

VOICE LESSON # 9 – The Case for Professional Voice Instruction

I) Your voice is your own, but to improve your voice you have to observe it. That can be difficult because we hear ourselves from within, and what we hear of our voice is very different than what others hear. So, to make improvements in our singing, we sometimes need someone else's observations. If one has the time and resources, voice lessons with a qualified, professional teacher can have many benefits, including:

- A) enhanced breath control and greater ease in singing long phrases
- B) better pitch control
- C) a clearer, stronger, more pleasing tone
- D) enhanced musicianship skills (ease with reading notes, a more sensitive musical ear, etc.)
- E) greater confidence

A professional voice instructor can guide you with exercises and specific techniques to help your voice become the best that it can be. It will be work, but the rewards can be great. It won't happen overnight, but with practice of good techniques you should hear gradual improvements. With greater skill and ease comes greater joy in the vocation of cantor.

II) Resources for finding a voice teacher:

- A) **National Association of Teachers of Singing** (www.nats.org) – the best resource for finding a qualified voice instructor. The premier professional organization for teachers of singing. Website includes a member directory.
- B) **Music Teachers National Association** (www.mtna.org) – An organization that includes professional music instructors in all areas, including voice.
- C) The faculty of your local college or university music department.
- D) Your local community music school* or your local public and parochial schools.
(*National Guild for Community Arts Education - www.nationalguild.org)
- E) Other churches in the area that employ professional musicians.

When seeking to engage the services of a voice teacher, do not be afraid to (politely) ask questions about the teacher's background (number of years teaching, education, accomplishments of former students, etc.). A truly professional teacher will not be offended by such inquiries and should be forthcoming in their answers.

Also, be very clear about your goals and what you feel are your biggest weaknesses. Take your service book along and show the teacher some examples of the kind of music you will be singing in church. We suggest giving the teacher a copy of *A message for voice teachers* (See below).

For some adults, music study can be very challenging and at times try one's patience. Think of voice study as an opportunity to grow musically and spiritually (specifically, in the virtue of patience).

Finally, remember that the Sacred Liturgies deserve our very best efforts.

We should always practice thoroughly and seek to develop our skills to their highest level.



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A message for voice teachers:

The prospective student before you currently serves or aspires to serve the Byzantine Catholic Church as a cantor. In our tradition, liturgies are completely sung in unaccompanied chant—we use no musical instruments. Our system of chant comes from Carpatho-Ruthenia (a region that comprises areas of western Ukraine, eastern Slovakia, and northern Hungary) and incorporates influences from many other varieties of ecclesiastical chant found in central Europe.

Our chant covers a wide range of difficulty, from easy folk-like tunes to melodies that are quite elaborate and chromatic. Most do not have a regular rhythmic pulse, but follow the ebb and flow of the language of prayer. The cantor is not a soloist, but leads and supports a robust tradition of congregational singing. A clear, healthy tone and solid pitch control are essential.

Our cantors are volunteers moved by a sincere desire to serve God and the Church. Many have very little or no formal musical training, and naturally suffer from some of the problems that are common to untrained singers (see reverse). This prospective student will need instruction in the fundamentals of vocal technique and basic musicianship skills. Instruction in solfège (moveable Doh, La Minor) will be immensely helpful in the pursuit of their goal. As much as possible, we suggest incorporating the very chant melodies themselves into the lesson—the student should bring their service book along with them.

We appreciate your willingness to consider assisting this student. If you require any additional information, you can log on to our website which contains recorded examples of our chant (<http://mci.archpitt.org/legacy/RecordedMusic.html>), copies of our service books (<http://mci.archpitt.org/legacy/Publications2.html>) and other helpful content. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact us at the address above.

Thank you and God bless you.

After many years of observation, the faculty of the Metropolitan Cantor Institute has assembled this list of some of the most common problems in the singing of Prostopinije (Carpathian plainchant):

- 1) A lack of pitch control that results in a sagging tonal center
- 2) Poor breath control that results in awkwardly placed breaths.
- 3) An over-exaggerated portamento style of singing (swooping and scooping) that has come to be seen as traditional by some, but is really the result of poor habits.
- 4) The opposite of no. 3 – a choppy, non-legato style.
- 5) Tempi that are much too slow or too quick. Our chant should have a natural, easy, speech-like flow. It is vital that the words of the prayers are clearly understood.
- 6) An overly loud, almost shouting tone. The cantor must lead and support the congregation, not overwhelm them.
- 7) The diction errors common to all inexperienced singers. Too much “R”, lop-sided diphthongs, poor enunciation, etc. We stress a clear, but ordinary style of singer’s diction.

Certainly not all cantors suffer from these problems. Some are very fine musicians. But errors such as these are common enough to warrant a mention here.

Again, if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the MCI at the address on the reverse. We will be happy to assist you in any way we can.