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CHILDREN'S CHOIRS IN CHURCH

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My talk today will be focused on the importance of relationships in working with children. I teach middle schoolers - all day, every day, 150 middle schoolers. I have taught all ages, Kindergarten through high school, college age students, and some adults. What I have learned in my time as a teacher and educator in terms of sound, in terms of tone, in terms of choirs - whatever it is you want to call what it is we do - I have found that the most inspirational, beautiful choirs that you hear sound the way they do because of the relationships that exist. This goes hand in hand with all the musical and technical training taking place to create that beauty. But if the people in that group do not have a relationship with their conductor, and with their peers, it no longer matters what kind of technical training they have or what kind of musicians they are. They will never have the unique sound that comes from a choir that is completely invested in every single singer in the room. Building those relationships, especially with children, is so important. If you do not, you will never have a truly beautiful sound. In fact, harking back to what Larissa said this morning, when you come in with a certain mindset about how you are going to be successful, it carries to the group as a whole. They can all pick up on that mindset of success. When that whole group is united in that, you have set the stage for a successful rehearsal or service.

So to me there are three relationships that are particularly important as you start this process. The first, of course, for us, is your relationship with God. If that is not strong, nothing else that we are trying to do is going to work. This relates directly to children in that they see everything. They may not listen to you, and they may pretend that they are not looking at you, but they see everything. I have a four-year old and I love to tell stories about him, as mothers do. But everyone always wants to know what it is we do with him at home because he loves coming to church, singing in church, he censes with his pretend censer, he is always running around like a little deacon. So people want to know if we are doing daily prayers with him, reading church books all the time, or what our routine at home with him is. And for better or worse, we do not have one. We really care about church, and about being there. He watches how important it is to us, and he sees that it is a priority for us. And because it is important to us, it is important to him. With you, as a conductor, it is the same. If it matters to you, and is important to you, it will matter to your singers. If you are there as an example, *showing* that relationship with God, they will get it. You sitting there *telling* them this is what you should do, this is what you should wear, these are my expectations in church, etc. That is all good, but what they really need is to *see* what you do. If they respect you, and if you have built that relationship with them, that is

what they are going to be excited about. They will see what you do, and they want to emulate everything they can about you. Unfortunately, that can put a lot of pressure on you. You have to have yourself together all the time! That's not to say you can't have a day where you cut yourself some slack. But whether you are there as their conductor, or it is just a service where you are present as a singer or lay person, they are watching. So take care of you, and take care of your relationship with God above all else. That is what will draw them in and bring them closer to God.

Wrapped up in that, of course, is your relationship with your parish and priest. What are the goals of having a children's choir? What does your parish hope to achieve through this? Is it a choir that will really only sing once a year or are they singing a service every week, perhaps as part of an attached church school or programme if you have that luxury? Know what that plan is or take time to make that plan; because for a lot of these children, music is something they connect with. Whether it is inside of church or outside of church, they get music. So you have a foot in the door to keep these children Orthodox. It is not cheating to use music as that tool to pull them in.

As children get older, keeping them invested can become difficult. They often start to feel awkward singing with younger ones, and begin to question what their role really is. I work with this middle school age, and I *sometimes* even understand them! But one of the biggest factors with this age is that they know what is a true part of worship and prayer, and what is a dog-and-pony-show. They are going to feel uncomfortable if it is the "performance" (for lack of a better word) where the children's choir is paraded out once a year to sing a couple hymns. The five year olds will be excited, but the middle schoolers will realise that it is not a natural and true participation in worship. They begin to develop that sense of what feels right in church, and more often than not, **that** is what will make them begin to pull away from participation in a youth choir. Conversely, if they feel that they have a job which is necessary, and important in supporting the work of the church, they will be drawn to it. So keep that in mind as you make goals within your parish, with your priest, and with your choirs. I do believe there are also opportunities to bring youth choirs in to perform at church functions - parish festivals, outreach, concerts, etc. They can be a huge asset at events like this. And there is beginning to be some lovely para-liturgical music that can also be featured by them in that sort of venue. That is where youth choir "performance" belongs. But there are many other natural ways for them to be involved within the services more regularly and appropriately. That is where the relationship with God and with your priest must always come first, and all decisions must come back to that.

The second relationship is of course the relationship that you build directly with children. That has to happen both within church and - in some ways more importantly - outside of church; or perhaps outside the boundaries of liturgy. Those relationships are built during coffee hour, or at church parties or picnics. It might feel uncomfortable for you at first to go and sit down with a group of kids but it must be done. Remember, for youth growing up in church, there is a very clear line between the "grownups" and the "children." And the "grownups" are friends with their parents, and of course the "children" are friends with each other. Figuring out how to break down that barrier where you have a true relationship with the youth is the most important step! Each child must matter to you. You have to show them you want to know what is going on in their lives. Then there is no longer the middle-man of "their parent" between you and that child. There is instead a direct link between you and him. It is also your great opportunity to find out that child sings in their school choir, or plays an instrument in band, *and reads music*. Why are they not singing in choir here at church? You can learn so many things that are incredibly useful to you as a director through the process of relationship building with each child. They want to know about you, and you have to want to know about them. That

is what will get them excited. Then use these middle school age children to reach out to the younger ones. They can be your best asset. They are the ones the younger children are looking up to. If you can get the older ones invested as leaders, not just to be a part of it, but to actually feel needed, and feel like a part of the process, they will thrive, and they will love it. They need to be needed. They will rise to the occasion every time. Because all they really want is a job that matters. And then guess what? They will do half the work for you to bring in the younger singers! And what has been created is a beautiful top-down approach to recruitment, and to relationships that can carry from one year to the next.

I was conducting at church one Sunday in our small mission of about 60 people. Of those 60 people, about 25 of them are children. And of those 25 children, probably 20 of them are under the age of 4. So things can get pretty exciting on an average Sunday. We are in a different place with getting those little ones actively involved in the service. But we have a handful of 8-16 year olds in the mix. On this Sunday, it being a small parish, there were just no sopranos there that day. Many of you have been there before, probably on a regular basis. Maybe for you it is basses or tenors. But on this particular Sunday, for me, it was sopranos. One of the families in the church actually has a former student of mine from my public school job. So I saw her standing in the congregation that morning, and I walked over to her before the service and asked her to sing. Of course she did a beautiful job. She is a great sight reader and has a lovely soprano tone. And after church, I looked at her and said, "Why don't you sing in choir here?" Her reply? "No one ever asked me to." Think about that. Not every child is going to be outgoing enough to seek you out and ask to participate. Some of them need to be asked. They are not choosing not to participate because they don't want to. They just need to be asked.

Once you have established a game plan and a choir, you need traditions! Children need little things to look forward to, and the minor things can motivate them to participate for an entire year. Think outside the box for traditions. A Bright Week party can be a wonderful way to keep the Paschal fun happening, and encourage participation in the extra work of Lent. Starting Lent with a "lock in" Saturday rehearsal can be great for building relationships and getting a jump start on music for the season. Mix rehearsal with games and food, and you have a great way to begin the Lenten journey with your children's choir. The Nativity season is another great time for traditions. Exchange gifts with the choir, or plan a party. Just give them something to look forward to, and they will do anything for you in the meantime. And don't forget that every tradition has the potential to be a great relationship building tool for you, so use it!

The next step is creating your rehearsal plan. Depending on the needs and goals of your parish, this might be weekly, bi-weekly or monthly. If rehearsals are more often, try and incorporate musicianship into your rehearsals. Taking the time now to teach the older ones to read music and to sightread will save you hours of time later. You also have the opportunity in rehearsals to get children thinking about text. They need to understand the words and understand how important it is to communicate the meaning to the congregation. Bring in a priest to rehearsal occasionally to help analyse the text of a particular hymn. The singing will benefit, and your singers get a theology lesson at the same time!

When planning rehearsals try and incorporate your older (middle school) students into the process. This will keep them invested and feeling "needed." Have them help you select which arrangement to sing on a given Sunday. Or discuss which is most appropriate based on the liturgical season. Help them understand why certain choices are best and then slowly turn over the reins to them. If you've taught them well, they will make the same choices you would make anyways, and be able to explain and support the decision. If you have time during rehearsals (I recommend that you make time) for a team building game at the beginning or end, let your older students plan and lead that. When planning for annual celebrations as discussed above, you absolutely want them to be a part of the planning process. They will do most of the work

for you! If you build a good relationship with these older children, they will make your life so much easier and they can handle an amazing amount of responsibility. At the end of the day, that is what will keep them invested and keep them singing. They **must** feel needed.

The final relationship I want to discuss is the relationship to music. This encompasses several elements: repertoire, rehearsal planning, vocal technique, musicianship, gesture. We will start by looking at rehearsal. Unlike adults, children need many rehearsals to prepare. (In fact, so do adults - you can just get away with less rehearsal in their case.) There are many different times to build in rehearsals. If your Sunday school will let you take over one class a month, that can work. Children are already in the routine of being there and the time is already set aside. Using time after church can work too, especially leading up to feasts when they might be performing. Remember, they will need 3-4 rehearsals at least to retain the music. Or, if you are one of the lucky few with a school built in to your parish community, talk to the teachers or principal to work out a time during the school week to rehearse with children.

Every rehearsal must begin with warm-ups. I cannot emphasize that enough! These warm ups should begin with physical stretching of the entire body, emphasizing the areas of the body needed for good breathing and resonance. Then they should move through vocal warm-ups that incorporate breathing, diction resonance, vowels, and listening. (See children's warm-ups at end.) They should also be age-appropriate. Online you can find many examples of the types of warm-ups and approach that should be used with various ages. I will discuss the particular challenges of the male changing voice a little later. The majority of your rehearsal is of course spent rehearsing music. Begin with an easy piece - something familiar to build confidence and to give you time to work on building their sound. Then you can move on to something more challenging during the middle of your rehearsal. You want to do this before they get tired and begin to lose focus. End your rehearsal with something fun - this can be church related or not. Maybe find a fun singing game that they love. They just always need to end on a positive note.

Vocal technique changes depending on the age of your choir. You need to be aware of the challenges facing each age group, and have tools to help them achieve healthy vocal sound.

For elementary age singers, they should be singing entirely in their head voice. What they listen to on the radio may have already taught them bad habits. Use warm-ups to help them find that higher sound placement. Singers ages 5-10 should be singing unison only - or always the melody, even if older singers are adding harmony. Their ears have developed to hear the highest part and they are not easily able to differentiate part singing. (See example of the "Alleluia" - young singers should always stay on part 1 while the more advanced can add in parts 2 and 3 on the second and third times.) Ages 10-12 can begin to have more harmonic fun, particularly if they have been singing with you for some time, or if they study music outside church. They can likely handle two part singing, where they are singing the lower part. Youth choirs benefit very much from what I call the Rule of Three. Sing it once, unison, add one harmony part the second time, add another harmony part the third time. It works so well in an Orthodox setting since so much of our music repeats 3 times. (See "Blessed be the Name of the Lord" for a Rule of Three example.) Please note that these age ranges are not a strict rule, but rather a guideline. Know your singers and their individual skill sets when making decisions about repertoire.

The middle school age ranges from 12-14. This age is where the fun really begins! They are the leaders of your group. Most of them can handle less melody and more harmony. In fact, they need the challenge of the harmony to keep them engaged in "children's music." This age is capable of so much more than they receive credit for. They have been listening to this music their entire lives, and are ready to help make it beautiful. They can be impressive if you hold them to a high standard. My public school middle schoolers consistently sing and sightread in 4 part harmony. I expect it of them, and they rise to the occasion every time. The biggest challenge facing this age is the boys. For many of them, this is the age where their voices begin

to change. This is a risky time for these male singers, as it is the most common time for them to stop singing. This is where relationships are so important: you will have more luck keeping them through the voice change if they trust you to help them through it. Initially, they may just start singing the melody down the octave. If they can handle that, great. That is success. Do not dwell on the droners. They will find their way eventually and calling attention to it publicly will scare them off for good. Try and work with them individually or in a small group to help them connect their ear to their voice.

As I have mentioned before, at this age, they want to be leaders. If they feel they are just older elementary children, they will stop. That is a guarantee. Have them help lead voice parts. Keep them challenged and keep them focused. Give them opportunities to start reading or chanting. But make sure you have given them appropriate instruction first so that they can be successful and prayerful. (See example "From the mouths", with verses that can be chanted. The song is far too easy for middle schoolers, but if they can be featured in the verses they will stick with the song anyway.) Ultimately, this age wants to be proud of their product. If they feel excited, challenged, and skillful they will keep coming back for more. If they find it elementary, boring, or embarrassing, it will be an endless challenge to keep them singing.

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to select appropriate repertoire for children's choirs. But do not be intimidated by the process. It can be much easier than you think. First, and most important, you must select quality. Children know when they are singing garbage and when they are singing something worthwhile. Be careful that "easy" does not equal boring. It should be age appropriate, but keep in mind the parameters above for different ages and notice that they dealt more with the number of harmonic parts than specific difficulty of music. Children want to sing songs with a memorable and interesting melody - not a simple piece with only 5 notes and no real interest behind it. Keep in mind, these kids have been listening to and singing along with all of the adult music probably all of their lives; not in four part harmony perhaps, but they all know the melody. They want a challenge, but one that is achievable. The easiest way to choose music for them is to pick something you already do with the adult choir, and simplify. Just have them sing the melody, or perhaps the melody and alto part. Use the Rule of Three as discussed earlier. Start with the melody, and add harmony each time it is repeated. Choose music which can adjust depending on who is present. Does it sound good with just the melody? Two parts? Three? Maybe there is a full choir version and they can sing antiphonally with the adult choir. Be creative! (See "As many as have been baptized")

I wish I had time to do an entire workshop on gesture. As a conductor your gesture is everything, whether you conduct youths or adults. You can completely change sound with gesture. Specific lifted gestures can help kids maintain their head voice into their lower range. Likewise, heavy gestures can create a pushed, unhealthy sound. If you are aware and using gesture to help make your choir better, you have the greatest tool in the world. But if you find that your choir almost never watches you, it may be a harsh reality to realize that you have trained them to ignore your gesture because your gesture is undermining their sound. Think about your choir and ask yourself what you are constantly reminding them - sing more smoothly and connected? Sing phrases? Don't breathe in that place? If they have a habit that you cannot break, you need to look closely at what your gesture is telling them in that moment. Chances are, you are telling them to do it wrong with our hands, even if your words tell them to do it correctly.

With children (and adults) you can really use gesture to your advantage if you understand the relationship between kinesthetics and sound. For example, sing an "ah" vowel on a unison note with your choir. Now have them imagine that they have a large rubber band. Hold the rubber band in front of your body with one hand on top and one on bottom and then stretch the rubber band vertically while singing "ah." Make sure they are feeling the imaginary tension

in their rubber bands. You will find that this immediately connects their sound with core and breath. If you do this exercise several times, you create a kinesthetic memory for your choir. While singing a piece, you can now use a similar gesture (stretching the rubber band vertically) as they hold an "ah" vowel and even if they aren't doing the movement, their muscles will respond to your gesture as if they were doing the gesture themselves. This is only one example of the millions of possible moments you can train your choir to respond to.

As a conductor you must understand that you are a mirror for your choir in every way. If you breath well and your gesture reflects and low, full breath, they will breath incredibly for you! Conversely, if you aren't grounded, your gesture is too high, and you are catching breaths when you can, and without any forethought, your choir will sound breathy and will lack a core sound no matter what you tell them verbally. Your gesture can be your greatest tool, or a weapon which undermines you at every turn. The best way you can grow as a conductor without classes and training, is to videotape yourself during rehearsals. Identify problems in the choir and then watch what your gesture is doing during that time as it relates to the problem. This does not mean your choir is without blame for their bad habits. But if you understand how your gesture is making it worse, or how your gesture can possibly fix the problem without saying a word, you have gained much more control. Understanding your conducting can be a tough, humbling process but it is infinitely rewarding once you realize your ability to completely change the sound of your choir using only your hands.

Working with children is a powerful gift. You can turn them away from or bring them closer to the church and God. All children will reach an age where they ask themselves why they are Orthodox and why they stay a part of the Church. For some, music might be the only reason they stay. For me, I asked myself that question in college. But I was lucky enough to be at a parish where the priest understood that it didn't matter what motivated me to get to church, just that I keep on coming. So he asked me to conduct vespers every Saturday night and he paid me to do so. Did I often show up just for the money? Certainly. But did it keep me coming, even during times when I otherwise would have given up the faith? Absolutely. I came for the music. But I stayed because the music helped me find my faith. You can do that for each and every child you work with in church. Create beauty in the music of the Church, and through the music, they will find the beauty of God.