

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – February 6, 2007

Moderator: *Helen Erickson*

Chat room topic: **Conducting tips for beginning directors**

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

Tonight, we welcome Helen Erickson as our guest speaker to discuss techniques and conducting tips for beginning directors.

Helen Erickson:

Thank you. Let me begin by stating that church reading is actually a minor order in the church and it does have an “official” liturgical function, which, of course, implies responsibility.

I will follow the outline available on the OCA web site, and after each section, we can have questions and answers. I guess the first question is what you need to know to be a choir director.

I’ve been told that some directors “smell” the music, but how to read music is important. Given the contemporary situation, this is a basic requirement. It helps to have a fairly good idea of how the services are supposed to go as well, in terms of what comes after what and how many times.

If you have a helpful and cooperative priest, you are very fortunate. But sometimes priests don’t understand what a choir director needs in terms of information. So it’s useful to know what you should ask your priest.

Question:

But don’t you need to have confidence that the priest knows more than you do?

Answer:

Often the priest simply doesn’t understand what you need to know. Has anyone experienced this? It seems to me that it helps the choir director to know what to ask.

Beginning with an outline of the service, it seems the following are particularly useful: What happens immediately (you are responsible for starting it), and what requires that you wait for an action or explanation.

‘Gladsome Light’ is a case in point – a question of the entrance in daily or great vespers. Do you expect an exclamation, or not? Another example: does something happen immediately after “Amen.”

Comment:

The first time my mission did a full vigil, I made an extensive outline which was invaluable. Then I went over it with the priest.

Response:

That sounds like a really good example of how to ask the right questions. It also helps the choir, too, when you can give them a road map, so to speak, of the service. And this means that you can share this information with your singers which gives them a sense of control over what is going on.

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Other choir directors are also an invaluable source of help, because they have a good idea of what you need to know.

Follow-up comment:

They have been a great help to me, especially those on the PSALM list. It also helps, I think, to have a priest who is willing to spend the time to discuss these things.

Follow-up response:

But some don't want to be bothered and that is a real problem. That is one of the great things about PSALM, that it permits this kind of interaction. That is a big help when your priest doesn't understand what you need.

Choir directors need this community, because clergy have the seminary training and their classmates. I can see a special camaraderie among those choir directors who attend the various meetings and workshops.

Question:

One night in vespers the choir sang the prokeimenon four times. Can you explain it if you can?

Answer:

With the prokeimenon, there can be a number of different verses, depending on the day. So it depends on the verses, if it is a "Great Prokeimenon", it will include more verses than the "daily" Prokeimenon.

Question:

I've got a small mission choir with 3 altos who sing soprano, 2 altos and 2 baritones. Three people can read music. The ones who can read are the better singers, and they never want to come to rehearsal. I have a lot of trouble with motivating people to come to rehearsal and to learn to read music. One baritone sings tenor most of the time, otherwise one of the altos sing it. One baritone and one alto are very good singers, and one soprano is pretty good.

Answer:

OK - this means you have the three main voices to sing most of the harmonic music of our tradition. Let's start at the end. This sounds very familiar - the "stars" and the "slugs"!

Are the stars willing to do something special? Would they be willing to rehearse something if they knew they could be a main event? (I hate to have this depressing view of human nature.)

Comment:

I think so. But I try to not do "performances" if you know what I mean. Last week, I told those who had not rehearsed that they couldn't sing the new communion hymn until they rehearsed it. So it was 2 people singing it during divine liturgy.

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Response:

It wouldn't have to be a "performance". What you could do is let them do the first verse of say, the verses on Lord I call, then let the others join for the second.

Question:

I'm at a loss as to how to motivate them to take their ministry more seriously. These are reasonable people, but we all live far away from church, one is 60 mi one way, etc, etc, etc.

Answer:

Leadership is often a helpful carrot – would they have the time for an ensemble rehearsal for them alone – come a few minutes early to church, stay a few minutes after coffee hour?

When people who cannot sing well and cannot read music end up sight reading during liturgy, it can be a real train wreck for the choir.

Comment:

I have one who says she's a professional and won't come as a matter of principle.

Response:

Another way to work on this is with a Saturday "choir retreat." If you can figure out a way to work in childcare, food, maybe an outside workshop person, etc.

If it's one individual who is problematic, you may be able to work around him or her.

Comment:

I started a choir blog where I post upcoming music and interesting articles and links to sound files, etc.

Response:

Bravo for the sound files – I've been working on this for choral ensembles at my school. Old fashioned tapes or actually CD's or mp3's work just fine; they allow choir members to hear how the music should be sung.

Question:

I'd like to teach the choir members how to read music, and I'd like to teach some voice production and musicianship, but I don't know how.

Answer:

There is a great book available through JWPepper (<http://www.jwpepper.com>) on choral sight-reading. The title is "Sing at First Sight" by Beck, Surmani and Lewis. What really works best at the beginning is to take a very easy progression - like 1-2-3-1 or do-re-me-do, and use that as your warm-up.

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Question:

How can I motivate our Russian speakers to join the choir? We REALLY need people who can sing in Slavonic since we serve mostly Russian immigrants. But I can't get them to make the commitment.

Answer:

It really helps to teach Slavonic text by using speech repetition – you speak the text, the choir echoes – you need a rehearsal, alas. Speak it in rhythm, by the way.

Question:

What do you do with four-part music when you don't have a tenor?

Answer:

Most of our music is actually arranged for 3 voices with a filler part. Sometimes that filler part is the alto, sometimes the tenor.

The bass part is the harmonic support. If you see alto and soprano moving in thirds (parallel to each other), you can usually drop the tenor. If you see soprano and tenor moving parallel to each other, you can pretty much have the sopranos sing tenor in their range and drop the alto.

The bass is very important in stabilizing the sound. Actually, when the sopranos and altos sing parallel melodies, the alto has the real melody. This is true of most of the verse tones.

If you think about the concept of a triad (the basic chords we use), one note always has to be doubled, anyway. Harmonic music is really a 3-voice texture.

Question:

I was thinking about some of your preparatory questions, especially about rehearsal. I was wondering how you plan a rehearsal and how you pace it.

Answer:

A rehearsal needs a game plan. You have to start with what you have to do to survive. Then you need to add what you can do to make it more effective, more interesting.

Follow-up Question:

How do I make it more effective and interesting?

Follow-up Answer:

Part of that is teaching about the music as well as running through music – mention the saint, who wrote the hymn – after awhile these things become common coinage – it doesn't take much time.

I've always found that you need to change pace during a rehearsal – really push on some things, sing through some things, focus on small parts.

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Question:

Is there an optimum length of time of a rehearsal? An hour? Two?

Answer:

If you rehearse for an hour, you don't need a break. Otherwise you need to find a way to build in some "down time" – jokes, refreshments (10 minutes).

A good rehearsal demands focus – people can't usually keep on task for an extended period without a change of pace. Going between singing, listening, echoing speech in rhythm, repeating a tricky phrase – all these things help concentration.

Professor Drillock:

Helen, the hour has gone by very quickly, and we want to thank you so much for your participation and your help. We do hope that you will come back in the fall and continue with your outline.

Helen Erickson:

It was a pleasure. Sounds good to me. Thank you and good night.

Professor Drillock:

We will not have a session on Feb 20 as it is the first week of the Great Fast, and we will be at the service of the Great Kanon of St. Andrew.

We hope to see you on the first Tuesday in March the 6th, when Professor Aleksei Shipovalnikov will be the guest speaker and will present a guide to 'The Rhythmic Structure of the Liturgy.'

We hope you can join us!

Good night.