

## ***Multiplying Talents: The Church Singer's Privileges & Responsibilities***

By Elizabeth A. Ledkovsky  
Presented in Washington D.C. – May 28, 2010

It may be helpful for you to know a little bit about me, and what informs my perspective, before I get to the topic of this talk – which is about the privileges and the duties that we all share as church musicians.

I was born and raised in New York City, baptized in, and grew up at the Synodal Cathedral, where my grandfather, Boris Mikhailovich, and later my father, served for many, many years as *regenty* (choirmasters). I have a particular, vivid memory of my grandfather that I think illustrates how my mindset developed, and that I would like to share. For those of you who don't know what Boris Mikhailovich was like, he was very tall, very slender, and dark-haired (I remember marveling at his lack of grey hair as I looked at him in his coffin). They say that he was very charismatic and charming, and that a lot of ladies would fall in love with him, but he was also very calm, understated, quiet and, to me, stern. My parents, of course, sang in his choir, and I, as a little girl, sometimes stood with my mother, or with the soprano ladies in the choir, too. And, one day, I did something that all little children like to do – my daughter Magdalena does exactly this! – I put my hand on the music stand – a “Manhasset brand” stand just like this one, and I started twirling around it, as if it were a Maypole.

But not for long! I was immediately stopped by my Dedushka. As much as he adored me, the eldest child of his favorite son, he was quick to discipline me sharply, admonishing me that, “Тут мы НЕ играем. Здесь мы Богу служим” (“We do NOT play here. We serve God here”).

This left a huge impression on me, of course. No one was exempt from his first priority, not even me, the bouncing little first-born grandchild. So, too, did my father's ensuing example of duty to the church influence me above all...

My life so far has worked out so that I have had the opportunity to live – and to sing in churches – all over *zarubezhie* (the Diaspora). I was fortunate to live in San Francisco for five great years, and in Europe, too, where I was pressed into service and ran the *kliros* of our Berlin parish. All this exposure to various choirs and conductors notwithstanding, as I was preparing for this lecture, I thought to myself: who am *I* to tell people what's good and what's bad about their habits in the choir? So, I decided to poll some of my favorite, most respected conductors (alas, in haste, I failed to consult a few who I'm sure would have contributed good insights...). I asked them about their pet peeves, and I will share those in a little while...

But now, on to the heart of the matter: the notion of *talents*. I am not going to read to you the gospel passage in which we hear our Lord's parable of the talents – I'm not a deacon, and I'm sure you're all familiar with it (*it is included below for reference*):

---

The parable of the talents:

*"For the kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability: and straightway took his journey. Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two. But he that had received one went and dug in the earth, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside*

*them. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: and I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knowest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: thou thoughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundantly: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth " (Matthew 25:14-30).*

So, in Chapter 25 of his gospel account, St. Matthew relays to us Christ's Parable of the Talents, in which we are given to learn of God's concern for you and your use of the talents He gave you. An Orthodox interpretation of this story, in which the rich get richer, and the poorest, a servant who literally buries his talent, is punished and condemned, has us consider our own talents, what they mean to your community – the Church – and what they mean to you.

In our present context – a seminar for experienced as well as aspiring church musicians – we are primarily concerned, of course, with your musical talents. These fall into the category that Father Victor Potapov defines, in his commentary on the gospel parables, as “talents of the soul” (distinct from, for example, material talents, as many a starving artist may well attest!).<sup>1</sup> Seeing that we are all ostensibly here to further develop our talents – these talents of our souls – I above all want to congratulate you for your endeavor to heed Christ's implied exhortation to multiply your talents. May God bless the effort!

---

<sup>1</sup> Archpriest Victor Potapov, *Gospel Parables, An Orthodox Commentary*, available at [http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/parables\\_potapov.htm#n25](http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/parables_potapov.htm#n25)

To be a church singer is a great privilege and honor – one that has been distinguished by the Church since the fourth century. In 360 A.D., the Ecumenical Council held at Laodicea enunciated its Canon XIV: “No others shall sing in the Church, save only the canonical singers, who go up into the ambo and sing from a book.” In other words, not just anyone was allowed to get up and sing. Scholars debate whether congregational singing was wholly supplanted or not (likely not), but it is clear from what we know, for example, from lives of saints such as St. Romanos the Melodist (early 6<sup>th</sup> century), that singers were part of an office (this is still practiced in the Greek Church, where a *psaltis* is properly “ordained” by a bishop).

The “professionals” or ordained singers must have gotten a little out of hand after a while. Some 330 years after the Canon specifying the concept of “canonical singers” (in 692) The Ecumenical Council of Trullo decreed Canon LXXV, in which canonical singing is defined:

We will that those whose office it is to sing in the churches do not use undisciplined vociferations, nor force nature to shouting, nor adopt any of those modes which are incongruous and unsuitable for the church: but that they offer the psalmody to God, who is the observer of secrets, with great attention and compunction. For the Sacred Oracle taught that the Sons of Israel were to be pious.

That bears repeating: it was the Holy Fathers’ will that we church singers “offer the psalmody to God with *great attention and compunction*.”

---

This has meaning for us on a number of levels: during the services, but also in how we structure our lives. The truly – I should say, properly – dedicated church musician does

not take a vacation away from his choir on a Great Feast: he plans his life around the obligations presented by the Church calendar. While this may seem onerous – it should not be so: there is no greater joy – nothing more uplifting – than the experience of singing God's praises in the presence of angels alongside your parish family.

The practices of ordaining singers and keeping the *kliros* an all-male realm may have fallen away, but, ecclesiastical rank or not, the church singer is properly DUTY-BOUND to his – or her – position in the choir, as much so as the deacon is obligated to serve weekly, in my opinion. To sing is a great privilege (as the Church has recognized for 1,800 years!), but with privilege comes responsibility. So you, Church Singer, might think about the ways your habits as a layperson impinge upon the duties you should feel bound to, and this is what I really wanted to get you to think about today.

- Do you leave the choir, perhaps during a simple litany, to put up candles?  
Remember this: your *singing* is your candle – your offering! Either put up your candles before service or, if there's no time – leave that task to others.  
Your singing must always come first.
- Are you habitually late to liturgy, leaving the choir director short-staffed for the antiphons, maybe thinking to yourself: *the juicy stuff comes later, anyway...?*
- Do you tend to leave early, perhaps with good intentions, say, to help the sisterhood set up coffee hour...? My dear friend and respected teacher, Vova Krassovsky, the choirmaster of the Cathedral Choir in San Francisco, always points out: many ladies can cook; not all ladies can sing. If YOUR talents

include singing, then you have a higher duty to the Church... let the other sisters step up and provide their (also important) function, but don't let them take YOU away from "the one thing needful" ...

- Are you wont to suddenly abandon the choir at inopportune moments, burning to confess your sins, take a powder, remove some burned down candles from the candle stand, receive anointment...?

Here, it's worth noting that a good relationship between choir and clergy is ESSENTIAL. In San Francisco, for example, on big holidays, they use their back room as a confessional, sending one of the priests up to the choir loft to allow singers to confess privately without having to travel all the way downstairs and disrupt their singing unduly.

- Do you read your prayer book during the singing?

The fact is, singers are not just average laity... although you may not wear a robe, you do have a great duty!

So – let's look at what some of ROCOR's best choirmasters had to say about things singers do that drive them nuts (or, conversely, impress them). Let me say, here and now, that I am probably guilty of almost every possible transgression imaginable! For example: texting in church. AWFUL. Yet... it's true. Sometimes I play hooky from my day job to sing a weekday Liturgy, and the only way I can get away with it is by responding quickly to emails that come into my blackberry. Terrible! But I do it, thinking, it's better than skipping the divine service altogether. So I present these comments of my respected friends and colleagues, knowing full well I'm guilty of MANY things, all the time!

I tried to arrange the various thoughts of these *regenty* by loosely organized topics.

They are more or less *verbatim*.

## **Topic 1) VOCAL Technique**

*I try to stress that singers should take some singing lessons. Most think that's for opera stars and for "haughty singers." But I explain how it's an investment into a lifetime of singing (ministry to the church), and that it's their responsibility to continue developing their talent and to bring the very best offering to the Lord. And all of those other items above relate to "the very best offering to the Lord."*

**Vedushchiye. Don't have 'em. Don't want 'em. Vedushchiye are the ones whose voices consistently penetrate beyond the choral ensemble. Baloney. Chesnokov devotes many paragraphs to the internal *stroy* (order) within a part and overall *stroy* among parts. Rehearsals are the place to equilibrate voices so that such issues of *stroy* can be solved during services with but a gentle reminder.**

The #1 thing I'm usually vocal about is when singers don't sing thoroughly to the cut-off. When people run out of breath and just stop, THAT annoys the crap out of me. I'd bring this up at *spevki* (rehearsals) every now and then and we'd do a few exercises to remedy, until people fall back into their bad habits. That is why it is totally necessary for the regent to engage the choir and make them pay attention.

**In my book, I compute the percentage of singing that has to do with actually emitting a sound. For many, it's a surprisingly small number. It should be no surprise however when the "other" components are seriously considered, e.g., listening, mentally anticipating the required sound from you, your section, the entire choir; breathing, etc. Too many of our dearest, untrained, amateur singers think that singing is only about making a noise. What I've been trying to stress is that at any given moment, the on-going preparation for the next note/chord, etc., must be a recognized, practiced process without which the result can only be sub-par.**

*Singers really need to understand that 50% of singing is listening. And they need to extend their listening to beyond their section. They need to be able to listen and adjust volume, pitch, timbre, and rhythm accordingly. Also critical for good staggered breathing. It's amazing how many don't realize this, let alone succeed in doing so. Even choir directors have this trouble. Many times they need to sing because of lack of voices (I do the same), but that masks the real sound coming out of the choir.*

Singers that cover one ear to hear themselves better... BAD!

Singers with filler parts singing loudly.

Humming pitch before start.

14) Dipping, scooping while singing.

15) Singing louder than everyone in your vocal section

---

## 2) Attitudes

Singers that don't come to *spevki* and sing as if they do annoy me.

Diva singers thinking they don't need to rehearse with the rest of the choir.

Guest singers singing loudly and making mistakes.

Also related, guest singers not having courtesy to ask conductor's permission to sing. (N.B.: *I love this one, and I suppose over the years I have always expected to be welcome, even though, I always asked! "C'mon, don't you know ME? I'm BOULIA, of course you want me to sing!"*)

I don't mind if people chit chat a little during the service, but whilst we're singing something, that's a big NO NO for me

\*Don't murmur the translation of anything under your breath (happens in our choir – really annoying)

When anything becomes a (non revenue-producing) routine, it's time to take up a new hobby. And so it is with choir singing. It's got to be something special if it's going to be done well. Just doing what was done before, doing it the same way as "last time" or doing it to the same level of quality doesn't/shouldn't cut the mustard. This is why I devote a lot of attention towards trying to inspire a striving for excellence, fully recognizing that we'll never reach perfection, including positive reinforcement when something comes out better in some way that it did before. That sense of "it can/should always be better" is necessary not only to improve quality, but to maintain it. Not all singers are on "that page." It's the job of the choir director to get them there.

Disappearing singers – putting up candles, filling out commemorations, etc.

Distractions – babies, talking during service/readings, texting/cell phones...

Some singers feel that **AT THE END OF A SELECTION**, unless they turn the page to the next work, (which typically will occur only after a reading or a petition) a bar before it's over, the world will end! Stand still and finish what you're doing, dammit! I forbid lack of attention to, or distraction from, the final chord. I haven't rooted out this horrible habit in some yet, but I'm aggressively working on it. Such behavior says "well, I'm done" before the PRAYER is completed! Unacceptable! (Reminds me of some Priests who turn away and start filling their plate while the choir is still finishing molitva!!)

It is so important for singer to understand the AWESOMENESS of what we do. My # 1 peeve is a lack of understanding of the seriousness of (and commitment to) service to the Church. Singers need to realize that the liturgy offers us an opportunity to experience the entire life of Christ, imitating angels as we sing. And, yet... not to the point of over-



doing it or focusing on yourself and YOUR prayer. Singers are contributing to the collective prayer of the clergy and the congregation, and personal devotion needs to be done *at home!*

### **3) Consideration**

Personal hygiene: body odors, bad breath, strong colognes, burping, farting...

*Careful with the perfume & aftershave.*

Hogging the music stand.

Gesticulating while singing church music.

Terrible grimacing while singing. (*I tend to be pretty expressive when I sing! This might be about ME!!*)

\*Turn the page, turn the page, TURN THE PAGE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

### **4) Professionalism/Respecting the conductor**

A missed dynamic due to not paying attention... not starting together annoys me!

Singer making early entries, late cut-offs.

\*For goodness sake, stand up straight and look at the conductor!

**N. V. Matveev, in his book on choral singing says that greatest *napryazhenie* (tension) of attention must be applied when *zadayut ton* (give the pitch; No kidding!!). Singers who are performing personal prostrations, searching for sheet music, etc., are generally the ones who will enter on an inexact pitch and seduce others to have a poor entrance. Unacceptable. There should be eye contact between the choir director and EACH singer when the pitches are distributed.**

... I also don't like any pious activities overdone, e.g. over-crossing yourself or doing *poklony* at a time when we are singing... ANNOYING! A constant battle with certain *blagochestivye* (holy rollers).

Here, I'll give a nod to my own father's mantra: **THE CHOIR IS NOT A DEMOCRACY!**

And I'll add, with a huge *mea culpa*, that no conductor likes an overly opinionated singer. I am sure that I have driven more than one *regent* crazy with my occasional unwelcome and/or ill-timed commentary or critical gesture, expressive facial contortion, or attitude, but I'm learning that such reactions on my part are rarely productive or conducive to a good atmosphere in the choir.

## **5) Thoughts on Overall Details to Singing**

**...There's nothing wrong with quiet singing. When the choir is so supportive of, and such a part of, the action of the service that it becomes virtually unnoticed, then we're really leading/fostering prayer by those assembled in the church. Attention to and subjugation to the action of the service and interweaving with the deacon or priest are regrettably not automatic in most cases. Unless this is discussed and practiced during rehearsals, it won't work as well as it should.**

*Diction: good vowels and especially precise consonants. Don't rush the stikhira, take the time for the words to come out distinctly and fill the church space.*

*Sing "a-le-LU-i-ya" and not "AH-le-lu-i-ya." Sing "Bog Gos-pod" and not "Bo-go-spod". Sing "Gospodi" and not "Hospodi." Sing "Tvo-e-GO" and not "Tvo-e-vo." Singing "I du-hO-vi Tvoemu" and not "I du-hA-vi Tvoemu." Emphasizing the wrong syllables (SPA-si Gospodi).*

## **6) And: the single topic that got a comment from EVERYONE: LATENESS!**

Of course, I consider latecomers walking right into their section whilst the choir is singing RUDE and disrespectful, so I make them stand at the entryway until I let them in.

[Late arrivals to service/choir.](#)

Don't come into the choir and muscle your way into "your" spot in the middle of a hymn, particularly a somber one

**One cannot properly sing a Service if one has rushed into the "loft" 4.5 seconds before "Vostanite!" ("Arise!"), much less when one squeezes through the singers who are in place, 20 minutes into the Service. Just like concerts, one needs to arrive well before the beginning, get organized physically and spiritually, and then ease into the action of the Service. For some reason, Services, which are far more important than concerts, don't receive the same or greater punctuality in preparation.**

*It's really important for singers to come prepared, relaxed, and BEFORE the service starts. I've found that the first five minutes of a service are the most critical for getting the singers really focused and for correcting choral production problems. If you don't establish that in the first five minutes, it's a battle for the rest of the service. So if singers start to come up late, then the sopranos and altos start repositioning themselves, commenting on how pretty their new shoes or blouses are, etc., and all of your initial work is kaput! I didn't prevent people from singing if they showed up late (it happens), but then they had to quietly and seamlessly fold into the choir. You don't want to be a task master and get people stressed; that's counterproductive to molitva and a good choral sound. But I would often comment later at the end of the service.*

So – we all (myself first of all!) have much to work on, and much to pass on to our singers!

I want to leave you with a favorite memory I have of our dear Metropolitan, Vladyka Lavr, who SO loved our sacred music and church singers. I will never forget what he said at the ROCM<sup>2</sup> conference in Seattle, in October 2007 – which was, incidentally, the last *pevcheskij syezd* (singers' conference) before his repose – God rest his soul!

He stood on the *amvon* (ambo) and said: “Певчим много прощается:” “Much is forgiven the church singer...” In his homily at that conference, Vladyka emphasized that the singer's role in the divine services, not only in drawing the souls of the faithful into a prayerful state, but by the simple fact that Divine Liturgy cannot be served – even by a metropolitan – without a singer, is *crucial*. Think about it: acolytes, sub-deacons, and even deacons are bonuses, but *none* of them are essential to our *богослужения* (divine services). Indeed – all services in the cycle, except for the Liturgy, can be performed in “reader” form, omitting the priest's portions. But a PRIEST categorically may NOT serve the Divine Liturgy without *us* – the singers, the *лук* who respond in song. We are *essential*!

It is a great duty, therefore, and a privilege, one of which none of us is truly worthy – not you, and not me. But with God's help, we can – indeed, if we are to multiply our talents, rather than bury them – we MUST strive towards becoming ever more worthy of this joyful duty, as our Lord exhorted us to do. Thank you for being here and for your own effort to grow the talents of your soul. May God bless us all in our efforts!

---

<sup>2</sup> Russian Orthodox Church Musicians