

New appreciation urged for classical music's contributions to church

WASHINGTON - Classical music is underappreciated for its spiritual contribution to the church, the metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church said in a Feb. 9 address at The Catholic University of America.

"I am well aware of the insignificant number of young people who listen to classical music, whereas almost everyone listens to popular music," said Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev. "This I consider to be a real tragedy."

However, he said he believes secular music "is possible within Christianity, including that which exceeds the limits of classical music which I love so much."

"Christianity is inclusive; it does not set strict canonical limits to art," he said, adding that "Christianity can even inspire a secular artist" to convey sacred messages in "the language of modern musical culture."

Metropolitan Hilarion, who is the archbishop of Volokolamsk and a permanent member of the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Moscow, delivered a multimedia presentation on "The Intersection of Music and Faith" to students, faculty and guests in the university's Caldwell Hall Auditorium.

Trained in violin, piano and composition, the metropolitan served in the Soviet military before entering the monastery in 1987. He has a master's in theology from the Moscow Theological Academy and a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Oxford in Great Britain. He has the author of more than 300 published monographs and other written works and has composed numerous musical works.

His composition "St. Matthew Passion," a grand oratorio for soloists, choir and orchestra written in 2006, has received standing ovations at performances in Moscow, Rome and Melbourne, Australia. Its English-language U.S. premiere was Feb. 7 in New York City. His 2007 "Christmas Oratorio" has been performed in

Washington, Boston and New York to critical acclaim.

In his presentation, Metropolitan Hilarion emphasized that genuine art serves God either directly or indirectly and even if it is not intended for worship, it can be dedicated to God.

“The works of Beethoven and Brahms may not directly praise God, yet they are capable of elevating the human person morally and educating him spiritually,” he said.

He praised Bach for music that he said contains a universal element that is all-embracing. He added that the composer was able to combine “unsurpassed compositional skill” with rare diversity, true beauty and profound spirituality.

“Even Bach’s secular music is permeated by a sense of love for God, of standing in God’s presence, of awe before him,” he said.

He commented that Bach, a Lutheran, was “truly ‘catholic,’” the original Greek term meaning “universal” or “all-embracing,” for he saw the church as “a universal organism.”

Bach’s music “belongs to the world as a whole and to each citizen separately,” he said.

The metropolitan used his own spiritual journey as an example of how faith and music can intersect. He was always a talented musician but one time he intentionally abandoned music because he felt caught between ministry to music and ministry to the church. He chose to renounce the world, including his love for music, to follow his calling to serve the church.

“I neither played musical instruments, nor even listened to recorded music,” he said.

Slowly, Metropolitan Hilarion changed his outlook, but it took listening to a performance of one of his own compositions at a festival of Orthodox music he was invited to attend. It helped him realize there was a piece of himself that was missing, he said.

“Listening to my own music, something stirred inside me, and I began to compose again almost at once,” he said.

His presentation was a part of a series of events celebrating the theme of Catholic University President John Garvey’s inaugural year: “Intellect and Virtue: The Idea of a Catholic University.”