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A COLLABORATIVE PLATFORM FOR THE
CREATION OF A COMPREHENSIVE DATABASE OF
ZNAMENNY CHANTLETS¹

INTRODUCTION

In June of 2014 I had the opportunity to give a presentation at the inaugural symposium devoted to the topic of Orthodox Liturgical Composition in North America, which took place at Northern Kentucky University. In that presentation, entitled “A Methodology for Composing Chant in English Using Znamenny Models”, I demonstrated that, because of the intimate and intricate connection that exists in Znamenny chant between the melody and the text, one could not simply preserve the original melody intact, remove the Church Slavonic text and then insert an English translation with the hope that somehow, through a combination of skill and luck, the English words would fall in the right places and yield an acceptable result.

Rather, it was necessary to engage in no small amount of analysis, both on the macro level of a particular hymn’s structure into phrases and on the micro level of words and syllables, to deconstruct and then reconstruct or re-compose the melody in the English language, in order to maintain the same close relationship between melody and text that was present in the original-language composition.

An analytical examination of Znamenny compositional technique demonstrates its superiority over other styles of textual treatment in Orthodox liturgical chant. A text that is wedded to a Znamenny-style melody is able to convey the meaning and content of the sacred textwords in a manner that is more forceful and expressive. Each Znamenny hymn possesses a uniqueness of musical form and structure, inflecting and declaiming the text in accordance with its sound and cognitive meaning, while avoiding the dramatic or the sentimental. Thus Znamenny singing brings the sacred liturgical text to the ear, mind, and heart of the listener in a manner that is, ultimately, much more powerful and effective than other styles of sacred chant, in which the text is

1 An English neologism for the Slavonic term *popevka*, which draws upon the root of the verb “to chant” (*peti*) and fashions a noun out of it by means of the diminutive suffix “-let,” as in “islet” or “booklet.” This verbal derivation seems appropriate insofar as it expresses the relationship between “chant” and its component parts—“chantlets,” just as *popevki* are component parts of a *raspev*.

delivered in the manner of a recitative sung to repetitive formulae of musical phrases, irrespective of the textual structure.²

In countries and cultures where Orthodoxy still finds itself in a nascent stage, such as many places in North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia, and where the language of worship is not Church Slavonic, a powerful, eloquent Znamenny chant recreated in English and other indigenous languages could therefore play an important role in evangelization and missionary efforts.

An aspiring composer of Znamenny chant faces many challenges, however. Despite its manifest advantages, there are not many Orthodox church musicians who have been raised in a tradition of Znamenny singing. Znamenny singing is not a well-known, active tradition in most Orthodox institutions, whether parishes, seminaries, or monasteries. While some scholarly treatises on Znamenny chant have been published (almost exclusively in Russian) by writers ranging from Archpriest Vasili Metallov and Maxim Brazhnikov to our contemporary, Boris Kutuzov,³ they deal in varying degrees with the history and theory of Znamenny chant, but not necessarily the practical matters of its composition and performance. Learning how to read staffless Znamenny notation is a task of yet a different magnitude, requiring a close-knit relationship with a mentor who is actively involved in a living tradition of Znamenny singing.⁴ Modern-day composers and church singers who would aspire to adapt Znamenny chant into other languages are thus quite far removed from those master singers at the court of Tsar Ivan Vasil'yevich (the Terrible) who, as one Russian chronicle relates, knew all the signs and melodic formulas by heart and were able to apply them extemporaneously to the sacred texts. They require some type of comprehensive reference resource that would facilitate the process of new Znamenny composition in our present day.

Such a resource can be created with the aid of modern computer technology. While it is indeed a short-cut that attempts to circumvent the course of history, it can potentially provide modern-day church composers with a tool that would enable them to pick up the thread of Znamenny compositional development where it left off in the second half of the seventeenth century, when Alexander Mezenetz was perhaps one of the last to argue for the superiority of Znamenny singing in the face of the new currents of *partesny* singing and

2 A common example of this can be found in Lesser Znamenny chant (*malyi znamenny raspev*) and its derivatives—Kievan Chant and the so-called Common (*obychnyi*) Chant of the Russian Imperial Chapel (*pridvornyi napev*).

3 Metallov, Priest Vasili. *Azbuka kriukovogo peniia*, Moscow: 1897; Metallov, Priest Vasili. *Osmoglasie znamennogo raspeva*, Moscow: 1899; Brazhnikov, M. red. *Novye pamiatniki znamennogo raspeva*. L., Muzyka, 1967; Brazhnikov, M. *Drevnerusskaia teoriia muzyki*. L., Muzyka, 1972; Brazhnikov, M. red. *Pamiatniki znamennogo raspeva*. L., Muzyka, 1974; Brazhnikov, M. *Lica i fity znamennogo raspeva*. L., Muzyka, 1984; Kutuzov, B. P. *Russkoe znamennoe penie*, Moscow: Andrei Rublev Publishers, 2008.

4 In North America one such individual is Nikita Simmons, who generously offers personal instruction in Znamenny singing, in addition to the pedagogical materials found on the website he maintains: <http://www.synaxis.info/>

phrasal chant,⁵ which by then were making strong inroads in the singing of divine services in Muscovy and Southwestern Rus'.⁶ As history would have it, the direction in which the Russian Church and Russian church singing developed prevented the age-old tradition Mezenetz was defending from becoming incorporated into the musical practice either of the Russian missionaries, whether to Alaska, America, or Japan, or in the Russian Orthodox émigré communities that were scattered throughout the world after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Alexander Mezenetz, however, did have a point: Znamenny singing is indeed an amazing musical treasure of world-wide magnitude, superior in many respects to more recent musical styles of church singing. Regardless of its fortunes in its Russian homeland (which have experienced some positive developments in recent decades that could have never been foreseen or expected), it certainly deserves a second chance in the new Orthodox lands throughout the world, wherever Orthodox mission is ongoing. It can potentially play an active role in facilitating that Orthodox mission, since, as already mentioned above, it has the ability to wed text and melody in a marvellously expressive way, and deliver them with a power and beauty found only in its counterpart and historical predecessor – Byzantine chant.

THE PROBLEM

Composers who seek to create new Znamenny-style melodies in their own native language need at their disposal a comprehensive and easily accessible and searchable catalogue or database of all the true and time-tested variables, as represented in the existing Znamenny repertory, that is, the various melodic kernels, called *popovki* in Slavonic or Russian, for which I have introduced the English neologism 'chantlet', of which there are many hundreds, if not thousands. These chantlets serve as melodic vehicles for words and phrases having a varied number of syllables and varied combinations of strong and weak syllables, otherwise known as accented and unaccented syllables. Moreover, they may be classified according to their melodic function in terms of building the phrase: there are chantlets that initiate phrases, cadential ones that conclude phrases, and mid-phrase chantlets that serve as bridges between the initial and the cadential. Finally, all these chantlets may be categorized according to the Octoechos, with some being specific to a particular tone, and others being interchangeable from tone to tone.

Presented with a text intended for a musical setting, in whatever language, the modern-day composer of Znamenny melodies needs to determine several things:

1. The tone of the new composition (already predetermined by the Typikon)

5 A term for which we are indebted to Jopi Harri in his dissertation, *St Petersburg Court Chant and the Tradition of Eastern Slavic Church Singing* (University of Turku, 2012).

6 See Mezenetz, A. *Izveshchenie o soglasneishikh pometakh*, dating from 1670, republished in an edition by Stepan Smolenskii, 1888.