

Death of a Baptist Musician

KATHARINE MURRAY

Music has always played a prominent part in Christian worship. In all the different traditions and forms, the praise of God has been sung down the ages, producing a wealth of inspired music which has enriched believers and unbelievers alike. The cultures of Eastern Europe, as well as of the Western world, have the writers of church music to thank for some of the supreme works of art in their heritage. In Russia, the sung liturgy of the Orthodox Church has an ancient tradition, and in the Soviet Union today, where religious music has long lain unheard and unknown, a new interest is growing in this important part of the nation's culture in spite of its religious associations. Side by side with a renewed appreciation of the visual arts of the church, especially iconography, the younger generation has been rediscovering church music. Official attitudes, if not altogether encouraging, appear to be tolerant.

However, it is not the Russian Orthodox Church alone which has been responsible for the composition of religious music. The Baptist churches too have their musical contribution to make. Foreign visitors are often struck by the beauty of the singing in Baptist services, as much by the congregation as by trained choirs. Here the composition of hymns is still a living tradition – a spontaneous expression of worship – and so new pieces are constantly being added to the collection of church music. But alas, this music is virtually unknown to the Soviet public as a whole.

The Baptists have had small editions of their hymnbooks printed from time to time, but difficulties have usually surrounded their publication. Lovingly hand-copied editions are common even in central churches. So is the sight of the congregation singing from memory. With such a demand for hymnbooks within the Church, there are none over for outsiders. There has been recent good news, however: the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists was able to publish last year a small edition of a hymnbook containing 136 hymns with music.

Bratsky Vestnik ("Fraternal Herald"), the official publication of the Baptist church, published in the November issue an obituary of one of the men who has been responsible for the composition of a number of new hymns over the last 50 years. Nikolai Alexandrovich Kazakov died in April 1973 in Leningrad, where he had spent a large part of his life. Not only had he written the words and music of some 65 hymns which were

published between 1924 and 1928; larger works of church music came from his pen towards the end of his life. In 1969 his Christmas Oratorio was performed for the first time. This was the final version of his collection of Christmas music which had been performed in Baptist churches over the past ten years. A cantata based on Psalm 41, however, has never been performed. It is sad that a man with such obvious talent should not be better known outside the Russian Baptist Church. Perhaps at some future date Russian culture will “discover” him and his music will be appreciated by a wider audience, if its publication in the USSR is made possible.

Kazakov was born in 1899 in Tbilisi, where he grew up in a family belonging to the *molokan* (“milk-drinking”) sect – an ascetic group which was in many ways close to the Protestant and Puritan traditions, though without their strong adherence to the words of the Bible. Since under the Tsars this sect was outlawed, Kazakov’s father, a building engineer, was exiled to the Caucasus for many years. Later, however, he was converted to the Baptist faith, and the young Nikolai Alexandrovich followed in his footsteps.

In 1916 Kazakov went to Petrograd to study at the Technical Institute, and the city became his home for the next 20 years. He began to work for the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians in 1921, mainly as a choirmaster but also teaching homiletics at the theological courses which the church was able to organize during these years. Theological articles by him were also published in the Council’s journal. Throughout his life, it appears, his love of music was equalled by his desire to serve the Church. Not only were all his compositions intended for church worship, but he also became a preacher who travelled all over the country visiting congregations. As *Bratsky Vestnik* says, “He both knew and preached the Word of God well. His sermons, beautiful in their structure and profound in their content, brought great edification and joy to the hearers”.

During the 1920’s sixty-five of Kazakov’s hymns were published, some in hymnbooks and others in the church publication known as *Khris-tianin* (“The Christian”). He also helped with the notation and harmonization of the music editions of the hymnal. *Bratsky Vestnik*, however, says little about the middle years of his life. He moved to Ufa in 1935, and during the war spent four years at the front, where he was decorated for his services. It may be that during this time, like his father under the Tsars and like other leaders of today’s Baptist church, he was called upon to suffer for his faith.

Not until the late 50s and 60s, then, were further works by Kazakov performed. The Christmas music already mentioned, which was finally

perfected as his Christmas Oratorio, was first heard in 1957. He was also asked to write a special piece of music to celebrate the Baptist centenary in 1969.

As to the character of the man, *Bratsky Vestnik* has this to say :

In all his service he threw himself into the work passionately and with all his heart. He loved to say that a Christian should 'do his best, whatever his task or position, and that the preaching of Christ must be inseparably linked with a truly Christian life. And this inseparable linking was clearly shown by Nikolai Alexandrovich's life. It so happened that in the course of his life he was more than once obliged to begin his work all over again. But every time his work was outstanding, he was crowned with success, and those who worked with him had the greatest respect for him.

What *Bratsky Vestnik* does not dwell upon, however, is the tragedy of an artist who is unable to publish his works freely. Kazakov wrote for the glory of God and His worship, and no doubt was content with having given his best in that service. But where works of religious music cannot be known by the general public, the national culture sustains a loss.

A POEM BY ILYA GABAI

A Memory?

An old man's step, the despondency of a hump
In the fear-ridden gait of a frightened faith --

But we do not hide. Pure and proud
And obvious to foes is our Supper.

And it is a festive evening! At our table
There is a carefree bottle and joyous ingot.
And the name of the perfect Madonna shines
And the speeches are regal -- at our table.