

## WHAT ORTHODOX CHOIRS SHOULD KNOW

### 1. The place and ecclesiastical role of the choir.

They should know that they basically represent a lower order of clergy, even if they are not formally ordained, so they must have vestments and carry themselves in a pious manner. They need to realize the grave responsibility they have in assisting with the sanctification of the faithful as they participate in the services. They need to be prepared for prayer and worship and not distracted by trivial conversation and jokes.

### 2. The lexicon and order of services.

This is a big one. Choirs need to know the meaning of terms identifying different types of hymns, like apolytikion, kontakion, troparion, megalynarion, doxastikon, katavasias (canon), etc. and other terms such as antiphons, heirmos, stichera, papadica, chromatic, etc. I believe only a tiny percentage of church goers, let alone church musicians, know the true meaning and origin of these terms. They also need to know the meanings of several Greek words, such as Theotokos, Trisagion, Kyrie Ekekraxa, etc., and even the word Orthodox itself. They need to know and understand the order of Orthodox services beyond the Divine Liturgy, especially Vespers, Orthros, Compline, Paraklesis, Akathist, Holy Week, weddings, baptisms, and funerals. They need to be familiar with the psalmody of the Church, especially how psalms are used within the services and how and when different psalms are used. This category would also include substitutions in the antiphons, troparia, processions, megalynaria, Communion, etc. for Feast days and weekdays. It also includes knowing the changes necessary for hierarchical services.

### 3. The tones of the Octoechos.

They do not necessarily need to know all of the finer points of musical theory (although the director should), but they need, at least, to know the "sound" of each tone, and preferably the types of modes (scales and main notes) used for each tone. They should be able to recognize the heirmological form of a tone and identify it upon hearing. They should have a basic idea of which note to drone on (ison) in each tone. They should know the names of the scale steps, pa, vou, gha, dhe, ke, zo, and ni (D, E, F, G, A, B, C). Also, in this category, they need to know how to achieve "symphonia" with the priest or deacon, that is, how to get the main pitch from him and sing in the proper tone from it, so the service flows and is not jolted by key changes or pitch alterations.

### 4. The style of chanting. (Yphos.)

They may not be able to achieve a true Byzantine yphos when chanting together, especially in English, but they should understand that the style for chanting is simple and plain, with no vibrato. Tone should be natural, centered between head and chest. It can even be slightly nasal in certain places of the music. (But not excessively and not all the time.) They need to realize that bel canto singing is not appropriate for chant. They need to understand the rhythm and tempo necessities of each hymn. They need to enunciate (especially in English!) and give emphasis to important words and syllables through accents, ornaments, or length of note. They need to understand that it is best to sing unaccompanied, without help from an organ or other instrument.

### 5. Scale tunings.

This is not as exotic as it seems. Even if you listen to pop music on the radio, singers are always "bending" notes and adjusting scale tunings. I do not believe this has to be as precise and exacting as a trained chanter would do, but a choir can learn, for example, to slightly lower the pitch of A in a soft chromatic scale, or know when and when not to flat a B in a diatonic scale.