

The Sound of Heaven

Lucille Belomy

My first experience with an Orthodox choir was in my senior year of college in New Britain, Connecticut. I had walked into another world. The atmosphere was a haze of incense. The light was dim as it filtered through the enormous stained glass windows on both sides, but a glow came from the countless candles lit by the worshippers as they entered the church. Then I heard the choir, and my life changed. I would search for that sound again and again for a very long time.

I married the college sweetheart who brought me there that morning in that very church. We baptized our twin sons there. When they were about to enter kindergarten, we moved to the Bay Area of California for better opportunities in teaching. We attended a small Russian Church in Saratoga, and after a few years, I became the choir director. I had been in high school and college choirs, and that was all the experience I brought. I remembered that sound from my former church, but I was not ready to find it. I was simply a choir director, getting the singers of each part to learn their notes and creating basic musical dynamics—softer here, louder there. About two years later, I was invited to lead the choir of an Episcopalian community newly converted to Orthodoxy. They had been blessed to use the Western Rite along

with the Episcopal hymnal. “Come and teach them Orthodox music,” their new priest said to me. Changing over from the hymnal music to a more traditional Orthodox liturgical style was a journey of several years. This was my focus, and the search for that elusive sound was still on the back burner.

Years later, I joined another convert parish, where I eventually took over as choir director. At one of the rehearsals, we worked on the litanies that permeate the Liturgy. “Our litanies are flat and rote, almost mindless,” I complained. “You know the words, but are you praying them? They are a supplication for mercy, but we are not singing them that way. Close your eyes and pray when you sing your notes.” We all heard how different that was. “Now, let’s try it by praying and singing from our hearts.” Immediately, I heard the sound. I felt the same transformation as the first time I heard it. I was in tears and overjoyed.

The litanies were much better after that. Next, we worked on the Cherubic Hymn. It was a perfect progression because we not only worked on the sound, but also grappled with the deeper theological implications. We took it line by line. “Let us”—another supplication—“who mystically represent the cherubim.” Here we accept



The Great Entrance celebrated by angels. Fresco at Peribleptos Church, Mystras, 14th century.

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that somehow, in some unknown way, we become the representatives of the cherubic choir in heaven and our job is to “sing to the life-giving Trinity”—our Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—“the thrice-holy hymn,” praising God as does the cherubic choir in heaven. This is quite a task, and so we tell ourselves to “lay aside all earthly cares,” to put aside what troubles us in our daily lives and enter into another sphere where we transcend who we are, where we are, and what we focus on. We then pause while the holy gifts are brought in procession to the altar to await their transformation into the body

and blood of Christ, whereupon we burst into another supplication, “that we may receive the king of all, who comes invisibly upborne by the angelic hosts.” We prepare for this transformation to take place on the altar and within us as we sing in the manner of the angels and prepare to receive the body and blood of Christ. We end with the jubilant “Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!”

Our rehearsals became centered on pray-singing in this manner. It couldn’t help but change us to some degree. The Liturgy could become a place where we leave the world behind us and enter into a union with God. Did we always achieve the sound every service? Probably not. But we did strive toward it, individually and collectively—toward an egoless state of being filled with love, that would enable us to enter the sphere of the cherubim.

I retired as director when I turned 80 years old, reluctantly relinquishing my role to younger and more eager choir directors. I had come full circle with the sound, and it fills me with joy whenever I hear it. ✨



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