

Literary Accounts of Church Singing and Worship at the Valaam Monastery in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Jopi Harri

Abstract

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During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Russian Orthodox monastery of Valaam was noted for its unique tradition of liturgical music, which appeared to several observers to preserve ancient musical forms largely lost in the rest of the Russian Orthodox Church. In some cases, these unique forms of liturgical chant were preserved in the inter-war period and in the refounding of Valaam in Finish territory after the Second World War. However, analysis of the accounts of the singing and liturgical life at Valaam by Russian travelers and amateur musicologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when compared to printed books and manuscripts of liturgical music that were used at Valaam during the same period, suggests that the unique character of Valaam chant was exaggerated. Material from the archives of the Valaam monastery, only accessed in the last few decades, allows for the reconstruction of an integral part of the Valaam chant repertory, thus putting an end to any dispute regarding the musical style of the monastic community and providing a path to contextualizing the written accounts of Valaam singing in a reliable way.



During the first half of the nineteenth century, Valaam was in the process of becoming one of the major monasteries of the Russian Orthodox Church. This development culminated at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Valaam was wealthy and revered, known to have an indigenous monastic culture of high standards. In 1913, there were 921 brethren and male volunteers, and the total number of inhabitants may have been as high as 1300. But the outbreak of the First World War began a period of decline, so that by 1919 the number of monastics was down to 562, and in 1924, to 431. The causes were many, one of them being the location of Valaam within the newly independent Republic of Finland and the closure of the border to Russia, which ended the flow of new monastics from the former homeland.¹

The singing tradition of Valaam has been accessible via literary accounts as well as via the *Obikhod of the Valaam Monastery* – a chant anthology first published in 1902. According to the foreword, the chants were written down as they had been sung for decades, so that they would not be distorted or forgotten due to the turnover of singers (since the transmission of the music was essentially oral). The fact that the *Obikhod* is monodic has given rise to the supposition that the singing would also have been monodic;² in other words, extraordinary in relation to the mainstream Russian church music, as it is often characterized in pre-revolutionary Russian literature. There exist two smaller-scale polyphonic chant publications that suggest otherwise, but these seem to have escaped wider attention.³

¹ The population figures have been derived from Ambrosius [Jääskeläinen], “The Years since 1715,” in *Valamo and Its Message* (Helsinki: Valamo-Seura, 1983), 39; Romanos Pyrrö, “Veisatkaa Jumalalle, veisatkaa! Kirkkolaulu Valamon luostarissa Suomen itsenäisyyden aikana” (M.Th. thesis, University of Joensuu, 2000), 16; and Heikki Kilpeläinen, *Valamo – karjalaisten luostari? Luostarin ja yhteiskunnan interaktio maailmansotien välisenä aikana* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2000), 190–191, all based on monastery registers.

² As in Arvi Karpov, “Valamolainen kirkkolaulu,” *Uskon Viesti* 4 (1981): 4.

³ *Обиходъ одногласный церковно-богослужебнаго пѣнія по напѣву Валаамскаго монастыря* (Изд. Валаамской обители, 1902); *Сборникъ церковно-богослужебныхъ пѣснопѣній по напѣву Валаамскаго монастыря* (Изд. Валаамской обители, 1902); *Херувимская пѣснь по напѣву Вала-*

When the Valaam archipelago was ceded to the Soviet Union in March 1940, the monastery was relocated to Heinävesi. Because of the further weakening of the brotherhood, what remained of the singing tradition faded away and by the 1960s was thought to have fallen into oblivion. Only in the current century have we realized that a significant number of part-books from the 1890s–1930s that once belonged to the music collection of the main church had in fact survived in the monastery archives. This material allows the reconstruction of an integral part of the Valaam chant repertory, thus putting an end to any dispute regarding the musical style and finally providing means for contextualizing the written accounts of Valaam singing in a reliable way.⁴

Literary Sources of Valaam Singing

Probably the earliest account on Valaam singing and worship was made by Archimandrite Ignatius Brianchaninov in his 1847 article on the monastery, which he visited in September 1846. Regarding music he writes:

The chant [here] is Znamenny or, so to speak, “Stolp” [столбовой; recte: *столповый*] – Old Russian.⁵ The tones [тоны] of this chant are dignified, unhurried, sorrowful [величественны, протяжны, заунывы]; they denote the laments of penitent souls.... The artist finds in Valaam singing a lot of roughness, shortcomings of performance; but also recognizes the deep sentiment of the divine and the unusual strength that stirs the soul. Here everything must be precious and

амскагв монастыря (Изд. Валаамской обители, 1903). The 1902 *Обиходъ* (*Obikhod*) was reprinted in 1909, allegedly with corrections and additions, but in fact these are limited to the small number of misprints that were listed in the original edition, and there is no additional material whatsoever.

⁴ See Jopi Harri, “On the Polyphonic Chant of Valaam Monastery,” in *Church, State and Nation in Orthodox Church Music*, ed. Ivan Moody and Maria Takala-Roszczenko (Jyväskylä: Publications of the International Society for Orthodox Church Music, 2010), 187–208.

⁵ According to the foreword to the 1902 *Obikhod*, “Valaam Chant is a combination of chants: great and little Znamenny, as well as others.”