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Teaching Singing in the Russian Empire Educational Institutions: Importance and Results

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Abstract

The article deals with the system of Singing lessons in the educational institutions of the Russian Empire. Attention is paid to the historical and educational significance of musical and choral training in schools, the difficulties and methodological approaches in teaching.

Pre-revolutionary, Soviet and modern scientific literature was used as materials. The methods of research were the principles of objectivity, historicism, systemic, complex consideration of social subjectivity in the subject of study, the maximum possible neutrality of the researcher towards the interpretation and evaluation of the actual material was assumed. The use of these methods allowed the authors to consider the system of singing lessons in educational institutions in retrospect and in historical sequence.

In conclusion, the authors note that singing had a great importance in the Russian Empire. Traditions and teaching of singing ascended to the ancient history of Russia and played an important part in the spiritual life of society. In the middle of the XIX century, singing was taught in primary schools in Russia, but due to the complex system of teaching, the progress of students was slow. In the 1870s, the teaching methodology based on the analytical-synthetic method was changed, which made it possible to dramatically improve the quality of teaching.

Keywords: Russian empire, folk school, singing.

1. Introduction

Singing was a significant part of life in pre-revolutionary Russia. Important seasonal holidays (especially in spring and summer) as well as church celebrations were accompanied by songs. It is also important to note that young people in Russia were playing dances with songs. Starting in the

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beginning of the fall, they continued until Red Hill day (the first Sunday after Easter). Dances in circle were a part of pagan tradition.

The Orthodox Church provided patronage to the religious songs, by creating parishioner church choirs. Singing was one of the educational disciplines in the period of Kiev Rus. Thus, in the Kiev Women's College, founded in 1086, singing was one of the compulsory subjects ([Miropol'skii, 1873](#)).

2. Materials and methods

Pre-revolutionary, Soviet and modern scientific literature was used as materials. The methods of research were the principles of objectivity, historicism, systemic, complex consideration of social subjectivity in the subject of study, the maximum possible neutrality of the researcher towards the interpretation and evaluation of the actual material was assumed. The use of these methods allowed the authors to consider the system of singing training in educational institutions in retrospect and in historical sequence.

3. Discussion and results

Teaching singing in Russian (including Soviet) historiography was considered since the middle of the XIX century. In the pre-revolutionary period, this topic was given attention by such specialists as: V.F. Odoevskii ([Odoevskii, 1868](#)), O. Gutman ([Gutman, 1899](#)), O. Miropol'skii ([Miropol'skii, 1873](#)) and others. The authors were searching for new methods in singing tutoring.

In Soviet period, the peak of vocal pedagogy studies took place in the 1950–1960s. At this time the pre-revolutionary method of teaching music was improved and simplified. These issues were studied by recognized experts, such as V.A. Bagadurov ([Bagadurov, 1953](#)), Y.A. Barsov ([Barsov, 1968](#)), E.Y. Gembitskaya ([Gembitskaya, 1955](#)), D.L. Lokshin ([Lokshin, 1957](#)) and others.

In the XXI century, the teaching of singing in the pre-revolutionary period were reflected in a number of works, among which it is necessary to name the studies of: N.V. Gruzintseva ([Gruzintseva, 2016](#)), M.V. Komissarova ([Komissarova, 2015](#)), L.V. Chernova ([Chernova, 2016](#)), E.I. Kislova ([Kislova, 2015](#)), I.V. Kornilova ([Kornilova et al., 2016](#)) and others. In this period, the authors focused on the history of pedagogy and the evolution of methodological approaches in teaching.

The pedagogical significance of music in general and singing in particular is determined by the strong influence of feelings on one's spiritual life. It is necessary to understand that music is mainly the language of feelings, not only personal, but also universal; embodying emotions, the song serves as an expression of the elements of the inner life of man in society and of the society itself. In the pre-revolutionary period, teachers believed that one can express his deepest feelings and noble aspirations through a song. The moral significance of singing was not only in teaching a person, but in "tuning" a person to his best manifestations and impulses.

At the same time, singing could have a high national importance, but the basis of folk music education had to be native songs and prayers. That is why the national anthem of the Russian Empire was the song-prayer "God save the Tsar". This song was the embodiment of the history of the people, the bearer of the foundations of national education. In it the society expressed its' past, its' views on life and hopes. It should be noted that the song played an important role not only in Russia, but also in other countries. Thus, for example, in Germany, choral societies had a "cementing" significance in the unification of German societies ([Gei, 2014](#)).

It is important to note that musical education was of purely practical importance. Song and music, filling the leisure time on holidays, served as a distraction from drinking establishments and the increasing rate of alcoholism ([Kuz'mina, 2015: 93-97](#)).

Finally, the introduction of proper musical education could help to improve Russian church singing and served as a support for the school. For example, the society was more sympathetic towards singing and if the choir participated in the church at the school, the school acquired higher public authority.

In the first half of the XIX century, Singing as a basic subject in schools was in decline. The reason for this was the prevailing opinion that not all students had the talent for singing. The situation changed since the Great Reforms of the 1860s, when singing was included in compulsory subject in the curriculum in practically all schools, as well as in the cadet corps of the Russian Empire ([Cherkasov, Smigel, 2016](#)).

Exemption from Singing was allowed only if the student experienced soreness, weakness or pathological deviations. But all these cases were very rare in educational institutions. It is important to note that Singing classes, among other things, were an effective tool for correcting speech defects, so-called tongue-tie and stammering. In addition, it should not be forgotten that voice and hearing, like other abilities, could be developed through methodological training and systematic exercises.

By the 1870s, the teachers of Singing were puzzled by the question: "From what age should we start teaching children Singing?"

It is common knowledge that children begin to sing very early. While in the cradle, by falling asleep to the sound of a lullaby, the child got used to calm singing. Since then, his hearing began to develop, although he did not yet distinguish individual sounds in the song, but perceived the song as a whole.

With the development of the body, the strengthening of the vocal organs began as well as speech and singing skills (which were formed by imitation). At the age of 5-6 the child began to sing along. The gradual development of a child's voice can prove that apart from special cases of musical giftedness, which is an exception, a child's voice is formed not earlier than in the period of 8-9 years. From that time the singing teaching began in pre-revolutionary Russia. It was noted that in kindergartens children were taught singing at an earlier age, which, with the right choice of plays, is quite possible. However, teaching singing before the specified age was not recommended (Miropol'skii, 1873: 7).

By the 1870s, the question of the preference for solo or choral singing was on the agenda in primary schools. It is important to note that teaching singing was much simpler, since it represented the initial way for the development of the basic elements of singing. However, without choral singing, it was incomplete. Surprisingly, choral singing caused objection even among music teachers of primary school. The arguments of these teachers amounted to the following: 1) there is no time for choral singing in primary school, 2) this type of singing is difficult for pupils, 3) assuming artistic development, it is impossible in school, and finally, 4) where to get voices for choir in school?

It was parried by teachers-innovators that 1) if there is a place for singing in elementary school then there must be a choral one, since these are not separate lessons, but joint ones. Beginning with solo singing, it was time to move on to choral singing, 2) the problem of the difficulty of choral singing was more of a teacher's problem of singing, since it was completely incomprehensible. If one student could sing a tune, then why he could not sing it if somebody sings along? O. Miropol'skii, attending singing lessons in primary schools noted that "singing in two, three voices gave them (children – Auth.) the greatest pleasure and they eagerly performed in choir" (Miropol'skii, 1873: 9).

In the 3rd point opponents of the introduction of choral singing noted that children cannot develop artistically. However, innovators considered this fact to be an exaggeration. They noted that the first stage of performing music is the correctness of singing; if the students sing for the first time and achieve it, then some kind of ensemble can be heard in the choral singing. Technical endurance, subtle nuances, grace, high artistry of performance were the result of long practice, and it would be strange to demand these qualities from children.

As to the fourth point the innovators reported that their Singing lessons did not set the task of staging opera performances. In singing, the combination of several voices will lead to choral singing and elementary singing did not require a considerable number of voices. Summing up, advocates of choral singing noted that there is time, money, and a complete opportunity to introduce choral singing in primary schools. Choral singing had a positive influence in education in its development of teamwork skills, in the realization that only together one can achieve the goal, forming a habit of carefully performing one's own activities and coordinating with the others. The competitive spirit was also important as well as the understanding of proportion, tact and harmony.

A few words about the method of teaching singing in primary school.

In the middle of the XIX century, teaching Singing was considered difficult because it required a creative approach from the teacher. Prince V. F. Odoevskii* wrote that "all music is

* Vladimir Fedorovich Odoevsky (1804–1869) – music theorist, prominent Russian scientist and writer.

nothing but a series of compounds of the seven basic quantities and their derivatives” (Odoevskii, 1868: 5). Similarly, the drawing was a mix of a straight line and a curve, and mathematics was a mix of 10 basic numbers. In the end, it was V. F. Odoevskii who developed a method of choral training (Chernova, 2016: 25).

Professor Laroche, in his preface to the manual for Sheva's method singing lessons, noted that it might seem paradoxical that all musical knowledge and skill is reduced to one main feature: “the ability to intone” that is, “to imagine in proportion, to picture with a voice a sound represented by a sign on paper”. Thus, all the music, in technical language is based on intervals. If you take into account that there are 7 main sounds, and the 8th is the first repeated twice, that there are 7 basic intervals, and the remaining derivatives, then the understanding of the musical literacy should not even seem complicated.

A few words about the methodology of teaching. By the 1870s, there were two methods of teaching singing: synthetic and analytical. The peculiarity of the synthetic method was that the pupils first learned musical sounds, in the form of a scale, then went on to more complex musical exercises, then to whole plays, and the acquisition of music competence skills was complete by learning.

When teaching in an analytical way, the learning process was reversed. At first, the students learned a few simple plays by ear, which later served as teaching material. Methodists noted that the children, both in speech and in song, did not distinguish the elements at first, but perceived them as a whole. Under the teacher’s guidance, the students split the whole into elements, into separate sounds that differed in height, strength, and continuation. Thus, in a synthetic way, learning begins with elements and escalates to the plays; and in the analytical way it starts with whole plays and moves down to elementary sounds.

In the process of singing teaching in Russian schools, the synthetic method dominated, despite the fact that it was more appropriate for special education and is hardly applicable for primary schools. As a result, the music system was first taught in schools, and then, scales, keys, intervals, and so on. Accordingly, in the routine study of textbooks, the teaching of singing went on by itself and this was the reason why singing was not perceived by all students. By the 1870s, Russian teachers developed a more simplified system of teaching. The core of it was the analytical method that was supposed to simplify the learning process and make it accessible to everyone. In the end, this method existed almost until the 1950’s and later was slightly updated (Chernova, 2016).

Innovations suggested that the teaching of singing should begin with preliminary exercises. Their goal was: firstly, to get acquainted with children's vocal abilities and their readiness for singing; secondly, to prepare the development of hearing, tact, voice intonation and the ability to distinguish high and low tones; thirdly, to prepare the material for further learning; fourthly, to teach the children to write the first 7 digits to write notes and to familiarize children with the school system.

As you know, the first impressions are the strongest, and so the teacher from the very first lesson should try to involve the children in the learning process, to inspire their confidence and assure them that learning to sing is not a difficult matter.

After acquaintance with the students, the teacher had to make friends with the children. He had to find out what songs they knew and what they liked. This was done so that the children could overcome their shyness and awaken their spirit of competition. To practice the intonation it was necessary to “get into the voice” of the teacher. The tact and proportion would appear later during the performance of songs. The choice of songs should be adapted for further work, while it was important that the songs had a distinctly simple diatonic scale. The writing of the figures should go along with the oral exercises.

The core of all training was to be based on an analytical-synthetic method, and the fact always had to precede the conclusion, an example had to precede the rule and particular had to precede generalizations.

After preliminary exercises, it was important to lead the students by asking them questions to help them to analyze and write down in notes the songs they learned. At the same time, their skills were especially important as well as resourcefulness and inventiveness of the teacher. Further progress of the studies depended on the success in the independent analysis of the first song.

General recommendations were given for effective learning by a new method of elementary (simplified) teaching:

1. Simple, but graceful melody and text, should be used as basis of the entire period of learning, gradually increasing difficulties in intervals, tact, tempo and voice range;
2. Oral and written work should be alternated, but oral ones should be preceded by written ones. If the student is able to sing from memory, he should be able to write down what he heard;
3. Theoretical information on music should be given gradually, in performing and learning the melody and it should be immediately "fixed in mind" with new examples. Thus, there was no need to talk about additional octaves in the main scale, if they did not occur in the studied song.
4. It was especially important that children learn to picture every given sound in mind. For this, the best means were musical dictation and note reading. Both of these exercises had to be used in the training course. Pupils should hear and guess intervals and write them down; each digit (note) should serve as a sign of the real sound for them. Exercises could vary. For example, one student, calls out a note aloud, the others sing it, while the others write it down. The main thing was that in each task the student must certainly delve into it, listen to the sound and reproduce it or seek it out by himself. Only with this method of teaching singing could develop and give results.
5. Along with the melodies (prayers, hymns, songs) there should be exercises in performing musical sounds by numbers with the names of notes: do, re, mi, etc.
6. All exercises should have a meaningful character of elegant melodies, and not be routine-monotonous imitations of mechanical combinations of musical sounds or meaningless compositions.
7. As soon as the children learn to perform simple plays correctly and clear, in the average tempo with the simple division in tact, when they will learn to distinguish and apply their knowledge, it was necessary to proceed to two-voiced singing. Canons served as transition from solo to choral singing, with less difficulty in performing, due to their construction ([Miropol'skii, 1873: 17-18](#)).

The simplified notes studying system played a significant role in musical pedagogy for a long time ([Chernova, 2016: 27](#)).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that singing had a great importance in the Russian Empire. Traditions and teaching of singing ascended to the ancient history of Russia and played an important part in the spiritual life of society. In the middle of the XIX century, singing was taught in primary schools in Russia, but due to the complex system of teaching, the progress of students was slow. In the 1870s, the teaching methodology based on the analytical-synthetic method was changed, which made it possible to dramatically improve the quality of teaching.

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