

# Father Sergei Glagolev: An Appreciation

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*This essay was originally presented as part of the Orthodox Masterpieces series at St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary on February 10, 2018. It followed Great Vespers sung by the seminary Chorale, featuring music by Father Sergei Glagolev. A live video recording may be found at <https://www.svots.edu/headlines/orthodox-masterpieces-series-launched>. A CD recording of thirty-two works by Glagolev, Lay Aside All Earthly Cares, is available at <https://cappellaromana.org/product/lay-aside-earthly-cares/>.*

I have heard the legacy of Father Alexander Schmemmann described as one of freedom. So many descriptions of Orthodoxy present the Church as history and rules. Indeed, many people find their way to the Church through reading about the early church. The strictness of the Orthodox Church's disciplines reflects the strictness of its theology. But we Orthodox—or, perhaps, we humans—have a tendency to accentuate the rule and forget its source. Father Alexander reminded us what Orthodoxy is. It is not simply the historical church founded by Christ, but it is the Church holding the orthodox vision of Christ. Being Orthodox does not mean fasting before Communion, or doing so many prostrations in the morning. Being Orthodox means beholding Jesus Christ as fully God and fully man. Orthodox disciplines flow out of that vision.

Freedom. That is also the legacy of Father Sergei Glagolev, both as a pastor and as a musician. If we can thank people like Father Alexander for helping to frame Orthodoxy in the United States, we need to thank Father Sergei for giving substance to that frame. In an essay, "Some Personal Thoughts on the Composition of Liturgical Music," he wrote that church music is similar to church iconography in that they both share a sense of continuity and familiarity, but a familiarity that leaves room for creative composition.<sup>1</sup> Father Sergei's music has given us the latitude to dream boldly about what music in the Orthodox Church can be,

to imagine sonic possibilities for voices praising God.

Of course, Father Sergei does not allow complete autonomy to the composer. The composition exists in relation to the text, and in relation to the Church and its liturgy. Father Sergei demands skilled mastery of music and words; fidelity to the text is his paramount ideal, and that fidelity is borne through musical mastery. Father Sergei asks for a theological and historical understanding of liturgy, and of the sacred function of our hymns; he states that composers should have a grasp of Greek and Slavonic in order to understand how text setting works in those languages.

What emerges, then, is a tension between innovation and tradition, as well as between complexity and simplicity. Father Sergei's music dwells in this tension, and this helps to inform the experience of Orthodox Christians in America, which is often an experience of tension. Several Orthodox Church musicians and composers refer to the premiere of Father Sergei's setting of Psalm 103 as a watershed moment for Orthodox music.<sup>2</sup> The piece works so perfectly because of its fleet gracefulness; it is informed by liturgical history; in Father Sergei's own words, it "demonstrates what may likely have been the tradition of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, calling for chanters, youthful trios singing in the middle of the church, right and left choirs, and finally, the entire congre-

<sup>1</sup> Sergei Glagolev, "Some Personal Thoughts on the Composition of Liturgical Music," *Jacob's Well*, Spring/Summer 1997, <http://www.jacwell.org/Liturgical%20Music/1997-SPRING%20Glagolev.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, David Lucs, "Blessed Are the People Who Know the Festal Shout," International Conference on Orthodox Church Music, Joensuu, Finland, June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZ4wZ3L6gAQ&t=519s>.

gation gathered to lift up their voices in the refrains of the psalm.” But it is not pedantic, nor does it sound as if it belongs in a nineteenth-century imperial Russian chapel; instead, it bears those markers of erudition and Slavic origins, and uses them to “bless the Lord.”

Freedom: “Bless the Lord, O My Soul” initiated a new understanding of how, as Orthodox in America, we are called to be faithful to the traditional worship of the Church and to make it our own. Each of Father Sergei’s compositions engages in this critical task in a unique way. Take, for example, his 1970 setting of “The Wise Thief” for a trio of women. At the Matins service of the Passion Gospels, traditionally served at night on Holy Thursday, we hear this hymn three times: “The wise thief on this day you made worthy of paradise, O Lord. Enlighten me as well by the tree of the cross and save me!”

Like so many hymns in the Byzantine tradition, there is a dynamic movement to the text. The thief—who is the thief? Maybe we should imagine him as one of the “thieves” who robbed a man on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. Maybe we should recall that Jesus cried out that the temple had been made a den of thieves. Maybe we should recall that the chief priests and elders came looking for Christ as for a thief. This thief is made worthy—the same declamation we use at the ordination of a priest—of paradise. But then the text turns inward—“enlighten *me* as well by the tree of the cross.” I am in the same position as that thief. I robbed the man on his way from Jerusalem. I have made the temple a den of thieves. Only by the wood of the cross do we see Christ as he is—in the words of the Exodus reading we will hear later on Holy Friday, God allows Moses to see only his back.

There are so many musical choices when considering this text. We have, of course, the rich musical tradition from Russian composers like Kastalsky and Grechaninoff. But Father Sergei uses a different jumping-off point—the musical lament. The alto line of this setting moves down in half-steps and repeats that same gesture. This musical figure, going back to the fourteenth century, portrays a lament. One of the most famous early examples is Dido’s lament, “When I Am Laid In Earth,” from Henry Purcell’s 1688 opera *Dido and Aeneas*. We hear it again in the “Crucifixus” of Bach’s Mass in B Minor, probably composed in 1714. We hear it yet again in Chopin’s Prelude in E Minor, written in the 1830s—except here, the lament bass is hidden in an inner voice, not in the bass, and Chopin’s harmonies add a chromatic texture to the progression.

This figure of lament persists throughout musical history—even Led Zepelin uses it in the song “Dazed and Confused.” But by using it to set the text of “The Wise Thief,” Father Sergei adds another element to our place within the hymn. We are at the foot of the cross, watching this transpire, watching Christ’s pronouncement of “worthy” for the wise thief, and begging him to enlighten us as well—because now, seeing him on the cross, we begin our lament.

Because the lament bass is a loop, the musical challenge is to make it interesting. Father Sergei does this through the ending. The penultimate harmony is a D major chord, and we could easily believe that this will have a happy resolution to G major. Just as we are emerging from the cycle of the lament bass, there is a glimmer of hope, an expectation that, enduring this lament and confessing Christ with the wise thief, we too may be counted worthy of paradise. Father Sergei’s musical

answer brings us back to the passion, back to our self-realization as thieves. His approach to “The Wise Thief” shows the freedom we are given as artists, as creators, as makers of music—the freedom we are continually given through Christ, who makes all things new. Father Sergei weds Western classical music with a profound liturgical moment in Holy Week, in a setting that is nothing but thoroughly Orthodox in its approach.

A human artist is a human in the image and likeness of God. Every time we recite the Creed we acknowledge God the Father as *creator* of heaven and earth, and that word in Greek is also the root of *poet*—God the Father, poet of heaven and earth. God creates everything out of nothing, but he gives us the freedom to create something out of something. Father Sergei, through his music, shows us that a free, creative response to the call of God can renew us, and can inspire us to see God’s hand in all of our creations.

So, Father Sergei, thank you for your service, your music, and your humility to—in your own words—not let yourself get in the way of worship. ✱

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Father Sergei Glagolev at the Orthodox Masterpieces Vespers and lecture, February 10, 2018.