

# Maxime Kovalevsky's Legacy in the Realm of Liturgical Music

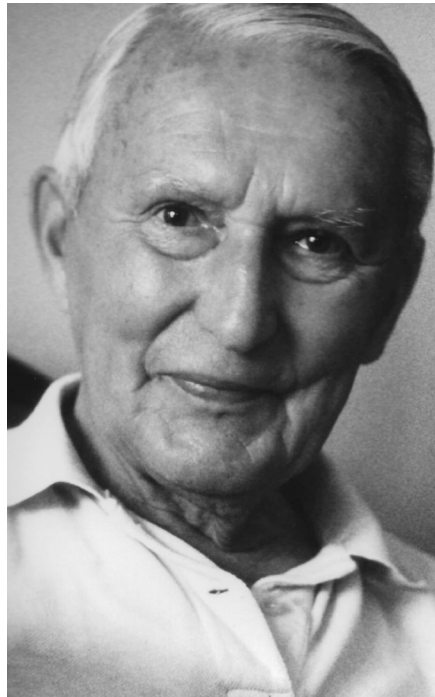
Cyrille Sollogoub

The 1930s saw the beginning of a deeply creative ecclesial movement in France known as the *Église catholique orthodoxe de France* (ECOF). Born of the encounter between the new Russian immigrants to France and a group of French Catholics who sought a return to the tradition of the undivided church of the early Roman empire, this group, little known to most contemporary Orthodox, brought forth a liturgically rich movement that left a significant imprint on French liturgical music. The ECOF is closely associated with the brilliant Kovalevsky brothers, Eugraph and Maxime, and is perhaps one of the most rigorous attempts in recent history to blend the riches of Russian Orthodoxy with Western culture, creating an Orthodox church deeply rooted in Western civilization.

The founding vision of this movement—the rebirth of Western Orthodoxy in France, and in particular the restoration of Western liturgical rites within the Orthodox Church—was met with suspicion and distrust from other Orthodox churches. Over the years, hostile reactions and criticisms of the ECOF surfaced not only in relation to the Western Rite itself, but also to other issues pertaining to church tradition, including an ostensible laxity over church rules and a seeming porosity to non-Orthodox teachings. A long and tortuous road amongst the different patriarchates ensued, as the group was affiliated

at different times with the Patriarchates of Moscow, Constantinople, and Romania, as well as with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, and finally broke communion with the canonical Orthodox churches in 1993.

To cover every aspect of this movement—its origins and disintegration, including the complex questions surrounding the restoration of the Western liturgical rite, which is surrounded to this day by controversy and charged emotions on every side—would deserve an examination well beyond the scope of this article. All controversies aside, what is clear is that the sudden and tragic rupture of 1993, to this day an open wound in the hearts of many



Maxime Kovalevsky.

faithful, contributed to the marginalization of the movement, putting “under a bushel” its rich history and legacy and discrediting its initial intuitions, still fully Orthodox. It is high time for a critical and dispassionate reappraisal of its legacy to recognize the right and fruitful intuitions of the Kovalevsky brothers, and in particular those of Maxime, which were at the foundation of the movement.

Maxime Kovalevsky was not only a gifted musician, but also a talented composer, considered by Nikolay Lossky to be the most remarkable composer of church music in the twentieth century. He was an authentic liturgist, a choir conductor, a theologian, and a specialist in the history of liturgy and the liturgical arts. He left behind a considerable body of work of inestimable value, consisting of articles on the meaning and the history of liturgical chant as well as original polyphonic compositions, characterized by a faithful respect for the living liturgical traditions of West and East.

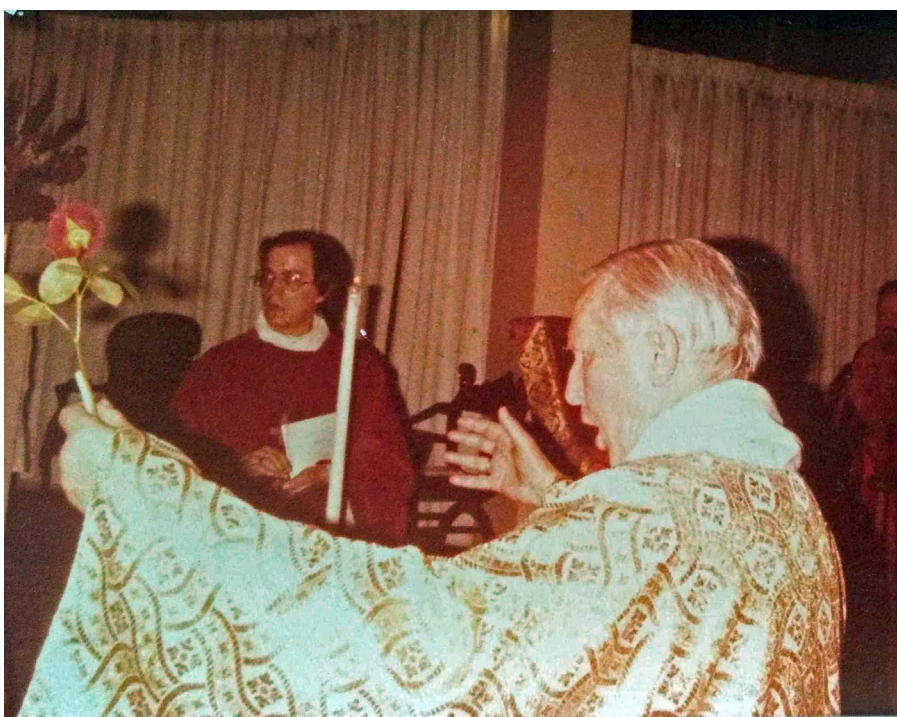
### Liturgical and Musical Formation

To understand the origin of Maxime Kovalevsky’s liturgical vocation, his musical education, and more generally how his sonic universe was shaped, it is important to reflect on his biographical journey. He was born in 1903 in Saint Petersburg into the Ukrainian nobility, in a family that had contributed to the cultural and political life of the Russian Empire for generations. Maxime and his two brothers (Peter and Eugraph, born in 1901 and 1905 respectively) received a complete classical education, in which the arts, especially music and painting, held an important place. In the field of music, the brothers took private lessons at home in piano, violin, and voice and also studied at the music school of S. F. Schlesinger.

Their liturgical life and their experience in Saint Petersburg are not of great interest, since the family attended a government chapel with no real parish life. As children, they spent their summers in the small village of Yatonouvka near Voronezh, on the family estate. It was in this village’s church that they were taught the basics of liturgical chant.

The learning process was continued in Kharkov, where the family moved in 1918, during the Civil War. The revolution and this subsequent war had a great impact on the spiritual life of the whole family. The Church appeared to the young brothers to be the only pillar that might survive this cataclysm, the only thing to which it was worth devoting their lives. In Kharkov, a city founded by an ancestors of the Kovalevskys, the brothers assiduously attended liturgical services in the Monastery of the Protection of the Mother of God. Maxime discovered the simplicity and sober beauty of monastic chant, as well as the pedagogical function of the liturgy and liturgical singing, expressed particularly by the canonarch, who announced the tone of the hymns and read the text fragment after fragment, echoed by the choir. This experience formed his understanding that the liturgy is and should be *the* means to understand the faith of the church, and that all theology ought to be liturgical—that is, experienced, expressed, and communicated by and through liturgy.

Liturgical life in this region was particularly vivid, marked by the vision of the bishop of Kiev, the renowned Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky), who was a relative of the Kovalevskys, and who had himself initiated a modest local liturgical renewal. In the monastery, Maxime and Eugraph participated in one of the two choirs for two complete liturgical years, attending the liturgy almost daily. “In Kharkov, we were submerged in a



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Maxime Kovalevsky  
directing a choir  
while wearing a  
vestment-like robe.  
1980s.

‘background sound’ that we fully assimilated and that actually entered our bodies,” Maxime said in an interview at the end of his life.<sup>1</sup>

In 1920, the Kovalevskys moved to France by way of Simferopol (Crimea) and then Constantinople, where they took an active part in church life. Once in France, they settled in Beaulieu on the French Riviera near Nice, where the family had a villa inherited from their uncle, the famous sociologist also named Maxime Kovalevsky. The brothers installed a chapel on the second floor of the villa and painted all the icons themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Once in Paris, Eugraph became one of the first students at the Saint Sergius Institute and Maxime began studying mathematics at the Sorbonne. In parallel, the young brothers participated actively in the religious life in Paris around the institute, the Russian Student Christian Movement, and Nikolai Berdyaev’s academy of philosophy. Together with other students who believed that the mission of the Russian emigration was to witness and restore Orthodoxy in the West—including Vladimir Lossky, Leonid Ous-

pensky, and Nikolai Poltoratsky—they founded the Brotherhood of Saint Phoebus. This group played a leading role in founding the first French-language parish, dedicated to Saint Genevieve of Paris and served by Father Lev Gillet.<sup>3</sup> Maxime led the choir and undertook the pioneering work of translating the liturgy and adapting the Russian melodies to the French texts.

In Paris, Maxime continued to study music at the Rachmaninoff Conservatory, and made several new acquaintances who played a decisive role in shaping his musical education. First he met Nikolay Kedrov, Sr., one of the first composers in the diaspora to introduce modal harmonization in liturgical chant, imitating ancient Russian traditional folk music to create very beautiful modal sonorities. Maxime benefited greatly from the experience and knowledge of Kedrov, with whom he worked closely and shared his compositions. He sang regularly with the Kedrov family, formed a close friendship with Kedrov’s son, and eventually married Kedrov’s daughter. Nikolay introduced him to Nadia Boulanger, a famous composer, conductor,

<sup>1</sup> “Le compositeur liturgiste, le musicologue et le chef de chœur, entretien avec Clara Goetman (Buenos Aires, avril 1983),” *Présence orthodoxe* 1–2 (1989): 32.

<sup>2</sup> The iconostasis from this private chapel is currently in the *Présentation de la Vierge au Temple* Parish in Paris.

<sup>3</sup> See Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *Lev Gillet, A Monk of the Eastern Church* (Oxford: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1999).

and teacher, with whom Maxime became very close, attending her lectures on the history of music for a period of several years. Nadia enlarged Maxime's vision and knowledge, initiating him into the riches of French melody, especially Debussy and Gregorian chant. He studied Gregorian chant seriously, visiting various abbeys in France where it was practiced, listening, and immersing himself in this ancient tradition.

Maxime, who all this time was also working as an actuary in an insurance company, remained fully committed to the development of the ECOF, and as one of Eugraph's closest collaborators, stayed faithful to his brother and their project until the end of his life.<sup>4</sup> Eugraph's efforts were occupied by his search through ancient sources as a basis for the restoration and development of the Gallican rite, and in particular the reintroduction of the liturgy of Saint Germanus into the family of Orthodox rites. Maxime undertook the project of finding a musical substrate for this development. He devoted much of his life to this huge creative work, serving as choir director at the Cathedral of Saint Irénée in Paris. In parallel, until the end of his life, Maxime taught the history of liturgy, sacred art, and comparative liturgies at Saint Denys Orthodox Theological Institute, founded in 1944 by his brother Eugraph and Vladimir Lossky. As a specialist in the history of liturgical music, he was frequently invited to lecture in France and across Europe and to publish studies on this topic.<sup>5</sup> He also took part in editing several collections of liturgical hymns, in which a number of his compositions and harmonizations can be found.

### Theological Reflections on Liturgical Singing

Maxime considered liturgy to be the vital centre of the Church, not only as a sacramental source, but as an educating force

allowing the expression, assimilation and deepening of Christian theology for the development of the human person. The way liturgy is experienced and understood by a group was, according to him, an indication of the group's spiritual maturity. Furthermore, he believed that the modern world, characterized by the end of theocratic states and the emergence of states indifferent to religion, opened a new freedom and leeway to traditional, institutional churches and appeared to him a fertile ground for the organic development of Christian liturgy.<sup>6</sup> Maxime considered that, compared to other Christian traditions, Orthodoxy possessed a very rich liturgy, some elements of which were faithful to the tradition of the undivided Church—for example, the epiclesis and the communion of the faithful under both traditions, the incomparable richness of the liturgical texts, the tradition of celebrating in the vernacular language, and liturgical chant with its traditional melodies.

Still, he regretted that, by mere laziness or by the inertia of engrained habits, these treasures were too often buried. As he often wrote in his articles, tradition was for him contrary to habit. "Fear habits more than enemies," he advised. "Habit is the lowest degree of effort, it is a static and passive attitude. By contrast, tradition necessitates a constant struggle to conform oneself progressively to an ideal."<sup>7</sup> This was particularly the case in traditionally Orthodox countries, where the question of liturgical renewal did not arise. He was also disappointed by the Russian diaspora, where, despite a certain liveliness of theological thought, no real liturgical renewal was sought, and the treasures of Orthodox tradition remained largely untapped. The emerging ECOF, gathering "a new category of Orthodox people" who were born in the West, had been imbued with its culture, and came to Orthodoxy consciously, seemed to

<sup>4</sup> At the end of his life, Maxime published a book explaining and justifying the different jurisdictional choices made by his brother Eugraph and by ECOF after Eugraph's death, *Orthodoxie et Occident, renaissance d'une église locale* (Suresnes: Les Éditions de l'Ancre, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Maxime contributed important articles to the *Encyclopédie des musiques sacrées*, ed. Jacques Porte (Paris: Éditions Labergerie, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> See his "Le problème liturgique au XXe siècle," in Maxime Kovalevsky, *Retrouver la source oubliée: paroles sur la liturgie d'un homme qui chante Dieu* (Paris: Éditions "Présence orthodoxe," 1984), 13–34.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



the Kovalevsky brothers like fertile ground for mission and the restoration of an authentic liturgy, stripped of liturgical forms based on habit rather than the living tradition.

This work of composing traditional liturgical music in French led him to wonder about the underlying logic of liturgical chant, its various functions in the liturgy, and the musical material it used to fulfill these functions. In particular, he tried to find common elements beneath the many varieties of ancient Christian chant traditions—Byzantine, Slavonic, Gregorian—in order to identify general principles. During a seminal lecture delivered at Saint Sergius Institute, he suggested that there were several specific features of liturgical music: to express the inner movements of the heart, to support, clarify and sanctify the word, to free one from the contingencies of the outside world, and to promote the assimilation and memorization of the liturgical texts.<sup>8</sup> The musical materials developed over the centuries by the Church derived from those functions.

This explains the unique place given to the human voice, this coinciding of breath and word, in Christian liturgy, and clarifies the Church's prohibition on musical instruments. Moreover, the rhythm of the chant is given by the words; the chant arises from the words and is intimately and organically linked to them. In particular, it is the sentence which determines the rhythm, free and irregular, and not the music which applies its rhythm to the sentence. The various cantilenas developed by the Church over the centuries allow us to deliver the meaning of the text objectively.

Maxime was also probably the first to call attention to the principle of "formulism" in church singing—that is to say, the use of traditional "formulas," chiseled and transmitted over the centuries. His personal research on this topic coincidentally tied in with the related investigation of the oral tradition developed by the Jesuit anthropologist Marcel Jousse, whose ideas, discovered by Maxime in 1965, were particularly important and striking to him. Jousse argued that in order to

<sup>8</sup> Maxime Kovalevsky, "Le chant de la liturgie chrétienne: pérennité de ses principes dans la diversité de ses manifestations," in *Liturgie de l'Église particulière et liturgie de l'Église universelle: Conférences Saint-Serge, XXIIe semaine d'études liturgiques* (Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche, 1976).



Maxime and his mother Inna Vladimirovna Kovalevsky (center) with his brothers Pierre (left) and Fr. Eugraph (right). Photo taken in front of the Cathedral of Saint Irénée, Paris, between 1946 and 1948. Archives éditions Forgeville.

Left to right: Fr. Grégoire Hardy, Maxime Kovalevsky, Hieromonk Martin, Abp. John Maximovitch, Fr. Ambroise Frontrier, Bp. Jean Kovalevsky. Photo taken in front of the Cathedral of Saint Irénée, Paris, between 1962 and 1964. Archives éditions Forgeville.



be assimilated, remembered and transmitted, teaching must be expressed in a limited number of formulas. Still, the use of ancient formulas did not exclude creativity, a crucial element of tradition in its fullest sense. Creativity in liturgical chant did not lie in creating new formulas, but rather in creating new juxtapositions of traditional ones. Maxime implemented these principles to build a music adapted to the new languages used in the Orthodox liturgy—particularly French—while maintaining a link with the living and always fertile tradition.

#### Adaptation and Composition in Liturgical Singing

Maxime Kovalevsky's first compositions were written in the tradition of the Moscow school, which had been initiated in Russia in the nineteenth century and continued by composers in the Russian diaspora (such as Kedrov and Mikhail Ossorguin). This approach was characterized by a return to ancient Russian sources, especially the old traditional chant (Znamenny, Putevoy, Demestvenny), combined with a harmonic language derived from the modal implications of the chant and from Russian folk tradition. The harmonizations and

compositions from the Russian diaspora in Church Slavonic were gathered in a famous multi-volume anthology of Russian Orthodox church music prepared by a group of enthusiastic experts.<sup>9</sup> Maxime took an active part in this project, and some of his works in Church Slavonic were included in the anthology.

But the most influential legacy left by Maxime is his liturgical music in French. In the style of the Moscow school, he composed liturgical hymns for the first liturgies celebrated in French in the years following his arrival in Paris. Some of his compositions and settings were later collected by one of his disciples, Michel Zimine, in a book that is widely used today in French-language parishes.<sup>10</sup>

Maxime's most creative work remains his music for the ECOF. For this, he chose ancient Gregorian liturgical tones which, according to him, belonged to the same cultural and cultic background as the ancient Gallican rite restored by the ECOF. He thus adapted the Gregorian melodies to the French language, while simultaneously enriching the monodic tones with a polyphony inspired by the harmonic principles of Slavonic church music, with

<sup>9</sup> The *Londonskij Sbornik*, so called as the first volume of this anthology was published in London: *Нотный сборник православного русского церковного пения. 1, Божественная литургия* (London, 1962).

<sup>10</sup> *Kyriale orthodoxe: recueil de chants de la divine liturgie de S. Jean Chrysostome* (Paris: Contacts, 1972).

which he was impregnated. This audacious combination of Slavonic and Gregorian music offers a brilliant synthesis and a unique and authentic example of the inculturation of Orthodoxy in a Western cultural context. He used the Gregorian tones mainly in the Gallican and Roman liturgies (that is, the Liturgy of Saint Germainus of Paris and Saint Gregory the Great's Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts). He used Slavic tones for the troparia and kontakia of the twelve great feasts, perhaps in order to facilitate intercommunal worship with other parishes on these occasions. Of particular interest is his work on the Book of Crowns, presenting Slavic and Latin tones for the same texts in parallel, such as the Sunday hymns to the Mother of God (theotokia) and various prokeimena and alleluia verses. Maxime also left behind other admirable compositions, including Latin hymns that he harmonized for the French language such as the hymn of the Cross attributed to Saint Venantius Fortunatus, Archbishop of Poitiers in the time of Saint Rade Gund, "Les étendards du Roi s'avancent"; and the Advent hymn attributed to Pruden-

tius in the fourth century "Écoutez, une voix s'élève."<sup>11</sup>

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Maxime Kovalevsky belonged to the generation of Russian émigrés who witnessed the disappearance of an empire and lost everything during the revolution and the subsequent exile. Instead of falling into despair, he lived out that situation as a unique opportunity for mission and creativity, embodying thus the concept of living tradition. More than a wide collection of magnificent compositions, Maxime Kovalevsky bequeaths us an authentic process of church renewal: a return to ancient sources, an understanding of their basic principles, and a method for implementing those principles in a specific cultural context. The time has come for a thorough evaluation of Maxime Kovalevsky's legacy and for a recognition of his work in the sphere of liturgical chant as one of the most interesting and creative treasures left to us by the encounter between the Russian emigration and French culture. ✽

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<sup>11</sup> A version of this hymn can be heard at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h16b-sc-L6\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h16b-sc-L6_8).



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