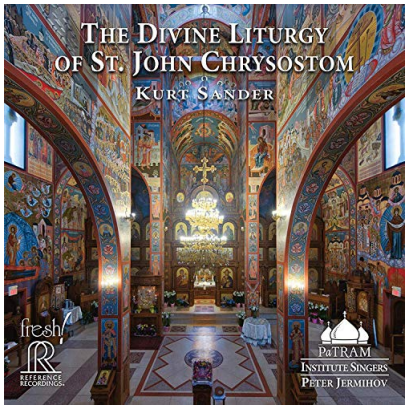
Feature Article by James A. Altena

Sacred Music as a "Living Creative Tradition": An Interview with Composer Kurt Sander and Conductor Peter Jermihov



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Kurt Sander is director of the choir of St. George Russian Orthodox Church in Cincinnati, OH, and Professor of Music in the School of the Arts at Northern Kentucky University (NKU), across the Ohio River in nearby Highland Heights, KY. He has the unique distinction of being the first composer in the Russian Orthodox Church communion to create a musical setting of the Eastern Orthodox Divine Liturgy to an English translation of the original text. The setting was commissioned by Peter Jermihov, founder of the St. Romanos Cappella in Chicago and one of the leading choral conductors of Eastern Orthodox sacred music active in the USA today. His recent recording of Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil with Gloria Dei Cantores and assisting artists has met with universal acclaim, including six (!) laudatory reviews in Fanfare. In connection with the release of a recording of that work, Dr. Sander and Dr. Jermihov and have set aside the time to discuss it and related matters with Fanfare.

Let's start with you, Kurt, personally and professionally. You earned a Doctor of Music degree in composition at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, in 1998. Please tell us about your prior musical background. Did you grow up in a musical family? When did you first become interested in music, and decide to pursue it as your life's work? Where did you study prior to coming to Northwestern, and why did you choose to study at these particular schools?

KS: I always had a deep love for music growing up. Although my parents were not musicians, there was always music playing throughout our house. My father was an avid classical music fan

with a special affinity for Russian composers. As a child I often played amid bookcases of LPs while the music of Shostakovich's symphonies and Prokofiev's piano concertos played in the background. I'm sure that this was influential in terms of who I am today as a composer.

When I was five, I began studying piano with Wilbur Flashe, an organist who lived in my hometown of Lakewood, Ohio. He was truly a composer's piano teacher. You see, I was not a particularly disciplined pianist and instead of playing the notes as written, I would often add little embellishments to my assigned pieces, whether it was an extra measure here or a slightly different turn of phrase there. Evidently, he saw something of value in that and never corrected or tried to "fix" me. I think that by letting me slide, as it were, he ultimately gave me a license to be creative and extemporaneous with my music—a critical dimension of music-making that I believe is missing in how we go about teaching music in our schools.

After graduating from high school, I attended Cleveland State University, where my father was a professor in the Speech and Hearing Program. I was originally a reluctant business major because music seemed to be a risky career move, but I did enroll as a music minor. In taking the first-year music theory sequence, I soon found myself spending most of my time and energy writing music compositions. It was around that time when Bain Murray, one of my theory professors, pulled me aside and convinced me that I needed to be a composer. Of course, I didn't have the slightest idea of what that meant; I only knew that I loved composing music.

Despite the poor job prospects for a composition student, I decided to take a leap of faith and give it everything I had. Eventually, I graduated and went on to study at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music for my Master's, and Northwestern University for my Doctorate. While it wasn't an easy path to follow, I don't regret the decision. Frankly, given my singular passion for composing music, I didn't feel that I had much of a choice at the time. There was nothing else I wanted to do.

Peter, you have narrated in detail your early family background and subsequent professional training in music on your personal website, peterjermihov.com/narrative.html. What would you like to highlight out of, or expand on, from that for our readers?

PJ: On the personal side, I am the son of post-World War II Russian-émigré parents and was raised in a Russian Orthodox family in which Russian was my first language. On the professional side, I was educated as a church reader and choir director beginning at age six, and as a result became fluent in Church Slavonic. Around the same time, I began studying piano under a Moscow Conservatory-trained teacher, Professor Kulikovich, and was intimately involved in a various forms of music-making, playing piano and singing, up to the time of enrollment as a music major at the Chicago College of Performing Arts; my major there was theory and composition and my minors were piano and voice. During my undergraduate studies, I took a year off to travel to Stuttgart, Germany to study piano under Frau Ong at the Stuttgart Hochschule für Musik. I completed the Master of Music degree in choral conducting, with minors in musicology and theory and analysis. Upon completion of my graduate course work, I received a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship to study orchestral conducting and to conduct research on my doctoral dissertation at the Leningrad State Conservatory. After two years of studies in orchestral conducting at the Leningrad State Conservatory, I completed my doctoral degree in

choral conducting at the University of Illinois at Urbana by defending my doctoral dissertation, entitled National Traits in Selected Choral Works of Georgy Sviridov; the dissertation was written under the guidance of the composer himself.

Throughout these formative years, I was also accepted into various conducting masterclasses under such master teachers and conductors as Leonard Bernstein, Eric Ericson, Kurt Masur, Helmuth Rilling, and Leonard Slatkin. Upon completing my formal education, I began to guest-conduct and had the great privilege and joy of leading such world-class choirs and orchestras as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Louisville Symphony, Moscow Chamber Choir, Moscow Radio and Television Symphony Orchestra, Pro Arte Orchester Wien, St. Petersburg Chamber Choir, St. Petersburg Philharmonic, Shinson Nihei Symphony, and USSR State Symphony Orchestra. At the present time, I continue to guest-conduct worldwide and do a substantial amount of teaching in the academic setting. I am especially pleased to have founded an Orthodox music masterclass for composers and conductors in Chicago and for two consecutive years have led conducting masterclasses at the Moscow State Conservatory in Russia.

Also, how did you come to found the St. Romanos Cappella and PaTRAM Institute Singers?

PJ: The St. Romanos Cappella is sponsored by the Society of Saint Romanos the Melodist, and was founded in 2001 as a personal vision to perform and record with professional singers sacred choral music, with a special emphasis on music from the various Byzantine and Slavic Orthodox traditions. The main thrust of the Cappella is to bring this unique, often neglected, and spiritually imbued repertoire to the American public.

The other professional chamber choir which I direct (the one with which I recorded Kurt Sander's Divine Liturgy) is the PaTRAM Institute Singers. This ensemble was formed in 2016 under the auspices of the PaTRAM Institute and its directors Alexis and Katya Lukianov, and its goal is to record and perform Russian Orthodox choral music. The idea for such a choir arose as a need to offer Orthodox church choirs of three jurisdictions (Moscow Patriarchate, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, and Orthodox Church in America) a model and impetus to raise their standards and levels of performance. At the same time, there was the implicit desire to bring together the finest Orthodox singers from across the U.S. and Canada.

And now, some questions for both of you to answer. First, which of your teachers have been your key mentors and influences upon you as a musician and a person, and what did you learn from each of them?

KS: There have been so many good people who have guided me in those early years, but Edward Nowacki, a professor the Cincinnati College-Conservatory, stands out as someone who really influenced my approach to music. He wasn't a composer, but rather a musicologist who specialized in early music history and Gregorian chant. I remember in class how he used to chant directly from the Liber Usualis, while we all tried to follow along in the squiggly ekphonetic notation. He was one of the toughest professors around, but no one complained because we all knew it was borne out of a passion for this music. He truly wanted to share this love with the class in the short amount of time he had with us. This level of love and inspiration is quite rare. I don't know if I've seen it more than once or twice in the 10 years that I was in college.

PJ: Among the most important mentors in my formation as a musician and conductor, the first was Il'ya Musin, Professor of Symphonic Conducting at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and teacher of conductors Semyon Bychkov, Yuri Temirkanov, Valery Gergiev, and many others. The main thrust of his teaching consisted of the development of a conducting technique that was suited to "lead and shape sound." His technique centered around gestures that were able to convey the expressive content of the music, and he was relentless in insisting on a manner of conducting that was never peripheral. Specific techniques included use of circular and three-dimensional gestures, the moveable ictus, all joints and parts of the arm, and expressive left-hand gestures.

Two other Russian musicians were also central to my musical growth: the Russian composer Georgy Sviridov, whose teaching focused on a meticulous and inspired reading and understanding of the poetry at hand; and choral conductor Vladimir Minin, founder and Artistic Director of the Moscow State Academic Chamber Choir, who by his eloquent and charismatic example was able to elicit unparalleled beauty of tone from his choir. The main lesson learned from Sviridov and Minin, however, was the unique synergy that can arise between a composer and conductor, a synergy that I seek out to this day and have experienced with, for example, Kurt Sander. I observed Minin rehearse Sviridov's music under the composer's guidance, and this shared pursuit of compositional intent and seeking out of particular timbres and "intonations" was hugely inspirational and revealing with respect to the role of the conductor in score realization. This interactive process set a benchmark that lies at the heart of my work with both the music of living composers and my approach to the music of composers from the past. The voices of all three men and the music they carried in their souls are an indelible part of my music persona; they are my life-long companions.

Next, what do you consider to be the most important lessons and techniques you have acquired as a composer, performing musician, and/or conductor, and how do you endeavor to pass those on to your own students and to members of your respective choirs?

KS: This is a great question, but not an easy one to answer. It took many years for me to begin to understand what it means to be a composer. I'm not talking about someone who creates music—anyone can do that with technology these days. When I say composer, I am referring to someone who has something meaningful to say and can communicate it through music. As culture changes, and society's musical tastes grow increasingly fragmented, it is a real challenge to find common points of reference. Even the immortal Beethoven and Mozart are less well understood today than they were two generations ago.

While I'm still learning things with every new piece that I write, I have come to the conclusion that the secret to being a great musician or great composer lies with sincerity—a certain honesty about who you are and what you want to communicate. This takes time to develop and it can be blocked by many things. While you're in school, for example, you spend most of your time under the scrutiny of your teachers. When you're finally out on your own, you still carry a lot of those feelings with you—"Am I doing this right? Is it too tonal? Does it sound too complex?" Etc. These questions can be maddening.

So, as a teacher, I try to be aware of this. I tell my students that when they go to compose, they need to ignore what I call the "ghosts in the room." These ghosts are really our own insecurities, our own perceptions of what people want us to be. While we must always take our audiences into account, we cannot give them the control of our creative voices. When we sacrifice that, our music takes on a kind of insincerity or artificiality that is ultimately recognizable to the listener.

My best advice to a young musician or composer is to be sincere. Deep down, people hunger for experiences that are genuine. Think of the great singers and songwriters of past generations—the ones that truly move us with their words. I firmly believe that those singers whose songs are autobiographical have the greatest impact. When we know that what they are singing about is heartfelt, we make human connections with those persons—not just as artists or singers, but as human beings.

We live in a time where everyone is connected to each other, and yet people have never felt more isolated and alone. I read an article recently that said the number of Americans who claim to have not one close friend has tripled since 1985. Why is this? I suggest that it's the logical consequence a largely superficial mode of interaction that we find in today's culture. Those weighty human activities and issues such as art, music, philosophy, religion, life, death, etc., don't fit neatly into the rapid-fire social media world of texts and short phrases. As a result, we never discover those profound experiences that come about while exploring these things together. So, I tell my students that music can be the conduit for a different and more meaningful form of communication, but only if it is real—and believe me, people can tell if it's not. To me, this is the true definition of a composer.

PJ: What was demanded of me, I expect from the musicians with whom I have the privilege of working—to make music from the heart, which is controlled by mind-ear processes and carries a life-changing force. I invite musicians to make music with total commitment. A hugely important lesson I have learned over the years is to set a worthy goal or idea for the musicians, and to connect to that goal or idea myself (i.e., to lead by example), but never to demand cooperation (i.e., if the idea is indeed worthy, the musicians will follow). Using Leonard Bernstein's distinction between a conductor-leader and a Kapellmeister, I do not aspire to be a music trainer (nor do I think I belong to this category); I aspire to be a conductor who finds for himself the central nerve of a composition and sets out to inspire and lead others to realize that central thing. It's easier merely to drill an ensemble, and it's risky and challenging to lead others, but the payoff found through inspired and shared music-making is simply the gift that keeps on giving. Music-making is about connecting with others; there is no greater joy for me as a conductor than connecting with the deep and profound music of a composer like Kurt Sander, bringing that awareness to the choir, and then experiencing the magic of synergy!

Peter, what do you both consider to be the most important information, techniques, and values that you attempt to communicate to your students? What are your chief pedagogical methods for so doing?

PJ: My main concern as a teacher is to present an image to the students of a man who knows his limitations, who is honest in his appraisal of himself and others, and who is constantly seeking

ways of becoming a better musician and person. Awakening and nourishing a desire to examine and better oneself is the greatest gift a teacher can offer a student.

I teach technique, which is the means by which musicians as performers realize in sound their understanding of the composer's vision. Conductors, as a rule, tend to "discover" their paths to the podium considerably later than instrumentalists, and this means that their conducting technique is not as developed as that of instrumentalists at this later age. So, there is a great deal of "catching up" that is required, and a workable technique allows the student conductor to gain confidence to overcome the deficiency.

And now, Kurt, some questions just for you. Please also tell us something about NKU, where you teach, and its music department and programs. What led you to make your career there? What are its music programs like, in terms of size, variety of fields of study, and so forth?

Northern Kentucky University is near the Ohio River, roughly 10 minutes south of downtown Cincinnati. The School of the Arts at NKU enrolls close to 1,000 students, comprising degrees in music, visual art, theater, and dance. I made the decision to join NKU in 2003 largely because I saw in it a program that was similar to my own experiences at Cleveland State. Our program is different from the big conservatories, where so much energy is concentrated on the development of the student as the quintessential performing machine. While we have many talented students who are great performers too, they aren't always sure what it is that they want from music. They simply know, like I did at that age, that they cannot see themselves doing anything else. As a teacher, this is incredibly inspiring because you can be an integral part of what influences their career paths. It is conceivable that a first-year student coming in as a music minor could be inspired and find the courage to graduate as a music composition major and find a career, as I did so many years ago.

What classes do you teach at NKU? What do you consider to be the most important information, techniques, and values that you attempt to communicate to your students? What are your chief pedagogical methods for so doing?

While I enjoy teaching many different subjects, mostly I teach music theory, music technology, and composition. People are sometimes surprised to learn that a composer of Orthodox liturgical chant also teaches students how to do a remix of the latest Ed Sheeran song. Of course, I don't teach technology for its own sake. Its value is in its ability to open doors and to facilitate new creative ideas. As a teenager growing up in the 1980s, I would spend hours in my room creating music with a small 4-track cassette recorder. While the technology was not very advanced compared to today, the process of using as a tool for my ideas was an invaluable one. Today, it's a whole new world in terms of what computers can do. I often tell my students that the projects they can do today were once reserved for only wealthy artists and multi-thousand dollar studios. Yet, no matter what kinds of advances await us down the road, the value of what we create still comes down to sincerity and meaning. In music, one cannot automate what is, at its core, an intrinsically human thing.

Your booklet notes briefly recount your path from the Episcopal Church into the Orthodox faith in 1992–93. You were invited by a young lady (who shortly thereafter became your wife!) to

perform in an Orthodox church choir for a wedding, and were struck by "this faith that was able to fuse so profoundly the elements of music and prayer." What more can you tell us about your previous religious background and this spiritual pilgrimage, and what it has meant to you both personally and professionally, as a believer and a musician?

KS: I grew up attending a fairly traditional suburban Presbyterian church. It didn't focus heavily on liturgics or theology; yet, many people there were kind and loving and did their best to live out their faith. When I became a young adult, I left this church to serve as a paid singer in a wealthy Episcopalian parish known for its rich musical culture. Being there every week, I found that the way they worshipped was quite different from what I knew. In many ways, it opened my eyes to things like sacred music, liturgics, and especially the central focus on the Eucharist in each and every service. I believe these experiences with the Episcopal Church were critical to my growth as a church musician and ultimately led me to the Orthodox Church.

As you correctly mention, I discovered Orthodoxy when I was invited to sing at a wedding. While I had sung at many weddings over the years, this service was like nothing I had ever seen before. The music was all unaccompanied and fully integrated with what was going on in the service. The prayers of the priest and the sound of the choir effortlessly fused into this beautiful ritual that felt as if it existed outside of time.

In the Orthodox Church, there is no spoken word. Everything is sung or intoned, which makes the very act of worship a musical phenomenon. This was very different from the sermon-centered services I had known as a child. In some sense—and maybe this sounds a bit odd to the non-musicians out there—I found the experience of the Orthodox liturgical rite more like listening to a profoundly beautiful composition. As a composer, it seemed like the perfect way to glorify God.

By 1993, I had fully converted to Orthodox Christianity, a decision that I never regretted. People sometimes ask me what led me to convert to such a strict faith tradition, assuming that I must have somehow been a very religious person to make such a jump. In truth, I really wasn't that different from the millions of other people who attend church every third Sunday. I knew a bit of what it meant to be a Christian, but growing up, I was not strongly invested in church life or activities. Becoming Orthodox, you start to see that faith is not a once-a-week commitment. It requires, not a weekly or daily, but an hourly, commitment.

I think what ultimately led me to Orthodoxy was a recurring desire for something true and unchanging. There comes a point in most peoples' lives when they realize that there are questions in life that cannot be answered by simply living out one's day to day routine. I suppose my journey was not a reaction to any one church or teaching, but gradual progression toward the truth of what it means to be a human being created in God's image. I'm a living example that proves that Orthodox Christianity is not simply a destination for the ultra-pious; it is a place for everyday people to find answers to some of life's most fundamental questions.

What was the subject of your doctoral dissertation at Northwestern? What more can you tell us about working on that under Dr. Alan Stout and his allowing you "the space and freedom to

bring a sense of the Divine into my academic work"? How exactly do you attempt to bring in this sense?

KS: My dissertation project was titled "The Musical Icon," and focused on the development of a compositional process similar to that of the iconographer in Orthodox visual art. I first read about this idea in the liner notes of a John Tavener CD where the composer talked about similarities between icons and sacred music. The process intrigued me and I set to work on how this might look to a composer. Essentially, the painter of Orthodox icons works within a specific tradition that defines things like perspective, color, shape, etc. All of this could be traced back to the theology behind the image. I hoped to more clearly define a process by which the composer could apply some of these same principles to their writing, while also allowing the individual personality of the composer to reveal itself.

This was obviously new territory for my professors at Northwestern, who were not particularly well-versed in Orthodox Christian theology. To their credit, however, Professors Alan Stout and Candace Brower invested a lot of thought into what I was doing and helped me formulate my ideas. We often hear from some in the media how universities are secular places that show a strong disdain for religion, but I didn't find this to be true at all. In fact, I think it was very much the opposite in terms of how I was mentored. I learned a great deal about my own faith journey because of their respect and willingness to enter into my world and see what I was trying to discover. This is really the hallmark of a great teacher—one who pulls a chair up next to the student as they explore things together, even if they both don't see the world in exactly the same way.

What is your typical work schedule with your choir? How large is your ensemble, and how wide and complex a liturgical repertoire are you able to undertake with it? Are the services of divine worship at your parish conducted primarily in English, or Slavonic and Russian, or in some mixture of these?

KS: Like most Orthodox churches in the Russian tradition, we serve a weekly Sunday Divine Liturgy, with a Vigil service the night before that includes the Great Vespers and Matins services. We also serve many feast days that occur throughout the liturgical year. Our parish is not large by Protestant or Roman Catholic standards, and our choir is quite small. On an average Sunday, we will have about 12–15 singers of varying ability. What makes our choir special, though, is that half of our choir singers are children. My wife Larissa, who is also a conductor and church musician, works with the children of the church every Sunday, teaching things like diction, tone, blend, etc. It is such important work as people don't usually wake up one day in their 30s and decide to be church singers. It requires training that is best started in the early years. She has a true gift for turning quiet children into leaders in the choir loft.

Our church services are usually sung half in English and half in Church Slavonic (a liturgical language similar to Russian). While we have quite a few Russian parishioners, recently we have attracted a large number of Americans who come from all walks of life. A person visiting our parish would see beautiful mixture of large American families, Russian babushkas with head scarves, and urbanites sporting tattoos and piercings. In today's Orthodox Church, you can really sense the full meaning of Galatians 3:28, that says "you all are one in Christ Jesus."

As both of you may know, back in January/February 2019 (issue 42:3 of Fanfare), I conducted interviews with Alexis Lukianov, the founder/chairman/CEO of the PaTRAM (Patriarch Tikhon Russian American Music) Institute, and with Vladimir Gorbik, the chief choirmaster of Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery (Lavra) Representation Church in Moscow. What are your respective relations with them, and with Alexander Milas (Executive Director of PaTRAM)?

KS: I first met the folks of PaTRAM at a choir conference out in Santa Rosa years ago. Their work really aligned with a lot of the things that I was doing at the time, so our paths crossed often. I'm grateful for all of their efforts to improve the music in our churches and to bring Orthodox choral music to so many new listeners through their CD recordings. My first professional association with Alexis came about in Saratov, when we recorded the CD Teach Me Thy Statutes with the Russian conductor Vladimir Gorbik. In addition to being the producer, he was one of the eight octavists who sang on that recording. I also sang on that CD, along with a number of other American singers who were sponsored by the organization. This Saratov recording set in motion a number of other projects that came about through PaTRAM's partnership with Reference Recordings.

Shortly after this, PaTRAM and Peter approached me with a proposal to compose a new musical setting of the Divine Liturgy, written in English but stylistically drawn from the Russian Orthodox tradition. I gladly accepted and began the work in the summer of 2016. It was an enormous undertaking and took about eight months to compose the entire work. We recorded the CD in August 2017 and it was released this past May. It has been a long process, but a very rewarding one for all of us. The feedback we have received has been really inspiring and really underscores the value of what PaTRAM is doing. I have received such wonderful messages from Orthodox as well as non-Orthodox listeners who have been profoundly moved by this recording, which has become a source of comfort in an otherwise troubled and stress-filled time.

PJ: I have conducted over a dozen events for the PaTRAM Institute over the course of the past three years, ranging from masterclasses to concert performances. I met Kathy and Alexis Lukianov, the founders of this organization, in June of 2015 during my recording of the All-Night Vigil by Rachmaninoff with Gloriae Dei Cantores; they were major donors for that project and also expressed a desire to sing—Katya as an alto and Alyosha as a basso profundo (he has a truly unique set of vocal pipes that place him in a very select pool of basses who can sing profoundly low notes). I knew that they were Russian church music supporters and enthusiasts, but through this recording process I came to know them personally; they became friends of me and my wife Irene. The friendship was solidified with a mutual love for Russian choral music and a commitment to raise musical standards in church choirs across America. This was and remains the basis of our friendship, with many important and memorable projects that we have collaboratively realized and projects that we have planned for the future. Quite simply put, there are not that many philanthropists who are dedicated to the narrow niche of Russian sacred music, and I consider it a blessing to have met this amazing couple at a juncture in my life when my musical journey leads me back to my church roots. They are great benefactors of Russian church music, and their efforts will, undoubtedly, leave a mark on the upward direction of Russian Orthodox church music in America.

As a result of my rather intensive work with the PaTRAM Institute, I have frequently encountered Alexander Milas and have found him to be a very helpful and competent administrator. I have known Vladimir Gorbik for a longer period of time (perhaps four years) and have had the pleasure of seeing him work both at his church in Moscow in services of worship and in performance settings; he is certainly a fine choral conductor and perhaps the main and most successful advocate for Fr. Matthew Mormyl's approach to liturgical singing. (Fr. Matthew is the former choir director at the Trinity Lavra in Sergiev Posad.) I consider Vladimir to be an esteemed colleague.

Kurt, for how long have you known Peter Jermihov? What led him to approach you, as opposed to other potential candidates, to compose the first setting of the Divine Liturgy directly to an English text?

KS: I first met Peter back in 1991. In fact, he was the conductor of the choir at that first wedding service I attended before I became Orthodox. I never would have believed that 25 years later, he and I would be working on this Divine Liturgy recording together. In my opinion, he is one of the great choral conductors of our time. He is so incredibly gifted in his understanding of music and the human spirit. On the podium, his musical world is so vast and subsumes theology, art, history, and emotion. But for me, I think the greatest thing I could say about him is that I trust him with my music. Really, this is the greatest compliment a composer can give. I don't need to explain anything to him—he just gets it. It is like Peter and I are tuned to the same aesthetic frequency, and there is this artistic connection between us that is hard to describe in words.

Peter has long been an advocate for new music, particularly in the Orthodox choral sphere. I have worked with him on a number of projects in the past, so when the opportunity came from PaTRAM to sponsor a newly composed liturgy, Peter recommended me for the job. I am grateful for his support and in looking back, I think we both agree that this CD was a high point in both of our careers.

Peter, what led you to approach Kurt, as opposed to other potential candidates, to compose the first setting of the Divine Liturgy directly to an English text? Did you have any particular hopes or expectations for what he would compose, and if so how close did the final results come to matching those?

PJ: This is an excellent question, and thank you for asking it! Kurt Sander is, in my humble opinion, one of the finest composers of Orthodox music alive today. I have admired his work for many years (we have known each other for at least 30 years). I met him in Cleveland, where I directed a church choir; he came to sing in that choir, and later married my lead soprano. So, this is a case where the professional and personal elements intertwine in the most meaningful ways. Kurt's music speaks to me; it moves me; I feel it aspires to beauty and marvelously attains it! Our recording of this latest major opus, The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, is truly one of the most gratifying projects I have ever worked on; I think this work is a masterpiece, and destined to take its place in the pantheon of great compositions.

Approaching Kurt for this commission was the most natural and common-sense thing I think I have ever done! Kurt is an English-speaking composer, so asking him to compose this

commission in English was the logical thing to do. Initially, I wanted to make the commission through the Society of Saint Romanos, but my dealings with the PaTRAM Institute at the time led me to "broker this deal" through the Institute, which turned out marvelously for everyone. Bravo to the proprietors of PaTRAM Institute, Alexis and Kathy Lukianov, for embracing this commission with such dedication and follow-through!

There were stipulations from the PaTRAM Institute side with regard to certain stylistic considerations, but I felt all along that Kurt should give free rein to his creativity and put down into writing whatever moved his soul. This is exactly what I think he did, and the result is a stunning addition to the choral repertoire of the Orthodox Church. I do not use the designation of "Russian Orthodox Church," even though this work is rooted in some respects in the Russian masterpieces, because it is a kind of personal assimilation of elements from various traditions—Germanic developmental and harmonic tendencies, Russian choral sonority and voice-leading, Italian elements of lyricism, Byzantine use of ison, and universal elements of expression. Kurt's musical style is evolving, and I can only hope that he will have the perseverance and determination to continue to realize his musical visions.

Some more questions for Kurt, again. Since you doubtless have the sound of manifold settings of the Divine Liturgy in Slavonic (by Arkhangelsky, Chesnokov, Grechaninov, Hristov, Kastalsky, Lvovsky, Martinov, Nikolsky, Rachmaninoff, Shvedov, Titov, and Yaitchkov, among many others), ingrained in your mind, what challenges did you face in composing to an English text instead, and how did you overcome those?

KS: This has been one of the most enlightening aspects of this CD project. I have written a number of Orthodox choral works in English as well as Church Slavonic. Of course, I had some sense of language identity and how it impacts the sound of a particular composition. But this project, more than any other, underscored the important role that language plays in defining a particular aesthetic. For example, what we think of as an "American sound" or a "British sound" in choral writing, is, in large part, a reflection of the English language itself.

For me, the project was a real challenge, because my commission specified an English-language setting within the "Russian style" and the sonic differences between English and Church Slavonic are significant. The former makes extensive use of monosyllables and fairly predictable accentual patterns, whereas the latter is highly syllabified and unusually erratic with how the stresses appear in words. Eventually, I acquiesced and allowed the English language to speak in its own way. The end result was a unique fusion of two aesthetic worlds into a single work—one Russian, the other American.

Russian Orthodox chant traditionally has strict rules governing adherence to znamenny chants for its liturgical music. Famously, Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil was not approved for official liturgical use because the composer deviated from those in creating his own chant melodies for some sections of his work. And ROCOR is known to be more strict in many such matters than is the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). What degrees of restriction and freedom did you encounter in composing your setting, and how did the former guide your work, so that it does not fall into mere static repetition of the past but instead advances a "living creative tradition," as you put it in your booklet notes?

KS: When people think of Russian Orthodox music, Rachmaninoff's famous Vigil comes to mind. While this work is indeed a paradigm aesthetic for the Russian church, most Orthodox liturgical musicians would say that it is a work intended for the concert hall, but not for the reasons that you might think. It is widely considered a concert piece because it does not fit the liturgical context of the All-Night Vigil service. Some movements are simply too long for what is happening liturgically with the clergy. For example, the beloved "Bogoroditse Djevo" (Virgin Mother of God, Rejoice) could never be sung three times, as is often prescribed liturgically. So, in order for a composition to be deemed appropriate for worship, it needs to conform to what is actually happening in the altar.

When we look back in time at the role of the Orthodox liturgical composer, we find that in most of the life of the Orthodox Church, the musician has been given quite a bit of freedom to create new compositions for worship. Of course, there have been times, as in L'vov's Imperial Chapel, where a kind of rigid approval and censorship policy was implemented, but this was not the normal historical practice, and was more political than aesthetic. Ultimately, a work's appropriateness for the Church has more to do with functionality than aesthetics.

Thankfully, I did not run into any kind of resistance to my Liturgy from bishops, priests, or conductors. Honestly, it is really is not much of an issue today, although there are still many who prefer the "oldies" of the 19th century. Things are changing for the better, however, and I believe we are starting to enter a new era that actively encourages creativity among the Orthodox.

In your "Composer's Notes" in the CD booklet, you write of finding your inspiration for your setting in one of the "little elements of the liturgy—the litanies, responses, the short, one-sentence choral utterances, etc.," and that through this means you "came to the realization that these are actually the fibers that hold the work together."

KS: Before writing this work, I had to ask myself some fundamental questions, such as, "What is the Divine Liturgy?", and "How do all of its texts prepare us to receive the Eucharist?" While I thought that I knew the answers, when you compose a 90-minute work, you cannot help but discover some new things along the way. From a musical standpoint, the Divine Liturgy is very different from the Roman Catholic Mass with its traditional five-part division. The Divine Liturgy is more fluid—like an uninterrupted event that slowly unfolds in time. This creates a real dilemma from a musical standpoint. How does a composer create unity when there are so many different textual sections of varying length?

After a few rough attempts at setting the larger portions of text that would act as columns, I decided that I needed to change my approach. Instead of focusing on the larger parts of the service, I looked to the litanies—those brief moments where the clergy intone petitions and the choir responds, "Lord, have mercy." I thought that if I could set these short petitions as a kind of thematic ritornello that comes back throughout the work, it would bring about an element of familiarity that has been a primary element of musical form throughout history.

In retrospect, I believe it worked well musically. More importantly, it helped me understand more about the Liturgy and the reason why these litanies come back so often throughout the service. No matter where the liturgical narrative leads us, these short petitions always bring us

back to a place of prayer. The motivic elements you ask about are conceived in the litanies, but then appear in other parts of the Liturgy as well. I hope that the listener, perhaps even on a subconscious level, will sense this and make that musical connection to prayer.

Likewise, Peter, in your "Conductor's Notes," you write that your setting employs a Leitmotif and has "a palindromic structure for the entire work." Would each of you please enlarge upon these statements, and in particular the specific kinds of thematic and harmonic unities this setting of the Divine Liturgy has?

PJ: The opening Litany contains a seven-note motive which begins in the soprano voice-part. This Leitmotif appears throughout the Liturgy in various voice parts, tonalities, and major and minor modes, and culminates in a transformed five-note configuration in the Anaphora in the final bars of the "We Praise Thee" section. The significance of this melodic thread is not the element of recognizability, but the subliminal effect of a work that is unified in all of its aspects. The Liturgy is also, roughly speaking, palindromic in that the musical material of the opening two Antiphons is heard in the "After Communion" movements at the end of the Liturgy. Again, this is not so much of an "aha!" moment, but an underlying presence that solidifies the architectural structure of the work. The entire conception is grounded in the D-Major tonality and progresses through related keys. The litanies between the major movements connect all the parts of the grand conception. Litanies, typically avoided by composers of the past, assume a central role in this work, as they prepare the worshipper/listener for the next liturgical event, in essence making the entire Liturgy a movement to and away from the Holy Eucharist. This kind of liturgical unity has never been heard in the major opuses of the Russian masters, and Kurt deserves credit for paving a new approach.

Finally, for both of you: What immediate future plans do you have for composing, conducting, teaching, and recording? What are your goals for yourselves over, say, the next 10 years?

PJ: Regarding my major projects, I am travelling to Serbia in October to conduct masterclasses in Belgrade and Novy Sad, and also concerts of sacred music (Russian and otherwise) in collaboration with my esteemed colleague, Maestra Tamara Petijevic. I am also scheduled to conduct the Moscow State Academic Choir (my beloved mentor Vladimir Minin's choir) in the spring of 2020. In June of 2020, I will lead the Orthodox Music Masterclass for Composers and Conductors in Chicago, with a stellar array of international master teachers and composers. Next summer I also plan to record the Greek Liturgy by Ivan Moody with the Saint Romanos Cappella, a commission made through the Society of Saint Romanos. In addition, during that same time, the PaTRAM Institute has asked me to record with the PaTRAM Institute Singers some choral masterpieces of the Russian Diasphora at the Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, New York. I will also continue to give conducting masterclasses to graduate students at major universities across America and abroad, as well as to teach by Skype sessions, which are remarkably suited for the teaching of conducting.

KS: I have a number of projects that are in the works at the moment. I just finished working with Vladimir Morosan of Musica Russica on the publication of my Divine Liturgy, which is now available for purchase, both as a full score, and as offprints of individual movements like the Cherubic Hymn and the Trisagion. Vlad has been the leading scholar and editor for Russian

Choral music for well over 30 years, and is largely responsible for bringing so many beautiful Orthodox choral works to the English-speaking world.

In terms of the future, over the next few years I am looking at some opportunities to compose new settings of the All-Night Vigil and the Orthodox funeral service—what we might think of as an Orthodox "requiem." These are exciting projects because the hymnography is so incredibly rich in these services. There is so much that can be brought out when composing it as a unified whole. New settings in the English language would create an exciting addition to the growing body of Orthodox choral repertoire that is currently capturing the attention of so many ensembles these days.

SANDER Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom • Peter Jermihov, cond; PaTRAM Institute Singers • REFERENCE 731 (2 CDs: 90:06)

This release is a landmark of sorts in the discography of recordings of Eastern Orthodox liturgical music. Although English-language recordings have been made of settings of Orthodox liturgical works that originally set texts in Old Slavonic, this is the first recording of a setting of the complete liturgy of St. John Chrysostom originally composed to an English-language text. Kurt Sander converted from Anglicanism to Orthodoxy in 1993, and completed a doctorate in music composition at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL in 1998. Since then, he has served as a conductor of Orthodox church choirs and is presently a professor of music at Northern Kentucky University in Highland Heights, KY, near Cincinnati, OH. In 2016 Sander was approached by conductor Peter Jermihov to create an English-language setting of the liturgy, which duly appears on this disc.

The result is a considerable success. **Sander creates an overall musical unity throughout the course of the liturgy by the use and continuous transformation of a musical leitmotif, and by creating an overall palindromic structure for the entire work, which also theologically symbolizes the unity and atemporal eternity of the sacred rite.** While Sander's compositional voice does not have the arresting distinctiveness of the greatest masters such as Rachmaninoff and Chesnokov, it is attractive and consistently holds one's interest. As the traditions for Orthodox liturgical composition require, Sander's music remains thoroughly tonal and firmly rooted in the vocabulary of the ancient znamenny chants, though occasionally a slightly more modern harmony pokes the proverbial camel's nose into the musical tent.

I profiled the remarkable work of the PaTRAM Institute program back in 42:3, in feature interviews with conductor Vladimir Gorbik and PaTRAM's CEO Alexis Lukianov. **For his part, Peter Jermihov has attracted multiple rave reviews in Fanfare's pages for his stellar recording with Gloria Dei Cantores of Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil (aka Vespers). Here, leading singers from the PaTRAM Institute, Jermihov produces equally fine results, obtaining an utterly authentic Russian choral sound from his American forces.** Reference Recordings for its part captures the proceedings in rich, warm sound, and provides a detailed booklet with essays, photos, a list of performers, and the complete text of the liturgy. Tracks and timings are given on the back tray card. To both those who are already aficionados of Orthodox liturgical music, and to neophytes interested in an introduction to Orthodox music and worship, this release is cordially recommended. **James A. Altena**

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