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THE DAUGHTER OF A CHRISTCHURCH ACTRESS FIGHTS CHURCH DUPLICITY IN MOSCOW.

Is the Moscow Anglican Church flouting Russian law to satisfy American commercial interests ? Is a new darkness stalking the land with wolves congregating in clerics' clothing ?

Consider the facts. During the Soviet era St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Moscow, built 1882, was taken over by the state. Religious observances were forbidden and because of its splendid acoustics, the church was used as a famed studio by the recording company 'Melodiya'

In 1992, after the fall of Communism, services were resumed in the Church and while Queen Elizabeth II, the official head of the Anglican Church, was on a historic state visit in October 1994, Russia's first President, Boris Yeltsin promised to return St. Andrew's to the Anglican community in Moscow.

He ultimately forgot to fulfill the promise and to this day, just as in Soviet times, the church remains the property of the Russian state. While services take place in the church with Kremlin approval, the question of ownership or long term rent, remains unresolved. Litigation between Moscow Anglican Church and the State Property Committee has dragged on interminably.

Melodiya vacated the building and the basement of

the Church, while still not ruled by any laws whatsoever, was occupied once more; first of all workmen used it for storage space. Finally charitable organizations were admitted under the aegis of the church and eventually two rooms were given as rehearsal quarters to the orchestra, Ensemble XXI Moscow.

There were no contracts and occupants came to an oral agreement with the Pastor Simon Stephens. This loose arrangement flew in the face of Russian law, yet how could one not assist people involved in charitable and artistic activities ?

Ensemble XXI Moscow had been founded against the odds while infant democratic principles struggled for acceptance across the land. It was brought into being by two Moscow Conservatory graduates; Irish/New Zealand artistic director, Lygia O'Riordan, and Finnish concertmaster, Pia Siirala.

For the first time on Russian soil string players were from many lands; viz; Vietnam, Cuba, South America and local Russians. All were united by their love of music-making and EXXIM toured from the beyond the Arctic Circle, the western borders, and as far away as Sakhalin on Russia's Pacific coast. Foreign tours including Austria, Ireland, the Netherlands, Hungary and Australia have solidified the reputation of this young ensemble; the first international ensemble in Russia. Nonetheless, as it's not classified a state orchestra, EXXIM has experienced great difficulties in matters of rehearsal space.

As the orchestra functioned for the most part on a charitable basis, it made next to no profit. So the Anglican Church offered the orchestra two rooms; and

in return the musicians played at services and charity concerts, raising funds for the renovation of St. Andrew's historic building.

Everything went well until another organization appeared in the church's basement. The presence of ROOF's (Russian Orphanage Opportunity Fund) office and the orchestra rehearsal rooms was acceptable on charitable grounds, but editorial offices of the journal 'Oil and Gas'; a Eurasia monthly published by Eurasia Press Inc, USA could not be justified in any way.

An impressive list of advertisers, amongst which are the biggest oil companies, speaks for itself. It is difficult, however, to understand what this specialized bi-lingual publication has to do with the Anglican Church. When the Moscow press sought an explanation from the monthly's Chief Editor, Pat Davis Szymcsak, their Russian journalist received an irate, ill-mannered reception and was advised to see her lawyer.

The hapless journalist had asked Ms Szymcsak to whom she pays money for the rent of her offices, as well as her taxes. Later it was discovered that the proprietor, the State Property Commission, has no dealings with Eurasian Press Inc.

Clearly someone is being paid money somewhere. Otherwise it would be difficult to understand why, without prior warning, representatives of the Anglican Church began writing letters to musicians of Ensemble XXI Moscow demanding that they vacate the two church basement 'rehearsal' rooms.

The letters were sent on April 12th , May 4th and May 18th.

Whether the Tax Inspectorate or Department for

Economic Crimes are acquainted with these facts is still unclear. Do the statutes of Moscow Anglican Church, permit commercial activities on hallowed ground ? It seems most unlikely.

At the beginning of July, the Church Administrator, Sara Harris, signed a contract with the Dutch Company, Voerman International, handing over the orchestra's property, as though it were church property. Without reference to the musicians Voerman International promptly invaded the rehearsal rooms, confiscating EXXI M's property which it then removed to the company's warehouse in two lorries.

A historical music stand used by renowned conductor Gennady Rozhdestvensky, and a photocopying machine presented to the orchestra by CANON were simply seized by the Church. The stand had been used by Rozhdestvensky for the majority of his historic Shostakovitch symphony recordings and for Schnittke recordings in the composer's presence.

Stolen property included a large collection of invaluable scores plus a unique double bass, formerly used in the Bolshoi Theatre; and now transported without the appropriate protection.

Pending a final assessment to check the condition of their belongings the musicians will be reporting these events to the police, and possibly taking legal action.

Their conclusion - that authorities registering religious organizations must exercise more control of those it considers legitimate. Otherwise Russia will be overrun by businessmen under the guise of religion.

Howard Smith (c) July 2005.

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