

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations Music Chatroom Transcript – October 3, 2006

Moderator: *Valerie Yova*

Chat room topic: **Building a Local Inter-Orthodox Ministry**

Valerie Yova

I chose this topic because it's near and dear to my heart. Have y'all had any chance to look at the materials for tonight? The outline is probably the most important.

I don't have a good idea what all of you are doing locally to bring together Orthodox musicians, and I'll ask you to share that in a bit, but...I'd like to say a bit about what we did in Detroit and how it has helped the folks there. The history of the Detroit ministry, by the way is not complete. It's still going strong... I just moved to San Diego in 2003 and don't have an updated version of how things are going in Detroit.

We started the ministry there for a couple of reasons...one reason we got together was to SAVE the Sunday of Orthodoxy! They used to have the host parish sing for the Vespers. One year, it was at a particular parish and the service was almost entirely in a language other than English. Half of the people left before it was over.

So Pauline Costianes went to the Orthodox Council and offered to put together a choir for the following year, which she did. That was, in a way, the beginning of the ministry. When I moved to Detroit in 1989, I started to meet the other directors, some of whom I knew previously through St. Vladimir's and other places, and we decided to do a recording of music ALL in English.

There wasn't that much around in English at the time. We focused on American Orthodox composers. This led to lots of concert opportunities. Recordings are great motivators. You learn lots of music that you can then get tons of mileage from. I have to say that personally, one of the greatest blessings of this ministry was that these directors became my very dearest friends in Detroit and still are, I miss them all so much.

I am now in San Diego and starting from zero. There's NOTHING going on here. So I'll be taking my own advice from the outline I gave you. I have begun organizing a meeting of the directors of the "better" choirs here. We might try to pull off a Nativity concert.

You will get some idea of how a local ministry can start and grow from the history of the Detroit group. You will see years when we did very little. Those were times where the leaders had stuff going on in their lives like illness, marriage, new jobs, etc. But I keep encouraging them to just keep with it, even if in some years it's just the Vesper Choir during Great Lent. People sometimes need a break, and they definitely need some new, young, energetic blood.

I'd like to hear from all of you about what's happening in your areas, and take questions if you have them.

Question:

Would it be safe to say that little interaction between choir directors from various jurisdictions is the prevalent situation in most major cities?

Answer:

I think it IS the case in most cities and regions that there is very little inter-Orthodox activity. Some don't even do Vespers.

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Question:

What can I use as motivation? I know if I sent out invitations for something like this, I might get one or two, but no more than that.

Answer:

I think you have to personally cultivate relationships with the directors, by meeting with them individually, maybe have coffee, talk about some ideas, then try to get 3 or 4 together. It only takes a few motivated people. If the area is small, or the folks closest to you are not interested, you might have to open up the geographic circle a bit and seek out some folks in other cities, within a few hours of you.

Question:

What about the language factor? Some folks just won't sing anything but "their" language.

Answer:

First, language: You have to decide with your team what your goal is. In Detroit, we were fortunately like-minded and wanted to do everything in English. Well, liturgically. You'll see that we tried to pay homage to everyone's ethnicity in the Christmas concerts. It was great fun to learn everyone's carols. Sometimes we also did the carols in English.

But you have to have consensus on what you want to do and on the language issue. If people are bent on singing in their favorite liturgical language, you can provide translations of the hymns for the singers and audience. You could also do some of the shorter hymns in both languages. It IS a touchy issue, but you might be able to get an inter-Orthodox group of musicians to agree to use the COMMON LANGUAGE OF OUR COUNTRY, *English*.

Comment:

In my area, we don't even do Sunday of Orthodoxy vespers - just the procession right after liturgy at the local Greek church. Where I live, within a 3 hour drive, there are five Orthodox churches, so it's doable. But, language is a major problem in our area for Orthodoxy Sunday vespers.

Response:

OK, well those are your "team mates." You can still do something. You're not going to be able to do something on a weekly basis, but a workshop is doable, even a recording with several all-day rehearsals. Why not start with you and one other motivated director? Just have your two choirs do a combined Vesper service.

Question:

Are those first two recordings (Let us Sing to the Lord 1 & 2) still available for purchase?

Answer:

There are cassettes of the first recording and some compilation CD's left. If anyone wants one, just e-mail Janet Damian at damianj@juno.com, unfortunately, we sold about 4,000 copies, but tape #2 is currently sold out. A bit of the music from that tape is available on the CD.

Comment:

In the Bicentennial year, I sang in a multi-parish choir for a concert and we rehearsed every other Sunday evening for a few months and then a few weeks in row for the concert and for the recording. It was always at the same place which was centrally located

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We actually had the nerve to have auditions for the recordings. We wanted the cream of the Orthodox choir crop, so that we did not have to be pounding out notes for three months. We were very blessed to have quite a few really gifted people willing to make the time commitment.

Comment:

When I lived in SF area, back in the mid 1980's we ONCE had a pan Orthodox choir for Orthodoxy vespers. It was magnificent, AND had the largest attendance before or since AND, we sang 100% English This was way before Alice and Anne were on the scene

Response:

I think Alice (Hughes) and Anne (Schoepp) have recently put together a choir in the San Francisco area.

Question:

Did you charge for the concert, and if yes, did the money recycle into the group activities or get donated somewhere?

Answer:

Sometimes we charged, most times we took a collection. The CD's were what generated the most income, and that money went back into the fund for making the second CD, and later for workshops.

We tried to always break even on events. We occasionally were able to get sponsors to help pay for concert and workshop expenses.

Comment:

This year for Orthodoxy Sunday, we are hosting in our newly built church and we hope to have a decent turn out because of that. I'm pushing for a combined choir

Response:

That's great!

Question:

I'm looking at the sample program you sent for downloading. It's quite an ambitious program. How long did you rehearse for this?

Answer:

About rehearsals: We did a lot of trial and error to figure out what works for people. For the Nativity concerts, we sometimes started rehearsing in late September, with a rehearsal a month, until November, when we rehearsed every week. We would mix it up with some Saturday mornings, but Sunday late afternoons ended up working best for us. For the recordings, we had a pretty rigorous schedule with weekly rehearsals for several months and several all-day Saturday rehearsals.

Question:

Did you rehearse in the same location, or in different parishes to make it easier for some?

Answer:

We did most of the rehearsals in the same place, very centrally located.

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Question:

Were the conducting duties shared among participating parishes?

Answer: On each recording there were two conductors and the Lenten Vespers we tried to give each director a chance to conduct, but usually I did the rehearsals, or Mrs. Vickie Kopistiansky because we were the two with music degrees. We felt strongly that the folks coming to do this wanted something different from what they get every week at church. We set the bar as high as we could and we felt that they should have conductors who have enough musical training to teach them and kick them up a notch, if you know what I mean.

When you are trying to learn that much music in a short time, it takes very careful planning of rehearsals and strong rehearsal technique.

Question:

I've thought about doing something like this but have struggled with the Conductor question.

Answer:

I'm not saying that the conductor issue... wasn't touchy at times. Sometimes directors don't realize that they have limitations that will hold back a group like this. We had to handle it sometimes gently, and sometimes I had to be a benevolent dictator! :)

Question:

How? How do you tell someone they're not good enough?

Answer:

You probably don't tell them. You just work around them and make sure that the person who is conducting IS good enough. If you single out the most capable person, and don't try to be an Equal Opportunity Choir, it's easier. If you ask too many people to conduct, then it DOES get tricky.

If you leave someone out, it becomes obvious. What about a guest conductor? Someone from not-so-far out of town but far enough, and really good!

Comment:

I think a way to get everyone involved is to have each conductor rehearse the music with their own choir in their own parish. Then come together with everyone. Then they are all prepared and the 'real' conductor can take over. There won't be hurt feelings... everyone's happy...

Response:

Oh, that's a big presumption that they will be well-prepared. If they read music, they will be a bit prepared. They will only be as well prepared as the preparer.

Comment:

That's a BIG presumption, in my opinion most average choir members don't really read music.

Response:

I guess it depends on which type of group you are talking about. In Detroit, we had both kinds. The Vesper Choir was everybody who was interested and would commit to rehearsals, and we made very few changes in the music from year to year. The other group was a bit more "hand picked" and they were folks who read music at least a bit and could learn it on their own.

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Comment:

But even the worst conductor can have someone bang out notes on a piano. At least they can learn it that way.

Response:

With a more open forum, obviously the choice of music is going to be different.

Comment:

I have strong feelings against the idea of guest conductors for this kind of thing and for the same reason, I don't like the idea of "guest choirs" for services. It is like saying the people you have aren't good enough.

Response:

It could also be looked at as an opportunity to give the conductors a chance to learn something, as well.

Comment:

I think it would depend on who the conductor was, and if people respected him/her as being an outstanding conductor of some reputation.

Response:

The guest conductor would have to be significantly MORE qualified than the local ones.

Valerie Yova

I'd like to mention that a few years ago I put together for the PSALM Annual Meeting, a guide to hosting a local workshop. It takes you from nine months out all the way up to the debriefing after the workshop.

I'm going to be refining this and working with Alice and Anne to come up with a Manual, so keep an eye out for it. If I can do ANYTHING to help you with organizing something locally, I'm here. You can email or call me any time. I want to encourage you to get started. DO SOMETHING, no matter how small you start! It was my pleasure to be here and a belated Happy St. Romanos' Day!

Comment:

Thank you so much Val! This was an excellent session!

Dave Drillock:

Valerie, thank you very much for a wonderful session. We hope to see all of you in chat in two weeks, Tuesday, Oct 17, at 8:30 pm EST when Dr. Vladimir Morosan will discuss the topic of setting texts to music.

Goodnight everyone!