

## The Easter Sunday Ukrainian Divine Liturgy Composed by Father John Sembrat, OSBM: A Review

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Father John Sembrat's Divine Liturgy, recorded this year by a combined male chorus in Edmonton,<sup>1</sup> continues the better traditions of composed Liturgies in the Ukrainian Church that harken back to Dyletsky in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, this is also a contemporary sacred musical work, marked with its composer's own creative specificity. Furthermore, upon careful consideration, one is fascinated to discover traditional folk elements in the Liturgy, as well as the characteristic musical flow of Alexander Koshetz (1875–1944), the colourful harmonies of Kyrylo Stetsenko (1882–1922), the nobility of Stanislav Liudkevych (1879–1979), and the musical elegance of Sembrat's contemporaries Myroslav Skoryk (1938–), Oleksander Kozarenko (1963–), and Hanna Havrylets (1958–).

The first impression on listening to the Liturgy and reading the "score" is that of the *integrity* of the music, its logical movement from one piece to another, and of the stylistic fluency of the musical language. It would seem that the composer wrote the work at one sitting – such is the unity of the spiritual picture portrayed.

There is an atmosphere of joy and solemnity which is quite fitting for a Paschal Liturgy, an elevated spirituality, in which religious inspiration is pronounced from the first to the last.

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<sup>1</sup> The CD is available as "Resurrectional Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom," Fr. John Sembrat OSBM, Composer; Michael Zaugg, Conductor.

Every piece, every *ektenia*, every *tropar* is imbued with this pure religious feeling, a feeling of great spiritual obedience and chaste adoration of the Divine. The composer has created a stately musical fresco that breathes with sincere religious emotion, pouring forth as Faith from the human heart filled with awe. Consequently, it is not surprising that this liturgical oeuvre took many years to complete; and the author's labours have left nothing superficial, only that which is essential.

Among the most distinctive characteristics of Father Sembrat's compositional style is its *musical flow*. This is what allows the liturgical work, which contains such a variety of individual pieces, to coalesce into a unified whole. The music flows softly, like a broad river, calmly and assuredly moving from piece to piece towards the end, encompassing the various larger "island" elements within its current. This flow is obviously important to the composer, who variously emphasizes the intention of maintaining momentum, including, for example, elements of *recitative*, or the practice of holding the last chord between the *ektenia* petitions so that the priest starts the next petition "on its heels," so to speak.

The Liturgy's music itself evokes a feeling of peace, refuge, protection. Nothing irritates, no excesses distract one's attention. The emotions evoked by the music are natural and balanced, although at the same time they can be potent, with a wide dynamic range. Also, one might get the impression that the music is familiar – that one has heard it before. This is because Sembrat utilizes the themes of many traditional church melodies. But these melodies are never left in their primary form; they are slightly altered, and this gives familiar tunes a polished refinement. An impression of familiarity is also felt in the composer's original melodies, because Father Sembrat uses the technique of "hiding" complexity by "simple" chord resolution, by a conscious consonance, by a deliberately "correct" voice distribution, etc., which indicates his great professionalism and skill.

The stately character of this Liturgy, more than simply highlighting the majesty of the paschal theme, establishes a stylistic *concert quality* in the composer's musical language. This concert-like character is present in virtually every piece,

with the lesser as well as greater forms in this Liturgy having clear musical peaks. They “breathe” in broad dynamic waves, changing texture and directing the musical momentum towards an emphasis of the key textual elements, thus lauding this most important Christian celebration. It is a distinctive feature of Father Sembrat’s individual style, and clearly connects his Resurrectional Liturgy with Ukrainian composed liturgies as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century with their rich and dignified concert forms.

I would like to mention yet another quality evident in this work – its *ecclesiality*, or *churchly* quality. Throughout all the pieces, we are aware of a deeply pious person, who not only opens his heart in prayer to the Almighty, but also knows how to make this experience understandable and felt by the attendant faithful. There is no part of Father Sembrat’s Liturgy that is unsingable in a church. Every intonation, motif and phrase; every small and large form, is composed in a manner that feels “right” in church. In this specifically Sembrat’s Liturgy differs from most modern Ukrainian choral religious works, which unfortunately do not sound like church compositions. Thus, in practice most of them do not find a home in our churches; they exist more like secular choral works, albeit with religious content. In contrast, this Liturgy has every chance of becoming part of the standard repertoire of choirs in all the Ukrainian church denominations.

This work, as already mentioned, contains some traditional and some original compositional elements. In the *ektenias* the composer often turns to known motifs, but in contrast to the well-known classical Liturgies, say, by Leontovych, Stetsenko, or Koshetz, each response in Sembrat’s Liturgy is altered slightly. The melody is similar but not quite the same, which lends variety to every *ektenia* and adapts each response to the particular words of the text sung by the presiding priest. Thus, even a simple *ektenia* is transformed into a “micropoem,” with its own characteristic content and musical development. This and other techniques, taken together, result in a type of religious musical drama, a complete harmonization of the choir with the petitions of the priest and deacons.