

The Orthodox Church in America – Department of Liturgical Music & Translations
Music Chatroom Transcript – September 19, 2006

Moderator: *Alice Hughes*

Chat room topic: **Forming a Children's Choir**

Alice Hughes

Good Evening everyone. I hope you all had at least a chance to look at the two handouts.

The first question to answer is why have a children's choir? Anne Schoepp's paper is a good starting point for answering this question.

We can't rely on children learning to sing at school or camp or home the way that we used to. But if we want to raise up leaders of music for the 21st century, WE need to do it because in many places they aren't learning the basics in school.

I know of a handful parishes have children's choirs already in existence, some regularly, some irregularly.

If it works to have them in the main choir that is one choice. Sometimes it is hard for children to sustain the energy needed for that. I really feel, and agree, that the ability to read (words not music) is a prerequisite to choir singing.

If you have a critical mass of children, say 6 or more...who want to sing that may be a good time to begin. I think that children about age 7 are usually ready. You can have children younger than that but EVERYTHING including the text will be by rote.

Everything by rote is not necessarily a bad thing, but the older children's learning may be slowed down. A pre-school choir can also work but it might want to rehearse for a shorter time or have them leave earlier. It really depends on the kids and the situation.

Question:

Alice, it seems that girls are more inclined to sing, any suggestions on getting boys to join?

Answer:

Getting the boys in is trickier. What helps is a good model. If there is a great male singer in the parish, who also happens to be an athlete. You have a much easier time. But usually just making personal contact goes a long way. Invite them to sing and make it fun.

Question:

Usually, readers come from within the choir, instead of using 'readers' to get people/kids to join the choir.

Answer:

Good idea! If you have a youth choir that sings regularly... by that I don't mean every Sunday. But often. Then finding the boys to become readers is easier. Sometimes the easiest way to get started is for some particular event or feast.

Question:

Alice, can you tell us how you began with children's choir and how did you organize it, what did you do at rehearsals, etc?

Answer:

I am a music educator first and foremost so I just jumped in. When we initially began, we also had a parish school. I made rehearsals immediately after school one day a week.

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Question:

Did you incorporate the music within the parish school?

Answer:

That way kids who didn't attend the parish school could also come.

Question:

How about the structure of the rehearsals?

Answer:

Those kids in the initial group sang a weekday liturgy twice a month! I realize that is a peculiar situation but it was great. As regards structure for rehearsals, very similar to an adult choir rehearsal. We would warm-up – this is the opportunity to do a lot of teaching...basic breathing and vocal technique... and SOLFEGE.

If I were to start a youth choir in a more normal parish situation, I would try to identify key kids and their parents and determine the best time to have a 45 min to hour rehearsal on a weekly basis and then announce to the entire parish that when we would begin and invite all.

I like to make sure that any gifted kids I'm aware of won't have soccer practice at the same time. The real key to getting kids to keep coming back is for them to enjoy the rehearsal and make music each time they come together.

Question:

Were you actually able to get that kind of commitment?

Answer:

Yes, I was able to.

Question:

So, is the key to get kids to sing in harmony? Or, do we teach them unison chant?

Answer:

Also, if they hear and feel that they are improving they are more likely to keep returning. It depends on the kids. Some groups may have some more experienced singers who could hold a harmony part others may not. In my groups we have always ended up with 2 or 3 parts. You need to establish from the beginning what the goal is kids and adults need a goal.

Perhaps they will chant the verses for the antiphons on a Feast day and do a special Communion antiphon.

Question:

I think it is important especially in younger kids that you practice pronouncing all the words of a troparia or whatever it is you are going to sing.

Answer:

You could do that.

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Question:

Alice, what has been your most direct route to achieving sheer "enjoyment" of singing?

Answer:

Finding good melodies.

Question:

Any suggestions?

Answer:

The Communion Hymn "Receive the Body of Christ" in the Alaskan melody is a good one. In our parish they LOVE to sing the Paschal Troparion in many languages. Each language with its own cultural heritage and rhythm and they sing these with enthusiasm

Question:

Can you do anything if you have only one or two kids?

Answer:

Yes you can do it with fewer kids but it is tougher unless they are gifted. The more kids you have the more freedom they have to sing out. Also, kids love to learn, when given the opportunity. I find that the kids really tune into certain things.

It is really important (just as with the adult choir) that you expect regular attendance

Question:

Alice do you have an opinion related to signing and singing at the same time?

Answer:

You mean like signing for the deaf? I know of one children's choir in southern California that does this. I have never done it but I LIKE the idea. Combining movement with sound, engages kids. It is very kinesthetic, but it might be distracting in church though...again, it would depend upon the particular situation.

Question:

Alice, your outline mentions playing recordings of children singing---any suggestions?

Answer:

I knew that question would come up! I do have some... perhaps I could make a list and put it somewhere for folks to see. There aren't a lot but there are some.

One of my choirs a few years ago did one that is available through Conciliar press: The Lord is My Shepherd. I think Musica Russica also has some others.

Alice Hughes

It is important to have long term goals with the choir as well...teaching sight singing, having the Children's choir act as a feeder to the adult choir, etc

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Question from Alice:

How many of you teach sight singing to your choirs (adult or children's)?

Answers:

- * If I had a chance, I was going to last year :-)
- * I want to teach sight singing to my adult choir (with children in it) but don't know how
- * We haven't taught sight singing either

Alice:

One of the best ways is using: "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start..."
Seriously, I included a couple of handouts that show how I get started teaching kids and adults solfege.

Besides singing full scales which where you need to begin, I use the patterns found on page two of the handout.

Question:

Alice, may I ask you to do the Sight-singing Sheet #1 and #2 using the bass clef? I have found the movable do the best system.

Answer:

When I taught, I used to use numbers, but I haven't found it to be as successful as movable do solfege. Yes, it would be easy to do that on the bass clef. That is actually sheets 3 & 4.

Hand signals are also fabulous with children. I haven't found them as useful with adults. The patterns on the sheets I gave you, are patterns that I have the kids memorize.

Question:

So you have them do memory work?

Answer:

It helps them to learn their way around the key. In this system "Do" is always related to the major key signature. With one sharp, do is G, 2 flats do is Bb etc.

Then it doesn't matter what the mode is. Minor scales begin on La, Dorian on Re, Mixolydian on G, etc.

Once they know their way around the solfege I give them their music, with the solfege written in like the example in the packet. Eventually, depending upon how much time you rehearse they will learn and can write the solfege in for themselves.

I do the same with my adult choirs, junior high and high school choirs

The last page of the hand out is for fun with the kids. Songs that they know (or should know) with the solfege syllables. This could also be done, without music, for our common church hymns. Later you can relate it to actual musical notes. I have found is the solfege helps them begin to recognize patterns. If the choir is having difficulty singing something and you say look it is "la, ti, do, re, do". It give them a handle that they understand.

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Question:

Have you ever done all boys or all girls? I would think that could be fun for them.

Answer:

Yes, I have done all boy or all girls for some things. They love it. You can also have them have freindly competition. This helps everyone sing out more and you all can have a good laugh at the end!

Question:

I would think that the "round" is also a lot of fun but also very helpful for learning "part" singing.

Answer:

Yes rounds are fabulous!

Question:

Have you ever staged musical productions with kids (I don't mean Broadway), but something even very simple on stage? Or, is that too much work?

Answer:

Yes, I have done lots of musicals with kids and professionals. Get this I even make the pros use solfege when they aren't getting it.

Question:

What is you have kids that wont listen and don't take you seriously?

Question:

Alice, would you be willing to do the bass solfege, #3 and #4, and also a few rounds? Even if only as a different type of warm-up?

Answer:

I don't have any rounds done except the ones in words only. Rounds are great for teaching part singing and to use them for adult choirs and as different warm-ups.

Question:

Alice do you have any suggestions for books that would help with teaching choirs from scratch? Teaching choirs that don't know how to read music or proper breath control or voice placement? Or any other aids for a choir director - videos, cds etc.

Answer:

There are several books but different ones for voice and sight signing foundation of singing by John Paton has a great 12 chapters on the basics of singing and it also has other stuff you may not want.

There is also a book called Successful Warm-ups by Nancy Telfer. This is designed to be used with choirs. It has lots of great stuff. If you buy the teachers edition you also get a great appendix that talks about specific vocal troubles and which exercises to use to fix it.

Alice Hughes

Thanks. It was nice to meet all of you. Goodnight, and please don't hesitate to contact me if you have questions.