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Virtual Conference brings Orthodox musicians together



Yonkers, NY – Over 200 church musicians from Europe, Australia, and North America gathered in online presentations and discussions exploring the theme of "Music as Liturgy." The 3-day event was co-hosted by the International Society for Orthodox Church Music (ISOCM) and St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary (SVS).

As choirs and churches around the globe face the uncertainty of how to remain physically safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants at the 2020 Pan-Orthodox Music Symposium looked at the question of how clergy, faithful, and in particular singers and chanters "do the liturgy."

"I have never taken part in a music event outside of my parish before now, so the Introduction to Liturgical Conducting Masterclass has given me confidence to conduct when our two choir directors are not available," said David Galloway of St John of the Ladder Orthodox Church, Greenville, SC, "I have made connections with many Orthodox conductors and music educators to help me learn even more."

The work of church musicians has become particularly difficult in 2020 with the pandemic restricting both the method and number of church musicians who can sing responses during liturgical services. One of the most attended sessions during

this year’s Symposium explored ways to move forward in a post-pandemic world.

“With many of our churches and schools have been partially or completely closed, the pandemic is challenging us to find ways to pray and make music while also taking care of one another,,” according to Robin Freeman, Director of Music, St. Vladimir’s Seminary, and member of the Symposium organizing committee. “This online Symposium highlighted for many of us the growing possibilities of technology for teaching, learning, and making music together.”

While participants were unable to gather in person to celebrate the All-Night Vigil and Divine Liturgy, this year’s event featured masterclasses on 8 different topics to develop skillsets in advance of a return to the kliros and choir lofts in their home parishes.

Coursework, led by Dr. Peter Jermihov, Chicago, IL, Dr. Tamara Petijevic, Novi Sad, Serbia, John Boyer, Portland, OR, and Nazo Zakkak, San Diego, CA, and others explored conducting at varying levels of experience, vocal technique, Byzantine chant, composition, and engaging young people with church music.

“The conference addressed both the spiritual and technical issues that we face as church musicians.,” said Ruth Rutledge, head chanter at St Barnabas Orthodox Church, Costa Mesa, CA, adding, “The spirit of charity and genuine care was very evident among all the speakers who were of the highest caliber and professional excellence. It was a beautiful, profound, and practical three days of education and time to contemplate the larger perspective of our work in the church.”

Dr. Susan Ashbrook Harvey of Brown University offered a keynote presentation titled “Ancient Models from Ancient Syriac Christianity” wherein she explored how musical traditions were shaped by liturgical experience and are carried forward into today’s worship among Syriac Christians.

Other presentations included “The Rites of Hagia Sophia” by Dr. Alexander Lingas of City, University of London; a piano performance by Dr. Paul Barnes, “A Bright Sadness,” featuring original piano selections written by Victoria Bond, David von Kampen, Philip Glass and Father Ivan Moody, inspired by Orthodox chant, and a second keynote presentation by Protopresbyter Ivan Moody exploring the theme in reverse, “Liturgy as Music.”

This year’s Symposium was dedicated to the life and work of the Archpriest Sergei Glagolev, the noted priest and musician who led efforts beginning in the 1950s to

exclusively use English throughout the church year. A commemorative video was shown (https://youtu.be/xTPmf96wYV0) and Father Sergei offered greetings to attendees during a special live session at this year's event.

"It would be difficult to imagine a more successful Symposium, and the extraordinary fact of its occurring in the present challenging circumstances seems only to have made participants the more inspired," said Father Ivan, chairman of the ISOCM. He added, "it is to be hoped that this pan-jurisdictional event will inspire further work that brings people together in this way – one of the central aims of ISOCM – working for the glory of God."

With a record number of participants attending this year's Symposium, representing nearly every Orthodox jurisdiction in North America across 39 states, and attending from 12 countries, organizers expect future events will be considered in the coming months.

Encouraged by the positive engagement by participants, organizers suggested an openness to new, positive possibilities, allowing the Holy Spirit to work within us, guiding our efforts to be more attuned to each other – musically and personally – with hope in God blessing our effort in building up the universal Church through sacred liturgical music.

Presentations and Addresses from the Symposium will be included in a future edition of the ISOCM's online Journal: https://journal.fi/jisocm/index

The ISOCM is already preparing for its Ninth International Conference on Orthodox Church Music in Joensuu, Finland, 7–13 June 2021, exploring the theme of "Church Music and Topography: City, Village, and Monastery."

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About the International Society for Orthodox Church Music

Founded in 2005, the ISOCM seeks to provide an open platform for musicians, musicologists, singers, and composers that encourages dialogue, the exchange of information and ideas, and inspires cooperation. The Society sees the promotion of communication between East and West as one of its priorities and hosts biannual conferences, at the University of Eastern Finland on its Joensuu campus. The Society also hosts regional symposia and gatherings elsewhere throughout the world to help create opportunities for collaboration and the sharing of knowledge in the field of Orthodox liturgical music.

For more information about the ISOCM, visit: www.isocm.com

Contact: David Lucs

516-314-3198 or

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