

Sacred Music

Choral Reviews

The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom

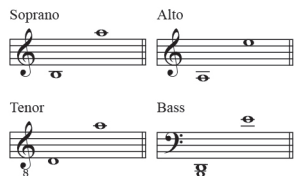
Music by Kurt Sander
SATB, divisi, TB soli,
unaccompanied

Musica Russica MR-Sa-DL

Performance Demonstration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85eJZDfUX-2k&list=OLAK5uy_mvK0paXbG8X6-XugHmoilrVv6fplSHp_w

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American Orthodox publisher and scholar Vlad Morosan hailed the recent release of Kurt Sander's landmark English-language setting of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom as an "American Orthodox musical milestone," and "an unprecedented event in the realm of Orthodox liturgical singing in North America."¹ The Reference Recordings album, most excellently sung by the PaTram Institute Singers under the direction of Peter Jermihov, has garnered two 2020 Grammy nominations, and deservedly so. It is a

sublime recording, which expertly marries gorgeous choral performance with majestic, inspiring choral composition.

The Liturgy is designed for worship, though it may also function, per helpful instructions from the composer, as a concert piece. Americans are mostly unfamiliar with the structure and purpose of most of the Orthodox liturgy, which sometimes mirrors that of the "high" Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopal services, but which adds so much more sung prayer. Sander's setting is thirty movements long—each masterfully and spiritually crafted to fit perfectly and purposefully within the liturgical framework. For non-Orthodox conductors and singers, the Liturgy also provides a wealth of sacred, unaccompanied choral material that is particularly appropriate where it overlaps with similar moments within Catholic and Protestant services, but also where it serves more generally throughout the year. The music is set for large, divisi choir, with indications for very low bass section doublings at the lower octave.

Orthodox services utilize a great deal of priestly chant, much of it traditionally absent from musical

settings of the services. A helpful feature of Sander's Liturgy is the inclusion of priestly incipits in important places, particularly in movements that are easily excerpted. In others, such as No. 1, "The Great Litany," these chant fragments are a little more sporadic. The composer explains in his preface to the score that, "For practical reasons, I have not written all of deacon and celebrant intonations in the score, and it may also not be realistic from a standpoint of time to incorporate the full scope of this liturgical practice into a performance setting. Exceptions, however, can be found in select parts of the score where composed intonations are given. An ideal performance should include these intoned petitions and prayers of the deacon and celebrant as they would be in a service."

Sanders provides cohesion to this lengthy work through the inclusion of melodic and harmonic ties, particularly in the important and numerous "great" and "small" litanies. His melodies are finely crafted, and his harmony, while conservative, sparkles with expertly placed dissonance and consonance. In No. 4, "Praise the Lord, O My Soul," a set-

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ting of Psalm 145 (146), Sander provides a beautiful downward cascading line on the text “all his thoughts shall perish,” before soaring into a goosebump-inducing choral climax.

The entire work exhibits deep fervor and heartfelt faith. It is conservative in its scope and harmonic language, liturgical and worshipful in purpose, yet somehow conveys the freshness of a contemporary composition. In No. 7, “The Beatitudes,” Sander sets soli voices, or a combination of voices, to introduce each beatitude, reminiscent of an incipit, followed by more florid counterpoint which naturally elides over the end

of each statement of blessing. At the transition from “blessed are they...” to “blessed are you...,” Sander subtly shifts into a more homophonic and emphatic choral texture, perfectly capturing Jesus’s more individualistic sermon content. The triple statement of “rejoice!” is set with *fff* dynamic, and is a particularly glorious moment.

No. 8, “Come, Let Us Worship,” is an example of a brief, easily learned movement, perfect as a prayer response outside of its original liturgical setting. Similarly, in No. 11, “Alleluia,” the composer introduces a lilting obligato in the tenor, which

leaps into the soprano on the third iteration, defining this gorgeous, joy-filled response. “Joy-filled” also seems to define the entire Liturgy in a microcosm—namely an attention to detail, beauty of line, and choral craft in every moment of the composition. The Liturgy ushers the listener into the numinous, surrounding the worshiper with holy sounds that seem to pray twice.

Sander is at his best in No. 16, “Cherubic Hymn.” He begins quietly and appropriately mysterious, moving briefly from *e* minor to *A* Major on the word “mystically,” perhaps foreshadowing the movement from *e* minor to *A* Major at the end of the Liturgy. The harmonic movement is slow, dripping awe and worship as it slowly unfolds like a sunrise. Sander subtly paints the theology through repetition, as the choir echoes the word “Trinity” three times within the choral texture, followed immediately by three repetitions of a phrase on the line “Life-creating Trinity.” This movement, in particular, demands breath control and a superior sense of intonation from the choir.

The opening soprano melody in No. 18, “Anaphora: Mercy of Peace,” will ring in the singers’ ears for hours, specifically as it explodes in joy at the response “We lift them up unto the Lord.” Sander brings back this angular, heartfelt pattern throughout, leaping from *C#5* to *F#5* before descending to *B4*. The “Mercy of Peace” is the spiritual and musical heart of the Liturgy, providing structure and coherence to the communion supplications. Sander is in no hurry to leave the house of



“I’ve toured with several other companies and will stay with Witte Tours. The process was straight-forward, the pricing was reasonable, and there were no surprises. Performance venues were fantastic, some iconic, as in San Marco in Venice. This tour provides once-in-a-lifetime travel for some of these students, so I feel a large responsibility to get it right!”

— Dr. Karyl Carlson, Director of Choral Activities
Illinois State University

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prayer that he has constructed, and nor should he be—the music is astounding.

In “Praise the Lord from the Heavens,” the twenty-fourth movement in the Liturgy, Sander utilizes an extended lower and upper pedal tone in the bass and soprano in b minor, which allows the tenors and altos to manipulate dissonance within an ocean-like choral atmosphere. Sander brings the light of the sun briefly through the darkness of the deep on the repeated text “alleluia” before obscuring it again behind clouds. The listener begins to understand, particularly in these later move-

ments of the Liturgy, that Sander is similarly slowly revealing depths of musical meaning within his landscape of choral sound, sometimes in small gestures but often over a larger, lengthy, more profound canvas.

The composer slowly leaves the e minor key relationships of the interior of the Liturgy, symbolically transforming the worshipper from darkness to light through a bright A Major in No. 30, “Blessed Be the Name of the Lord,” followed by a cathartic and celebratory D Major in the final movement No. 31, “Many Years,” which he uses to launch the worshipper back out into the world.

Sander’s setting of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is important, not only because it serves as a rare, English-language setting of the Orthodox service, but because it is beautiful and is worthy of study, performance, and a lasting place in the sacred choral repertoire.

Timothy Michael Powell
Atlanta, GA



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