

Prayers from the Old Church is a three-movement work for SATB a cappella choir and alto soloist based on prayers from the Russian Orthodox Church. Church-Slavonic texts and their translations are taken from the *Old Orthodox Prayer Book*, which uses pre-Niconian sources favored by Old Ritualists.¹ The prayers were selected due to their significance to the history of the church and to my own personal experience as an Orthodox Christian.

The three prayers in the piece come from the Canon to Jesus Christ and the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom.

The Jesus Prayer (Молитва Иисусова)

The Jesus Prayer, a refrain taken from the Canon to Our Lord Jesus Christ, opens the work. Traditionally, “The Prayer of the Heart” is a hesychastic practice: through repetition of the prayer, the hesychast may focus his or her attention and obtain *Theoria* (illumination), absorb the spirit of the prayer into him- or herself, and will pray ceaselessly and unconsciously. It can be loosely compared to the practice of meditation.

Prayers from the Old Church opens with the Valaam chant melody in Church-Slavonic, sung by Alto soloist. I chose to open the piece with an alto voice to reflect my own background in choir and church singing, and to honor my grandmother, sister, and many cousins who were baptized Orthodox. The Valaam chant style developed in the Valaam monastery by way of simplified Byzantine chant. The second iteration of the chant is harmonized in the traditional way: in two parts, melody and ison. The third iteration introduces the four-part choir. The transition uses an abbreviated version of the chant, in Ukrainian. This iteration in a vernacular language is an acknowledgement of my personal ancestry: the language in which my grandparents, and modern Ukrainians, would pray.

The Cherubic Hymn (Херувимская пѣснь)

During the normal Divine Liturgy, the Cherubic Hymn is divided into two halves and occurs during the Great Entrance. The Great Entrance occurs between these halves, when the offering of bread and wine are brought from the Prothesis (the altar, through the Holy Doors and behind the iconostasis) to the Holy Table inside the sanctuary.

The second movement of *Prayers from the Old Church* is longer, and more demanding, than the outer two movements; it can be parsed into two large sections: the first of more somber quality than the second. The movement is set mostly homophonically in four parts, as is traditional of other settings of the prayer. At the point where the Great Entrance would occur, there is a melody/drone transitional section that features the basses. I chose to feature the male voices in this movement to call to mind the extraordinary male choirs that are heard in Orthodox churches throughout Russia and the rest of the world. The second half of the movement

¹ Hieromonk German Ciuba, Hieromonk John Berzins, Archpriest Pimen Simon, and Priest Theodore Jurewicz, eds. and trans., *Old Orthodox Prayer Book* 2nd ed. (Erie, PA: Russian Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Christ (Old Rite), 2001), vi-vii.

concludes with a repeated phrase on *Alleluia* in B-flat major, which connects it to the unison B-flat that starts the final prayer: the Lord's Prayer.

The Lord's Prayer (Отче Наш)

The final movement sets a prayer that is universally-known in Christianity. I have chosen to use the Ukrainian translation of the text for this movement in homage to my late parents, who were both children of Ukrainian immigrants. The movement begins with the choir singing *sotto voce* in unison, to reflect themes of unity, simplicity, and peace. The melody is of my own design, though chant-like in style. It serves to close the movement as well, fragmented between voice parts and harmonized polyphonically.