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# FINDING BEAUTY IN CHORAL RELATIONSHIPS<sup>1</sup>

**JOHN M. BLACK**

Orthodox Church in America  
[johnmblack@gmail.com](mailto:johnmblack@gmail.com)

Parish choirs have an inherent responsibility to keep the liturgical life of parishes alive and dynamic through their singing. For established choirs, this may mean combining existing repertoire with new settings as needed based on evolving membership, musical abilities, and voicing.

Both directors and singers have to understand their roles and how they must work together with conciliarity to refine, enhance, and when necessary, smooth rough edges to achieve expectations for a healthy liturgical experience for all members of the community. The workshop will be interactive and provide information which can help create a more prayerful and sonorous sound for your choir, helping both singers and directors alike.

## BACKGROUND

Every parish choir is itself an icon of a Christian community. As choir directors and chanters, we sometimes invest much time and energy building up the techniques of conducting, musicology, teaching skills, and if we are doubly blessed, liturgical theory, in order to improve our choirs. We attend many workshops and continuing education classes (this author included) and return armed with new ideas and new music. Yet some directors and choirs experience difficulties that do not fit neatly into musicology and conducting technique. In fact, some anecdotal evidence collected for this practicum suggested that it was precisely these moments of returning with new methods and ideas that seemed to amplify the personal dynamics within the choir.

The goal for this practicum was to explore two related topics:

1. The relationships within the typical parish choir, and how difficulties in those relationships may affect how the choir functions (musically or logistically)
2. How a choir composed of older (sometimes elderly) singers may have a different set of challenges from what many music educators learn about teaching children

In its final form, the practicum covered:

- Practical exercise(s) to smooth out the sound of an older choir
- Unique challenges of adult learners
- An open discussion about the relationship between directors and singers
- My own concluding thoughts

<sup>1</sup> Practicum, originally entitled, "Key Elements of Working with an Established Choir".

**TRANSCRIPT<sup>2</sup>**

What does it mean to be an “established choir”? In this session, I wanted to discuss the often unspoken difficulties and tensions that sometimes occur within a choir that is “older” – that could mean *literally* older, as in filled with ageing voices; or *institutionally* older, where regardless of the age of singers, the choir as an institution has been there for quite some time (and has been doing things a certain way for quite some time.)

We will not delve into advanced pedagogy of vocal production.

- That is not my personal expertise (I invite anyone who has deeply studied vocal coaching in older singers to be a presenter the next time we have a symposium, to continue this conversation.)
- While vitally important, it is a long-term solution to improving the sound. I wondered what kinds of things we could do in a small practicum that would have a decent impact, in a few memorable, measurable steps – the small adjustments that make a big difference.

I conducted a number of informal but confidential interviews with (a) older choir members and (b) those who work with them. I asked singers things like, “What do you wish your choir director understood better about you? What if anything do you feel you’ve lost in this singing experience as you’ve aged?” I asked directors things like “What do you find most frustrating in directing/coaching your older singers?”

**PART 1: MUSICAL EXERCISE: SMOOTHING OUT THE ROUGH EDGES**

From directors of course I heard comments about finding new music, rehearsal attendance, limited vocal ranges, and cracking voices. From singers of course I heard things like “they don’t sing my favourite setting”, etc. These kinds of responses were almost to be expected.

However when I pressed further about the work of the choir as a whole, I began to hear a surprisingly common theme: *smoothness*. Comments like, “We sound too choppy,” “disjointed,” “the sound doesn’t flow along well,” etc. All different ways of saying there is a general lack of smoothness. These also aligned with my own experiences.

In my experience, when a choir struggles with a smooth sound, it is usually more a mental/attitudinal problem than a physiological one. Applying a few changes in how we conduct, and repeatedly calling attention to the issue, can solve a portion of the problem without ever digging into advanced vocal retraining.

What about introducing new music? (Perhaps there is a new setting which will help my choir sound better?) We need to be honest about something: If we are having severe difficulties with the sound of our choir, or in our own voices, learning more music won’t help. *It is not a quantity problem*. This is about “how do I make what we already do better? How do I smooth out the rough edges? *How do I find beauty in the music we already have?*”

**FINDING THE LARGER PULSE**

We experimented with different approaches to finding the pulse of an easily-memorized piece of music with a steady pulse. The main example was the *Paschal Kontakion*, to the Russian-Greek

Tone 8 Greek Chant  
B. Ledkovsky

Chant Tone 8, arranged by B. Ledkovsky, as found in the SVS Press Paschal volume.

2 The following is the text of the live presentation. Some sections were shortened for reasons of time.

We used techniques such as shifting the centre of gravity in time, imaginary conducting on different pulses, and blind aural feedback from each half of the room. The objective was to illustrate how the sound immediately changes (becomes smoother) if we focus on a minim/half-note pulse instead of a crotchet/quarter-note. We then briefly brainstormed how the same approach could be applied to other well-known pieces.

### **PULLING THE STRING / SINGING THROUGH THE CONSONANTS<sup>3</sup>**

For unmeasured/irregular-pulse music, singers should try pulling an imaginary thread slowly and steadily out of the mouth during each long phrase, reinforcing the imagery of the tone and breath remaining constant even as the voice passes through syllables and consonants. A good example for this might be *The Lord's Prayer* by Rimsky-Korsakov. This exercise is designed to reduce the uncontrolled staccato in between syllables that can develop in older voices due in part to lack of breath control.

## **PART 2 - FINDING BEAUTY IN CHORAL RELATIONSHIPS**

It is well known by now, within general educational theory circles, that adults generally have very different learning patterns and mental processing styles from children, teens, and young adults.

However, while it is obvious in most settings that an older adult has different emotional needs from a 10-year-old, sometimes this point is temporarily lost once a director steps onto a podium. Some interview responses suggested is that it was precisely this disconnection which was not just the *amplification* of tensions in an older choir, but often the direct *cause* of it. I have witnessed this both in myself and in other directors. The schoolteacher comes out, and the older singers tune out. One comment was: "Unless you're actually dealing with children, don't treat your singers like children."

### **THE ADULT LEARNER - INDIVIDUAL DYNAMICS**

- **Adults can be more distractible than kids.** Quietly, inwardly distractible. Children have many silly things on their minds, but adults have many emotional things on their minds.
- **Impatient with the ordinary.** They may already know more than you think they do.
- **Distrustful of information** that does not fit their past experience, especially anecdotal and especially coming from a younger authority figure (older singers, younger director.) One comment: "She keeps telling me all this stuff but I just don't think it's true."
- **Loss of control.** As we get older, there are fewer things we have control over, including the physical self. Give them moments to explore the music on their own and challenge them to correct themselves. Correcting too quickly stifles this.
  - Think of the difference between a President and a Coach
  - Two shepherding models: One walks behind with a crook, striking sheep that start to wander. The other walks in front with a staff and the sheep follow.
- **Loss of identity/youth.** This cannot be overstated. Ageing hurts, often emotionally. I heard a story from a director whose choir had a very poorly-arranged version of a hymn in their binders – a "crooner", strangely ornate and even liturgically inappropriate by some standards. The director wiped out every trace of it at the first opportunity to teach a replacement. In theory, it seemed the right thing to do. But one older singer disappeared without a word for many weeks. When encountering her at coffee hour much later, the director asked where she had been. She told him, "that piece was my childhood; it was

3 Omitted in the live presentation.

a piece of my heart, and you cut out my heart.” It took many conversations to heal that relationship.

#### **OPEN DISCUSSION<sup>4</sup>**

Directors: “What do you wish your singers understood better?” (Vocal/Ensemble? Interpersonal? Education/Experience Gap?)

Singers: What do you wish your director understood better about you? Musically or otherwise? How has your own voice/musicianship changed over the years?

#### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

##### **THE GOOD SHEPHERD**

Everything in the Church is an icon, and that includes the choir and its director (or cantors and lead cantor.) This is not a job, it is a vocation. The choir gathered around its director is an image of the clergy surrounded by the parish, which in turn is an image of the Church gathering around Christ its chief Shepherd. This tells us what kind of relationship we should form with our singers: we are to shepherd them, not lord it over them.

If there is only one change you make to your routine or physical space as a result of this practicum, please do this: find a very small icon of Christ the Good Shepherd, even if it is only the size of an index card or wallet photograph. Fasten it to your music stand or shelf in such a way that it is facing you alone and it remains in your line of sight always.

##### **THE STILL SMALL VOICE**

Singers and liturgical musicians must have an attitude of stillness. Recall iconography’s inverse perspective – the image does not thrust out at the viewer; rather, the viewer is drawn into the image. Our voice, even when filled with energy, must retain that same property.

Both the notes and the text grow from the heart. Challenge your singers to think of themselves as hymnographers. Even though someone else wrote both the words and the notes, we must “write” them in the present moment. *We become in a small way a co-hymnographer.* This is not merely high philosophy – it is real, because we actually affect how the music and words penetrate the hearts of the people – by how we arrange music, how we choose music, how we conduct it, how we as individuals sing it. Your voice carries theology; it has been entrusted with the message of the Gospel like a life-or-death note clipped onto a wartime carrier pigeon. Because the message of the Gospel *is* a matter of life or death.

##### **VOCATION AND AGING**

One of the older choir directors I spoke with was having a rough time – both her voice and her hearing were failing. She said one thing that broke my heart: “I don’t know how *not* to be a choir director.”

We like to think of vocation as *doing* something; accomplishing something visible. But almost every parish has at least one elderly person that just stands in his or her place. That is all they do. How much do they accomplish just standing there? What is their vocation? We all have a ministry in the Church; theirs is *stillness*, which is a more difficult virtue to attain than the most beautiful singing. They stand and pray. This is not a lesser vocation than that of the choir director. Everything we do in our “active” life might just be preparation for that greatest vocation of stillness, which everyone will eventually be called to. For some, that transition manifests itself in very tangible ways, where the voice itself must take on stillness.

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4 Recording devices were turned off at this time.

In any of these cases, never look at the situation as a “vocal problem”. He or she is a person who is struggling with a (perceived) loss of identity, a loss of gift. It is painful, tragic, and often hidden away in their heart where we do not truly witness the struggle. This is not to say we should ignore a difficult vocal/musical situation which has a real, negative impact on worship. But it means we must proceed with care and love, and as with all things, begin with the heart.

The voice will follow.

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