. Reflection on the Western depiction leads only to sympathy and, perhaps at best, awe at the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice. There is certainly nothing wrong with this--but I ask you to consider which of the two has greater and more lasting value.

The development of Western classical music follows a similar trajectory. Originally, the Eastern and Western Roman Empires shared a musical tradition. Both Byzantine chant and Gregorian chant share the system of eight tones, and more than that share a character of basic simplicity, based on the understanding that, in the Church, music must never overshadow the text, instead supporting and aiding the communication of its meaning. However, as time passed in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance approached, the musical art was extensively refined and eventually developed, from these humble and simple roots, into a complex and magnificent art form. But in the course of that process, the emphasis on the text was left behind.

Anyone familiar with Western vocal music knows that, in most instances, the beauty of any piece resides in the music, not the words. The words are never central--people attend concerts for the aesthetic beauty of the music. If one were to read the words without the music, one would be struck by two things: first, how short the work is without the music, and second, all too often, how trite the words are. In an opera, the words remain in order to advance the basic plot, but the artistry and beauty of the work lies far more in the music.

Consider any opera, or even an oratorio such as Handel's *Messiah*. The words are repeated so many times as to be almost laughable if read without the music, all so that, despite all the beauty of the music, the words may still be heard and understood.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with Western music. The works of the great classical composers of Western civilization represent one of the greatest achievements of Western civilization. But I think it is necessary to give careful thought to what was almost without thought assumed across the board in all American Churches over the past two centuries—namely, that quality and effectiveness in music is equivalent to accomplishment in classical Western polyphonic choral music. Certainly our choirs in the hundred-odd year history of the Archdiocese have made a tremendous effort to equal the choral quality and complexity of the various churches with which we have shared the religious landscape and with which, to be blunt, we have been in constant competition for the hearts of our people, particularly our young.

The reality of the modern day, however, is that now *all* of the churches in this country are struggling to retain the loyalty of the next generation. Much of this has nothing to do with music. It is simply the case that, for most of this nation's history, society at large was Christian, and thus a certain level of public piety and church involvement was simply necessary for social status and advancement, with the consequence that almost everyone could be found in Church at least semi-regularly. And at the same time, in what were all too often churches filled for the most part with people seeking social advancement, not the truth and peace of Christ, a high level of professionalism by secular standards became very important, leading to, among other things, a very high standard of classical musical quality and a performance-minded attitude for the choirs of American churches.

That reality is now almost entirely in the past. We do not like to admit it, but our Church, along with all of American Christianity (particularly those old denominational churches once firmly ensconced in the halls of American power and influence) is fast approaching a crisis. In the past 50 years, the world has changed around us. Christianity is no longer something which young Americans take for granted. Indeed, classical music itself is far less popular than it once was. The philosophy which viewed church music as a performance which, if of a sufficient quality, would draw people to the Church, has lost most of its credibility. The unquestioned truths of the past are now all up for debate, as America's churches try desperately to maintain what they still have and, if they are ambitious, try to regain the hearts and loyalty of the younger generation.

Much though we hate to admit it, we as Greek Orthodox are far from immune to this general trend among our young people. Indeed, it is something with which we have struggled since Greek people first came to this country. We have put tremendous effort into maintaining close-knit communities, into musical quality, into more use of the English language (or more use of the Greek language, depending on the community), all in hopes of maintaining what we have worked so hard to build here.

But many of our efforts have been unapologetic imitations of the other churches among which we exist. And therefore, as we see them struggling with the same issues which we face, it is time for us to consider carefully which of their methods are worthy of imitation and which are not, and to allow ourselves to face the desperately

important question of what it is that does in fact bring people to the Church—for all too many have stopped coming.

And this ultimately brings us back to the question of Church music, iconography and the essential and fundamental truths to which both have faithfully borne witness. In our Church today, it is time to return to our roots, to waste no more time imitating those around us. If we read their latest books, look at their worship, and consider their spirituality, we will find that they are in fact already imitating us, to varying degrees.

For it has become a truism among those who study religion in America that what people desire is not ultimately more programs, more glitz and glamour, or more artistic quality. What people desire, what people need, is the truth of Christ's love and salvation, the truth that the Orthodox Church has preserved for two millennia.

It is for this reason that we must honor our choir here at Assumption, for they are leaps and bounds ahead of the pack already in the effort to return our worship to the simplicity and elegance of our tradition. It is a hard path for them, for it means abandoning the beautiful experiment of the past 70 years in our churches, setting aside the magnificent choral music, the lush and full chords of polyphonic music. It means learning a tradition that is not easy to embrace, and perhaps hardest of all acting as advocates of a change which it is very difficult for many of us to accept. For the vast majority of us grew up with the classical choral music, and it is difficult to accept something new in the Church when we have never known anything different.

But it is vitally important that we learn the lesson which is easily seen in the already far-advanced decay of the Western churches. We must heed the warning before it is too late, and learn again the importance of transmitting the truth and essence of our Faith to our children, to those outside our Faith who visit, and, ultimately, to ourselves. For the truth that is contained in the words of the Liturgy is the Gospel of Christ, the Faith that upholds the universe, the answer to the deepest and most desperate questions of human existence. If we do not allow that message to be proclaimed in the Church, if we continue to obscure it with the beautiful music of the past, then we must not be surprised if not only our children, but even our adults, find themselves uninspired by their Faith.

But if, on the contrary, we embrace once again the traditional worship of our Church and heed the Gospel contained in the words of our worship, if we indeed internalize them and participate in them, and if, on the broader level of Faith and practice, we devote ourselves to the truth and reality of our Faith, to genuine prayer, faithful almsgiving, and frequent attendance and participation in the worship of our Church, then we will not only find ourselves rejuvenated, but will find our children enthusiastic for the Faith and devoted to the future of the Church. And, most important of all, we will be acting as we should, as devout and faithful Greek Orthodox Christians.

In Christ,

Fr. Anthony Cook