

1. A - maz-ing grace! how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I'm found, Was blind but now I see. see.
 2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears re-lieved; How pre-cious did that grace ap - pear The hour I first be-lieved! -lieved.

3. Thro' ma - ny dan-gers, toils and snares, I have al-read - y come; 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home. home.
 4. The Lord has prom-ised good to me, His word my hope se - cures; He will my shield and por - tion be As long as life en-dures. -dures.

5. The earth shall soon dis-solve like snow, The sun for-bear to shine; But God, who called me here be - low, Will be for - ev - er mine. mine.

THE LIVING TRADITION

Toward an American Liturgical Sound: Vladimir Morosan and the “Appalachian” Paschal Troparion

Nicholas Sluchevsky

Detail from Benjamin Franklin White, *Original Sacred Harp* (1936 Denson revision), showing the shaped notes used to aid singers.

A few years ago, Vladimir Morosan composed an unusual piece of music based on the pentatonic scale, a version of the Paschal Troparion in what might be called an “Appalachian” style.¹ A simple enough story—but as always, there is a backstory. This is a musical story about constructing a new identity. It is the story of the evolution of a unique American sound for the Russian Orthodox liturgy. Finally, it is a story of potential: is this a piece of music that will lead us on a new journey, toward a new discovery?

The Man

Vladimir Morosan is a composer, choral conductor, and musicologist. After undertaking pioneering research in Europe and the Soviet Union, he wrote *Choral Performance in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (1986) and founded Musica Russica, the largest publish-

er of Russian choral music outside of Russia. The archival materials he compiled on Orthodox sacred music have now been published electronically as the Orthodox Sacred Music Reference Library (orthodoxchoral.org). He is also the founder and artistic director of Archangel Voices, a vocal ensemble that produces albums of Orthodox liturgical music in English. Morosan serves as consultant to the Department of Liturgical Music of the Orthodox Church in America and sits on the board of advisors of the Patriarch Tikhon Russian-American Music Institute (PaTRAM).

The Story

Morosan has long had an interest in “Appalachian” music, a typical American fusion of Anglo-Celtic ballads, hymns, the blues, and more. The first recordings of this music were made in the 1920s, although its origins go

¹ The piece may be heard at http://www.musicarussica.com/sheet_music_pieces/omp-vm001. Amateur performances of the music by local parish choirs from North America and Russia may also be found on YouTube.

much further back. As the Library of Congress notes, the very term “Appalachian music” is artificial. It was coined by a group of scholars and ethnomusicologists in the early part of the twentieth century, but with no trace of self-identification by the presumed carriers of the tradition. Still, the term has been widely accepted in musicology.

This musical tradition gave birth to country music and to bluegrass. It also led to a revival of folk music in the 1960s. The stylistic range of musicians that have drawn on Appalachian music includes country stars like Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, and Earl Scruggs, but also Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, and Statler Brothers. Even the Grateful Dead were heavily influenced by these traditions: “Cumberland Blues” comes to mind.

We must bear in mind that Appalachian music is folk music; in a word, it is “people’s music,” music of the



common people engaged in common activities. Prior to the advent of mass media, folk music writ largely served an important function: it communicated news and connected people with their culture. It became an integral element in binding people to an ever-evolving identity formed around what people did rather than what they thought. Appalachian music is quintessentially American, reflecting the multiple sources and influences from which it derives: the music of a melting pot country, a country of immigrants.

In the following conversation with Morosan, a reference is made to Sacred Harp and shape note singing. These form a crucial part of the musical tradition of the Blue Ridge Mountains, primarily in the western Carolinas. The nineteenth-century songbook *The Sacred Harp* used a form of music notation in which the notes were represented by triangles, squares, and other shapes. This system, which has since been used in hundreds of hymnals, reflects the efforts of itinerant choir and music teachers in rural areas of the Blue Ridge Mountains to develop a basic and intuitive music notation that could be taught quickly to church choirs with no musical training. The music itself is always in four-part harmony and sung *a cappella* (despite the name “Sacred Harp,” there are no instruments). It is distinguished by a performance style in which singers stand in a square formation facing the song leader in the center. The focus is on sonic exchange between the voice groups, somewhat like antiphonal singing.²

Conversation with Vladimir Morosan

With such a rich tradition, where and how did you make this con-

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Vladimir Morosan.

² See “Shaped-Note Singing,” *Blue Ridge Music Trails of North Carolina*, <https://www.blueridgemusicnc.com/listen-and-learn/music-styles/shaped-note-singing>.

nection to Orthodox sacred music by way of *Christ Is Risen*? Where did the inspiration derive from and how did it evolve into what you composed?

I have to start out by recounting the well-known story of the *Appalachian Spring* ballet by Aaron Copland, arguably his most famous and identifiable piece. The fact is that when he composed this piece, it was entitled “A Ballet for Martha” [choreographer Martha Graham]. The name “Appalachian” was added later, by others.

Without even remotely comparing myself to Aaron Copland, I have to say that the “Appalachian” label was given to my *Christ Is Risen* entirely by others, and I find it quite humorous that it’s officially labeled that way on Russian websites, when, in fact, it is entirely my own composition.

Did you research any of the digitized collections of this tradition (such as the Archive of Folk Song in the Library of Congress, created by Robert Winslow Gordon in 1928), and did this in any way influence some of your thinking regarding OSMR/the Orthodox Sacred Music Reference Library?

I am not in any way an ethnomusicologist, and I did not consult any collections at the Library of Congress or elsewhere, though of course I know of their existence. Moreover, I consider myself primarily a choral conductor and musicologist with a specialty in Russian Orthodox sacred music rather than a composer—as in someone who “lives to compose.” My compositional output is very modest, consisting primarily of Orthodox hymns for various services, many of them composed on an “as needed” basis.

In the published edition of *Christ Is Risen*, I gave an account of how it came into existence, and discussed its dedication to Father Jon Braun:

Father Jon Braun’s journey from the Campus Crusade for Christ to the priesthood in the Orthodox Church has been marked by the quest for suitable music in worship. This missionary-minded pastor would exhort church musicians: “Give us music we can pray to!” with the added implication that some styles of music might be better suited for Orthodox worship in America than others. When the present setting of the Paschal Troparion took shape in this composer’s mind, based on a pentatonic scale reminiscent of Appalachian folk songs and incorporating the open sonorities of shape-note singing, Father Jon immediately came to mind as the perfect recipient of the dedication. Indeed, a stylistic blending of musical elements that are recognizably “national” and at the same time exhibit tangible “folk” elements resonates in people’s hearts in a manner that is entirely appropriate (and traditional) for Orthodox Christian worship.

What personal experiences did you have with Appalachian music, with the Grand Ole Opry, with country and bluegrass music? Were you able to attend any of the festivals such as Newport Folk Festival? Have you ever been to Warren Hellman’s ‘Hardly Strictly Bluegrass’ festival in San Francisco?

I am fond of saying “I’ve never met a folk music I didn’t like.” This includes American folk genres such as bluegrass and Old-Time music,

Sacred Harp hymnody, Russian and Ukrainian folk singing, and African folk music. I've heard my share of bluegrass bands, but never attended any of the famous events you mentioned.

My acquaintance with Sacred Harp and shape note singing dates back to my graduate school days at the University of Illinois in the mid-1970s. The University of Illinois Chamber Choir I was a member of took a program consisting entirely of American choral music on tour in connection with the Bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1976.

Going back in history, are there musicians of the folk tradition that you particularly respect and whose music you enjoy?

I have great love for latter-day Russian folklorists such as Dmitry Pokrovsky (1944–1996) and Vyacheslav Shchurov (1937–2020), to name a few. I met Pokrovsky in person several times, particularly when he came to the Russian Summer School at Norwich University in Northfield, Vermont.

Appalachian culture reflects had many influences beyond the Anglo-Celtic. There were are German, French Huguenot, and Eastern European elements as well. Can you trace your composition to any of these influences in your composition for Christ Is Risen?

I think it's primarily the pentatonic scale that gives this particular melody its character.³

Regarding the evolution of Orthodox sacred music, as with contemporary iconography, what do you see as the most important developments? Will there be a new school of sacred

composition? In your own flights of fancy, what direction do you think our sacred music will take? Is there room, is there a will, to compose an entirely new, uniquely American style of liturgical music? We already have your work, as well as the two settings for of the Divine Liturgy of Saint. John Chrysostom by Kurt Sander and Benedict Sheehan.

This is a very fruitful territory that I would love to unpack some more. Here my inspiration has long been Father Sergei Glagolev, the "venerable elder" of American Orthodox church composers. Highly aware of the intonations and cadences of the English language, musically aware of traditions that preceded him, able to synthesize a multitude of diverse musical styles and ethnic traditions, he has been able to point the way to a future generation.

As for a school of composition, composers seem to thrive in conjunction with excellent ensembles that are able to perform their works. In this regard, the recent experiences (commissioned works) of the composers you mentioned—Kurt Sander and Benedict Sheehan—offer some hope for the future.

Unlike other forms of cultural appropriation, such as blackface minstrel songs—a racist artifact of slavery in the United States—the application of so-called "Appalachian" musical themes to the Orthodox liturgy pays respectful tribute to its musical origins.⁴ The approach taken by Vladimir Morosan acknowledges that there is no one language or one sound of worship: worship binds everything together into one whole.

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³ A pentatonic scale is a musical scale with five notes per octave, as opposed to the seven-note heptatonic scale that is more familiar in conventional Western music.

⁴ Katya Ermolaeva, "Dinah, Put Down Your Horn: Blackface Minstrel Songs Don't Belong in Music Class," *Gen*, October 30, 2019, <https://gen.medium.com/dinah-put-down-your-horn-154b8d8db12a>.

As ridiculous as it may sound, it is nevertheless common for immigrant Orthodox congregations to have minor conflicts over the specific sound of the Paschal troparion. We have yet to encounter anyone who does not like Vladimir Morosan's version, however. One possible reason is that this version is so musically foreign to everyone in the immigrant community, is so directly associated with the new country in which they find themselves, and has such a joyful and optimistic sound to it that listeners simply cannot label it with emotional "metadata" from their own past and thereby reduce it to anything less than pure worship. In fact, the very melody draws one happily into worship. We leave behind the blind observance of tradition and enter an entirely new place; however briefly, we leave the exile behind and reenter the Kingdom.

From Vladimir Morosan's "Appalachian" *Christ Is Risen* to Kurt Sander's and Benedict Sheehan's settings of

the Divine Liturgy to the numerous compositions of Father Sergei Glagolev, a new style of Orthodox music is taking shape, much like the new styles emerging in iconography. In the words of Glagolev, "All liturgical art aspires to the condition of iconography. Church art and architecture, the poetic prose of prayer, the sacred sound of singing, are all iconic in Orthodox worship."

Father Glagolev continues, "In the Orthodox Church 'pure music' is not melody without words, but rather the melody of the words."⁵ Sacred words make a sacred song. In Orthodoxy, the words "Christ is risen" are among the most sacred. The music becomes the carrier of this sacred essence, and the sheer joyfulness of the "Appalachian" *Christ Is Risen* carries this sacredness forwards to a new community in a new world. It speaks to everyone regardless of origin. It imbues us with the optimism of this new world, a world of immigrants preparing for a new life. ✱

⁵ 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-Glagolev.htm>.



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