

Teach a Child to Sing . . .

AS ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY continues to grow in the United States, an inevitable question for forward-thinking parents is, “How do we educate our children in a manner consistent with our values?” As a result, Orthodox Christian schools are beginning to dot the American landscape. Day schools covering various grades have been established all over the country, and more are planned. Many of these schools follow the so-called “classical school” model, patterned after the Trivium, which has as discrete stages of learning grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric.

As people who will eventually be raising children in the Orthodox Christian faith, my wife and I find it heartening that there might very well be educational options that will be edifying to mind and soul. I encourage those involved with Orthodox schools, however, to give serious thought to a necessary segment of the curriculum which appears to be largely absent from the conversation: music. More specifically, I would like to discuss the possibility of in fact establishing Orthodox choir schools.

The general benefits of music as part of a child’s education have been exhaustively covered in many other venues, so I will limit myself here to talking about the particular characteristics of a choir school. First off—what exactly is a choir school? For many, the images conjured up by the term are of rood screens and stone chapels and seemingly malnourished boy sopranos vested in cassocks and ruffs lining up in stalls. If we are talking about eighteenth-century England, this is not necessarily wrong, but neither is it exactly what I mean.

Rather, in its ideal form, a choir school combines the concepts of Christian education, community, and worship, and further enhances them by training students to sing the music of the Church. Music becomes an educa-

tional cornerstone; in addition to the rest of the curriculum, the boys and girls are taught to read music, to sing, perhaps also to play an instrument, and then this is applied in the context of worship by having them sing services on a regular schedule. By including the singing of services, this becomes something beyond mere musical education; it is also liturgical catechesis. In other words, not only is the children’s education improved, but so is their liturgical life—as well as that of the parish community housing the school!

While it is true that the most well-known inheritors of this tradition are Anglicans in England, such schools exist today in the United States, such as the Choir School of the Cathedral of the Madeleine (Roman Catholic) in Salt Lake City, Utah, or St. Thomas Choir School (Episcopal) in New York. Even in England, the Roman Catholic Choir School of Westminster Cathedral has been a wonderful non-Anglican example of such an institution. In addition, the school of the Moscow Synodal Choir of the late nineteenth century provides a relatively recent Orthodox precedent.

Looking at these examples, of course, it is clear that not every aspect is necessarily desirable or practical. Certainly, an all-boys boarding school, like St. Thomas or Westminster Cathedral, is not likely to be an option many are going to want to pursue. On the other hand, the Madeleine Choir School provides a useful model of a co-educational day school, and their mission statement provides a great deal of food for thought:

The Madeleine Choir School [is] a mission of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Salt Lake City and a service of the Cathedral of the Madeleine. . . . The school continues the cathedral tradition of preparing young people to engage the culture with the Catholic intellectual,



artistic, moral and religious tradition. The Choir School pursues rigorous academic curricula in the humanities, mathematics and sciences, and the arts. The school fosters a strong program of moral and character formation, and seeks to provide a thought-provoking and comprehensive study of Christian Theology. [. . .] The Choir School preserves and furthers the choral art primarily in service to the public worship life of the Cathedral of the Madeleine. (Source: Madeleine Choir School website)

In other words, the school is first and foremost a mission and a service of the church community, intended as an academic and spiritual benefit to the students, a liturgical benefit to the congregation supporting the school, and even to benefit the craft of liturgical singing itself by helping to preserve and perpetuate it.

The benefit is by no means strictly internal, either, since the music of the Church is itself a form of outreach and evangelism. “He who sings prays twice,” St. Augustine of Hippo is often quoted as saying; surely, being intentional about

Thoughts about Orthodox Choir Schools

By Richard Barrett



Photo by David Lues; 2006 PSALM National Conference.

An important related consideration is the practical reality that tomorrow's choir directors, singers, and cantors will not simply appear out of thin air. I am fortunate enough at my parish to have had a good number of teenagers who are interested in singing and chanting, but it is also evident to me that musical education, as simply a core competency of the educated person, is an area which has largely failed the last handful of generations of Orthodox Christians. In general, we need to make sure we are teaching our children how to sing the music of the Church and helping them to cultivate a love for this liturgical craft. Developing and implementing an Orthodox choir school curriculum would be an important and hopeful step to take towards this goal.

Are our children capable of learning this kind of material? Of course they are! Our young people are going to have a far easier time receiving this kind of musical instruction as children and teenagers than they will when they are older. In January of 2007, John Boyer, *protopsaltis* of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of San Francisco and member of Cappella Romana, participated in a pilot residency at the Agia Sophia Academy in Portland, Oregon, teaching three classes of children from grades one through six to sing music written in Byzantine notation. Music teacher Kathleen Powell, who invited Boyer to Agia Sophia, said that his interdisciplinary approach stretched the students in a number of directions. "The children enthusiastically responded to [his] techniques," she said, "which required them to use not only their musical skills, but also their Greek language, mathematical skills, and scientific reasoning." (Source: Cappella Romana website) If elementary school students are able to do this with such brief exposure, how much more will they be able to do with sustained instruction

throughout their education?

Are there challenges involved in developing this as part of the curriculum for an Orthodox Christian school? Absolutely there are. Most obviously, the very first question is how we might pay for it, and this is not an uncomplicated matter given present economic realities. There are other issues: faculty, curriculum, facilities, and so on, all key to succeeding at such a venture. I am by no means suggesting that this is something easy to accomplish. However, these are significant issues for Orthodox Christian schools in general, not just for an Orthodox Christian choir school.

Some pieces of the puzzle are hopefully self-evident: chapel services, learning to pray the Hours, spiritual and moral formation, and so on should already be a vital component of any Orthodox Christian education. Good planning and the devotion of resources to build a musical curriculum around those elements can go a long way towards expanding any Orthodox education program to include a strong choral component.

I do not pretend to have a comprehensive, detailed plan about how to establish Orthodox choir schools, nor is this intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the topic. It will take much more than just the person with the idea for it to be successful. It is nonetheless clear that Orthodox Christian schools are an idea whose time has come, or at least draws nigh; I am only suggesting a direction some of these schools could take. Consider this an attempt to start a conversation. ✠

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