

Book Reviews

Andrew Crow, Editor

The Choir and How to Direct It

Pavel Chesnokov

John C. Rommereim, translator

Musica Russica, 2010

259 pages, \$49.95 paperback

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Reviewing a textbook in 2015 that was written between 1917 and 1930 may seem initially odd. However, the recent efforts of John C. Rommereim to bring Russian composer Pavel Chesnokov's treatise to an English-speaking audience are notable. *The Choir and How to Direct It* will be a useful acquisition in several scenarios: as a guide to performance practice for the choral music of Pre-Revolutionary Russia, as a historical treatise on the practice of conducting and the role of the conductor, and as an alternate voice among more modern conducting textbooks.

Pavel Chesnokov (1877–1944) studied at the iconic Moscow Synodal School from age seven until eighteen and he began to teach there soon after completing his studies. This lengthy association with the school and its professional liturgical choir placed Chesnokov at the opportune nexus of composers, performers, and conductors for the Russian Orthodox choral tradition during a fruitful season. The political revolution of 1918 ended the Synodal School and cast a cloud of suspicion over those associated with church music. Unlike many of his colleagues, Chesnokov never emigrated and instead gave considerable effort in the early years of the Soviet government to the completion of this tome. Although he completed the book in

1930, he could not achieve publication until a decade later because of its “apolitical” content and his own identity as a church musician. During that time Chesnokov corresponded with Alfred Swan in America, hoping that the book could be published in English, a project begun but not completed.

Chesnokov opened the book with the existential question, “What makes a collection of singers a choir?” and then proceeded to discuss various components of ensemble organization in the first two chapters. There, Chesnokov also distilled “three essential qualities of choral sound: ensemble, intonation, and nuance” (page 6). This assertion organized the rest of the book into chapters dedicated to the theoretical exploration of each quality (Part One) and then a manual for perfecting each quality in practice

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(Part Two). Even these three primary qualities mark a departure from the focus of textbooks we rely on from the past 30 years. And within them Chesnokov may contradict some readers' presumptions about the Russian preference. For example, Chesnokov did not advocate stacking the choir with basses to build a diminishing pyramid of balance upward to the top treble voices. Instead, he insisted that the ideal choir has an equal number of singers for each voice part. In Chapter 7 he outlined an intricate system of arranging singers within the ensemble according to timbral qualities with "A Complex System of Choral Organization."

The chapter "Intonation" for *a cappella* choirs includes many astute observations about the tendencies of certain tones and intervals within functional tonality that have since been validated with modern scientific analysis and accepted by our profession. Chesnokov's chapter "Nuance" may be the most valuable portion of the book. Its subject is often neglected in written instruction or relegated to a discussion of specific repertoire. Here is a detailed account of the intricate aspects of expressivity that may be broadly applied to repertoire beyond the Russian church, organized into one chapter for generally homorhythmic music and another for contrapuntal music. These chapters alone justify the book with their usefulness for present-day practice and would make a valuable reading assignment for a graduate seminar in choral music. Further, the appendices include Chesnokov's application of his approach and score markings to specific repertoire examples from the time period.

Mature students of conducting can benefit from the snapshot of conducting advice from a century past. The short chapters in Part Two must be read through the lens of historical performance

practice though many of the precepts there can be still readily applied. Other ideals seem to be timeless: we still delude ourselves that "each singer does not undertake to make a single sound without watching the conductor" (page 5)! John Rommereim and the publishers at Musica Russica have fulfilled Chesnokov's wish that the textbook be available in English while providing a fascinating exhibit and a useful teaching tool.

—Andrew Crow

