

A Russian Émigré Church Musician

Victor Pokrovsky, His Life and Music

Kazan, Manchuria, Tokyo, America

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Preface

Victor Pokrovsky, a choir director of Tokyo Resurrection Cathedral (Nikolai-do), is still remembered by many by his nick name “Poku-san”. He held the post from 1924 to 1961, before and after World War II. Metropolitan Sergey (Tikhomirov), successor of St. Nikolai, selected young Pokrovsky as choir director at the Cathedral, in order to improve it and to introduce new Russian masterpieces from the late 19th and early 20th century in Japanese. Since St. Nikolai’s time, it had been the goal of the Japanese mission to use Japanese in all the divine services. Pokrovsky set more than a hundred beautiful pieces of Russian sacred music into Japanese, among which 75 were published and are still heard in various churches in Japan.

The Metropolitan praised him in a speech in 1929 as “a great choir director who accomplished enormous work.” In this essay I will attempt to show the life of a Russian immigrant Church musician and the peculiarity of his composition.

In the Kazan district of Russia, Victor Alexandrovich Pokrovsky was born in 1897, as the first son of Priest Alexander and his wife Nadezhda at a church by the Suhaya River. The Pokrovskys were a priestly family, whose former family name had been Gremyachkin. In the time of Tsar Paul I, they received the new name Pokrovsky on the day of Pokrov, the Veil of the Protection of the Theotokos.

Victor studied for four years at the Kazan Ecclesiastical Seminary before entering Kazan University in 1914. As a university student, he sang with the Morreff Choir, of which Mr. Koltchin (a choir director of Holy Trinity Cathedral in San Francisco in the 1950s-60s) used to be a member. He also attended the conductor class at Kazan Hummert Music School. While in his fourth and final year of University, he was called into the White Army.

After the Bolshevik coup in 1918, Pokrovsky was forced to leave Kazan and flee with the White Army to Siberia and at last to Manchuria. At that time, Kharbin was a center of Russian settlement in China and was connected by railroad (Kitaisky Vostok) with Vladivostok. After the Revolution, a great number of Russians moved to live there, as many as 300,000 to 500,000.

As the Moscow Patriarchate was restrained under the Bolshevik government, the Kharbin Archdiocese helped the Japanese Church to a great extent. Met. Sergey often visited Kharbin to request support for the restoration of the Holy Resurrection Cathedral, destroyed by the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923. In addition, he was looking for a capable person to lead the choir of the Cathedral.

Having been discharged from the Army in 1923, Pokrovsky turned to his love of music, forming a chorus with other soldiers to make a living giving concerts. He was then asked to become the choir director at Holy Theotokos Church in Kharbin.

Among several candidates, Met. Sergey especially liked his music. Pokrovsky accepted the offer and moved to Japan in 1924, at 27 years of age. His main task was to grow a full-scale choir at the Cathedral and to set the new Russian masterpieces of the late 19th and early 20th century to Japanese. He often visited Kharbin to collect resources for composition. These handwritten copies are still kept in six bound books by his wife Irina who is now 96 years old.

Before discussing Pokrovsky's work, it is necessary to understand the situation of church music in Japan at that time. When St. Nikolai (Kasatkin) started his mission in Japan in the 1860s, he undertook to translate prayer books into Japanese, beginning with the daily prayers, an abridged Sunday Vigil and Liturgy, some prayers from the Books of Needs, the Baptism and Funeral services and others. On the way to Japan, he met St. Innocent of Alaska in Siberia, who advised him of the necessity of using the native Japanese language for the mission. By the time of his repose, St. Nikolai translated almost all the necessary prayer books except the full scale Menaion and Pentecostarion.

After gaining a few Japanese disciples in the 1860s, St. Nikolai encouraged them to sing in Japanese text using the Russian melody that he remembered. He started simply by translating "Lord have mercy" into "Shu awaremeyo." He then added other translations one by one. Since the Japanese musical background was completely different, it was extremely difficult to teach Russian melodies. Western musical scales were a totally foreign sound to the Japanese musical ear. The first Japanese priest, Fr. Pavel Sawabe, a former samurai, recalled when he first sang Cherubic Hymn at the Chapel of the Russian Consulate in Hakodate, the Russians rushed out of the chapel trying to stifle their laughter at hearing such a strange melody.

Soon, St. Nikolai assigned Jacob Tikhai, brother of the assistant priest, as a music director, and published music books for the Sunday Vigil and Liturgy, major feasts, the Panichida and other services in two styles—one in unison for the local parish, the other for four-part mixed choir for the Cathedral in Tokyo. The Cathedral choir was started in 1875 and mainly consisted of a seminary and girl's school students. Their music was based on the Lvov-Bakhmetev Common Chant. At that time, since four-voice choir was quite new, many people in the Tokyo area visited to hear the modern music from the developed Western world. For Japanese, Russian culture was recognized as a part of European culture.

However, St. Nicholai reposed in 1912 and financial support from Russia was interrupted by the Revolution. Finally, the Great Kanto Earthquake destroyed the Cathedral. As Met. Sergey looked backed on these days, he felt that he had lost everything which St. Nikolai had accomplished for the Church. Not only the Cathedral, but also the

seminary building, the library and dormitories were ruined by the earthquake and the resulting massive fire. Met. Sergey decided to reconstruct the Cathedral. To collect donations he traveled throughout Japan and often visited the Kharbin Archdiocese to promote the rebuilding project.

To educate the choir, Pokrovsky received the full support of Met. Sergey. Rehearsals were held twice a week. He taught with his violin. Tito Kato (now 96 years old), a choir member from 1927 to 1931, recalled his teaching, "He was very strict. He never missed hearing a wrong pitch. Sometimes young ladies sang in tears." Whenever he had time, Met. Sergey sat down in the back listening to the practices. And the Bishop often gave warnings to lazy members who missed the rehearsals. Vasilissa Yoshimura (now 85 years old) said "Pokrovsky's lesson was strict, but we loved it."

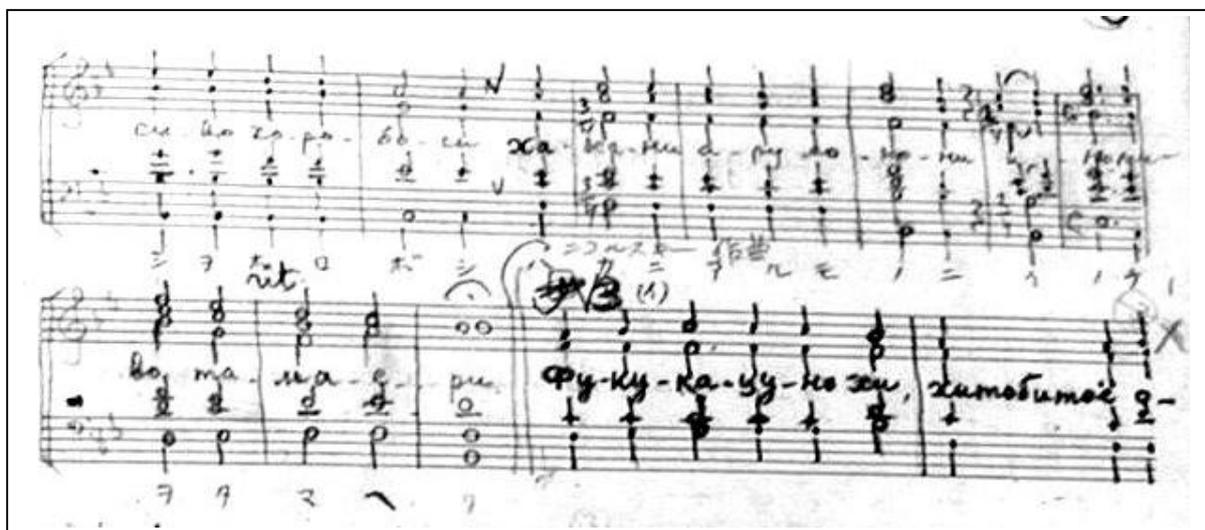
Tito continues, "He was very careful not to interrupt the flow of the service. He asked Japanese clergy to intone in the correct pitch to harmonize with the choir. He never gave up training their ears. But as soon as a service started, he adjusted the choir's pitch to fit the clergies' intonation. It was amazing. He always considered the service as a whole. Met. Sergey had the same opinion. I often heard him ask which Cherubic hymn would be sung, and then he decided his pitch."

Pokrovsky's efforts raised the quality of the choir. Met. Sergey praised him in his speech at the Ceremony for the Reconstruction of the Cathedral in 1929. "Victor Alexandrovich Pokrovsky, a great choir director, has worked hard since 1924. His name will be written in the history of music in Japan. Our choir does not merely sing well, it is more than that. It is artistic and full of Spirit." A guest from Kharbin, Fr. Aristarkh Panamaryov, admired the Cathedral choir: "Russian Sacred songs, dear melodies of my home. This heartfelt sound went up to the dome with love. Sound of integrity and purity. There was no coloratura imitation. No ridiculous tenor, which disturbs our prayer. The souls tempted by such sugary decoration tend to fall into despotism. Here, we found the hearts cleansed by songs of faith and purity." Met. Sergey and Pokrovsky aimed to avoid Italian operatic style in the 18-19th century fashion by introducing true liturgical music from the best essence of the new Russian sacred music.

Met. Sergey wrote, "At the Vigil of the Consecration ceremony, sung were Yaichkovsky's Psalm 103, Smolensky's 'Paschal Stichera', Strokin's 'Now lettest Thy servant,' Chesnokov's 'Praise the name of the Lord in Znamenie melody', Arkhangelsky's 'Great Doxology,' Vyshnevsky's 'From my youth,' and Kastolsky's 'To Thee, Thy servants.' He added that Arkhangelsky was favored in Japan. The music of the former publication was in wide harmony based on the Common Chant of 1869. According to Tito Kato, the Stichera of "Lord I call" were usually sung in Arkhangelsky's music in narrow harmony. (Unfortunately, the music sheets are no longer to be found.) One reason for this popularity is presumed that Arkhangelsky's music was considered suitable for the mixed choir, as he was the first person

to introduce female voice into Russian sacred music.

In his speech, Met. Sergey emphasized that the choir sang in Japanese. He said proudly that 75 % to 90% of the music in every service had been set in Japanese. Due to the difference in word order and in the number of syllables between Slavonic and Japanese, it was difficult to set Japanese texts. A predicate verb and its object stand in the opposite position. A word in Japanese contains more syllables than in Slavonic. Irina remembered that he worked hard every night until 2 or 3 o'clock. And he could not speak Japanese well. Fr. Job Hibi and his son, a seminary student Jacob (later Fr. Jacob), helped set the music in Japanese. The picture below is a part of his draft of the Paschal Canon. We can see Russian letters showing Japanese words and at the bottom the same text written in Japanese letters.



Examining Pokrovsky's composition, we can find some improvement compared to the former music by St. Nikolai and Tikhai. Pokrovsky gave more careful consideration to Japanese intonation and phrasing and he tried to reconstruct music based on the method of the chant composition. He also tried to use the newest texts that were available.

St. Nikolai had aimed to start using Japanese in the divine services as soon as possible, and the resulting music seems to have been prepared to fill the church's immediate needs. Texts were set to the Slavonic melodies without carefully considering Japanese intonation and phrasing. And until one week before his death, St. Nikolai repeated revisions of the translation, however for a long time they were not reflected on the music.

Church music in Russia itself had changed more from the time when St. Nikolai had experienced it before leaving for Japan in 1860. Composers became to pay more attention to their traditional chant music, from which new Russian styles were developed. Because Met. Sergey had been Dean of the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg until 1908 and Pokrovsky studied music in Kazan until 1918, they should have been acquainted with the new wave in Russian sacred music at the turn of the century.

In Pokrovsky's music setting, we can find the examples of his careful consideration of the Japanese language. Examining Smolensky's "Paschal Stichera", to fit a number of syllables he often added or reduced notes and adjusted melodies to make Japanese word sound natural. In the case of the second Stichera, since Japanese text is completely different in phrase and word order, he reconstructed new music connecting the melody kernels taken from the other parts of the song.

Another example is Makarov's "Angel Cried." Once Pokrovsky changed the music to match the technical level of the singers. Even now, offbeat rhythm is difficult to accomplish for Japanese. In the original Slavonic, "Светися, Светися" ("O shine, shine") starts in an offbeat manner. According to Tito Kato, the choir tried to sing several times in rehearsal without success. In response, Pokrovsky changed the music into one half note as shown in the chart. Vasilissa Yoshimura remembers that whenever he introduced new music, he asked clergy and choir members their impressions.

In 1937, thanks to Tito Kato, some of his music was published in Osaka in two books: "The Anthology of Russian Church Music," 170 pages with 64 titles, and "Pascha," 56 pages with 12 titles. In these books, there are 16 hymns of Arkhangelsky, 3 of Chesnokov, and 3 of Kastalsky. Everything seemed to be going well.

However, World War II changed everything. The situation of non-Japanese habitants became worse day by day. In 1941, the Military Government demanded that Met. Sergey retire. All the Russians who lived at the site of the Cathedral were forced to leave the premises. The Pokrovskys moved to Yokohama. Met. Sergey died alone in Itabashi, north of Tokyo, just 5 days before the War ended.

After the War, under the American Bishop Irinei, Pokrovsky was reinstated in his former position. In 1962, he moved to the United States, following his daughter Lydia who married William Kosar, an American Naval officer at Nikolai-do Cathedral.

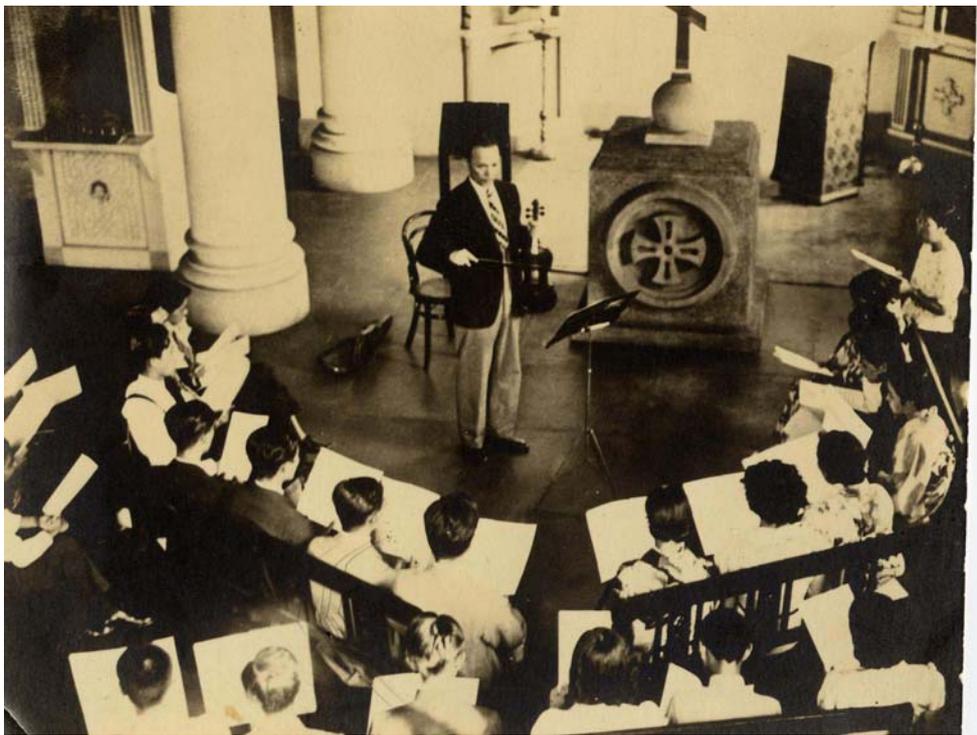
Following his move to the US, Pokrovsky held choir director posts at three churches on

The image displays three musical staves for comparison, all in a key with one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The top staff, labeled "Slavonic", shows a vocal line (C) and a bass line (Б) with lyrics "Све - ти - ся, све -". The notes are mostly quarter notes, with some offbeats. The middle staff, labeled "1st plan", shows a vocal line (А) and a bass line (Б) with lyrics "a ra ta na ru". The notes are mostly quarter notes, but the rhythm is more regular. The bottom staff, labeled "final", shows a vocal line (А) and a bass line (Б) with lyrics "ア ラ タ ナ ル". The notes are mostly quarter notes, and the rhythm is very regular. A downward arrow points from the "1st plan" staff to the "final" staff, indicating a transition or comparison.

the East Coast. In the States, he started to interpret music in English. Walter Shymansky, who used to be a choir member at St. Michael Russian Orthodox Church in Newark, New Jersey said, “He helped me whenever I had questions and always was willing to take time out from his life to help me and others.”

After retiring to Washington DC area, Pokrovsky attended St. Mark Church in Maryland, joining the movement to establish service in English. Anne Strelka remembered that he praised her mezzo soprano voice in her teenage years and encouraged her to join the choir.

According to his daughter Lydia, he always emphasized the importance of singing in a country’s understandable native language. I think he was a man who knew that Christians belong first to the Kingdom of God. During the War, when little Lydia was singled out by other children for being a foreigner. She came home crying to ask whether she was Russian or Japanese. Her father answered her, smiling gently, “You are neither Russian nor Japanese, but Orthodox Christian.”



choir rehearsal