

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – June 5, 2007

Moderator: *Father Sergius Halvorsen*

Chat room topic: **Techniques for training Church readers**

Professor David Drillock, Chair of the OCA Department of Liturgical Music and Translations

It is a great honor to welcome the Rev. Sergius Halvorsen as our guest moderator for this evening's chat session who will lead a discussion on techniques for training Church readers. He is an excellent person to lead us in this our discussion of this topic. Welcome, Father Sergius.

Father Sergius Halvorsen:

Thank you, Dave. This is a very important subject and one that is either overlooked or taken for granted. Let's begin. Did anyone have a chance to read my piece on orthodoxpsalm.org? Were there any questions about what I wrote, or any places that you would like me to elaborate?

Comment:

Your third paragraph on page one is so important for all who are responsible for parish worship to read and to understand.

Response from Fr Sergius:

Yes, thanks. My basic point there is that when you read in church, you proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So, it is not something that one should just "toss together" at the last minute. Maybe a good way for us to get going would be for the different people in the discussion to briefly describe how they are involved in training readers.

Participant response:

I'm the choir director in my parish; after having a really, really terrible reader, my pastor tasked me with training all readers.

Question from Fr Sergius:

So, having been duly tasked, how is the training going?

Participant response:

I spend a lot of time on liturgics, development of liturgy, voice production, enunciation, pitch matching, rubrics and various liturgical books we use.

Question from Fr Sergius:

That sounds good. What do you do when you prepare the reading?

Answer:

I usually find out what the scripture reading is going to be for the Sunday. I usually start on Monday or Tuesday and read it, try to understand what it is saying and then practice reading it. I try to make sure that for my daily scripture reading, I at least read the scripture for the Sunday I'm going to read.

Fr Sergius:

Excellent! The most important thing in preparing a reading is to make sure that you actually understand what the reading is saying.

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That is really helpful. I wish that every choir director and reader were in this chatroom tonight to go through this.

Question for Fr Sergius:

Maybe this would be a good time to ask this question. At my tonsuring, the Archbishop talked to me about the importance of reading the scriptures daily. He suggested reading them with a commentary to help understand the meaning behind what I'm reading. Does anyone have any suggestions for a good commentary?

Response:

That kind of depends on your background with scripture. Have you ever studied scripture formally?

Answer:

No, not formally.

Response from Fr Sergius:

There are many out there and one that is used frequently at St. Tikhon's is the commentary by the Blessed Theophylact. (Some of Theophylact's commentaries can be found online at www.chrysostompress.org) Another good one is the Jerome Biblical Commentary by Raymond Brown. One of the big challenges with finding a commentary that works well for you is to find a commentary that tells you enough about the reading for it to make sense, but not be so very technical, or deep that you get even more lost.

My hunch is that your best bet would be to do this. For a few weeks, keep a journal and note the questions that you have with the text that you are preparing. Then at some point in time sit down with your pastor and see what he would recommend in terms of a commentary.

Question from Fr Sergius:

Are there any other readers that you are working with right now?

Question from Fr Sergius:

Are you a reader, or a trainer of readers?

Response:

We have a group of people who read, but no other tonsured readers right now. My pastor wants me next to work with the teens, and older grammar school kids, to get them started. Within the last year, we've had two tonsured readers move out of our parish, and I worked with them.

Question from Fr Sergius:

Have you thought of scheduling a "reader's workshop" to work with current readers, and those who you want to cultivate?

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One of the most helpful ways to learn good techniques for reading is to actually do it in front of other people, and then have them all participate in peer review.

Let me say a little bit about peer review, with "gentle critiques." What is really helpful in training readers is to have them actually read in small groups, with a facilitator. Once the reader has finished, you should begin by telling the reader what he or she did well, and then solicit similar complementary remarks from the others.

Then, you can ask the reader what he or she thinks is a weakness. After that, you can give a bit of critique, as well as asking for comments from the others. This is incredibly helpful for the reader, because often we are unable to hear our own mistakes.

When I give workshops, this is how I do it. Taping one's reading is also a wonderful way to help them hear how they sound.

Another really important part of this process is to have the reader do the same reading again after they have heard the peer review. Give them an opportunity to go back and fix the mistakes, or strengthen those parts that were weak.

Comment:

I have been reading in church regularly for a couple of years. I'm not involved in any formal training. Mostly I'm trying to train myself.

Response from Fr Sergius:

You're in a tough position. Have you ever taped yourself reading? Even if you are in a situation where you can get solid feedback from the pastor, the choir director, or other parishioners, taping yourself is an excellent tool.

However, it is also really good to seek out peer review. Before you read the next time, perhaps you can ask the priest to especially listen to you reading and then after the service ask him for feedback.

The same goes for the choir director, or other readers in the parish and even trusted lay-people. They can all give meaningful feedback.

Comment:

I would like to suggest a website that I find useful in helping me to pronounce the difficult names when reading: it's <http://biblespeech.com/> I like it because it has audio bites on how to pronounce the names.

Response from Fr Sergius:

That is really interesting.

How do you practice with your readers for the prokeimenon?

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Answer to Fr Sergius' question:

When I give it to a new reader, I tell them the scripture passage it came from, explain that it means that which comes before the Epistle, where to find the verses in the rubrics book, practice enunciation and voice projection, try to match pitch to the choir. Explain how to do multiple prokeimena

It's very important for two reasons: the flow gets interrupted if there is a train wreck between reader and choir, a liturgical train wreck...very bad. And a train wreck does not provide for a service celebrated decently and in good order.

Response from Fr Sergius:

Aha, yes, match pitch to the choir. That is really important, no? Yes, those rubrical twists are also quite important. But, back to matching pitch.

Does your choir have regular rehearsals?

The prokemenon is like a dialogue, as is much of liturgy. You have to be ready to respond after the reader intones the prokeimenon.

Answer:

Yes, we rehearse regularly, but attendance is kind of spotty.

Comment from Fr Sergius:

Because it is wonderful if you can have your readers practice the prokeimenon with the choir before the Liturgy. Also, pitch matching requires a bit of musical know-how on the part of the reader. The best thing is to have the reader look at the music for the prokeimenon, and learn his or her part. Then when they go to sing the "duet" with the choir, they will really know which note they should take to chant the verses.

Comment:

Pitch matching clicked for one reader when I told him to sing with the Sound of Music: sol do la fa mi do re.... I also tell readers to take their pitch from my voice – I normally sing alto and I go over how I give pitches and which of the four notes I sing is the one to take.

Response from Fr Sergius:

If you have the time, try to get the readers to sing the prokeimenon with the choir so that they can be thinking inside the chord as the choir is singing. This is often easier than to try to pick up a note when the choir director gives a pitch, and then try to keep that note in your head during the singing of the prokeimenon.

For some reason, a lot of parishes have become a bit sloppy when it comes to the training of readers. Do your readers use the "traditional" Russian style melody which ascends from the lowest possible note the reader can sing? There are times when it works, but not many, because it can detract from the words and their comprehension.

Comment:

Your section on "Create a chant strategy" covers this well.

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Response from Fr Sergius:

If you are interested, I have done a recording of the Ezekiel reading from Holy Saturday Matins with *Archangel Voices*. I think you can buy it at musicarussica.com.

Question:

When you get a chance, is there anything I should know about reading a Kanon?

Response from Fr Sergius:

When you say, reading a Kanon, are you talking about chanting all of the verses yourself as a cantor, or singing antiphonally with a choir?

Response to Fr Sergius' question:

The choir sings the irmos, and the reader reads the troparia, then they sing again, etc. as part of matins.

Answer from Fr Sergius:

The first thing that I would recommend is that you look through the translation of the troparia that you will be using before the service begins! This is a big one, because sometimes the translations can be a bit rugged...much more so than English translations of the Bible.

Now, perhaps I just assumed too much, namely that you are singing/chanting in English. But, no matter what language you are using, it is VERY important that you familiarize yourself with the text so that you are not caught off guard.

Then, once you do that prep work, it is also extremely important that you know your way inside the melody for the irmos, and the refrains. This way you can pick a note that works for the choir.

Technically, it is usually best to pick a note that is part of the chord the choir will sing when it begins the next refrain, or goes on to the Katavasia.

Comment:

Fr. Sergius, it doesn't sound like the choir is singing the refrain from this description (it is pretty atypical for the refrains to be sung in most Russian parishes, I think). The singing is usually in Slavonic, the reading of the Kanon alternates between Slavonic and English.)

Response from Fr Sergius:

Even if the choir only sings the irmoi, the chanting/reading of the troparia and refrains will be much nicer. If it is done in a pitch that works with the melody that has just been sung by the choir.

Comment:

Singing the refrains is something that we have to give more attention to.

Question:

If the choir director has not said to me anything about my pitch, should I assume that I'm OK?

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Answer:

I think you would be on solid ground if you solicited a bit of feedback from the choir director. It cannot hurt.

Professor Dave Drillock:

Fr Sergius, thank you very much, for leading a very exciting and useful discussion. We must include the topic of church reading when we present music workshops.

Father Sergius Halvorsen:

I heartily agree with you. Should any of you have additional questions about church reading, please feel free to contact me at jtshalvorsen@sbcglobal.net

Professor Drillock:

On Tuesday, June 19, 2007 Dr. Nicolas Schidlovsky will offer a unique presentation on the Old Believer musical tradition. We hope you can join us!

Good night.