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**THE SACRED ENCAMPMENT:  
THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE LEARNING  
MUSICAL TRADITION**

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This paper explores some of the singing and musical experiences which are part of Orthodox youth camps. This is not a report of academic research. It is based on my own experience and reflections, with the addition of a small survey to identify the different uses of music in youth camps in the United Kingdom and further afield.

In this paper, I will cover: the context for Orthodox youth camps in the UK; the experience at the camps; musical practice in relation to young people in Orthodox parishes and communities; and what further developments could be considered in this area.

**THE EXISTENCE OF ORTHODOX YOUTH CAMPS**

Orthodox youth camps in the UK have been taking place for many years; at the present time, there are three regular camps that take place, outside of the current restrictions. They bring together young people usually aged 9-17 for some time in the summer. The children are supervised and safeguarded by a team of leaders over the age of 18, many of whom attended camp as participants. Tents form the main accommodation, usually including the chapel for the duration of camp. The young people often experience things for the first time at camp: hearing the services predominantly in English, being given the opportunity to read prayers, chant and sing, or even attend a service other than the Divine Liturgy.

A camp shares something of the character of a monastery, living and worshipping in a community with a structured schedule and daily services. Nevertheless, a camp is by nature temporary rather than permanent, an encampment reminiscent of the nomadic life of the Israelites in the wilderness.

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How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the Lord has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters. Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters; his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. (Numbers 24:5-7)

These words from the Book of Numbers bear some consideration. The encampment described was arranged in the shape of a cross. In the words of the prophet, it is akin to nature, organic yet organised, reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. Aloes remind us of the spices brought by Nicodemus to anoint the body of Christ (John 19:39). Cedars are durable and valuable and remind us of the building of the Temple by Solomon (3 Kingdoms 6:13). The waters flow out and remind us of baptism and mission. Within the liturgical year, these words form part of one of the readings for Vespers for the Nativity of Christ.

Orthodox youth camps can be seen in a similar way to this. The camps seek to return participants to a purer spiritual state, preparing them to serve Christ and His Church in different ways – as those who nurture, servants, builders, missionaries – with the aim of exalting the kingdom of God. Of course, I am probably stretching this scriptural analogy too far. Nevertheless, Orthodox youth camps are certainly considered important by the hierarchs of the Church, and by the people involved, having become an established part of the UK Orthodox way of life. They are an opportunity for young people who may be scattered and geographically remote to connect with the Church and other Orthodox young people, live in a supportive Orthodox environment and learn more about the faith. They also provide a musical learning experience.

### **MUSICAL EXPERIENCE AT ORTHODOX YOUTH CAMPS**

“Sing to the Lord a new song; His praise is in the church of the saints.”  
(Psalm 149:1)

In the summer of 1996, I attended my first Orthodox youth camp in the UK, along with my brother. We had been received into the Church as a family the previous December and our embryonic parish had very few young people connected with it. While we each had experience of camps through the Guiding and Scouting movements, this was the first time we would spend so much time with other Orthodox young people.

Our family had always been musical, and we grew up singing at home, at school and at church. In my case, my musical ear, being comfortable with sight singing, eye for detail and burgeoning interest in liturgics meant that I acquired the position of choir leader for our parish at the age of 13. But my experience was limited: I had sung Orthodox music from the Russian tradition during conferences of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, under the direction of Fr Michael Fortounatto, but in our newly-received status we depended on the supply of music and liturgical books from a variety of sources, as do so many other mission communities. For the first

few months of our Orthodox life we served Great Vespers every Saturday, but every week was sung in the First Tone: imagine my surprise when we received the stichera for Lord I Call and the Aposticha in the other seven tones. The Theotokia for the end of Vespers followed even later. An attempt at a hard-chromatic chant for one of the services in our first Great Lent was rather a failure on account of lack of familiarity. Overall, there was a fair amount of trial and error involved and I had little to compare, not having the opportunity to attend other parishes.

Attending an Orthodox youth camp was a way to understand the services of the Church more deeply, to learn about different singing traditions, to sing alongside a larger group in worship, and to begin to understand what I could offer back to the community.

The music we experienced at camp included singing and chanting at services every day: morning prayers, evening prayers, blessing of the camp, Great Vespers and Divine Liturgy. We sang grace at meals. We sang round the campfire. We sang while on walks or completing activities. We made up songs for tent inspection for extra marks. We sang in talent shows or concerts. Any person leaving the camp was accompanied by everyone singing Kyrie eleison in blessing. In short, singing was all-pervasive and part of camp life.

These experiences were reflected in the responses to the survey I conducted. Some respondents reported the singing of non-liturgical spiritual songs in different contexts in camp, and others added that young people would sing songs based on a theme of the day. Singing in English and other languages was reported as an essential part of camp, often transmitted orally and resulting in enduring memories of song and place. In addition, few young people are aware of the wide variety of folk songs across the cultures of participants, including in English, and these can provide a new way of understanding each other through song.

While camp was an opportunity to embed the musical tradition of that jurisdiction, there was also the possibility of widening the horizons of the young people to sing and hear the traditions of other parts of the Orthodox world. At the same camp, I learned to chant the Apolytikion of the Cross in Greek and English in the Byzantine style, as well as to learn to sing in Slavonic the Troparion of an icon of the Theotokos held at the campsite. Both happen to be in the First Mode/Tone but are completely different in nature, of course. These songs or chants often act as triggers to a memory of a spiritual experience in later life.

There can be a negative side to singing at camp – or rather, not singing. There will always be a proportion of young people who cannot or will not sing. There are children who have not had the opportunity to sing before, those who have been told they cannot sing in tune in the past, the boys who may be concerned about their voices breaking, the girls who may have a fear of embarrassing themselves, or many other reasons for a lack of self-confidence. There may also be issues with reading notation,

whichever method is used in that tradition. In the UK, as in many other western societies, there have been challenges in engaging young people in any musical practice, including singing, once they leave primary education – just the age when they will be attending camp. To get young people to sing may require a much more supportive and non-judgmental approach, allowing them to sing without worrying about the absolute accuracy of every note before building up their confidence, musicality and skill.

Camp may provide a safe space for these young people to try singing for the first time or return to it, particularly in singing outside the services. However, these young people may also be intimidated by the idea of a choir or group of chanters in the services, just as they would be in their home parish where any new member may not be welcome, let alone a young person. Some respondents to the survey said that a choir or group of chanters can become a clique and feel exclusive, and this can be difficult to overcome. Making singing as inclusive as possible should be the aim and teaching simple refrains from services to all young people is one way to get them to engage.

“Behold now, what is so good or so joyous as for brethren to dwell together in unity?” (Psalm 132:1)

The benefits of singing at camp were broadly agreed by respondents to include the experience of a variety of musical traditions; singing or chanting in English; and experiencing a full schedule of services. The encouragement of teamwork was considered an important benefit, a way to bring about unity in a group made up of people from different backgrounds, as was the improvement of musicality in participants. Further, the physical and mental benefits of group singing are well known and can be emphasised to young people, albeit these are outside the scope of this paper. All these benefits apply to all participants, but for those for whom the Church is still new, as was my case, they will potentially benefit even more.

In the survey, I asked for the most memorable moment connected with singing at camp. Some were funny: learning that the tenor part in standard harmonised music was often a filler part and not very interesting; or learning a song around the campfire from someone who is now a Bishop about wanting to be a sheep at the last judgement. Other recollections were far more profound: “When chanting together, it was the most unifying moment.” “Singing under the stars surrounded by friends and knowing it’s a taste of Heaven.”

I loved the musical life of camp, both as participant and leader. I have learned beautiful chants, fun songs, and have even added one song to the campfire canon. Years later, stopping on a mountain by the roadside in Montenegro with a group of friends at sunset to sing together O Joyful Light to the melody learned at camp will always remind me of the importance of my singing experiences there.

## MUSICAL PRACTICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN ORTHODOX PARISHES AND COMMUNITIES

Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' And he laid his hand on them and went away. (Matthew 19: 13-15)

The musical practice at Orthodox youth camps can provide a lasting impact when young people and camp leaders are back in their parishes and communities. The music learned at camp is sometimes incorporated into a community's worship – this was certainly the case for me, where I took the time to write out several chants learned by heart at camp back in the parish for the choir. Sometimes singing from camp will be included in social activities as part of wider Church life, such as pilgrimages and parish meals. Some respondents also reported taking the singing back to their personal lives and prayer routines, using the sung grace from camp for meals at home, for example.

Young people are full participants in the Church and are encouraged to be present at services with their families and godparents. But their opportunity for participation is limited. Singing can be a way of achieving this, even from a very young age.

Unfortunately, very few communities themselves build on the musical practice at youth camps. This may be for a variety of reasons: lack of resources (only one respondent reported financial support for youth music activities in their jurisdiction); lack of confidence in the communities to arrange something appropriate; or perhaps a lack of understanding of some of the benefits. Only two respondents reported that their community has a youth choir and four respondents said that they actively recruit young people into the choir. While most respondents said that anyone can join the choir, the lack of confidence in young people taking that step themselves suggests that targeting them more carefully is necessary.

I do not exclude myself and my community from this reflection. I am the choir director in my parish. Even though I have benefitted from attending camp as a participant and a leader, and there are several young people in our parish who attend camp, we have not built on this foundation musically. We have had some one-off successes, such as the Sunday School children learning the Troparion of the Cross to sing for the beginning of the school year, and young people join in the singing of the symbol of faith and the Lord's Prayer, but we have no other musical activities for the young people. I would welcome more young people to read and sing in the choir, but I have not actively sought them out. As with any community, we have challenges relating to how we are constituted, but we have not necessarily thought enough about how we might engage young people through singing and other musical activities.

## HOW MUSICAL PROVISION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE MIGHT IMPROVE

So that psalmody, bringing about choral singing, a bond, as it were, toward unity, and joining the people into a harmonious union of one choir, produces also the greatest of blessings, charity. A psalm is a city of refuge from the demons; a means of inducing help from the angels, a weapon in fears by night, a rest from toils by day, a safeguard for infants, an adornment for those at the height of their vigour, a consolation for the elders, a most fitting ornament for women.<sup>1</sup>

The question remains of how to make best use of the musical experiences of young people in camp but widening that to all young people in our communities. Camps are necessarily limited in number and can only reach a fraction of the young people in the Church, even if different people attend each year.

Respondents to the survey had ideas of what they would put in place. The themes of the suggestions: to provide youth-specific musical activities; to introduce youth participation in the services; and to consider the music education that is needed to provide well-trained musicians for the future and fill the gaps left by formal education. For example, providing opportunities for young people to sing together, either as a youth choir for singing at services or just boosting confidence by singing together outside of Church. Using simple chants to be more active at different focus points of the service and using methods to teach by heart while they are still developing as people. There were even suggestions of a camp with the sole purpose of training in liturgical music.

We need to find ways to recreate the sacred encampment in our communities as a way to strengthen the Church now and for the future. Different solutions will work better in different communities, but the key will be working with the young people, under the direction of the clergy and the hierarchs, who may have additional criteria to consider.

If one of the reasons for Orthodox youth camps is to gather young people who are geographically scattered and isolated, a regional approach may be necessary, with communities working together. Resources need to be put in place to help parishes and communities achieve this. Small changes may be possible without great cost, but finance, time and expertise should be taken into account and investment made by jurisdictions, where necessary.

Young people have energy and enthusiasm when allowed the opportunity to act. Participants in Orthodox youth camps can transmit their musical learning onwards. Like St Basil the Great, we might say that their psalmody and music-making is truly “an adornment for those at the height of their vigour” and a blessing on the Church.

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1 St Basil, “HOMILY 10: A Psalm of the Lot of the Just Man,” in *Exegetic Homilies (The Fathers of the Church, Volume 46)*, transl. by Agnes Clare Way, 151–64. Catholic University of America Press, 1963. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt32b0rg.13>.