

## How Congregations Harmonized

Not long ago, Jeff Mierzejewski asked me in an email message:

“Would you be willing to help put together some basic information on folk harmonization patterns in the prostopinije tradition, based on your own experiences? There have always been two streams of "choir harmonies" and "congregational harmonies", and I would really like to set down something in writing on the latter that people could contribute to for whom it is a thorough lived experience. (A lot of singers these days have only a general idea of how to harmonize extempore, let alone how we've traditionally harmonized chant or devotional hymns.)”

What a difficult question. It's a bit like asking someone how they breathe or walk. It's something we have taken for granted and assume everyone knows how to do. But, of course, not everyone knows how to do it, certainly not today. Ask an academic, though, as we will attempt to analyze anything.

Let's go back to my memories of the 1950s. Some women had good soprano voices and sang along well with the cantor; sometimes one wondered whether he was leading them or they were leading him (lots of stories on tugs of war between cantor and congregation and priests complaining about dragging). Some men also sang the melody line well. The majority of others with so-so voices sang melody and they blended in.

Some women were altos and always sang some sort of alto part. (My mother became one of these, though she came from a Slovak Roman Catholic church.) Usually it was two notes below the melody line and it worked most of the time. Some men also sang this “alto” part. The most irritating aspect occurred when the melody ended on *do* and they took *la*, giving a minor sound to what was a major key. But only a few did this. Others seemed to know not to.

Some people—women and men—had low voices and sang octave lower, but on key. The few monotones were usually overridden by the others.

The men. Some with higher voices tried to sing tenor. Tenor is probably the hardest part to find in prostopinije and is usually the least needed. I suspect many of these men sang melody most of the time but took a tenor part on some endings. This actually worked best when the melody was around *mi re do ti do* and the like, so the tenor takes two notes above. It might otherwise be an alto part or an inversion of soprano and alto. An obvious example I can think of is the Hospodi pomiluj (3) “*do do ti do re mi; mi mi re mi fa sol; sol la sol fa mi re do.*” I think you know which one I mean. A man singing tenor would end it with “*sol la sol fa sol fa mi.*” Whether one called it alto or tenor, it worked.

Bass. These guys seemed to be good at chords and knew to take *do* as well as *sol* and when *fa* was needed. In major keys it was simple enough. They seemed to know how to sing minor keys, too, and even those pieces that switch back and forth from major to minor (like the standard Viruju).

How people learned these skills is beyond my expertise. Jerry Jumba has some ideas and they make sense. Essentially, our people had music all around them, and everyone was expected to be able to sing, and everyone did. Not everyone sang well; those who did became cantors or other sorts of professionals. The few who couldn't at all, the hopeless monotones, did other things, perhaps became the church janitor or the best baker of cakes. The vast majority in the middle, the 70% – 80%, could sing along and even harmonize by ear. Some of them filled out choirs (learning mostly by ear), they sang at weddings, and some played a musical instrument by ear.

The same for musical instruments. Most probably had no money for formal lessons but learned from someone older who played. I doubt there was theoretical instruction, but just "It is this way." And most important, there was a lot of listening. If you listen to other musicians playing over and over, every weekend, you will learn to play like them. With harmonizing, I suspect it was similar. People went to church at least once a week, often more often, and they learned to harmonize the way they heard others harmonize for years. Who started it? Boh zna.

I want to skip forward to the 1950s, when I was a child. We sang every day in primary school and had music class each week, where we learned basic sight reading. Only one boy in our class of about 30 was a hopeless monotone. I come from the Pennsylvania hard coal region and most of our neighbors were other Slavs—Eastern Catholic, Orthodox, Slovak Lutheran. Every kid was learning to play a musical instrument (lessons were free at public school). On warm afternoons after school one could hear from the street pianos, clarinets, trumpets, accordions, and such. Later I was also practicing my vocal scales.

My point is that the tradition of having music as a part of life continued. Those days we even had "Sing Along with Mitch" (Miller) and follow the bouncing ball, where the TV audience was expected to sing along. Today things are different. Funding for school music programs dried up long ago, children no longer grow up in American-Rusnak communities, and people in general do not go to church as often. So how can people learn to harmonize from their elders?

I suspect this is also why modern people cannot harmonize in general: because they don't sing from childhood. Not only don't they have music in school, but they don't have sing-alongs in the school auditorium and on the TV. They don't sing around boy and girl scout campfires and on bus trips. Even from the 60s generation—"If you miss the train I'm on..." "Lemon tree very pretty..."

I disappointed my voice teacher by not going to her alma mater, Duquesne, and not auditioning for the Tamburitzens. I would have become another Jerry Jumba, one year older, but with fewer opportunities for a woman. Nevertheless, my father was a cantor, my grandfather also, who brought his knowledge from Europe. Of all the grandchildren, I loved church, I listened, not just to the music of the church, but polka music, East European folk music, Russian Orthodox choirs. So any harmonies I come up with are not based on any music theory (other than basic primary school knowledge) but what I feel or heard (sometimes I'm not sure which).

A few years ago, I was watching some documentary on the BBC about a remote ethnic group, in South America, I think. In that village, nearly everyone could produce some very intricate handicraft (I forget exactly what it was). Researchers were amazed because they thought only a small percentage of any population could be so skilled. But to the villagers it was a fact of life—everyone can do it, with the odd exception. And everyone could. Not everyone was the very best of the best—those were few, but nearly everyone could produce a certain standard.

I thought of our people singing in church. Almost everybody could sing because that was the norm. I'm a teacher, and this idea is very powerful. Expect a child to succeed and he will. Some may need a little more help than others, and a few may not be able to make the standard (find something else those are good at), but most can. Another lesson from our ancestors.