

## AN ICON IN SOUNDS: THE PARALLEL PATHS OF VICTORIA POLEVA AND JOHN TAVENER

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### INTRODUCTION

A global catastrophe is not the best background for talking about Divine peace. But right now, in this terrible era that started on February 24, 2022, the theme of peace is the most relevant and necessary. Today there is nothing like God that we can rely on with such confidence. We speak like this simply and unconditionally, closely and clearly – God... Doubts, searches and hopes are long gone. Unity and unwavering faith have come to the forefront of human consciousness. For all mothers of Ukraine, the idea of divine protection sounds like an axiom. Only here, near sacred silence, is it possible to find shelter for tormented souls... But how to get into this stream of silence when there are so many sorrows and tears around? The compositions of Victoria Poleva and John Tavener, united by a common figurative sphere, contain in their matrix “algorithms” for achieving the promised world. These paths are very different. The compositions, unique in their depth – *O fervent prayer* for soprano and women’s choir *a cappella* (2007) by V. Poleva and *The Protecting Veil* for cello and string orchestra (1987) by J. Tavener – serve not only as spiritual portraits of their authors, but also brilliantly illustrate parallelism of the “female” and “male” dialogue with the sacred.

### 1. The problem’s prerequisites emergence and the problem’s formulation

The relevance of the problems of this study lies in the need to comprehend new forms of displaying the sphere of divine imagery in music and to outline the lines of continuity with the spiritual traditions of the past.

The aim of the study is to identify the semantic and musical and stylistic features of the embodiment of sacred symbols used by V. Poleva and J. Tavener in the context of the Christian idea of theosis (ancient Greek θεώσις from θεός “God” – “deification”).

The aim of the work predetermines the main objectives of the study:

- to designate the conceptual and ideological foundations of the doctrine of theosis;
- to formulate the fundamental provisions of hesychasm as a Christian mystical worldview and spiritual practice of asceticism;

- to study the genesis, specific features and key stages in the evolution of hesychasm;
- to argue the relevance of the key positions of the hesychast tradition in the context of the moral, ethical and philosophical views of the first third of the 21st century;
- to consider in the artistic, philosophical, conceptual and psychological aspects the musical patterns of selected compositions by Victoria Poleva and John Tavener.

The materials of research are *O fervent prayer* (2007) to the canonical text for soprano and women's choir *a cappella* by Victoria Poleva and *The Protecting Veil* for cello and string orchestra (1987) by John Tavener.

The study was carried out on the basis of the principles of philosophical, religious and cultural analysis. To solve the research tasks set in the work, the following methods were used:

- a method of historical and philosophical analysis of the emergence and development of the practices of Orthodox hesychasm;
- a psychoanalytic approach that allows revealing the psychological content of the ascetic practices of the hesychast tradition;
- a method of holistic analysis of a musical composition.

## **2. The analysis of existing methods for studying the phenomenon of “mystical experience” in philosophy, theology and psychology**

The music of Victoria Poleva and John Tavener is based solely on the knowledge of a personal experience of a mystical dialogue with the sacred. In our opinion, it is this quality of the choir *O fervent prayer* and the concerto *The Protecting Veil* that can serve as a starting point in the study of such different, but so similar, artistic concepts of composers.

Mysticism has always attracted the attention of both scientists and amateurs from science, which gave rise to the most controversial assessments of it in the literature. The American philosopher and psychologist W. James, the Protestant theologian and philosopher R. Otto, Russian religious philosophers S. Bulgakov, P. Florensky, V. Lossky, N. Berdyaev were the first to turn to the study of the mystical phenomenon at the turn of the XIX–XX centuries. In their works, they emphasized the inadmissibility of a simplified approach to the study of mysticism, which at all times in history plays an important role in the spiritual life of mankind. They also pointed out the polysemantic nature of the concept and the complexity of its unambiguous definition.

Attention to this topic increased after the Second World War, which is explained by the shocks experienced and the search for a way out of the spiritual crisis. E. Underhill, Tor Andræ, S. Grof, R. Zener, A. Knysh,

A. Maslow, F. Almond, W. Stace, J. Trimmingham, W. Wainwright, F. Happold, D. Hollinback, R. Elwood, M. Eliade, and among Russian researchers S. Averintsev, E. Balagushkin, P. Gurevich, Y. Kimelev, A. Klimovich, L. Konotop, A. Safronov, E. Torchinov and others. In their writings, mystic and mysticism were separated from such phenomena as magic, trance and altered states of consciousness. The problem of the correlation of the universal and individual principles in mystical experience was raised.

In the mystical teachings of the world, for the first time, not only the problem of the commonality of the religious experience of mankind, but also the unity of its value orientations was touched upon: “More and more people think about the existence of a deep unity of all religions, and associate ecumenical and global integration hopes with this”<sup>1</sup>. Interest in the phenomenon of mystic in the modern world is growing facing the threat of national, religious, political and other conflicts, when the security of the entire world community has become vulnerable. Now, more than ever, the following questions are relevant: is there a unity of human value ideals? Is it capable of overcoming disagreements, or is it doomed to defend its selfish interests to the detriment of the universal and planetary?

A deep and detailed analysis of world philosophical and mystical systems is presented in the monograph by N. S. Zhirtueva<sup>2</sup>. In this study, which is interdisciplinary in nature, parallels are drawn between the scientific, philosophical and mystical pictures of the world, the psychological and social vectors of mysticism are studied. In terms of the problems of the proposed article, it is important to mention that the mystical phenomenon is considered by the author of the monograph as the essential core of religion and its universal principle. As the general basis for a comparative analysis of mystical traditions N. Zhirtueva puts forward the desire for “unity” with the Absolute reality, which contributes to the transformation of human consciousness and personality with the help of religious psychopractices.

It should be pointed out that despite numerous studies, there is still no unambiguous definition of the concept of “mystic”. The process of studying mystic began in the works of W. James, who defended the priority of individual religious experience over religion that exists in the form of certain social institutions: “In at least one respect, personal religion is undoubtedly more primary than theology and the church; every church, once founded, lives thereafter, leaning on tradition; but the “founders” of each church

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<sup>1</sup> Жиртуева Н. С. Философско-мистические традиции мира : монография. Москва : Вузовский учебник : ИНФРА-М, 2017. С. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 274 с.

always drew their strength from direct personal communion with the deity. So, it was not only with those to whom, like Christ, Buddha, or Mohammed, a superhuman nature is attributed, but also with all the founders of Christian spiritual groups<sup>3</sup>. James emphasized that religious experience includes a wide variety of phenomena – conversion, holiness, prayer, mysticism. He was convinced of the reality of the existence of mystical states and emphasized their important role, because “we must look for all the roots of religious life, as well as its center, in mystical states of consciousness”<sup>4</sup>. P. Minin also wrote that “any religion, since the goal of human life is in close communion with the Divine, contains a mystical moment”<sup>5</sup>.

N. Berdyaev noted that “if the word “mystic” comes from the word “mystery”, then mysticism should be accepted as the basis of religion and the source of creative movement in religion”. In his opinion, religious experience is born “from direct and living contact with the last mystery”, and all the great initiators and creators of religious life had primary mystical experience, that is, mystical face to face meetings with the Divine<sup>6</sup>.

The defining feature of mystical experience, according to most researchers, is the desire of the mystic for direct living contact with the Absolute reality. “Such contact appears in the religious consciousness as “unity” with this reality, “dissolution” in it, “immersion” in it, “ascent” or “descent” to it”<sup>7</sup>.

E. Underhill considered mysticism “as an expression of the innate desire of the human spirit for complete harmony with the transcendental order, regardless of what theological formula this order is expressed by. This striving, according to the great mystics, gradually embraces the entire sphere of consciousness: it takes possession of their whole life, and in an experience called “mystical union” it reaches its goal. Whatever this goal may be called – the Christian God, the World Soul of pantheism, or the philosophical Absolute – the desire to achieve it and progress towards it <...> constitute the true subject of mysticism. I believe that this advancement is the true direction of development of the highest form of human consciousness<sup>8</sup>. Mystics find the basis of their method not in logic, but “in that inexpressible experience which they call the ‘act of unity’”<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> James W. The Varieties Of Religious Experience : A Study In Human Nature. November 9, 2009. P. 238–239.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P. 303.

<sup>5</sup> Минин П. Главные направления древне-церковной мистики. Мистическое богословие. Киев : Путь к истине, 1991. С. 366.

<sup>6</sup> Бердяев Н. А. Философия свободного духа. Москва : Издательство «Республика», 1994. С. 233.

<sup>7</sup> Жиртуева Н. С. Философско-мистические традиции мира : монография. Москва : Вузовский учебник : ИНФРА-М, 2017. С. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Underhill E. Mysticism. California, US. Publisher : CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011. P. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. P. 38.

### 3. "Sacred Silence" by Victoria Poleva and John Tavener as a new reception of the ancient tradition of hesychasm

The area of the sacred is the center of artistic research by Victoria Poleva and John Tavener. It is important that the attention of both composers is concentrated not *around* this topic, but directly on the study of the *mystical experience* of man. In connection with this, the ancient Orthodox doctrine of theosis, *hesychasm*, is filled with a new and relevant meaning<sup>10</sup>.

Hesychasm was actually discovered at the end of the XIX century in the works of historians F. Uspensky, P. Syrku and K. Radchenko. In the religious, philosophical and theological works of S. Bulgakov, P. Minin, Archimandrite John (Ekonomtsev), the ideological content of hesychasm was revealed. I. Meyendorff, A. Safronov, E. Torchinov turned to the study of hesychasm in the context of a comparative analysis of philosophical and mystical traditions. It should be emphasized that at present hesychast studies are "one of the most successfully and actively developing problem areas for Christian speculation"<sup>11</sup>. In his doctoral dissertation, O. Klimkov describes in detail the history of the formation of the science of hesychasm and identifies the key figures in this process<sup>12</sup>. Over the past decades, the greatest and recognized researchers in this field have been nominated by all Christian denominations. Among the most authoritative names, one should single out ep. Vasily (Krivoshein)<sup>13</sup>, Father Kiprian (Kern)<sup>14</sup>, V. Lossky<sup>15</sup>, Father John

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<sup>10</sup> *Hesychasm* (from the Greek ησυχία – peace, silence, calmness, tranquility, peace, solitude, a solitary place) is understood in a broad sense as an ascetic doctrine of inner spiritual concentration with the help of certain meditation techniques, developed by the early Christian hermits of the IV–VII centuries (St. Macarius Egyptian, St. Hesychius of Jerusalem, St. John of the Ladder, Abba Dorotheos, St. Isaac the Syrian, St. Anthony the Great, Macarius the Great, John Chrysostom, Deacon Evagrius of Pontus, St. Nilus of Ancyra, John Cassian, Ephraim the Syrian, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas and others).

<sup>11</sup> Хоружий С. «Практика себя». Искусство кино. 2000. № 12. URL: <https://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2000/12/n12-article28> (Last accessed: 26.11.2021).

<sup>12</sup> Климов О. К. Исихазм и русская религиозная философия XV–XVIII вв. : дис. ... доктор наук : 09.00.03 История философии. ФГБОУ ВО «Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет». 2019. С. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Василий (Кривошеин). Аскетическое и богословское учение св. Григория Паламы. *Seminarium Kondakovianum*. Прага, 1936. Т. VIII. С. 99–154; Василий (Кривошеин). Святой Григорий Палама – личность и учение (по недавно опубликованным материалам). *Вестник Русского ЗападноЕвропейского Патриаршего Экзархата*, 1960. № 33–34. С. 101–114.

<sup>14</sup> Киприан (Керн). Антропология св. Григория Паламы / Вступ. ст. А. И. Сидорова. Москва : Паломник, 1996.

Киприан (Керн). Духовные предки Святого Григория Паламы (Опыт мистической родословной). *Православная Мысль*. 1942. № 4. С. 102–131.

<sup>15</sup> Лосский В. Н. Боговидение. Москва : АСТ, 2006. 759 с.

Meyendorff<sup>16</sup> (Khoruzhiy, 2012). At the center of modern theological and philosophical discourse are the studies of the outstanding thinker of the XXI century, philosopher and mathematician S. Khoruzhiy<sup>17</sup>. Using hermeneutic and semiotic methods of explanation, the scientist tries to clothe in concrete verbal forms the inexpressible experience of involvement with God. But when studying hesychasm, we cannot but take into account the existence of an experience behind the text: the experience of inner purification, the “smart doing” of prayer, which often does not have a verbalized expression. Therefore, the author faced the problem of analyzing the experience of inner spiritual “doing”. Its solution presupposes, as an obligatory element, the author’s partial or complete entry into the context of this experience. In the book “Diptych of Silence”<sup>18</sup>, following in the footsteps of V. Solovyov, N. Berdyaev and P. Florensky, the author draws new content into the orbit of philosophy, contained in the experience of the monastic tradition of hesychasm or sacred silence.

It should be recalled that hesychasm was formed as a result of the centuries-old evolution of the mystical teachings of Byzantium<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Мейендорф И. Ф. Жизнь и труды св. Григория Паламы : Введение в изучение. Изд. 2-е, испр. и доп. для рус. пер. / пер. Г. Н. Начинкина под ред. И. П. Медведева и В. М. Лурье. Санкт-Петербург : Византинороссика, 1997; Мейендорф И. Ф. О византийском исихазме и его роли в культурном и историческом развитии Восточной Европы в XIV в. *Труды Отдела древнерусской литературы*. XXIX. 1974. С. 291–305; Мейендорф И. Ф. Византийское богословие. Исторические тенденции и доктринальные темы / прот. Иоанн Мейендорф ; пер. с англ. В. Марутика. Минск : Лучи Софии, 2001. 334 с.

<sup>17</sup> Хоружий, С. С. Диптих безмолвия. Аскетическое учение о человеке в богословском и философском освещении. Москва : Центр психологии и психотерапии, 1991. URL: <https://predanie.ru/book/90073-diptih-bezmolviya/#/toc1> (Last accessed: 21.12.2021); Хоружий С. С. Исихазм как стержень православной духовности. URL: <https://afonit.info/biblioteka/nasledie-svyatoj-gory/s-khoruzhij-isikhazm-kak-sterzhen-pravoslavnoj-dukhovnosti> (Last accessed: 21.12.2021); Хоружий С. Исследования по исихастской традиции : В 2 т. Т. 2. Многогранный мир исихазма. Санкт-Петербург : Издательство Русской христианской гуманитарной академии, 2012. 448 с.; Хоружий С. «Практика себя». Искусство кино. 2000. № 12. URL: <https://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2000/12/n12-article28> (Last accessed: 26.11.2021); Хоружий С. Умное делание или наука внимания. URL: <https://academy.foma.ru/umnoe-delanie-ili-nauka-vnimaniya.html> (Last accessed: 14.03.2021).

<sup>18</sup> The book “Diptych of Silence” by S. Khoruzhiy, written in 1978, could not be published in the USSR for reasons of censorship, but it existed in samizdat (self-publish books).

<sup>19</sup> Historians and theologians identify three most important stages in the development of the hesychast tradition: 1) classical asceticism and mystic of early Christian monasticism in the IV–VII centuries; 2) hesychast revival in Byzantium in the XIII–XIV centuries; 3) the revival of hesychasm in Russia in the XIX–XX centuries [Хоружий С. С. (2012); Исихазм как стержень православной духовности. URL: <https://afonit.info/biblioteka/nasledie-svyatoj-gory/s-khoruzhij-isikhazm-kak-sterzhen-pravoslavnoj-dukhovnosti> (Last accessed: 21.12.2021)].

In typological and historical and cultural aspects, the phenomenon of Orthodox hesychasm is among the world traditions of spiritual practice, mystical or mystical-ascetic schools with a detailed canon and centuries-old history, such as yoga, Zen, Taoism, Sufism<sup>20</sup>. The tradition of hesychasm, or sacred silence, recognized as the quintessence of the Orthodox religious style, has created and accumulated a set of observations, approaches, and practices covering the most important aspects of nature and human activity. According to S. Khoruzhiy, this is a kind of interdisciplinary knowledge about a person, which is reduced to a strict unity and integrity: “everywhere it is subject to a single view of a person, a single concept of consciousness and a single task, which is to implement a certain anthropological strategy”<sup>21</sup>. All these traditions have long been the subject of close study and even mass interest, since their undoubted value has been discovered both for the sciences of man and, in a broad sense, for modern spiritual searches.

In recent decades, a new reception of the ancient tradition of hesychasm has developed, both in scientific and in the mass consciousness; there was its integration into the modern spiritual, cultural and scientific context. As applied to the work of Victoria Poleva and John Tavener, the accents made by S. Khoruzhiy suggest new philosophical solutions and help to take a fresh look at many problems of today’s man and society.

Before touching the musical and dramatic aspects of the artistic conception of the sacred compositions of Victoria Poleva and John Tavener, it is necessary to identify the essential beginning of the hesychast tradition under discussion. As it is known, the Hesychasts preached that the inexpressible Logos, the Word of God, is comprehended in silence<sup>22</sup>. Contemplative prayer, rejection of verbosity, comprehension of the Word in its depths – this is the way of knowing God, which is professed by the teachers of hesychasm. At its core, the hesychast tradition has a certain prayer practice. It includes the unceasing creation of the Jesus Prayer: “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*”. It is also called

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<sup>20</sup> In the understanding of N. Zhirtueva, hesychasm is a transcendent immanent (antinomic) mystical tradition of “uniting” with the Absolute not by essence, but by grace, with the help of the union of divine and human energies (synergy)” / Журтуева Н. С. Философско-мистические традиции мира: монография. Москва: Вузовский учебник: ИНФРА-М, 2017. С. 14.]

<sup>21</sup> Хоружий С. С. Исихазм как стержень православной духовности. URL: <https://afonit.info/biblioteka/nasledie-svyatoj-gory/s-khoruzhij-isikhazm-kak-sterzhen-pravoslavnoj-dukhnosti> (Last accessed: 21.12.2021).

<sup>22</sup> The term “hesychast” is very ancient, used from the IV century BC. It meant a hermit monk who was at rest (“silent”). Such hermit monks have been in Egypt and Syria since the earliest times of Christianity.

“brain prayer”<sup>23</sup>. This prayer, repeated dozens, hundreds of times, is included as a necessary element in every monastic rule. According to S. Khoruzhiy, this prayer practice includes not only the utterance of a prayer as such, but also a rather complex apparatus of prayer experience, which includes, first of all, the storage of a prayer: “During prayer, the mind must function in a very specific mode, which does not stand on its own. This is known to everyone who prays”<sup>24</sup>. Investigating the phenomenon of the brain prayer in the most detailed way, the philosopher focused on a special way of organizing the energies and activities of a person: “Such a configuration, which in consciousness and in the whole human being gives rise to a process, or mechanism, is of a completely new type, which simply could not happen to a person before. This process brings a person to the limits of his horizon of consciousness and makes him open to meeting with the energies of another being, another horizon of being, and these are the divine energies”<sup>25</sup>.

Of fundamental importance for hesychast practice is the contemplation of the Light of Tabor – the light that the apostles saw during the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ on the mountain: “Through this light, uncreated in its essence, as the hesychasts taught, the ascetic enters into communion with the Incomprehensible God. Filled with this light, the “silent man” partakes in the Divine life, is transformed into a new creature”<sup>26</sup>. “Deification (or theosis)<sup>27</sup> is the central concept of the hesychast tradition, “the

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<sup>23</sup> The stress in the word is precisely this: umnòye (brain), not ùmnoye (smart): “Ascetics specially distinguish between these terms, ùmnyi smart we call that which has some elements of the mind in itself, which is not alien to the mind. And umnòye is what is done by the mind itself, as a whole. And in this hesychast doing, it is the human mind, as a whole, that performs this doing” [Хоружий С. Умное делание или наука внимания. URL: <https://academy.foma.ru/umnoe-delanie-ili-nauka-vnimaniya.html> (Last accessed: 14.03.2021)].

<sup>24</sup> Хоружий С. «Практика себя». Искусство кино. 2000. № 12. URL: <https://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2000/12/n12-article28> (Last accessed: 26.11.2021).

<sup>25</sup> Хоружий С. Умное делание или наука внимания. URL: <https://academy.foma.ru/umnoe-delanie-ili-nauka-vnimaniya.html> (Last accessed: 14.03.2021).

<sup>26</sup> Наумов Д. А. Исихастская мистическая традиция в восточно-христианской богословской мысли. *Вестник ЧелГУ*. 2004. № 1. URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/isihastskaya-misticheskaya-traditsiya-v-vostochnohristianskoy-bogoslovskoy-mysli> (Last accessed: 21.12.2021).

<sup>27</sup> Theosis (ancient Greek θεός from θεός “god”) or “deification” is a Christian doctrine about the union of man with God, the communion of a created person to the uncreated divine life through the action of divine grace. Briefly, the meaning of deification is expressed in the statement of Athanasius the Great: “God became human so that man could be deified” – which means the potential opportunity for each person and the historical need for a person in general to gain inhuman power in possessing himself and the natural world around him in organic unity with God.



anthropological ideal of Orthodoxy” – “a kind of mystical transcendence”<sup>28</sup>. And this view is different from everything that we find in other traditions, as S. Khoruzhiy emphasizes: “The mystic of deification is not the mystic of ecstasy, meditation or contemplation. The practice of the hesychast is directed straightly and immediately to the integral and actual transformation of the “created fallen” nature of man into the Divine nature. It is this transformation that is called the Deification of man”<sup>29</sup>. In modern scientific language, the goal of mystical practice is the transformation of the individual and the world through the “deification of the creature”, which contributes to the “birth of an integration mystic that overcomes the conflict of spirit and body”. The main methods of psychopractice are “disciplinary asceticism, psychosomatic exercises, love-trust in the Absolute, brain prayer”<sup>30</sup>.

It is difficult to imagine something more mystical than human contact with God. Accessible and at the same time inaccessible to everyone, this *dialogue* can only be captured in general terms in words, no matter how extended the treatises of the spiritual mentors of mankind may be. There must be a moment of personal “turning on”, which opens the boundaries of the personality, giving access to everything that is *outside* ... To see *more* than a person is, to see the unmanifested, but much more real than the ego, – outstanding thinkers of the world have called for this at all times. Do we have the right to assert that Victoria Poleva and John Tavener directly (or indirectly) sought to display the sacrament of theosis? Perhaps we are in captivity of rational speculation and artificial ideas? If it were so easy to encode the presence of the sacred in music, many authors would probably resort to such “technologies”. And what happens at the linguistic level when it comes to the concept of spiritual transformation? What conditions of the musical and stylistic, compositional order must be observed in order to penetrate and convey the innermost space and time through sound? This list of questions can be continued and detailed. However, there can be no straightforward answers a priori. Just as each of us has our own “nirvana”, so deification is the highest mystery of the spirit, an immeasurable depth of faith and an infinite sense of unity with all that exists. But in addition to emotional and artistic associations and virtual analogies with the ideas of Orthodox hermit monks, we, as listeners, have one true means of interpreting hidden meanings – our own mystical experience. It is it that the creators of

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<sup>28</sup> Хоружий С. С. Исихазм как стержень православной духовности. URL: <https://afonit.info/biblioteka/nasledie-svyatoj-gory/s-khoruzhij-isikhazm-kak-sterzhen-pravoslavnoj-dukhovnosti> (Last accessed: 21.12.2021).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Жиртуева Н. С. Православный исихазм в контексте компаративного анализа философско-мистических традиций мира. *Вопросы философии*. 2017. № 3. С. 58.

sacred music appeal to, in no case imposing their own ideas, because they will always be subjective and finite.

We offer to *listen* to the magnificent musical compositions of Victoria Poleva and John Tavener through the prism of the ideology of theosis – a mystical phenomenon, the existence of which is not only silently unknown, but also opens like a gate to Heaven... Neither words nor music, by and large, is not needed for living a sacred dialogue. But *we* need them. Like a start, way and meaning...

The combination of the traditional beginning and new techniques distinguishes the style of many spiritual and musical compositions by **Victoria Poleva** – large and small genres. At the same time, the path that the author has chosen for herself, despite the genre and thematic diversity of composer's opuses, is striking in its centripetalism. A steady feeling of an indestructible spiritual core pervades all the author's compositions – whether they are instrumental “pictures” (*Null* for symphony orchestra (2006), *Nenia* for violin solo and orchestra (2004), *ONO* for orchestra (2004), *Transforma*, diptych for ensemble of soloists and orchestra (1993), *Langsam* for orchestra (1992, rev. 2009) or luminiferous choral compositions based on canonical texts (*Mother of Light* (2003), *Offering to Alipy of the Caves* (2010), *Christ is Risen* (2009), *The Symbol of Faith* (2008), *Beatitudes* (2003)), *An offering to Pärt* (2003), *An Angel proclaimed* (2001), *David's Psalm 50* (2000), *Light chants* (2000). A special semantic mix occurs when voices grow into the orchestral tissue, giving rise to a unique – both artistic and philosophical – resonance (*Credo* on canonical text, version for mixed choir and symphony orchestra (2009), *Music of Summer*, chamber cantata on verses by J. Brodsky for solo violin, children's choir and strings (2008), *Nē man is an Island*, chamber cantata and on the text by D. Donn for mezzo-soprano (women's choir), strings and piano (2006).

Victoria Poleva thinks with a whole, each of her choirs is a complete cycle of “brain doing”. Choral opuses are very different. There are compositions that unfold “horizontally”, with a clear interdependence of music and verbal text – rhythm and meter are clearly expressed in such compositions. And there are compositions where the musical movement has qualitatively different characteristics, touching the area of trance states. It is to this type of choral miniatures that *O fervent prayer* on canonical text for soprano and women's choir *a cappella* (2007).

In fact, this is a composition about *how* you can get away from yourself – a closed and finite self. The composer boldly and sincerely says that this path is very long, winding and different in every next moment. The music of the choir is monolithic – it seems to be hanging on invisible colossi

in space. The sound fabric flows, leaving no space for the slightest void. The first phrase of the choir is like the self-discovery of the cosmos: the music appears out of nowhere – just as a natural phenomenon taken for granted manifests itself as a sacred presence. This effect of suddenly discovering what is *beyond* the sound is stunning. Life arises right at once, here and now, without cause and effect, without beginning and end. It should be emphasized that it can also easily and suddenly stop – just go to another state. This *game* of states is the main expressive and conceptual feature of the *O fervent prayer*.

It is important that the arsenal of technical means used by the composer in this composition is extremely simple: long choral pedals, an extremely narrow range of the melodic solo part, a non-periodic structure of the metro rhythm, a wide register coverage within the harmonic consonances. The sliding of the melody is especially expressive against the background of motionless pedals. N. Gulyanitskaya emphasizes the extraordinary beauty and grace with which the composer develops the modal tonality: “Attention of the listener is “caught” by harmonic turns: they are based on a chain of side and main steps, the originality of which is voiced by multiple parallel fifths. At the same time, the vertical is “modernized” by consonances with intruding or secondary tones. All this sounds unobtrusive and natural in the flow of musical narration, where the principle of *i:m:t* dramaturgy (exposition – development – conclusion) is preserved”<sup>31</sup>. In addition to the above-mentioned, it should be noted that modern features are also tangible in the constructive organization: the intonational outline of the composition is associated with minimalist repetitiveness – patterns that repeat in the process of movement. As a folded matrix of meanings with an invariable return to the original rod – this is how the energy impact of this sonorous canvas can be described.

The work of **John Tavener** (1944–2013) stands apart in the panorama of contemporary British music. Almost all of it is devoted to religious issues and is closely connected with the tradition of Russian spiritual chanting. As it is known, Sir John is the only composer in Britain who converted to Orthodoxy. The search for his voice in the tradition was long and difficult for John Tavener. On the advice of Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom), Bishop of the Diocese of Sourozh, rector of the Assumption Cathedral in London, in the year of his conversion to Orthodoxy, Tavener wrote the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (1977) and since that time he has found artistic support in the Orthodox liturgical tradition. In his compositions, the 62-year-old composer, knighted by the Queen of Great Britain, sought to revive the

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<sup>31</sup> Гуляницкая Н. Поэтика музыкальной композиции : Теоретические аспекты русской духовной музыки XX века. Москва : Музыка, 2002. С. 192.

musical culture of those times when music was part of the liturgical action and an expression of mystical union with God.

The life and work of John Tavener was directed towards the search for lost landmarks in art. The musician graduated from the Royal Academy of Music in London, was brought up in the musical direction of his time – modernism, and in 1968, at the age of 24, had a great success with the public and in the musical environment after the premiere of the dramatic rope *The Whale* (1966). Despite the fame and popularity gained after the performance of his composition, written under the influence of modernism, Tavener rushes along a completely different path. Spiritual search for a return to the living traditions in music, lost, according to the composer, in the West, became the main ideas of his work. In search of the deep foundations of music and the corresponding musical language, John Tavener turns to the traditions of various peoples, cultures and religious denominations. The central period of the composer's work of more than twenty years (from the late 70s to the late 90s of the XX century) is associated mainly with an appeal to Orthodox traditions, Old Russian, Byzantine, Greek cultures.

John Tavener did not know Russian, however, among his works there are not only compositions where texts in Russian are combined with texts in other languages, but also compositions written totally in Russian. The latter include *Six Russian Folk Songs* (1978), *Akhmatova: Requiem* (1980), *Akhmatova Songs* (1993) in two orchestrated versions. The essay *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (2012) was written in English and Russian. Tavener's compositions in other languages include *Lamentation, Last Prayer and Exaltation* (1977) in Church Slavonic, Gaelic and Latin, *Prayer for the World* (1981) in Church Slavonic, English and Greek, *The Ode of Saint Andrew of Crete* (1981) in English, Greek and Church Slavonic, *Orthodox Vigil Service* (1984) in Church Slavonic, English and Greek, *Akathist of Thanksgiving* (1987) in Church Slavonic and English, *Resurrection* (1989) in English, Greek and Church Slavonic; *Svyati* (1995) in Church Slavonic; *The Veil of the Temple (All night vigil)* (2002) in Aramaic, Church Slavonic, English, Greek and Sanskrit.

It is important to emphasize that Orthodoxy was not the only source of inspiration for Tavener – the composer actively turned to Sufi music, Coptic art, and the art of the American Indians. In many compositions of the beginning of the XXI century, the composer combined in his music the traditions of various religious denominations – Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and others. To a large extent, this was due to the fact that in the first years of the new millennium, the object of his interest was the philosophical system of the Swiss metaphysician Frithjof Schuon, which covers various religious traditions<sup>32</sup>. This change in the

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<sup>32</sup> *Frithjof Schuon* (18 June 1907–5 May 1998) was a Swiss metaphysician of German descent, belonging to the Perennialist or Traditionalist School of thought. He was the

direction of his views is evident in compositions written since 2001, such as *The Veil of the Temple* for soprano, instrumental ensemble, choir and boys' choir (2002), which includes elements of Sufi poetry, as well as Christian, Muslim and Hindu texts; *The Beautiful Names* for choir and orchestra (2007, text based on 99 Koranic names of Allah); *Requiem* (2007), where fragments from the Koran and Upanishads are included in the Catholic text, as well as the Hindu-inspired work *Lalishri* (2006) for solo violin and strings, written for Nicola Benedetti. The composition *Popule meus* (2009) for cello solo and strings is described by the composer himself as a reflection on the Catholic text "O my people! What have I done to you and how have I burdened you?" What did this mean for Tavener, who remained an Orthodox Christian until the end of his days? In one of his last interviews, the author mentions the composition *The Veil of the Temple (All night vigil)* (2002) written in 2002: "My seven-hour vigil "The Veil of the Temple" is built as an Orthodox vigil, but inside its structure there are aspects of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Native American religion. The way forward must now be universalist, but we must always hold on to our Orthodox roots"<sup>33</sup>.

*The Protecting Veil* for cello and string orchestra (1987) is a late 20th-century classical composition for cello and strings by British composer John Tavener. Completed in 1988, the work was begun in response to a request

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author of more than twenty works in French on metaphysics, spirituality, the religious phenomenon, anthropology and art, which have been translated into English and many other languages. He was also a painter and a poet.

With René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy, Schuon is recognized as one of the major 20th-century representatives of the philosophia perennis. Like them, he affirmed the reality of an absolute Principle – God – from which the universe emanates, and maintained that all divine revelations, despite their differences, possess a common essence: one and the same Truth. He also shared with them the certitude that man is potentially capable of supra-rational knowledge, and undertook a sustained critique of the modern mentality severed from its traditional roots. Following Plato, Plotinus, Adi Shankara, Meister Eckhardt, Ibn Arabī and other metaphysicians, Schuon affirmed the metaphysical unity between the Principle and its manifestation.

Initiated by Sheikh Ahmad al-Alawī into the Sufi Shādhilī order, he founded the Tariqa Maryamiyya. His teaching strongly emphasizes the universality of metaphysical doctrine, along with the necessity of practising one religion, and one alone; he also insists on the importance of the virtues and of beauty.

Schuon cultivated close relationships with a large number of personages of diverse religious and spiritual horizons. He had a particular interest in the traditions of the North American Plains Indians, maintaining firm friendships with a number of their leaders and being adopted into both a Lakota Sioux tribe and the Crow tribe. Having spent a large part of his life in France and Switzerland, at the age of 73 he emigrated to the United States [Frith] of Schuon. URL: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frithjof\\_Schuon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frithjof_Schuon)].

<sup>33</sup> Dixon G. We Must Always Keep Our Orthodox Roots: An Interview with Sir John Tavener. Tuesday, 26 February 2013. URL: <http://orpheuscomplex.blogspot.com/2013/02/we-must-always-keep-our-orthodox-roots.html> (Last accessed: 16.03.2022).

from cellist Steven Isserlis for a short (10-minute) piece. It soon developed into a more substantial work, and was subsequently commissioned by the BBC for the 1989 Proms season. Like many of Tavener's compositions, this work reflects the composer's Russian Orthodox religious faith. The inspiration for the piece comes from the Orthodox feast of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God, which commemorates the apparition of Mary the Theotokos in the early 10th Century at the Blachernae Palace church in Constantinople.

Comparing to the choral paintings by V. Poleva, a fundamentally different approach to displaying the sacred is obvious: from J. Tavener we hear not a one-time inclusion in a different space and time, but the sequential discovery of all its "elements". A storyline of "events" emerges, in other words, *the dramaturgy* of a "sacred dialogue". Thus, at the level of the whole, a multi-part composition is formed with logical thematic arcs and culminating peaks. The composition, which has a performance time of approximately 45 minutes, is divided into eight sections, each of which is based on an icon in the life of the Virgin Mary:

*The Protecting Veil*

*The Nativity of the Mother of God*

*The Annunciation*

*The Incarnation*

*The Lament of the Mother of God at the Cross*

*The Resurrection*

*The Dormition*

*The Protecting Veil*

The main tool for the development of musical material is texture, the density of which reflects the semantic process of approaching or removing the sacred. Tavener seems to "lower" the music from the Top, making it visible. In other words, music *does not become*, but *manifests* itself. The expressive difference between the "male" perception of the sacred lies in the emphasis on the variability of all textural lines. There is no weightlessness, soaring, striving to preserve the sacrament of the sacred presence intact: the composer bravely and unconditionally "picks up" sacred energy and examines it admiringly. The effect of the absolute naturalness of what is happening is created: the world of the deity is accessible and turned to man. The music seems to contain a symbolic "invitation" to co-participation. Pronounced melodism, bright delineation of textural lines, clear dynamic logic, declamatory nature of the material, up to genre associations (anthem, fanfare, baroque allusions) – all this creates a prism of "reality", makes the sacred image close and understandable, no matter how paradoxical it may seem.

## CONCLUSIONS

“The work of self-gathering, bringing the whole human being into a single center is not in itself the goal of the spiritual process, the spiritual work of a person,” S. Khoruzhiy wrote. – Only the true unity of man with God is recognized as such a goal – deification<sup>34</sup>. And in achieving this unity, the described “work of the heart”: “to collect and organize all the forces and abilities, thoughts and desires of a person, bring them out of dispersion, out of chaos and discord, stop the hypertrophied growth of some to the detriment of others, is only the initial, preparatory stage”. The music of Victoria Poleva and John Tavener already testifies to the next stage – the achievement of the level of “internal asceticism” (S. Khoruzhiy): “Here a person should not follow his nature, but surpass it, elevate it to the highest, divine dignity, in an incomprehensible way “turn out to be more than himself”<sup>35</sup>. “For me, the limits, the boundaries of space, are extremely important,” the author repeatedly noted in her statements. – You always want to expand them, to step over the line of “limiting possibilities”. Therefore, I often try to use extreme registers, extreme dynamic ranges, extreme tempos. I always remember the saying of Elder Siluan: “Keep your mind in hell and do not despair”. On the one hand, there is hell, on the other, there is hope. This gives rise to the strongest tension, stress, suffering, but also hope, the possibility of overcoming. This is the source...”<sup>36</sup>. Such a simple and capacious author’s statement contains the key to understanding the sacred content of Victoria Poleva’s compositions.

Summarizing the observations proposed in this study, we can say that the awareness of the artistic significance of a particular contemporary work of art is most fully revealed only in connection with a rethinking of the deep roots that link the new with tradition. And this tradition can and should be regularly “reincarnated” in new cultural meanings and forms. That is why the conversation about the sacrament of theosis in the context of rethinking the ancient ascetic practice of hesychasm is more relevant today than ever. How does it feel to cease to belong to oneself, leaving the soul to the Divine will? Is it sacrifice or happiness, loss of identity or gaining freedom? Like an icon, which “has the goal of bringing consciousness into the spiritual world,

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<sup>34</sup> Хоружий С. С. Диптих безмолвия. Аскетическое учение о человеке в богословском и философском освещении. Москва : Центр психологии и психотерапии, 1991. С. 23. URL: <https://predanie.ru/book/90073-diptih-bezmolviya/#/toc1> (Last accessed: 21.12.2021).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Москалец А. «Хочется переступить через грань «пределных возможностей». URL: <https://day.kyiv.ua/ru/article/kultura/hochetsya-perestupit-cherez-gran-predelnyh-vozmozhnostey> (Last accessed: 11.10.2021).

showing secret and supernatural spectacles”<sup>37</sup>, the music of *O fervent prayer* and *The Protecting Veil* is not an image established once and for ever – it is a living organism that changes along with its contemplator. Perhaps the greatest art of the human soul is to be *known*. And this is what the music of Victoria Poleva and John Tavener is about.

## SUMMARY

The paper considers the specific forms of reflection in modern music of the sphere of sacred imagery. The relevance of the key positions of the hesychast tradition in the context of moral, ethical and philosophical views of the first third of the XXI century is argued. On the material of *O fervent prayer* on canonical text for soprano and women’s choir *a cappella* (2007) by Victoria Poleva and *The Protecting Veil* for cello and string orchestra (1987) by John Tavener, the lines of succession in the work of both composers with the spiritual tradition of hesychasm are identified, conceptual and ideological fundamentals of the theosis are uncovered.

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