

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

Moderator: *Very Rev. Sergei Glagolev*  
Chat room topic: **Effective Music Leadership**

*Professor David Drillock, Chair of the OCA Department of Liturgical Music and Translations*  
Tonight, we would like to welcome Fr Sergei Glagolev as our guest speaker. In the small introduction for tonight's session, Father Sergei wrote about St. John of Damascus being a trained poet, musician, and theologian, and he will begin tonight's discussion by elaborating on those points.

*Father Sergei Glagolev*

Thank you, Dave. St. John is the ideal, because he combines poetry, music, and theology as one whole. Fr. John Meyendorff used to say, "That in Orthodoxy, theology and art are inseparable." Does anyone want to pick up on that?

*Question:*

I'm instantly reminded of my iconography studies. And I also am reminded of someone telling me when I was a new director that the words and the music together form a whole which is greater than the sum of the parts, in our music. Don't the Fathers speak of beauty as truth?

*Answer:*

You are right! Absolutely! As a result, one must not only understand the theology, but also must understand voice culture and music.

*Question:*

And doesn't the music "paint" a verbal picture just as the icon is a visual picture?

*Answer:*

Yes, that is exactly true. Our music is meant to be "iconographic." By this, I'm saying music must be understood as an art-form, just as iconography is.

*Comment:*

It is difficult when the music in the liturgy is not beautiful.

*Response:*

How true, exactly true... and this is a real problem! One could know everything about rubrics, but if not competent in voice culture, the sound would hardly be beautiful.

*Question:*

I don't think I understand what you mean when you say "voice culture", Father.

*Answer:*

The voice ultimately is an "instrument," one could hardly play the french horn, without studying! So it amazes me that people think that they can sing, without studying!

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*Comment:*

In many choirs, the idea of “voice culture” is anathema. They just turn off when the director speaks about things like that. How can a director get the choir to take this stuff seriously?

*Response:*

Would one dare to write an icon without studying?

*Follow-up comment:*

Wow, we have all these “choir members” who think all they have to do is show up!

*Follow-up response:*

This is what i mean by voice culture, somehow the choir master must be convincing that the music must be beautiful!

*Comment:*

Choir members know it should be beautiful, but they don't understand why it isn't already. When I tell them they're going flat, they say “how does that happen?” Then they don't want to do anything about it.

*Response:*

But this is why the warm-ups are so important. And people think they can come up 10 minutes before the liturgy, and think they can sing! It's no different than playing an instrument, like the trombone! There has to be voice culture... time made at the rehearsals for “cultivating” the voice

*Question:*

Can you give some guidance on that?

*Answer:*

Certainly, #1 - warming up the voice; #2 - voice placement; too many women sing between their teeth, this is why the sound is so strident.

*Question:*

Father, as a follow-up, can you say what can be done if the choir is in a small mission church, and the singers are very few in number? The hardest part for me, in a mission, is that everyone lives far away, making rehearsals hard.

*Answer:*

You can still cultivate the voices, even if there are 2 or 3 people in a mission. Sometimes you have to figure out a way people are willing to give up a Saturday afternoon, or after the coffee break following Liturgy. Of course, we have to find creative ways of dealing with this. In Encino, CA, I would have to divide my time, I had rehearsals after coffee hour on Sunday.

You have to make an attempt, and have a vision. Don't let go of that!

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*Question:*

Any suggestions on how to handle it when the priest invites people to sing who will never come to a rehearsal? This has happened several times on big feast days. They just show up.

*Answer:*

There are 3 liturgical sounds:

One is that of the trained choir... and that has to be rehearsed.

There is also that which can be sung by the entire congregation...the sounds are entirely different. One is trained, the other is untrained.

Both are acceptable, but obviously, they have to be balanced against each other.

The ones that sing in the choir, certainly have to be the ones who need to rehearse!

And the third, is the cantors – such as that in Byzantine chant.

*Additional response:*

Some parts of liturgy in particular, cry out for a response by the people. Begin with a common thing that people know, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the refrains on the Festal Antiphons.

*Follow-up comment:*

How can I bring the voice production and general musicianship of the choir to a better standard?

And when I have conducted the Lord's Prayer to encourage congregational singing, I still get nothing but people staring at me with stony faces.

*Response:*

You need to get the pastor to speak up about it and inform the people that some parts are meant to be sung by everyone! I feel for you... but this is the plight of the choir director!

*Additional comment:*

Usually one person starts singing and others follow, though not everyone. I actually planted a ringer in the congregation for the first couple of months to get them to sing.

*Response:*

You are being very creative and for me, this is encouraging. Just to repeat once again, there is room for chant, room for congregational singing, and room for changeable hymns that the choir has to perform. You just need to have patience and hang in.

*Question:*

Father Sergei, would you speak a bit about proper diction? I take voice lessons and I am always told to modify my vowels, etc. when singing higher notes. Sometimes the words are 'modified' too. I want to avoid the English boy choir style of diction. You have to have people using proper diction, especially in the stichera, or no one knows what you are singing.

*Answer:*

It's not only proper diction, but proper projection! Because, if you swallow vowels and consonants, then no one will understand. This is what I mean about projection. I'm not sure that "modifying vowels" is correct, this is probably not a good practice. When singing church music, it should be the "least affected." That means, you are doing something that is not natural. You

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are not a “boys choir,” so you wouldn’t want to sound like that. But you do have to drop your jaw for the “eee” sound that is so strident. Example: “Lord, have mer – cy.” The whole point is that you don’t accent “cy.”

*Question:*

Father, could you say more about voice placement?

*Answer:*

It is so difficult to explain, we would have to practice over the phone, or something like that. Throat tension needs to be free, the jaw should be loose, slightly dropped, and the tongue relaxed.

Unless the notes are really high. Then you need more space inside the mouth so the soft palate and the jaw need to be more open. Stand straight, not slouched! To breathe correctly, you must stand straight! And, slightly on the balls of your feet! Practice, practice, practice!

*Question:*

How do you help baritones develop the lower register?

*Answer:*

To develop the lower register, baritones and basses first must stop singing in their throat. What you might be able to do is, is get them to put their hands on their chest, and feel the vibration in the chest, not in the throat.

*Question:*

Is that true for the tenors as well?

*Answer:*

No, that is not true. The tone placement of altos and baritones is in the chest. For sopranos and tenors, it is in the head cavities.

*Question:*

Father Sergei, do you think females should sing tenor?

*Answer:*

No, they really shouldn’t. The tessatura is wrong for women. But the quality of the low women’s voice doesn’t seem to have the same resonance as a male tenor, and the music loses a bright quality. *Tessatura* is the “natural voice range.”

For example, in order to sing mezzo, you have to develop those “chest tones.” A lyric is not going to be able to sing those chest tones of a mezzo, and vice-versa. Unless you are singing PDQ Bach, which is every musician’s delight!

*Professor Drillock:*

Father Sergei, we are coming to the end of your very good, most exciting, and beneficial session. You really have all of us thinking and have inspired us to work that much harder with our choirs.

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Good night, all, and a blessed feast to everyone. We hope you will join us for the next chat session in January 2007. Please check the OCA web site for specific details.

*Father Glagolev:*

Thank you. I'm very proud of all of you! And your grasp on what is important, to bring musical skills and liturgical theology together, I feel so encouraged by your dedication! Have a Blessed, Blessed Nativity and have a wonderful New Year!!!!

Goodnight everyone!