

# The Influence of Znamenny Liturgical Chant on the Nineteenth-Century



## Russian Choral School A Guide for Performance

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# The Influence of Znamenny Liturgical Chant on the Nineteenth-Century Russian Choral School cont.

## Introduction

Russia has had a long-standing sacred music tradition documented in musical manuscripts from the late eleventh century. Although obvious permutations have ensued since then, a clear Russian national voice emerged from these beginnings through sacred monophonic chant. The infiltration and influence of the Italianate and Germanic styles during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, were so profound that the Russian chant tradition was nearly lost.

The Moscow Synodal Choir was reduced in stature due to the rise of the Imperial Court Chapel during the eighteenth century. The Moscow Synodal Choir and Patriarchal Singing Clerics,<sup>1</sup> however, attempted to maintain some semblance of the national chant tradition that would regain stature in the nineteenth century. The ancient znamenny chant was largely saved from Italianate abuses and permutations, but derivations of znamenny chant

morphed into younger forms like Kievian, Greek, and Bulgarian chant, that were not so fortunate.

In the late nineteenth century, a Russian national style began to reemerge in sacred choral music for the Orthodox Church. A choral precedent had been set by the example of the Imperial Court Chapel Choir, but composers of the nineteenth century reacted harshly against the Italianate style of music that had permeated the sacred music for nearly two centuries. They searched for a compositional style that would assert the Russian national voice once again. Many composers found the catalyst they desired through the use of znamenny chant as a basis for their choral compositions.

Znamenny chant had been out of use for years in Russia proper. Znamenny chant was written in *stolp* notation, which is comprised of staffless neumes used as ideograms for performance and based largely on an oral tradition. Since these

neumes were meant more as a supplemental aid to the oral tradition rather than for performance purposes, transcription into modern notation is difficult and large bodies of znamenny chant have yet to be transcribed.

Due to the *raskol* (the schism that split the Russian Orthodox Church) in the 1650s, however, there existed a body of the Old Believers called *starovery*, who had preserved the orthodox traditions of the unison chant amidst its neglect in other portions of Russia. They were guarded from foreign influence for centuries, exiled to the frontiers and dense forests of northern Russia.<sup>2</sup> While it is unlikely that znamenny chant underwent no change within the scope of nearly two centuries, scholars believe that the chant as presented by the Old Believers is as close to the original practices as can be feasibly expected.<sup>3</sup>

The study that follows takes a closer look at the znamenny chant as it has come down to us together with two choral compositions of the nineteenth-century Russian Choral School. The chant basis allows an alternate means of approaching these and other Russian choral compositions for conductors who do not feel comfortable with the Orthodox liturgy or Church Slavonic, but wish to program this important part of the choral repertoire in a concert setting. This article is by no means meant as a comprehensive guide for authentic performance. For complete interpretive and stylistic authenticity, further research is advised in the realms of Church Slavonic and Russian Orthodox liturgy. By looking at select examples, however, one can more readily recognize areas within the larger scope of nineteenth-century Russian sacred music, where znamenny chant is present, and integrate that knowledge as an impetus for further study, performance, and more authentic performance practices.

## Musical Properties

Many scholars claim that the chant literature cannot be understood outside its liturgical function and to attempt to think of it in aesthetic ways is to strip it from its context and function. This view is held because



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Znamenny chant is based on **eight tones**. The tones or modes present in Western Gregorian chants do not apply in the same way to Russian Orthodox chants. The eight tones (*glas*) in the Russian system are based on a series of melodic formulae. The chant does not use eight different scales or tonalities, but rather a Syrian prototype of melodic patterns (*popefki*)<sup>5</sup> that recur within a specific tone.<sup>6</sup> There is still controversy among scholars regarding the identification of these

Some other general attributes of znamenny chant can be assessed within the given compass presented above. Conjunct motion was predominant and leaps were rare, except for intervals of fourths or fifths that occurred at cadential points. A specific



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1. Low                      2. Sombre                      3. Bright                      4. Triple Bright

The musical notation shows four tones on a single staff. The first tone is a C note (one line below the staff). The second tone is a D note (first line). The third tone is an E note (second line). The fourth tone is an F note (third line). The notes are written as whole notes.

**Figure 1. Znamenny Chant Registers**

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freedom to sustain half and whole notes slightly. The half note received the “beat,” while whole notes usually occurred at ends of phrases or lines. Eighth notes were rare in znamenny chant, and no beat was unduly stressed. Texts were treated in a very reverent fashion. They were devoid of nonsense syllables used to elongate words as in Russian folk music. There were no repeated words in the rendering of a text and some texts were performed in a recitative fashion, intoned to clearly delineate the meaning of the words. The chants were controlled melodically with only two to four notes per syllable or word as a general rule. The early chants (the *heirmoi*), which provide the best examples, do not contain extended vocal

displays. The above characteristics are common among the greater body of znamenny chant literature extant today.<sup>9</sup>

Immeasurable variety was achieved in znamenny chant through the combinations of trichords. Despite the constraints of the scalar compass, the limited *ambitus* of each chant, the limitations of unrepeatable text, and keeping the text in strictest solemnity and reverence, each znamenny chant is quite different from another. The combination of trichordal possibilities and the freedom of rhythmic movement in the chant allow for a wellspring of artistry and identifiable characteristics. These compositional possibilities attracted nineteenth-century composers to the form of chant as a basis for their choral

compositions and notably as a unifying means towards a Russian national voice in the midst of foreign cultural invasion.

## A Means of Approach

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov  
(1844–1908)

“Всемирную славу”

[Let Us Praise the Virgin Mary]

“Всемирную славу” [Let Us Praise the Virgin Mary] is a Theotokion-Dogmatikon<sup>10</sup> in the first tone. It is a free arrangement of znamenny chant. In the subtitle of the manuscript, Rimsky-Korsakov specifies: “Arrangement in *demestvenny* manner, from great znamenny chant by N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov.” Today, scholars refer to *demestvenny* as derived from the Greek word *domestikos* [singing master], but back then, it was understood as the word for “house.” This meaning connotes a freely interpreted “domestic” style of singing *vis-a-vis* strict liturgical use. Here, the term *demestvenny* should be understood to mean “freely arranged.”<sup>11</sup>

Initially, there is an *incipit*, which is not present in the chant source. It is, however, included in Rimsky-Korsakov’s arrangement as a choral recitative introduction on a G-major chord and the text reads: “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.” This intonation is necessary, as it is in the original chant tradition and in its respective liturgical use. The canonarch<sup>12</sup> sometimes intones an *incipit* to establish the particular tone. He then leads the singers into the body of the chant. In Rimsky-Korsakov’s model, the choral recitative leads into the rest of the introductory material where the chant is in the soprano. There is no meter signature in this choral recitative, allowing for free rhythmic interpretation and appropriate inflection of the text.

Beyond the introduction, the first tempo marking of “Moderato” appears along with a time signature (Figure 2). Here, the influence of the znamenny chant is unmistakable. The chant is placed in both the soprano and the tenor in an open octave. Likewise, the alto and bass are an octave apart and move

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Figure 2

Умеренно [Moderato ♩ = 84-100]

Soprano: vě - ki - vě - kov, A - mĩn, Fse - mĩr - nu - yu  
 ве - ки - ве - ков А - минь, Все - мир - ну - ю

Alto: vě - ki - vě - kov, A - mĩn, Fse - mĩr - nu - yu  
 ве - ки - ве - ков А - минь, Все - мир - ну - ю

Tenor: vě - ki - vě - kov, A - mĩn, Fse - mĩr - nu - yu  
 ве - ки - ве - ков А - минь, Все - мир - ну - ю

Bass: vě - ki - vě - kov, A - mĩn, Fse - mĩr - nu - yu  
 ве - ки - ве - ков А - минь, Все - мир - ну - ю

Умеренно [Moderato ♩ = 84-100]

*p*

Figure 2. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Всемирную славу, [Let Us Praise the Virgin Mary],  
 Fragment from the Introduction to m. 3.

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in open thirds and fifths against the chant melody. This method continues in mm. 1–11. It highlights the open structure of the sonority and is a simulation of melismatic unison chant in a choral texture. The cadence at m. 11 returns all voices to an octave unison on D.

Though the soprano voice often carries the chant melody in Rimsky-Korsakov's arrangement, the chant frequently passes to other voices. The tenor voice most commonly receives the chant melody either when the soprano is not singing, when there is an imitation in the lower voices, or when combined with the soprano voice at the octave. The passage of the chant from one voice to another is the product of inventive polyphonic techniques and counterpoint.

The degree of influence of znamenny

chant can be determined by examining where the choral composition deviates from the chant source. This assists in the assessment of exactly how much influence the chant held over Rimsky-Korsakov's compositional processes. It also sheds light on the ingenious ways that he modified the chant source to fit his own arrangement.

Though the chant source is used frequently throughout this composition, it is considered an arrangement because the chant is used only as motivic material. The overall form of the composition is based more on the polyphonic techniques utilized by Rimsky-Korsakov than on the chant source. The chant is occasionally paraphrased or it disappears altogether from the texture.

In addition to rests that are added at

beginnings of phrases to accommodate the monastic performance practices, Rimsky-Korsakov also commonly lengthens the duration of cadential points from half to whole notes. Aside from these cadential points, other rhythmic deviations from the chant show the composer's ability to modify set parameters to accommodate his compositional style. For instance, the cadence at

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Figure 3

(a) Chant melody: Dogmatikon in Tone 1

(b)

Figure 3. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Всемирную славу*, [Let Us Praise the Virgin Mary], mm. 9–12.  
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m. 10 is quite remarkable because Rimsky-Korsakov departs completely from the chant in order to achieve a unison D in all voices at m. 11. Prior to this point, the chant melody can be found in the soprano and tenor voices. At m. 10, however, the composer negates the movement found in the original chant melody by placing a whole note in the

choral composition (Figure 3).

The composer treats the phrase ending at mm. 54–59 very differently than he has in the previous phrases. Instead of merely elongating the phrase ending, he changes the whole note from the chant into a quarter-note prolongation of the previous dyad on beat one and follows it with a dotted-half resolution by step (Figure 4, b1). Although lengthening of phrase endings seems common in performance practice, melodic ornaments are not. Additionally, m. 59 progresses in quarter notes in stepwise motion; however, the chant material shows the initial interval to be a third. One would expect the choral composition to read as G-B-B-A, but instead, the upper voices in unison read as A-B-B-A in a neighboring figure (Figure 4, b2).

Ascertaining the points of Rimsky-Korsakov's choral composition where he deviated from the chant allows one to see the degree of influence that the znamenny chant had on the compositional process.

From the frequency of like treatments within the music, it becomes clear which deviations are part of performance practice and which are the composer's own contribution to the structure of the piece. Certain elongation of notes from the chant source is common at the onset of some phrases. However, intervallic and rhythmic change in peculiar positions as well as complete deviation from the chant source deserves attention as the degree of influence is assessed.

In Rimsky-Korsakov's "*Всемирную славу*" [Let Us Praise the Virgin Mary],

there are many additional musical elements that deserve special attention from a choir aside from the chant source. Conductors must bring these elements to the forefront in rehearsals to achieve a more musical performance. Not only must the chant be identified, but also the inventive polyphonic and harmonic techniques utilized to accommodate the chant must be addressed.

## Alexander Kastalsky (1856–1926)

### "Дева днесь" [Today the Virgin]

Alexander Kastalsky studied theory and composition under Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–93), and was associated in some manner with the Moscow Synodal Choir from 1887 forward. In 1910, he became the director of the Synodal School. More than half his choral compositions are based on znamenny chant. Kastalsky's compositions served as creative inspirations that set compositional precedents for composers

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Figure 4

(a) Chant melody: Dogmatikon in Tone 1



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practiced by the Moscow Synodal Choir, consists of the chant melody placed in the first soprano and doubled at the octave by

the first tenors. The second version is labeled for large chorus and the counterpoint is expanded with the chant material passing

between other voices. The third version is labeled for small chorus. It is the same as the previous versions, but reduced to a simplified four-part texture.<sup>16</sup> The second version is used for this study.

In a fully homophonic texture involving all voice parts at the beginning of a piece, the znamenny chant material usually begins in the soprano 1 part; however, the tenor 1 part carries the chant melody in "Дева днесь" [Today the Virgin]. Many notes are doubled at the octave by the soprano 2, but they do not follow the chant material as exactly as the tenor 1 in the first two measures. It is not until the anacrusis to m. 3 that the soprano 1 doubles the tenor and fully takes over the chant melody (Figure 5).

As evident in Figure 5, the interval of transposition is a major second. Additionally, Kastalsky does not designate a meter signature, which remains true to the free metric flow of the znamenny chant source. The original did include solid bar lines at the ends of phrases, but these are common in the Kievian chant notation as well. The dotted bar lines in this edition are editorial markings to aid textual accentuation and phrasing.<sup>17</sup>

There is significant interchange of the chant melody between the soprano 1 and soprano 2 throughout, but the alto and tenor 1 overtake it at the anacrusis to m. 13. The two voice parts are in unison, while the soprano voices are involved in a descant above the texture. The tenor 2 harmonizes fairly consistently at the interval of a third under the chant melody. The bass moves independently, supporting the harmonic texture. This is a significant moment because of the texture shift into the lower three voices. It is also the only transfer of the chant melody into the alto voice (Figure 6).

At m. 16, the soprano 2 voice reclaims the chant melody and reinforces its dominance over the other voices. The composer passes the chant to other voices momentarily throughout the piece, but the soprano 2 part holds it most frequently. The most interchange of the chant melody occurs between the soprano 1 and 2 voices. It weaves through the two voices, making it difficult to identify aurally where the chant material and Kastalsky's material diverge. This is a hallmark



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Figure 5

(a) Chant melody: "Де́ва днесъ"



(b) [Con moto ♩ = 92-108]

Figure 5. Alexander Kastalsky, Де́ва днесъ, [Today the Virgin Sacred], Op. 7b, mm. 1-3.

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of Kastalsky's music. He does not merely keep the chant in the uppermost voice, but masks it in the choral tapestry of his own chant-like contrapuntal material.

In Kastalsky's "Де́ва днесъ," it is difficult to trace the chant melody and emphasize its importance to the ensemble in rehearsals because the chant melody is so interwoven in the choral tapestry. The chant sometimes switches without warning to another voice part and to highlight only the chant melody demeans the importance of the other voices set in a type of homorhythmic polyphony. The other voices are not merely supportive harmony, but act in a symbiotic relationship

with the chant.

The composer largely maintains the contour of the chant. The soprano, alto, and tenor voices move in similar motion much of the time. The bass is nearly always independent and moves in conjunct motion, yet still providing harmonic root support. When two of the upper voices move in unison or at the octave, however, it is important to highlight that portion of the chant from the texture.

Kastalsky was not only a master of homorhythmic counterpoint, but also of word painting. The anacrusis to mm. 13-15 marks an important place in the composition. As discussed previously, the chant melody shifts

to the alto and tenor 1 and the texture shifts into the lower voices. The soprano voices maintain a descant on a single syllable above the texture. The soprano 2 voice is static on F and G while the soprano 1 leaps an octave G in m. 14. The first stanza of text from St. Romanos the Melodist is used in this composition. At this point, the text translates "and the Wise Men journey with a star."<sup>18</sup> The fact that the men's chorus (assisted by the altos in unison) carries the brunt of the texture here implies a significant moment of word painting as they sing about the Wise Men. The Star of Bethlehem is represented by the soprano descant apart from the other



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voices (Figure 6).

Though Kastalsky was not the first to introduce chant melodies into choral textures, he was the first to implement it with some success. The parameters of the Orthodox Church regarding the intelligibility of the text limited many composers' ability to be creative in setting chant material. Kastalsky

was able to create a full choral texture from a chant source, however, rather than simply harmonizing it. He did not use conventional polyphonic techniques such as canonical imitation, inversion, and augmentation. Instead, he utilized timbre, register, and melodic qualities rather than vertical harmony in his voice leadings.<sup>19</sup>

The preceding characteristics of the

composer's music should be brought to the attention of singers so that they can best interpret their vocal line. This approach is especially true in subordinate voices when they have notes or phrases to bring to the forefront of the texture. Conductors should also be aware of the chant melody when preparing this piece because, although it is imbedded in the full choral texture, the chant is the overall structural element. It is also the

Figure 6

(a) Chant melody: "Дева днесъ"



(b)

Figure 6. Alexander Kastalsky, Дева днесъ, [Today the Virgin Sacred], Op. 7b, mm. 12–14.

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model for voice-leading and phrasing.

### Performance Implications

Few non-Russian-speaking American conductors feel comfortable enough with Church Slavonic, modern Russian, or the extant body of Russian chant literature to negotiate intensive study in Russian choral literature. Russian-born choral music scholars are still in disagreement about certain issues regarding znamenny chant. The stolo notation and liturgical practices of the Russian Orthodox Church are also foreign to many American conductors. Despite these issues, American conductors have much to gain from the existing scholarship in English of znamenny chant and nineteenth-century Russian sacred music.

In rehearsals, conductors should consider playing a recording of the chant in the monastic tradition by an Orthodox source. Additionally, non-Russian conductors should enlist the aide of an aurally transliterated pronunciation of the text. A word-by-word translation is also helpful to know musically what is occurring over specific words. This type of translation will give performers a point of reference regarding performance practice and internalization of the spiritual and functional aspects of the chant. Conductors should also consider actually placing the chant on the performance program before the choral composition, since many primary sources are now available.

### Conclusion

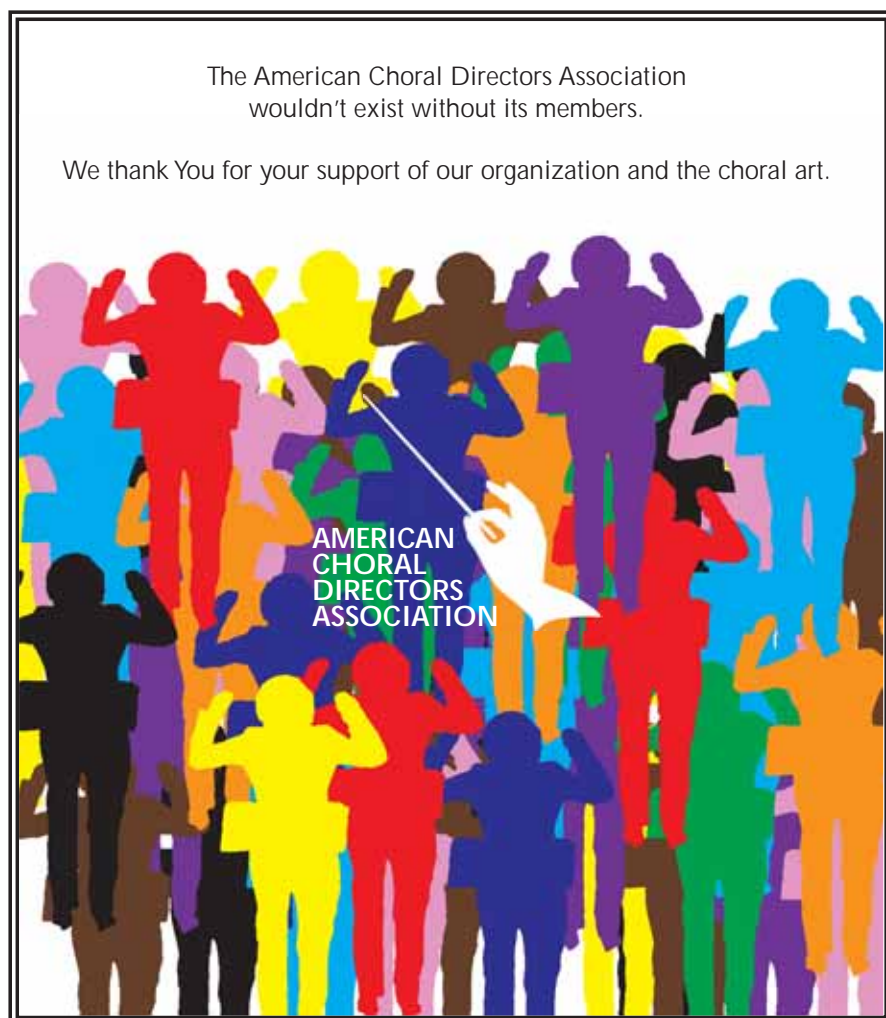
The musical properties of znamenny chant influenced many Russian choral composers. Understanding the degree of this influence even leads to better understanding of those compositions without a clear chant derivation.<sup>20</sup> The chant tradition was the catalyst for Russian artistic creativity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries even among composers with less knowledge of chant. It is an innate characteristic in the emergence of a Russian national voice during this time.

Although various composers used znamenny chant in many different ways, chant sources provide a musical way to approach these compositions for conductors uncomfortable with the language barrier. Knowing the musical properties of the chant and tracing those properties through respective choral textures allow American conductors to approach these pieces through musical means. That is not to say that a textual approach is not important. On the contrary, it allows American musicians to see interesting musical moments and examine more closely the relationship of those moments to the associated text.

The amount of music that exists from accomplished Russian composers that is rarely performed is remarkable. Many compositions have gone completely unnoticed by American conductors. Perhaps with the knowledge that many of these Russian sacred compositions contain derivations of a chant source, conductors will explore these compositions for their own programming purposes.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Moscow Synodal Choir sang in the





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Cathedral of Dormition in Moscow (the main cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church). The Patriarchal Singing Clerics were established and ordered under the Russian patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Morosan, *Choral Performance in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (Guilford, CT: Musica Russica, 1986): 38.

<sup>3</sup> Primary sources of znamenny chant material can be found in publications like: Orthodox Eastern Church, *Obikhod notnago plenii aoupotrebitel'nykh tserkovnykh rospenov* (Moscow: Moscow Synodal Publishing House, 1979) or the *Obikhod* of the Valaam Monastery.

<sup>4</sup> Johann von Gardner, *Russian Church Singing, vol. 1: Orthodox Worship and Hymnography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 23.

<sup>5</sup> These *popefki* are the building blocks of the *Eight Tones* that govern the hymnody in the eight-week cycle of the Proper and a few hymns from the Ordinary.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Swan, "The Znamenny Chant of the Russian Church—Part II," *The Musical Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (July 1940): 370–71.

<sup>7</sup> A red, mercuric sulfide used as pigment.

<sup>8</sup> Swan, 367.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 367–69.

<sup>10</sup> A hymn in honor of the Virgin Mary that contains dogmatic teaching concerning the incarnation and dual nature of Christ.

<sup>11</sup> Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov: The Complete Sacred Choral Works*, ed. Vladimir Morosan (Madison, CT: Musica Russica, 1999), 323.

<sup>12</sup> According to Vladimir Morosan in *Choral Performance in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, a *canonarch* is one whose duties included "ensuring that the readings and hymns were performed in the proper order and determining the melody and style of performance (soloistic, antiphonal, responsorial, etc.) in which a given hymn would be sung."

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Kastalsky, *Today the Virgin*, Sacred Op.

7b (N.p.: Musica Russica, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Morosan, *Choral Performance in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, 233.

<sup>15</sup> Much like the Roman *antiphon* with the repetition of a refrain, the *troparion* is based on poetic text rather than biblical text.

<sup>16</sup> Morosan, Notes to *Today the Virgin*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Kastalsky, *Today the Virgin*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Boris Asaf'ev, *Kharakternye osobennosti iskusstva Kastal'skogo and Khorovoe tvorchestvo Kastal'skogo* in Dmitri Zhitomirsky, ed., *A.D. Kastal'sky: Vospominaniia, stat'i, materialy* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Muzykal'noe Izdatel'stvo, 1960), 13–16.

<sup>20</sup> see Alexander Gretchaninoff's *Gladsome Light*, Op. 23, No. 2.



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