

Batushka – “Hospodi” (2019)

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Translation: Marcel Szczepanik

Maciek Masta:

I can't remember any other album that would make so much fuss in the metal scene as **Batushka**'s sophomore offering. What's more, this is probably the only album about which almost everything has been said, but, its essence – the content – has been totally left out in these debates. So far, not even a word has been written about the album's musical aspect. I have, however, decided to alter this.

Let's commence with an introduction of the unfortunate events around my compatriot band. Of course, I'm well aware of the tense situation between the two masterminds behind **Batushka**'s debut album. I know that using the band's name alone is a quite risky move nowadays. Nevertheless, over the course of almost 30 years of my black metal journey, I've acquired the knowledge of separating the work from its creator. In doing so, I'm liable to give **Burzum** credit. In view of his past vice and acts of misdemeanour, all the rough-and-tumble concerning stealing a band's name seems ridiculous at the very least. Simultaneously, albums like *Det som engang var* and *Hvis lyset tar oss* set the bar so unapproachably high that everything else appears to be a cheap copy of their unattainable greatness. That's why I've decided to leave behind the ruckus within the band. My focus is centred on its newest work entitled *Hospodi*. For clarity, I'd like to stress that this incarnation of **Batushka** is commanded by **Bartek Krysiuk** and his artistic vision.

Litourgiya hit me like a supernova. I've never experienced a concept that would draw on the vast and rich elements of the Eastern Orthodox Church in such an obvious and, at the same time, nimble manner. It's yet more surprising since the beauty of the ritual is simply overwhelming. It's like Gregorian chants except for the fact that they're excessively overused in the contemporary metal scene. *Litourgiya* was a magnificent work, and, despite sporadic voices of criticism concerning its unoriginal concepts, simplified melodies, and – last but not least – denial of black metal ideals, I always rooted for its success. Therefore, those voices left me thinking of any band that could come close to **Batushka** in terms of style and the main concept behind it. I've come to an irrefutable conclusion that there has simply been no other band like that.

To me, *Hospodi* is an even more well-thought and painstakingly executed album than its predecessor. The entire Orthodox tradition seems even more complete here, if it's somehow possible to call it like that. Clocking in at slightly more than 50 minutes, the album consists of 10 tracks. They're divided into three thematic pillars. The whole consists in the idea of employing such Orthodox tenets and rites as the *Liturgy of Death*, prayers for the dead, Orthodox burial rituals, and songs of mourning. The album utilizes the tradition of old folk chants sung in the presence of a coffin in the house of the dead man. **Krysiuk**, as it were, has resurrected the mostly forgotten, obscure chants and, to some extent, saved them from fading into oblivion. This feat alone renders his venture praiseworthy. It's so black metal of him!

That's what I wholeheartedly appreciate and subscribe to this subgenre. Cultivating native lore and tradition has always been one of the main foundations of black metal in my book. And here the foundations are distinct and very solid.

Hospodi can be seen as a successor to *Litourgiya*'s legacy music-wise, but by no means is it a sluggish replica of the debut. Melodic lines aren't the most sophisticated solutions ever created, but it's necessitated by the band's firm and faithful approach towards introducing the elements of the Orthodox, which, by extension, imposes some limits on guitar and drum patterns. Just like on *Litourgiya*, the religious atmosphere of the Eastern Orthodox Church is the very foundation of music and not just a melodic treat to please the listener's ear. A few tracks (especially these at the beginning and the end of the album, songs 1, 2, 3, 4, 8 and 10) commence just like an Orthodox mass. The opening track serves as the introduction to the album; it doesn't contain any metal elements, just an excerpt of a mass. Track number 5 (the lead single entitled *Polunosznica*) depicts the ritual more from the vestibule (prytvara) vantage point rather than from the iconostasis of an Orthodox church. We hear a song sung not by the priest, but by the people. It's also a song that contains the most aggressive part (its middle section) of the entire album. After the atmospheric introductions have passed, there's of course time for an assault of black metal. The music doesn't really fall back on pacy melodic lines. They're rather slow but fairly heavy pieces which function as the continuation of the ornamental intros. **Bart**'s vocals push the envelope really far; at times he's managed to outdo his already stellar performance from the debut. A choir can be heard in the background, which again feels like a great addition to the album. It doesn't cease to play even during aggressive moments, maintaining the atmosphere of the Eastern Orthodox Church. It's no point anticipating tempo changes, thundering blast beats, or adventurous guitar passages. Expecting **Batushka** to do such things is like looking forward to seeing a priest sporting long hair and headbanging madly in the front row of a gig. It's just not a band of this kind, and you'll either get used to it or not. The ball is in your court.

If we take to consider the debut offering in terms of both lyrics as well as its visual aspect, we won't find any overtly profane elements that could be somehow deemed offensive towards sacred religious canons. No lyric or icon was endowed with slanderous features. It's the very undertone of the album as a whole and the image of the icons' gouged eyes that make us contemplate the work's direction. Is it really orthodox black metal? This not particularly mysterious operation had probably the most powerful effect upon me, as far as the debut is concerned. The case with *Hospodi* is almost identical. It's a pity that the artwork is so divergent from the strict Orthodox iconic canon. I see it as a vice in a general overview of the work. I also don't want to take up the topic of the form of the album since it's going to be released in several dozens of formats. The possibilities provided by the pre-order function are immense, and, frankly speaking, I got a bit lost browsing all the cassette and vinyl versions available in almost all imaginable colours. The way the album is wrapped also depends on one's individual choice; you can get it packed in a compact plastic box or enjoy a stone grave slab one. Choose wisely.

In conclusion, I'd like to emphasize one thing. Irrespective of the intense hatred directed at **Bartek Krysiuk** and his music, he's managed to create an album equally captivating and

devastating to **Batushka**'s debut. And although all the tracks on *Litourgiya* were written solely by **Krzysztof Drabikowski**, **Bartek** continues to foster the debut's legacy in a great fashion. The album doesn't contain any weak links. Adding to that, there are absolutely no mediocre moments here. It's consistent from its very beginning till the end. And when the latter comes, I have only one wish that follows – I just want to listen to it once again.

Score: **9/10**

Synu:

The turmoil around **Batushka**, which began at the end of last year, is alive and well. In the wake of revealing successive declarations (recently the band's former drummer chipped in with his version of the story), legal claims, and judgment letters, both incarnations of the band are set to release their albums – the first one, being the subject of this review, is **Ba(r)tushka**'s *Hospodi*, and the other – **Krzysztof Drabikowski**'s *Панухуда*.

To begin with, I'd like to stress that by no means am I a zealous fan of the band. **Batushka**'s debut is a solid piece which would get a 3+ (C+) grade from me in the Polish grading system. I just cannot fathom the omnipresent worship that met the album. Therefore, I'm able to approach the newest output completely unbiased, without a shadow of partiality. There's no fanatical rabidity in my assessment, and I'm fully capable of keeping at a distance from the legal dispute that's still haunting the band.

The first aspect that drew my attention while listening to *Hospodi* was the magnitude of its arrangements and production. In this respect, **Batushka** have made a big leap forward. It's evident that the band have taken their time to focus on the details and the sound. The style, however, has been subjected to a change because the new iteration of the band doesn't have much in common with *Litourgiya*. Instead of deeply atmospheric orthodox black metal we're presented with an album following the latest standards of the melodic/symphonic black metal realm, suspiciously similar to the newest albums of both **Rotting Christ** and **Dimmu Borgir**. However, the stylistic shift has led to a loss of the Orthodox mysticism, which dominated the band's main concept and helped the band become recognizable in the metal scene.

Hospodi is an album that's professional in every aspect, ranging from arrangement to execution. It's not particularly surprising, bearing in mind who was responsible for its creation. However, one cannot fail to perceive that the album appears as a neatly enveloped product whose intended target is to continue the legacy of a prosperous music group. The album has everything that would allow it to ingratiate the band with (mostly foreign) audience, and I think it was the very reason which stood behind its creation.

The album, as it were, has a few really successful and riveting elements, such as the melodic doom metal piece *Dziewiatyj czas*, which feels like a homage to the Scandinavian scene, tolisesque solo in *Powiczerje*, the groovy fragment of *Utrenia*, post-metal riff in *Tretij czas*, or my personal favourite, the subdued *Liturgiya*. Still, there are some underwhelming moments such as *Polunosznica*, *Pierwyj czas*, or *Szestoj czas*, which simply wear the listener out with their predictability and stock solutions.

I'm really curious about the way the new tracks will come across live since I think the new arrangements don't suit **Batushka**'s hitherto static and restrained stage presence, to which the band has already accustomed its fans.

As for the end, I've wanted to juxtapose the reviewed album with the recently uploaded *Панухуда* by **Krzysztof Drabikowski's Batushka**, but ultimately, I've failed to deem it viable, at least for the time being. And if we could compare the group's two dissociated selves, then the one led by the band's original guitarist is still adhering to its concept of atmospheric music, as if coming from a wooden stave temple located within the boundaries of the Shevchenko Grove, whereas **Krysiuk's Batushka** has entered the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, dripping with gold and adorned with ornaments. It's all up to you which style suits your taste better.

Score: **6/10**