

Tchaikovsky Divine Liturgy

Russian choral artistry, and especially its sacred choral singing, has long enjoyed the admiration of the Western musical world. After hearing the Choir of the Imperial Chapel of St. Petersburg in 1844, Robert Schumann wrote in his diary that “the Chapel is the most wonderful choir we have ever had the occasion of hearing.”

Hector Berlioz was even more effusive about this same ensemble, writing in 1847 that it “surpasses everything we have in Europe... To compare the choral performance in the Sistine Chapel in Rome with these wondrous singers is the same as comparing a miserable little troupe of fiddlers in a third-rate Italian theater with the orchestra of the Paris Conservatoire.” Already in 1824 the Choir of the Imperial Chapel was renowned enough across Europe to be asked to give the world premiere of Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*, one of the most demanding choral pieces of its time, and one that still challenges any choir that attempts it today.

Yet at the same time as Russian choral singing was undergoing a remarkable flowering in terms of technical achievement during the first half of the 19th century, Russia had, as yet, produced a surprisingly modest number of sacred choral compositions that anyone nowadays particularly admires, or even remembers. Before 1880 it would have seemed to an outsider that Russia was destined to be a nation that performed sacred choral music, but that had little interest in producing it themselves. Even the few dozen works from the 18th and early 19th centuries that are acknowledged today as masterworks are, with few exceptions, little more than studies in Italian or German music.

Here a careful student of music history might justly ask, what of Glinka, or Mussorgsky, or Borodin, or Dargomyzhsky? Weren’t they acknowledged Russian masters in the first half of the 19th century? Certainly they were. But—and here’s the material point—while they wrote superb instrumental and vocal music with a uniquely Russian voice, they and their contemporaries were effectively prohibited by law from publishing liturgical music.

A little backstory is perhaps in order. Over the course of the 18th century, Russian church music had experienced a massive influx of new compositions by composers trained in the Italian style or simply imported from Italy (the so-called “Italianate Period” of Russian music), to the point that church services in many places had, quite literally, become concerts, showcases for music that often eclipsed—or even ran counter to—deeper religious goals. In 1816, in an effort to bring order to what had become a rather chaotic (and often tawdry) picture, Dmitri Bortniansky, then director of the Imperial Chapel, was given legal powers to censor the publication and dissemination of liturgical music. Bortniansky was a highly cultured musician, devout churchman, and masterful composer, and he doubtless meant well. However, in the hands of Bortniansky’s successors, this Decree of 1816 became a blunt legal instrument that served to stifle Russian church music for two generations. By 1871 there were only six names on the official list of approved church composers—Bortniansky himself, Alexei L’vov (Bortniansky’s immediate successor), Maksim Berezovsky (one title), and three others that are all but forgotten today (Makarov, Gribovich, and Vorotnikov). Vladimir Morosan writes: “the censorship process was so intimidating that individuals not connected directly with the Chapel did not even bother to submit works for consideration” (*Choral Performance in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, 81 [1986]).

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Enter Tchaikovsky. In early 1879, in collaboration with visionary music publisher Peter Jurgenson, Tchaikovsky published his new *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* without the approval of the then Imperial Chapel director, Nikolai Bakhmetev. Bakhmetev promptly banned publication of the *Liturgy* and ordered the printing plates to be confiscated. Jurgenson, however, turned around and counter-sued the Chapel, claiming that Tchaikovsky's score was simply a concert work based on sacred texts and that the Chapel had no authority over music intended for concert performance. After a highly publicized legal battle, the court ruled in favor of Jurgenson in June of 1879, and in late 1880, Tchaikovsky's *Liturgy* became available to the public. For the first time since 1816, new church music had been published in defiance of the Imperial Chapel's regime. The floodgates stood open. After hearing the work performed in concert at the Moscow Conservatory in November of 1880, Tchaikovsky wrote in a letter to Nadezhda von Meck that this was "altogether one of the happiest moments of my musical career" (M. Tchaikovsky, *The Life and Letters Peter Illich Tchaikovsky*, 392 [1904]).

In spite of a few half-hearted attempts to reassert dominance on the part of the Imperial Chapel, along with several attempts by the Synod of Moscow to institute its own system of censorship, Russian liturgical composition veritably exploded in the decades after the publication of Tchaikovsky's *Liturgy*. Perhaps Russia was trying to make up for lost time. Morosan records that from the 1880s to 1917 "the output of this 'new Russian school' of sacred choral composition numbered over forty large-scale works and between nine hundred and one thousand shorter works by twenty-eight major composers" (*ibid.*, 91). What the world now thinks of as "Russian choral music" almost entirely comes from this incredibly fertile thirty-year period leading up to the October Revolution, and all from the seed of Tchaikovsky's unassuming yet masterful *Liturgy*.

Tonight's concert therefore, more than being simply a performance of Tchaikovsky's score, is a celebration of the *Liturgy's* role in bringing about a flowering of creative expression in Russian sacred music. Without this piece (and the bold vision of its publisher) there would be no Rachmaninoff *Vespers*, no Grechaninov *Passion Week*, no Chesnokov, no Kastalsky. Hence, we have taken the liberty of adding in pieces by other composers—including two movements from my own newly published *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (2020)—in order to show how the work begun by Tchaikovsky continued in the decades after the publication of the *Liturgy*, and has continued even down to the present day in faraway English-speaking North America. We have also chosen to combine English and Church Slavonic in various parts of tonight's performance, not simply for the sake of intelligibility, but because this is one very significant factor spurring the evolution of Russian sacred music today. One has only to look to one of this year's Grammy-nominated recordings, the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* by American composer Kurt Sander (PaTRAM Institute Singers, Jermihov, 2018), to see that Tchaikovsky's efforts are still bearing artistic fruit. So, perhaps more than anything else, tonight's concert is an attempt to say "Thank you" to a composer who opened the door for the rest of us. Peter Illich Tchaikovsky, we owe you a debt of gratitude.

—Benedict Sheehan