

Christmas Oratorio

MUSIC BY
BISHOP HILARION ALFEYEV

THE RUSSIAN DEFENSE MINISTRY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

THE CHOIR OF THE TRETYAKOV GALLERY

**THE YOUTH CHOIR OF THE MUSICAL COLLEGE
BY THE MOSCOW CONSERVATORY**

THE WASHINGTON DC BOYS CHOIR

CONDUCTED BY
VALERY KHALILOV

17 December 2007
7:30 P.M.

BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF
THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, Washington, D.C.

Notes

Christ is born; glorify him. Christ is from heaven; go and meet him. Christ is on earth; be exalted. O All the earth, sing unto the Lord. With these words Saint Gregory Nazianzen began his Christmas homily in the end of the fourth century, and they have been a part of the Orthodox Nativity service ever since. We will hear them tonight sung by two Orthodox choirs, who came from Russia to share with you the joy of Christmas.

Many religions promise to bring people nearer to God in order that they may experience a certain degree of closeness and intimacy but no religion other than Christianity enables humans to know God as a friend, as a brother.

Through the Incarnation of the Lord we become sons and daughters of God the Father and brothers and sisters of Christ. God became incarnate in order to communicate with humanity as his equal. Having shared our destiny and our life, Christ earned the right to pronounce the last truth about himself and about us, a truth that could not be revealed in any other way. This truth teaches us

that there is no chasm separating God and humans; there are no insurmountable obstacles to our encounter with God, one on one, face to face.

This meeting takes place in our hearts. To make it possible, God came to earth, became man and lived a human life. He was born in a manger in Bethlehem, escaped to Egypt, returned to Nazareth, was raised in a carpenter's home, was baptized, went out to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven and to heal human illnesses. He also underwent suffering and death on the cross, was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. All this was done with one sole purpose: to make possible that mysterious encounter between God and mankind, to destroy the barrier between us and God erected by human sin.

The greatest mystery of the Incarnation is that, having happened once in history, it recurs in every person that comes to Christ. In the deep silence of the night the Word of God became incarnate on earth: this is how the Word becomes incarnate in the silent depths of our soul, where our mind lapses

into silence, where words cease, where our spirit stands before God. Christ was born on earth unknown and unrecognized, for only the magi and the shepherds went to meet him. In the same way, quietly and unrecognizably to others, Christ is born in our soul; our soul comes out to meet him, because a star has been born within, leading to the light.

We mysteriously recognize Christ in us during prayer, when we discover that our prayer has been accepted and heard, that God *'came and abode in us'* and filled us with his life-bearing presence. We encounter Christ in the Eucharist, when, having received his body and blood, we feel that our own body is penetrated by his divine energy, and the blood of God runs through our veins. We encounter Christ in other sacraments of the Church, when through contiguity with him we are renewed and revived unto eternal life. We encounter Christ in our neighbor, when we gain sight of his innermost depth where the image of God shines. We encounter Christ in our everyday life, when amidst its noise we hear his beckoning voice or when we

see his manifest intrusion into the course of history.

Precisely so—unexpectedly and suddenly—God intruded into the life of humanity twenty centuries ago, when by his birth he turned the course of history. Precisely so is he born again and again in the souls of thousands of people, changing, transforming and transfiguring their lives, making believers out of non-believers, saints out of sinners, saved out of dying.

When, around two thousand years ago, the Divine Infant was born, the angels sang, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.* (Luke 2:14) We will hear these words at the end of the concert sung by two Russian choirs and the Washington D.C. Boys Choir.

May the Divine Child born in Bethlehem, grant peace to the entire world and good will to all peoples.

Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev

CHRISTMAS ORATORIO

for soloists, boys choir, mixed chorus and symphony orchestra

At the heart of this composition lies the Gospel narrative of the birth and early days of the life of Jesus Christ on earth. The libretto uses Orthodox liturgical texts from the feasts of the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple.

Recitative for the bass and the baritone is interspersed by a variety of musical pieces for soloists and orchestra, for one or two choirs and orchestra, soloists and choir, orchestra without choir, and for two choirs *a capella*, singing alternately. The score includes three arias, for a treble, soprano and bass; two orchestral fugues, one for full symphony orchestra and one for the strings; as well as many choral pieces.

Like Bishop Hilarion's earlier work, the *Saint Matthew Passion*, this oratorio is characterized by the scale of the composition, the depth of the choral and orchestral scoring, the clarity of the melody and the widespread use of vocal harmonies. In its style and dramatization however, it is unlike *The Passion*,

which owed its intonation and style to Russian liturgical choral music of the 19th century and to the German master, Johann Sebastian Bach. Baroque models play no significant role in the *Christmas Oratorio* and the liturgical choral style is not the dominant one. Where *The Passion* was deliberately "ascetic" in its use of one choir and string orchestra; in contrast, this oratorio is composed for two choirs and full orchestra: strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion, including timpani, *campanelli* and tubular bells.

The dramatization is the movement from darkness to light, from the Old Testament to the New, from the painful expectation of the Messiah to the triumphant joy of mankind's salvation by God incarnate. The song of the angels glorifying the Son of God who is born in Bethlehem is joined by that of humans. This combined exaltation is symbolized by the singing of 2 choirs—the boys choir and the mixed choir.

The oratorio opens with the ringing of a bell, which serves a musical

epigraph for the whole composition, focusing the attention of the listener and reminding him of the essential character of the oratorio, that of a musical and a liturgical drama.

The first three movements of the oratorio (choral introduction, recitative and fugue) serve as an Old Testament prelude to the Gospel narrative of the birth of Christ.

The choir begins with a passacaglia (a repeated, unchanging pattern) with the bass singing, *O come, let us worship the Lord our God*. The line is repeated and with each repetition it is joined by another instrument, first, voices, the double basses play in unison, then the cellos, the violas, the tenor and bass sections of the choir, then the sopranos and altos, the woodwinds, the horns, the trombones and the trumpets. The momentum builds; with the addition of each new instrument and voice, the volume swells from the hollow timbre of the double basses and cellos at the beginning, to the powerful choral and orchestral tutti at the end of this movement.

Following the choral introduction there is a bass recitative, including a selection of verses from the first chapters of the Book of Isaiah. There follows an orchestral fugue in A-minor for six voices; a tense, chromatic theme is played first

by the cellos, then the violas, the second violins, first violins, oboes and flutes.

This Gospel story begins with the reading about the appearance of the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26-35, 38). Following this recitative from the evangelist is an air for Soprano, *Revealing to You the Pre-Eternal Counsel*.

Various musical pieces and Gospel readings follow. The story of the Nativity of Christ slowly unfolds through the music and liturgical texts.

The final chorus, *Glory to God in the Highest*, is the culmination of the composition. The two choirs and are joined by the entire orchestra. In the final passages the scoring of the choir and orchestra imitates the peal of bells. This is further enhanced by the use of bells, handbells and timpani. The oratorio closes with a jubilant *fortissimo* passage for both choirs and full orchestra.

Part the First

1. CHORUS

Come, Let Us Worship

Come, let us worship God our King.

Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ our King and God.

Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ Himself, our King and God.

Come, let us worship and fall down before Him.

2. RECITATIVE

Isaiah (1:2,16; 7:13–15; 8:9–10; 9:1, 6–7)

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. Hear then, O house of David! The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

Be broken, you peoples, and be shattered; give ear, all you far countries; strap on your armor and be shattered; strap on your armor and be shattered. Take counsel together, but it will come to nothing; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

3. FUGUE

4. EVANGELIST

Luke (1:26–35, 38)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

5. AIR

Revealing to You the Pre-Eternal Counsel

Revealing to you the pre-eternal counsel, Gabriel came and stood before you, O Maid; and greeting you, he said: 'Hail, you earth that has not been sown; hail, you burning bush that remains unconsumed; hail, you unsearchable depth; hail, you bridge that leads to heaven, and ladder raised on high that Jacob saw; hail, you divine jar of manna; hail, you deliverance from the curse; hail, you restoration of Adam, the Lord is with you'.

6. EVANGELIST

Matthew (1:18–23)

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel", which means, God is with us.

7. CHORUS

God Is with Us

God is with us, understand you nations, and submit:
for God is with us.
To the ends of the earth give ear:
for God is with us.
Submit, you mighty ones:
for God is with us.
If again you become strong, you will also submit again:
for God is with us.
And whatever you plan, the Lord will scatter it:
for God is with us.
And whatever word you speak, it will not remain among you:
for God is with us.
Fear of you we shall not fear, nor shall we be troubled:
for God is with us.
The Lord our God, let us sanctify him, and he will be our fear:
for God is with us.
And if I should trust in him, he will be sanctification for me:
for God is with us.
And I will trust in him, and I will be saved through him:
for God is with us.
Here am I and the children whom God has given me:
for God is with us.
The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light:
for God is with us.
We who dwell in the land and the shadow of death, a light will shine on us:
for God is with us.
For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given:
for God is with us.
Whose government was upon his shoulder:
for God is with us.
And of his peace there is no bound:
for God is with us.
And his name shall be called, Angel of Great Counsel:
for God is with us.
Wonderful Counsellor:
for God is with us.
Mighty God, Ruler, Prince of Peace:
for God is with us.
Father of the Age to Come:
for God is with us.
God is with us, understand you nations, and submit:
for God is with us.

8. EVANGELIST

Luke (2:1, 3–7)

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

9. CHORUS

Virgin Mother of God, Hail

Virgin Mother of God, hail. Mary full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, for you have given birth to the Saviour of our souls.

10. EVANGELIST

Luke (2:8–14)

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.

And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men”.

11. CHORUS

Glory to God in the Highest

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men.

12. EVANGELIST

Luke (2:15–20)

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

13. INTERMEZZO

14. CHORUS

Christ Is Born, Glorify Him

Christ is born, glorify him. Christ comes from heaven, meet him. Christ is on earth, be exalted. O all the earth, sing unto the Lord, and sing praises in gladness, O people, for He has been glorified.

A strange and most wonderful mystery do I see: the cave is heaven; the Virgin the throne of the Cherubim; the manger a room, in which Christ, the God whom nothing can contain, is laid. Him do we praise and magnify.

Part the Second

15. EVANGELIST

Luke (2:21–22, 25–32)

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

16. AIR

Lord, Now You Are Letting Your Servant Depart in Peace

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

17. EVANGELIST

Luke (2:33–38)

And his father and his mother marvelled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also, so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

18. CHORUS

O Virgin Mother of God

O Virgin Mother of God, you Hope of all Christians, protect, watch over, and guard all those who put their hope in you.

O Virgin Mother of God, you Good Helper of the World, protect and preserve us from all necessity and grief.

O God-bearing Simeon, come and lift up Christ, whom the pure Virgin bore. 'It is not the old man who holds me, but I uphold him: for he begs me to let him depart'.

The pure Dove, the Ewe without blemish, brings the Lamb and Shepherd into the temple.

O Christ, the King of all, give me warm tears, that I may weep for my soul which I have lost in evil.

19: EVANGELIST

Matthew (2:1–6)

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

20. CHORUS

Your Nativity, O Christ Our God

Your Nativity, O Christ our God, has shone upon the world with the light of knowledge: for thereby they who adored the stars through a star were taught to worship you, the Sun of Righteousness, and to know you, the Dayspring from on high. O Lord, glory to you!

21. EVANGELIST

Matthew (2:7–12)

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

22. CHORUS

Today the Virgin Gives Birth

Today the Virgin gives birth to him who is above all being, and the earth offers a cave to him whom no man can approach. Angels with shepherds give glory, and Magi journey with a star. For unto us is born a little Child, God before the ages.

23. EVANGELIST

Matthew (2:13–18)

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

24. AIR

A Voice Was Heard in Ramah

A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.

25. EVANGELIST

Matthew 2:19–23

When Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

26. FUGUE

27. RECITATIVE

1 John (1: 1–2; 4:7–10; 5:19–20)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

28. FINAL CHORUS

Glory to God in the Highest

Biblical texts are from The English Standard Version, adapted and modified as needed. Translations of liturgical texts are from The Festal Menaion, translated by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, South Canaan, Pennsylvania, 1998, borrowed and adapted as needed.

To pre-order a DVD of this concert with English subtitles, visit the *Inside the Vatican* table at the entrance.

O Come, All Ye Faithful

*Adeste, fideles,
laeti, triumphantes,
Venite, venite in Bethlehem.
Natum videte, Regem angelorum.
Venite adoremus,
Venite adoremus,
Venite adoremus Dominum.*

(Please join in singing verses 2 and 3)

O come, all ye faithful,
joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold him,
born the King of angels:
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ, the Lord.

Sing choirs of angels,
sing in exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above!
Glory to God,
in the highest glory!
O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Commission of the State Duma of the Russian Federation
on Public Association & Religious Organizations

The Commission of the Moscow City Duma on Inter-Ethnic
and Inter-Confessional Relations

The Publishing Council of the Moscow Patriarchate

SPONSORS

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The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church

The Representation of the Moscow Patriarchate in the USA,
New York, NY

The Russian Orthodox Cathedral of St. John the Baptist,
Washington, D.C.

The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception,
Washington, D.C.

Harvard University

St. Jean the Baptiste Catholic Church, New York City

Urbi et Orbi Communications and Inside the Vatican magazine