



Conspirare asked composer Benedict Sheehan a few questions to learn more about his *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*. Conspirare will present the Southwest Premiere of this work along with a newly-commissioned Credo movement on February 18 and 19, 2022.

Conspirare: *For someone who may be hearing the word liturgy for a first time, what is important for them to know about this liturgy or liturgies broadly before they listen (or, what would be helpful to know to enhance listening).*

Sheehan: Broadly speaking, the “Divine Liturgy” is the eucharistic service (i.e., communion service) of the Eastern Orthodox church. It is equivalent to the “Mass” of the Western churches. Over the course of history there have been many different eucharistic liturgies in use in both the Eastern and Western churches, but the one attributed to St. John Chrysostom—a 4th-century bishop known, in part, for his immense eloquence (the honorific “Chrysostom” means “golden-mouthed”)—is the one most commonly used in Eastern Orthodox churches today.

The central event of the Liturgy is the consecration of bread and wine to become the Eucharist, the body and blood of Jesus Christ, in which believers partake. The climax of this sacred action occurs during the *Anaphora*, or “lifting up”—Movement 11 of my piece—when the priest lifts up the bread and wine and says “offering unto thee thine own of thine own, on behalf of all and for all...” The choir then finishes the sentence, singing: “...we praise thee, we bless thee, we give thanks unto thee, O Lord, and we pray unto thee, O our God.” This, in a sense, is the moment of contact between heaven and earth, the moment at which the uncreated and eternal are united with the created and temporal and all people become partakers in that mysterious union. It is also the most intense and focused moment in my composition, the point where everything sort of converges in a moment of deep quiet and awe.

In another sense, though, the Liturgy as a whole is, in effect, this “event” of consecration. An important 20th-century priest and theologian, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, often emphasized the idea that it is not simply the bread of the

Eucharist that is the body of Christ, but that it is the assembled faithful who, in their very act of gathering in love and thanksgiving, become the body of Christ. As we saw in the event I mentioned earlier, the offering of the priest—"thine of thine own"—is ultimately fulfilled in the people singing, "we praise thee." Seen from this perspective, then, one can understand that the Liturgy is not simply a sacramental act performed by a priest, but that it is, in fact, a community of love. In composing my piece I have tried to incorporate both of these aspects inherent in the Liturgy—the transcendent and the immanent; the sublime and the familiar; the divine and the human.

Conspirare: *Is there anything that is especially important to understand or be aware of about the English-language Russian-Orthodox tradition as one listens?*

Sheehan: English-language Orthodoxy is a fairly new phenomenon. Orthodox parishes in America didn't really start using English at all until the 1950s, and most didn't start making the change until the 1970s. Many parishes have never made the transition, or are only beginning to consider it.

This means, among other things, that the amount of music written expressly for the English Liturgy is quite small, relatively speaking. In churches with a Russian Orthodox heritage—most of the parishes I've been a part of fit this description—the vast majority of musical settings were originally composed for Church Slavonic and then transcribed into English. The resulting settings often suffer, in my opinion, from a deep disconnect between music and text. Even the most skillful attempts seldom seem to me to be truly "at home" in their English versions. As a composer who spends a great deal of time setting words to music, it seems genuinely impossible to me that one could simply remove the text of a piece and replace it with words in another language and still have something that retains its artistic integrity. For me the text builds all the musical shapes from the ground up. One of my principal goals in writing my Liturgy, therefore, was to try to create music that was genuinely at home in English. And not just at home in terms of the English texts, but somehow at home in America in the 21st century, with all the ambiguities and subtle cultural transformations that necessarily go with that notion. This doesn't mean that my aim was to break with the Russian Orthodox tradition. Quite the opposite, in fact. My aim was, and still is, to help carry that tradition forward, to help it evolve and have new life in this time and place. Biologically speaking, life that doesn't evolve and adapt to new circumstances dies. Essentially, life that doesn't evolve isn't life. I think the same is true of tradition—a tradition that doesn't evolve is in fact not a tradition at all, but just a lifeless abstraction, a mere principle. I want something alive to pass on to the next generation—I want a real tradition—and so I will do what I can to help the Russian Orthodox tradition evolve and grow.

Conspirare: *The upcoming performances of the St. John Liturgy will include a new Credo. What inspired you to set W. E. B Du Bois's credo?*

Sheehan: When Craig shared the DuBois text with me, I was immediately drawn to it. I've long felt a desire to grapple with issues of racial justice and equality through the medium of Orthodox sacred music, and that's not something that has really happened as yet. The DuBois text has a character that is in many ways very similar to the style of Orthodox hymnography, but it deals with themes that I think could be more explicitly addressed in an Orthodox context. *Credo* seemed to me to be the perfect entry point. Also, over the last several years I've been doing a lot with combining choral music and narration, and I was eager to work with the DuBois text in that way. Orthodox services constantly move between reading, chanting, and choral singing, and I love building that kind of dynamism into my pieces. I'm extremely excited to be working on this.

Conspirare: *Did you have any trepidation or reservations about including a non-sacred text in the Liturgy?*

Sheehan: Given that this is a concert performance and not a liturgical service, I don't feel that there's any problem with incorporating a non-liturgical text into the Liturgy. This piece isn't meant to replace the Nicene Creed that's prescribed for the Orthodox Liturgy. Rather, my intention is to, as it were, "riff" on the Creed in a performance context. Of course, it's possible that it will still make some folks uncomfortable to have something so different take the place of the Creed, even in a concert, but I'm happy with a little bit of discomfort. The issues DuBois addresses in his text *should* make us uncomfortable. My goal here is to give a voice within a concert performance to things that have too often been passed over in silence.

Conspirare: *As you have spent time with DuBois' text, does anything in particular resonate with you?*

Sheehan: I find myself moved by almost everything in this amazing text, but especially by the second-to-last stanza which talks about "the training of children" and the need to lead children into "Life lit by some large vision of beauty and goodness and truth." To me, the surest way out of the chaos of our current cultural moment, out of our seemingly inescapable cycles of violence and injustice, is to give people—and young people in particular—a "large vision" to live for. If we are unable to truly "have a dream" of what the world could be like—of how much beauty and love and justice there could be—then we will remain trapped in the same endlessly repeating patterns of hatred and mistrust. The work of crafting that vision falls, I think, not to politicians or sociologists, but to artists, musicians, and storytellers. We need to be inspired—we need to *want* something different, not to just say we need it. And the best place to start doing this is with young people,

people who have not made up their minds about everything or gotten too entrenched in habits of life and mind.

Conspirare: *Is there anything else you would like listeners to know about St. John Liturgy?*

Sheehan: I want people to know that the Orthodox Liturgy can be a place for everyone, whoever they are and whatever they may believe. Since the early centuries of Christianity, sacramental participation in the Orthodox Church has been restricted to observant believers. But this does not mean that the experience of the Liturgy in all its transcendent beauty has to be a closed door for everyone else. My goal in writing my piece is, in part, to offer anyone who wants it a taste of the rich beauty of the Liturgy, a beauty that has no boundaries. Right at the beginning of the Liturgy the deacon prays “for the the peace of the whole word”—my hope is that, through my music, everyone can experience something of that peace.

About Benedict Sheehan:

GRAMMY®-nominated conductor and composer Benedict Sheehan has been called “a choral conductor and composer to watch in the 21st century” (Linda Holt, *ConcertoNet*) and “one of the most important voices in American Orthodox choral music” (*Choral Journal*). He is Artistic Director of the Saint Tikhon Choir and Artefact Ensemble, as well as Director of Music at St. Tikhon’s Monastery and Seminary in Pennsylvania. His *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Cappella Records, 2020), on which he conducts the Saint Tikhon Choir, received a 2022 GRAMMY® nomination for Best Choral Performance, the 2021 American Prize in Choral Conducting (2nd Place) and Choral Composition (Best Use of Traditional Elements), and has garnered critical acclaim as “simply beyond praise for excellence” (*Fanfare*), “radiant...superb...a masterpiece” (*MusicWeb International*), “fresh and vibrant” (*Audiophile Audition*), “inventive, moving, and extravagantly beautiful” (*The American Organist*), and “a new standard for excellence in the American choral landscape” (*The Living Church Magazine*). His music is published by Oxford University Press, Artefact Publications, Musica Russica, and others. He lives and works in Pennsylvania with his wife, vocalist and music educator Talia Maria Sheehan, and together they have seven daughters ranging in age from five to twenty-one. He writes his music in a tiny office that he calls his “cupboard under the stairs,” where he is currently working on (among other things) an oratorio for chorus, narrator, and chamber orchestra called *Akathist* in collaboration with fantasy novelist Nicholas Kotar. Learn more at www.benedictsheehanmusic.com

