

Music Education of Children in the Church

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Orthodoxy is a singing culture. When we gather to pray, we sing, and much of our theology is passed on through sacred song in the liturgical services. A great challenge for the Church today is that the secular culture around us is changing into a musically passive culture in which the common people watch the few perform. This change has taken place during my lifetime. When I was young, we sang at church, at school, at Girl Scouts, on the trail, in the car, working in the fields, and at Youth Group. All this singing involved everyone present, not just the musicians. It was an act of community. Community singing and musical participation are becoming rare as iPods increase in gigabyte capacity. Singing is no longer considered a natural act for a healthy human.

This change in our secular culture is unfortunate, for singing is known to be good for the soul. Besides several scriptural commands to sing,¹ both St. Athanasius and St. Basil describe the benefits of singing the psalms.

"For to sing the Psalms demands such concentration of a man's whole being on them that, in doing it, his usual disharmony of mind and corresponding bodily confusion is resolved, just as the notes of several flutes are brought by harmony to one effect; and he is thus no longer to be found thinking good and doing evil,"

"... so he who sings well puts his soul in tune, correcting by degrees its faulty rhythm so that at last, being truly natural and integrated, it has fear of nothing, but in peaceful freedom from all vain imaginings may apply itself with greater longing to the good things to come. For a soul rightly ordered by chanting the sacred words forgets its own afflictions and contemplates with joy the things of Christ alone.

– *St. Athanasius*²

"... it (the Psalter) is the common treasury of good doctrine, carefully finding what is suitable for each one. The old wounds of souls it cures completely, and to the recently wounded it brings speedy improvements; the diseased it treats, and the unharmed it preserves. On the whole, it effaces, as far as possible, the passions, which subtly exercise dominion over souls during the lifetime of man, and it does this with a certain orderly persuasion and sweetness which produces sound thoughts."

"When, indeed, the Holy Spirit saw that the human race was guided only with difficulty toward virtue, and that, because of our inclination toward pleasure, we were neglectful of an upright life, what did He do? The delight of melody He mingled with the doctrines so that by the pleasantness and softness of the sound heard we might receive without perceiving it the benefit of the words, just as wise physicians who, when giving the fastidious rather bitter drugs to drink, frequently smear the cup with honey. Therefore, he devised for us these harmonious melodies of the psalms, that they who are children in age or, even those who are youthful in disposition might to all appearances chant but, in reality, become trained in soul... A psalm is... the

elementary exposition of beginners, the improvement of those advancing, the solid support of the perfect, the voice of the Church... Oh! The wise invention of the teacher who contrived that while we were singing we should at the same time learn something useful; by this means, too, the teachings are in a certain way impressed more deeply on our minds. Even a forceful lesson does not always endure, but what enters the mind with joy and pleasure somehow becomes more firmly impressed upon it." – *St. Basil*³

The secular music teacher Shinichi Suzuki believed and taught that musical training ennobled the soul, and devoted his life to teaching children for this reason. "For the sake of our children, let us educate them from the cradle to have a noble mind, a high sense of values, and splendid ability. At our institute we use violin playing to develop these qualities in children." He also taught that ability is developed through experience and repetition.⁴ Today science shows us many physical and psychological benefits for those who engage in music, and a basic online search will produce several articles detailing these benefits. In short, singing engages the body, mind and spirit and truly integrates the whole person.

Perhaps this personal integration is one reason the Church has established sacred singing as a significant part of its practice. In order to continue this tradition, Orthodox parishes need able music leaders -- composers, arrangers, conductors, and chanters -- as well as singers to member the choirs. Ability will spring forth from children that experience and participate in music, so our first step is to cultivate singing culture within the Church and provide that experience. Singing must first be viewed as a natural and beneficial act for the average person. Joining in community song is the basic level of musical participation from which special ability and leadership can be cultivated.

Fortunately, young children are relatively free from cultural constraints and most will sing gladly. This is the place to start. Church music leaders should endeavor to build the opportunities for children to sing in the church, whether in church school, youth choir, Christmas plays, at church camp, or other social gatherings. Children can be started singing by anyone with a decent voice who can carry a tune – church-school teachers, choir members or others. Varied leadership will develop the understanding that singing is natural act. Whenever possible there should be singing in the home. Musically gifted or particularly interested children can be identified and put into apprentice-type positions in the musical life of the church. Maybe they can sing psalm verses at the chanter stand, or help with the choir book organization and maintenance. Their parents should be made aware of their interests and abilities and encouraged to provide further musical education or to enroll them in available school music programs. Children can sing at services as well when they are ready. They will need to be able to stand still through a service and stay focused for the appropriate length of time in order to participate in services. They need to be taught how to act and learn about liturgy as they grow.

In non-liturgical situations children can be taught Bible-songs, good folk songs and camp songs, add-on songs in which they create their own verses etc. The Troparia of the major feasts of the church can be easily memorized and contain the essence of each feast and quite a bit of theology. It is useful for children to learn about scales, how to read

notes, solfege, good breathing and basic singing technique. Much of this can be taught through games that are engaging, and they will gain a sense of confidence in their new skills, which in turn may benefit the Church in the future.

Including psalmody in church education is not a new idea. In the book, *The Early Church Fathers as Educators*, Elias Matsagouras, cites early church educators using the psalms as part of a basic Christian education. Protogenis, a priest of Edessa (c. 150 A.D.) taught the children of his parish elementary Christian subjects, writing, reading and singing. A fourth-century Protogenis used the Psalter for teaching reading.⁵ “Chrysostom also suggested that a good way of receiving a Christian education was to read from the Bible and to sing the Psalms, which would have had a good effect upon the child’s soul. Singing psalms was also recommended by Eusebius of Caesarea (263-340), and before him by Justin the Martyr.” Under Cyril of Jerusalem the church included psalmody in its catechesis.⁶

Some school districts today recognize the connection between musical education, mental development and test scores, and develop or continue to fund strong music programs. Unfortunately, this is not the norm, and children are getting limited music in our public schools. Surely there is a distinction between singing psalms and a music education, but a child accustomed to singing the Psalms will be more inclined to continue participating in church music, and if the church accepts the task of educating its children musically it will sustain its liturgical life and at the same time can be benefiting their souls, minds and bodies.

1. Is. 54:1, Psalms 5:11, 30:4, 33:1-3, 34:3, 47:6, 66:2, 95:1 & 6, 96, 1-3 & 7-9, 98:1 & 4, 147:1 & 7, Eph. 5:18 – 19, Col. 3:16, James 5:13, 1 Peter 2:9.
2. St. Athanasius, *The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms*, presented as the appendix in *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1953, 1989), pp. 114-115.
3. St. Basil the Great, *Exegetic Homilies*. Homily 10 (1, 2). B# CUA Vol. 46, pp. 151-154
4. Suzuki, Shinichi, *Nurtured by Love: The Classic Approach to Talent Education*. (Suzuki Method International Summy-Birchard Inc., 1983), p. 17.
5. Matsagouras, Elias G., *The Early Church Fathers as Educators*. (Light and Life Publishing Co., 1977), p. 25.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 28 – 29.