Perfect Future in Past Traditions

Evgeni Goncharenko
Christian Center Logos, Moscow

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree
Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol31/iss4/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
Evgeni Goncharenko is President of the Christian Center Logos, Moscow, and for several decades has been Music Director, Evangelical Christian Baptists of Russia. Graduate of the Moscow Music Conservatory, he has conducted choirs, orchestras and taught church music at the Moscow Baptist Theological Seminary. This paper was presented at the Baptist Historical Conference, Moscow, April 2011.

"And you are entered into their labors” (Gospel of John 4: 38)

As mankind marks the beginning of the third millennium since the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is appropriate for brothers and sisters in Christ to reflect upon our important traditions of worship. Each generation is confronted with the task of continuing or changing the ways we worship. As Evangelical Christian Baptists, we cherish or change how each of us seeks a more meaningful relationship with God. Focusing upon Jesus Christ, through prayer, Bible studies, and sharing with each other, each generation of Baptists builds upon the solid traditions of our faith. This paper is concerned with the music traditions in our worship: words and sounds crafted by composer and performer to enable human expression of deeply felt emotions connecting us with God. I want to share some of my research into our rich Russian Protestant musical traditions and the leadership in Christian music exemplified by Pavel Vasilyevich Pavlov and Askold Sergeyevich Belousov. Particularly, I am blessed to share an interview on this subject with our dear sister-in-Christ who knows personally about, and grew to adulthood in, our music traditions: Roza Ivanova Azikova.

A Long Time Ago

One of the most vivid manifestations of Protestant traditionalism, kept intact up through the 1990’s of this century, has been choral and general congregational singing in the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Church in Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia. Founded in 1867 by the Russian Baptist pioneer, Nikita Isayevich Voronin (1840-1905), the Tiflis’ congregation has been the keeper of age-old traditions ever since the first Baptist Church evolved on the territory of what was then Russia. These traditions are rooted in the “Molokans”, the forefathers of many early church members.

The Molokans began to be identified as a spiritualist group in old Russia around the mid-18th century, Simeon Uklein an early leader. They were driven from the cities by church and state authorities because they believed in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They maintained rural, communal communities in support of this belief. Their worship services were simple with spoken prayers, spoken scripture, and a spiritual message by a leader. Spoken stories, poems of joy and sorrow, and psalms began to be intoned by individuals in a sequence of different pitches; the “singer” changing the tone, rhythm, volume, and expression as God led them. These highly individualistic vocalizations in worship were passed from one person to another and to other communities.

Choral Singing Emerges

For the first three decades, the Church had no choral singing. General congregational singing was still in the Molokan tradition with the only difference being that most of the new songs
had a different content, new for the Molokan repertory and unlike the Molokan psalms, were easier to learn. As was a custom of the Molokans, the congregation sang without an accompanying musical instrument, but with one of their leaders guiding their singing by setting the tone and inspiring them in combined, single note or “unison” singing. Such performances, which are, in fact, typical Russian folk singing, especially Molokan, always leaves room for vocal improvisation.

The first attempt to arrange Russian Baptist Hymns was made by N. I. Voronin. In 1882 in Tiflis, a songbook (without musical scores) came off the press under the title The Voice of Faith. In the preface to one of the later editions of the volume, the editorial board wrote: “such a wonderful name as The Voice of Faith expressed best of all the content of the book by saying that believers sing to glorify God.” Most probably, the bulk of the songs from the first edition of the book were borrowed from the Tiflis congregation’s repertory.

Pavel Vasilievich Pavlov

In 1901, a choir was formed at the Tiflis Church. Its initiator and first conductor was young, energetic, and versatile Pavel Vasilievich Pavlov (1883-1936). The son of the outstanding Gospel proponent Vasily Guryevich Pavlov (1854-1924), whom V. D. Bonch-Bruyevich called “...a highly respected Russian Baptist leader, ‘Pavel’ inherited from his father love for Christ and devotion to God.” To organize the choir in a church with such a deeply rooted Molokan tradition was not simple. But after Pavel’s several enchanting conversations with young believers, “ABC” music basics, and vocal classes got underway at the church. Another problem was the acquisition of a harmonium. The conservative members of the congregation resisted the innovation. In addition, they felt that the use of any musical instrument in worship services was not a “God-pleasing business”. Pastor Vasily Guryevich’s authority helped. In one of his sermons, he cited Biblical quotations to prove that the use of musical instruments in worship services is both proper and desirable. Soon, a harmonium was set up in the Tiflis’s prayer house. Choral singing and harmonium melodies added special coloring to church services thereafter.

Pavel Vasilyevich never conducted. He led the choir and general congregational singing by playing the harmonium. This is an old church tradition. The great Johann Sebastian Bach and other church musicians led choral singing while playing the organ. The young Pavel might have learned to play the organ when he was in Rumania where his father was a church pastor for a period. Since 1905, the choir appeared jointly with preachers at the Artistic Society and Nikitsky Circus in spiritually enlightening programs. In 1913, Pavlov moved to Moscow. He led a choir and became a Presbyter in Moscow’s Second Baptist Church. He ministered in this capacity until his arrest during Stalin’s repression in the 1930s.

Pavlov laid a cornerstone in music for Protestant worship with the Tiflis congregation which has proved to be a milestone and most certainly will continue to be so for many decades. Conducting successors, Sergei Vasilyevich Belousov (1882-1925) and his son Askold Sergeyevich, followed Pavlov’s tradition of leading the choir by playing the harmonium.

Askold Sergeyevich Belousov

From the late 1920’s until 1986, Askold Sergeyevich Belousov (1909-1993) led church singing. Throughout his life as a devout traditionalist, he tried to preserve our singing legacy inherited from our forefathers. Endowed by God with a variety of talents, the versatile Belousov composed over 300 songs for choir, solo, duet and general congregational singing. He closely

---

1 “The Voice of Faith”, published by The Word of Truth, Moscow, Russian, 1926.
studied the impact of historical materials upon the evolution of the Evangelical Baptist movement in the Caucasus. An ordained teacher and preacher, he conveyed the meaning of the scriptures to youth logically and in an easy-to-grasp form.\(^3\)

My first meeting with A. S. Belousov took place at the Central Evangelical Christian Baptist Church in Moscow in the summer of 1974. After the worship service, Askold Sergeyevich invited me to the Belousov-Zakharov home where we met with Nadezhda Vasilyevna Belousova and Vera Vasileyvna, the widow of Pavel Vasileyevich Pavlov. For several hours we warmly and heartily spoke about music and choral singing in our churches and played wonderful music.

Vera Vasileyvna shared her reminiscences and her interest in the congregation’s choral and musical life. An extraordinary singer in the past, she had lost no interest in anything that concerned church life, even though she was then 83 years old. When attending services in the Central Evangelical Baptist Church, the music is not quite like Molokan melodies but they are near to them in spirit and style. One of them is “We Are At The Earth’s Bank”. Vera Vasileyvna and Nadezhda Vasileyvna always took seats especially reserved for them in the balcony to the right near the choir.\(^4\)

Not long afterward, I met Roza Ivanovna Azikova, whose life in God’s plan was wholly tied in with the Tbilisi church choir, as Askold Sergeyevich’s life had been. At an evening worship service on a Tuesday in the summer of 1975, accompanied by the choir and harmonium, conducted by Leonid Fedorovich Tkachenko, Roza Ivanovna sang two hymns: “As Long as Wonderful Fire is Burning” by Reihard, and “God, God” by Emerson. From the first bars, Roza Ivanovna’s voice won the hearts of all who listened by its trained timbre and impeccable intonation. The unerring sense of style, sincerity, and relaxed performance enabled the singer to penetrate through song imagery into our inner selves.

Two years later, along with Boris Berezhnoy, we came to Thilisi. Askold Sergeyevich initiated our trip. Nearly every evening for a week we got together at Belousov’s apartment along with Roza Ivanovna and Mziya, a performer and author of Georgian Gospel songs. Other members of Belousov’s circle invariably joined us. Standing on the old German piano were two solid busts of Beethoven and Mozart, the great musicians Askold Sergeyevich adored. As I recall he also liked Chopin.

Several days later, our common friend, preacher, and musician, Prokhladenskaya Church Presbyter Alexei Prokhorov came to Tbilisi with a group of his friends. We formed a vocal ensemble and sang at a Sunday service. Playing the harmonium inspirationally, Alexei conducted our ensemble by nods of his head. At crucial moments, he threw a hand over the harmonium and by vigorous conducting gestures, indicated the manner of performance. The rather slow congregational singing and fairly loud choral singing seemed to turn back the century for us to the times when some of our brothers and sisters were Molokans. After the morning service, a large group of “veterans” performed some old hymns, possibly from the repertory of the first Tiflis congregation.

Roza Ivanovna Azikova

More than 20 years have passed. R. I. Azikova is in Moscow again, and we are once more in the hospitable home of our friends: Anna Grigoryevna Zakharova and her son Alexander Semyonovich. Roza Ivanovna’s visit coincided with the regular summer session of our Logos Music Academy Faculty, which has met for over 20 years. She provided a memorable performance for our students and teachers. During the morning prayers she sang several old songs. For many

\(^3\) Christian Word, Moscow, Russia

\(^4\) Bratsky Vestnik (Brotherly Chronicle), Evangelical Christian Baptists, Moscow, Russia, N.4, 1984; N.3, 1991.
listeners, many of them our students, her singing was a revelation. These were spiritual tunes that
the first Baptists in Russia had sung. And now, at the end of the faculty session, along with music
history Associate Professor Viktor Pavlovich Kadochnikov, we were able to have an unhurried
conversation. Excerpts follow:

Roza Ivanovna, would you speak about yourself? When and how did you discover you liked music?
RIA: “I was born in Tbilisi. My forefathers on Dad’s side were Lutherans; on Mother’s line,
ancestors of Molokans, who later accepted the Baptist faith. I was baptized with water in September
of 1904. When I joined the congregation, singers were in demand. Our Lord bestowed that gift
upon me and for all my life I have sung with the choir. Even though I have grown old, I continue
to serve the Lord by singing.”

What will you sing for us? Which is your first hymn?
RIA: “I can hum the tunes that our first brothers sang. Unfortunately, these tunes got lost because
hardly anyone remembers them. Many first Baptists had Molokan roots, and Molokan singing is
extremely peculiar. Perhaps, then, this singing satisfied them. But as new people came to the
church, the singing repertory had to be renewed; something new had to be chosen. So, these first
tunes of our brothers are not quite like Molokan melodies, but they are near to them in spirit and
style. One of them is “We are at the Earth’s Bank”.

Question: When did you first hear this melody?
RIA: “I heard it in 1944. It was for general singing. For a long time, from 1937 to 1944, the church
was closed. Worship services were forbidden. And when the church re-opened, there was no choir.
People were utterly confused. Everything had to be started from scratch. Old choristers
remembered these tunes. They came together in a choir and started singing. I heard this tune from
them and it touched my heart.”

Question: Was there already a choir leader at that time?
RIA: “Yes. In 1944, Askold Sergeyevich Belousov led the choir. The first director of the church choir
had been Pavel Vasilyevich Pavlov. It was he who organized the choir in 1901. And these songs
were collected, sung, and passed on to new church members by memory, not by music score.”

Question: What else will you sing?
RIA: “I will sing one of the early songs of that period, “Hide Your Sorrow”, (The Voice of Faith,
N.355). I will sing it the way one of the pioneers of the Baptist movement in Russia, Vasily
Guryevich Pavlov, sang it. As with many others, he also came to the congregation from Molokans.
He walked all over Siberia, preaching the Gospel. His life was full of hardship and trepidation, but
he kept his sorrow to himself, trying to console and encourage others.”

Question: This is an inspiring melody with sounds of Molokan refrains, isn’t it?
RIA: “These songs were sung in my family. I heard them as a child, but turned a deaf ear to them.
At 17, when I came to the church my comprehension of these refrains changed completely. I
grasped their profound spiritual meaning.”

Question: Roza Ivanovna, what is your attitude toward these refrains? What do you hear in them? What do
they mean to you?
RIA: “These refrains mean a lot to me. They flow from the heart. They bring relief. Perhaps, just
because I heard them for the first time and comprehended them in hard times, they are particularly
dear to me. So, these refrains are the reminder of everything kind and good. I sing them with
pleasure, always remembering my dear relatives and my dear friends, many of whom have passed
into eternity. One more song, “The Lost Child”, (The Voice of Faith, N.303) was brought from Siberia
in the early 1920s. We used to get together and sing this song polyphonically. The tenor part
sounded very expressively in the background of our small choir.”
Question: Don’t you think that these refrains, these songs, in a way mirror the history of Evangelical Christianity in Russia?

RIA: “They do. Without these refrains, the hymns and songs I have heard in our churches without number could have hardly appeared. Everything has its beginning, and I believe these tunes are the beginning of our chorus. For instance, in A. S. Belousov’s compositions, these refrains repeat themselves over and over again.”

Question: To be more precise, the melodies or refrains?
RIA: “Yes, the melodies sung by those who were there at the start.”

Question: Yakov Ivanovich Vyazovsky’s hymns, too?
RIA: “Vyazovsky’s hymns, too. For Askold Sergeyevich learned from him. He lived in Moscow for two years, visiting the Second Baptist Church where Vyazovsky conducted the choir. Askold Sergeyevich spoke of Vyazovsky very heartily, calling him a wonderful choir leader. He knew music very well and was able to make those with whom he was in touch in his church ministry love it. He was a leading church choir director and published a number of articles in the Baptist Journal.”

The Importance of Traditions

“Everything has a beginning”, said Roza Ivanovna. Indeed, the roots of future development are in past traditions. By using traditions, grasping their essence and significance, we can develop the direction God is unfolding for us. Our assurance that we are heading in the right direction is in the reliance on Russian Evangelical Christian traditions. If the thread of tradition is cut, our huge spiritual and cultural heritage may be lost. These traditions are the foundation on which the building of Russia’s Baptism, having so many exclusively national features, stands. If these traditions are washed away, or their significance and essence at this current stage of the evangelical Baptist movement’s development is muddled, our confessional identity may be eradicated, and our spiritual culture may lose diversity in its Christ-centered focus.

The roots that from the start have largely nurtured baptism in many Russian regions are largely a special understanding of the Gospel truths, born as part of personal searches for God, so typical for the Russian soul. Ours is a peculiar peasant life style of sobriety, diligence, and devotion to God traced back to the Molokan communities. Whence, the emergence of national Christian poetry, literature and music. The evangelical outlook has also found its expression in Russia’s protestant theology.

Nowadays when globalization is increasingly engulfing all world civilization spheres and the world is entering a new development era of constant change, we must be particularly keen on and attentive to our cultural heritage. Our robust tradition will bear new phenomena joining into a single Christ centered stream. The changes taking place all over the world open up new opportunities for our service and evangelism. In this context, we will remember the roots that nurtured the Gospel movement. Let us pray that our traditions will divinely re-energize ministry in the Evangelical Christian Baptist churches in contemporary Russian society.