A Defense of the Orthodox Organ

Toni Kelaidis

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Before I was a teacher, a mother, or much of anything, really, I was a pianist. My initial piano lessons were the result of a Greek mother's pragmatism: my older brother wanted piano lessons, and if she was driving one of us, she was driving us both. But I fell in love, and begged my father to continue when my brother's interests quickly waned. There were many reasons I was so enamoured with music generally and the piano specifically. Not least was that my first piano teacher was a fun and eccentric-in-all-the-right-ways woman whose backyard was filled with Appaloosas—the colorful, spotted horses she raised for rodeo riders—and whose house was filled with musical instruments. Among the collection of instruments in Mrs. Mitchell's house was a large theater organ, something she had apparently picked up when the last silent movie theaters were closing in the midst of the Depression. That organ gave me an idea.

I was raised in the Greek Orthodox churches of the Intermountain West in the middle of the twentieth century, part of a close-knit, deeply interconnected Greek diaspora community whose roots stretched from the mountains of Crete to the mountains of southern Colorado and southern Utah. Like my classmates in Sunday school and Greek school, I had grandfathers who had fought the Turks in the Balkans and the Colorado National Guard at Ludlow during the Coalfield War in 1914, grandfathers who had forbidden their sons to go down in the mines and sent them off to business college, with the result that our families were models of midcentury American optimism and upward mobility. We were assimilated in so many ways, eager to embrace the best of what America had to offer. Our strange Eastern religion did, of course, set us apart, like the mousaka and pomegranates I ate at the lunch table while my classmates had bologna sandwiches. But our churches had

pews by then. And by the time I came along, the organ was an unremarkable feature of our liturgical practice.

While George Anastasiou claimed in the 1960s to have brought the organ to the Greek churches in America in 1921, the truth is that organ music began to appear in American Greek churches even as early as the 1890s, when Greek immigration to the United States was just beginning. This phenomenon was, however, not isolated to America. Greek communities in late nineteenth-century Germany and France also experimented with instrumentation, including with the organ—the primary liturgical instrument in Western Christianity since the seventh century (well before the Great Schism, if it matters to anyone). For almost a hundred years, from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth, the organ was an unremarkable part of the experience of many Orthodox Christians in my community.

It was not until 1987 that the National Forum of Greek Orthodox Church Musicians held a mini-symposium entitled, "The Use of the Organ: Can We Reconcile Tradition with Emerging American Practices?" While having two children under the age of three prevented me from attending, I was dumbstruck by the title. How on earth was the organ in American Greek churches an "emerging American practice"? After a hundred years, could anything still be "emerging"?

The announcement of the mini-symposium was, for me, the first sign that something was changing in the American Orthodox world. A growing spirit of what some have called "traditionalism" and others have called "fundamentalism" was beginning to take hold and suddenly (or so it seemed, at least), many of the ways in which my community had adapted and responded to our new home were becoming a source of ten-

A woman playing the organ surrounded by other female musicians. Mosaic from a Byzantine villa in Maryamin, Syria, late 4th century.

sion. This too, I came to realize, was a response to our American homes, a product of American-ness, perhaps more than the organ could ever be. To believe that Greek America, Orthodox America, or anyone else could escape the omnipresent forces of the culture wars and the conservative backlash of the 1980s would have been foolish. But I was at first amused, and later angered, when the organ became a flashpoint in this conflict.

As a child and young adult, I was very much aware that our Russian co-religionists in America worshipped without an organ. I was also aware that they did not use the Byzantine harmonies that we did. Znamenny chant, the original sung tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church, quickly evolved away from the Athonite Byzantine tradition that gave birth to it. It also rapidly divided into two distinct schools of its own, a northern one centered in Moscow and a southwestern one around Kiev. During the period of reforms in the seventeenth century headed by Tsar Alexei and Patriarch Nikon, the cumbersome (and arguably more pure) Muscovite tradition was replaced by the Kievan one. Kievan Znamenny chant had been influenced by Western liturgical music and the musical innovations of the Renaissance. It was the adoption of this more cosmopolitan style that laid the groundwork for the true revolution in Russian liturgical music in the eighteenth century. During this period, choirs replaced congregational singing in many Russian churches, and Obychny, a musical style drawing on Italian polyphonic influences as well as Russian folk music and modernized chant, began to take shape. These changes helped set the stage for the great Russian composers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Sergei Rachmaninoff. In the meantime, the Greek-speaking Church remained behind the wall of Ottoman Empire, largely cut off from the Western musical influences shaping Orthodox liturgical music in Russia. Ottoman Greeks were attempting to survive and to preserve their uniqueness against forces that threatened to erase them from the pages of history. The Russians, facing no such threat, were free to grow, learn, and change.

In twentieth-century America, these positions had changed. The Greek-American community was a population of economic migrants, eager to enjoy all that America had to offer and confident that their traditions, language, and culture were being tended to "back home" in the official Orthodox Republic of Hellas. The Russian community could not have faced a more different reality. This was a community made up almost entirely of refugees from the Bolshevik Revolution. Mother Russia was no more, and their home was locked behind the Iron Curtain under the control of men sworn to obliterate the past.

It is hard to be enthusiastic about making changes when that is the present—and future—you face. It is a siege mentality. And it is precisely the same kind of siege mentality that I have seen growing in the American Orthodox church writ large beginning in the 1980s, a mentality that has grown larger and more ominous as the divides in American culture have become more antagonistic. I cannot say this sense of threat has been helped by the influx of American converts, who came to Orthodoxy looking for an "unchanging tradition," seemingly unaware that where there are human beings, nothing is unchanging. It is, as far as I can tell, clinging to a fantasy of the past because we are afraid.

"Be not afraid" appears in the Scriptures over three hundred times, more than any other exhortation. To be a Christian, to be obedient to God, means to trust in God and His Providence, which perhaps is the very strange reason why I not only think that organs should stay in the Orthodox churches where they are already installed, but—where appropriate—they should be introduced into others. Everywhere the Church has gone in the world, it has adopted the language, style, and customs of the people it has sought to bring to Christ. And because music is an integral part of culture, a fundamental way people relate to each other and God, this has meant adopting local musical practices. You will not be disappointed, for instance, if you spend a few minutes (or hours!) on YouTube listening to Orthodox Christians in Ghana, the Congo, and Rwanda singing that Christ has Risen accompanied by African drums. You will, of course, inevitably also hear Byzantine and Russian harmonies in these clips, but nothing matches the joy of when local musical customs met with the universal proclamation of Christ's triumph over death. This is the point of Christianity, if you think about it: the universal news of Christ's salvation being offered to all people, in all times and all places, as they are. The gospel is not the good news that everyone gets to become Byzantines or medieval Russians. That would actually be pretty bad news.

This brings me back to that idea I had in Mrs. Mitchell's house, playing her organ. As a young girl, I was not offered many avenues of participation in the Orthodox Church. My brother, male cousins, and frankly any Greek boy I knew over the age of about six was "sent to the altar." No such service existed for us girls. But there, at six years old, the very age I would have become an altar server had I been born a boy, I realized this was a way I could serve. And I have. I have played the organ at weddings, baptisms, funerals, and Divine Liturgy. I have accompanied children's choirs. The organ has been a way for me to use my gifts in the service of Christ's Church. But it's not about me. The fundamental question I believe we should ask when thinking about our liturgical life is this: How do we make this truly *leitourgia*, the labor of the people, all of the people? Part of that effort must include offering our praise in music that is comprehensible to the people. And in America, that very well may mean an organ or two. ✠

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