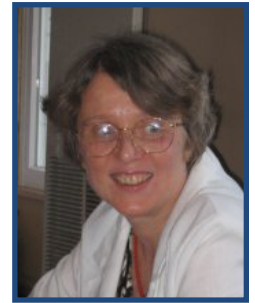


A DRAMA IN JERUSALEM — AND A MUSICAL DISCOVERY

SLAVFILMS

Reviewed by Susan Welsh



The Conductor (Дирижёр), 2012

86 minutes, DVD, Russian with English subtitles

Director: Pavel Lungin

Music: Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev

Your *SlavFilms* columnist, being far from an expert in cinematography, generally ignores soundtracks. How surprised I was, then, to find the music in this film the most fascinating thing about it!

Of course, it is not really a “soundtrack” at all, but selections from the 2006 “St. Matthew Passion” (“Страсти по Матфею”) by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, the chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). His oratorio is part of the story line and forms the musical underpinning of the film. Who knew that in the second decade of the 21st century, a superb, classically trained composer would emerge in Russia, working in the tradition of Bach? (He is quick to point out that his Passion is also in the tradition of the ROC.)

The idea for the film came from Hilarion, after director Pavel Lungin’s 2006 film *The Island* (“Остров”) was enthusiastically received by the ROC leadership. Hilarion asked Lungin to make a film about his “St. Matthew Passion” that would illustrate the life and Passion of Christ through appropriate frescoes, as a visual accompaniment to the musical performance. Lungin was uninterested, saying that he only makes fictional films; but eventually a screenplay emerged. Briefly, it tells the tale of a Moscow conductor, Vyacheslav Petrov (played powerfully by Vlas Bagdonas), who is taking his orchestra and chorus to Jerusalem to perform the Passion. He is a man driven by his art, to the detriment of his relations with people, notably his teenage son. Petrov and the three vocal soloists are all emotional wrecks by the time they arrive on stage, for reasons that I will not disclose here. Loneliness, suicide, marital infidelity, terrorism, mid-life crises, and love — they’re all there. And Hilarion’s oratorio weaves through the story of their lives, culminating in the beautiful performance of the Passion itself. It’s a grim, intense, very Russian story, leaving one American viewer

to wonder, “What exactly are we supposed to take away from this?”

This film is an unusual collaboration between two very different men. Lungin (b. 1949), son of the late screenwriter Semyon Lungin and translator Lilianna Lungina, was raised in a secular Jewish family, although he seems to have converted (spiritually, if not literally — I cannot ascertain which) to Russian Orthodoxy. He has lived in France since the 1990s and often looks as though he patronizes Yasser Arafat’s barber. Hilarion (born Grigoriy Alfeyev, 1966) studied violin and composition at the Gnessin Russian Academy of Music in Moscow from 1973 to 1984, destined for a musical career. But at the age of 21, after his military service, he decided to dedicate his life to God; he became a monk and abandoned music altogether. For 20 years he did not write, play, or listen to music, seeing it as a diversion from his religious devotion. To make a long story short, he changed his mind in 2006 and began composing again.

The Director and the Metropolitan talked about their work in a televised [program](#) on March 29th, 2012. Hilarion began with a discussion of repentance. “People often think,” he said, “that repentance means a person has sinned and so he has to repent. I think repentance is a much more complex process, because repentance should infuse his whole life.” The Russian word, *покаяние*, comes from the Greek (*μετάνοια*), he noted, which literally means “changing the mind.” This is, from Hilarion’s point of view, the principal subject of *The Conductor*.

How did the composition of the Passion come about? It emerged when Hilarion was serving simultaneously as Bishop of Vienna and Austria and administrator of the Diocese of Budapest and Hungary. “The idea came to me almost fully formed. I was driving from Vienna to Budapest, a route that I traveled very often. In six years of my service I drove that route 150 times. And



Unexpected collaborators: Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev and director Pavel Lungin. Note the body language (especially the hands).

suddenly the idea came to me to write a ‘St. Matthew Passion,’ that is, to take Gospel text, but to use as the libretto the liturgical texts of Passion Week, the texts of the Orthodox Church. I wanted this composition to reflect the Orthodox understanding of Christ’s passion, so I used both the contemporary and 19th-century musical styles of our Church and some elements of Russian liturgical chanting (знаменный распев), as well as some elements of Bach’s baroque style.” **Lungin:** “What was it, basically inspiration?” **Hilarion:** “I think it was inspiration. Ninety percent of the music was written in three weeks, during which time I continued my regular duties.... In my spare time, sometimes at odd moments — some of this music was even written at the airport or on a plane.”

Both men seem pleased with the result of their collaboration. Lungin said that the living presence of the music “achieved an unusually strong effect in my view; the music gave this simple story a surprising emotional depth and power.” Hilarion told Lungin that when he first saw the film, he was particularly struck by the tension that builds immediately from the opening scene. “The conductor is still asleep, and a fax arrives. Without the music, that tension would not have been created.... From the very beginning, the music creates a kind of expectation: What is going to happen now? What does the fax say? The whole time, you are filming the face of the hero, the conductor. He has a very expressive face, even though he speaks very little. It is the image of a man who expresses himself through music.”

Returning to the theme of repentance, Hilarion refers to the film of that name made by the Soviet Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze 30 years ago, “which had the effect of a bomb exploding. Perhaps he somehow helped to bring about the changes that began in the country, because he was part of a wave; people were rethinking their past, and particularly the Soviet past. It was a time when people’s eyes were opened to what they previously had not been able to see.”

“I think that our film is a continuation of that kind of deep cinema, cinema that is oriented to the deepest stirrings of the human soul.”

Susan Welsh can be reached at welsh_business@verizon.net. She would appreciate feedback.

Vladas Bagdonas, as the conductor Vyacheslav Petrov, conducts the “St. Matthew Passion” in the film.



Asked what books he would take to a desert island, Hilarion replied: “I would take the Bible and *Winnie the Pooh*.... I have one favorite poet, Federico García Lorca, whom I have loved since childhood; I wrote music to his poems even in my youth, and for me he has always been poet number one.”

— Reply to a question during a lecture at the State Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow, Aug. 25th, 2012.

More Information on Metropolitan Hilarion

Videos of many of Metropolitan Hilarion’s compositions are available on YouTube, but I have been unable to find DVDs for sale. An audio CD of the “St. Matthew Passion,” performed by the Choir of the State Tretyakov Gallery and the Tchaikovsky Symphony Orchestra of Moscow Radio, under the baton of Vladimir Fedosyev, can be purchased from MusicaRussica.com and Amazon.com.

“Music and Faith in My Life and Vision,” by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, lecture in English at The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., Feb. 9th, 2011, <http://president.cua.edu/inauguration/videos-embed.cfm#Hilarion>.

“An Interview with Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev,” by Joseph Susanka, *Crisis Magazine*, Feb. 28, 2012, in English, <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2012/an-interview-with-metropolitan-hilarion-alfeyev>.

“On Death, the Internet, and Nominal Christianity,” in Russian, video of a lecture and lengthy discussion period with Metropolitan Hilarion at the State Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow, Aug. 25th, 2012, <http://www.pravmir.ru/mitropolit-ilarion-alfeyev-smert-internet-nominalnoe-hristianstvo/> Of particular interest to SlavFile readers is the dialogue on the importance of learning foreign languages and reading foreign literature.