Pronunciation of Old Church Slavonic – some guidelines

Vowel sounds

Most Slavic languages have a limited set of vowel sounds which should basically be pronounced as the similarly written vowels of languages such as German of Spanish. There is, however, one particular vowel that is less frequent in most popular languages. This is the vowel that I represent as [ɨ], ie a small "i" with a stroke. Note that I will put phonetic symbols between square brackets, which is standard in phonetics. The vowel [ɨ] is somewhat intermediate between the unrounded front vowel as in German "die" and the rounded back vowel as in German "du". The vowel [ɨ] should be pronounced without protrusion of the lips. Try to pronounce "du" while keeping the lips spread and you will pronounce a vowel sound that will be just good enough.

Consonant sounds

While vowel sounds are not a big problem in most Slavic languages consonant sounds certainly are. Particular challenges arise from the sibilant sounds (compare English "s" and "z"). A large number of consonants comes in two variants. The first is the so-called "hard" variant, which is more or less similar to the standard pronunciation of consonants in many popular languages. The so-called "soft" variant, however, is the tricky one. Not only should it be carefully distinguished from its hard counterpart, it should also be kept apart from strongly palatalised sounds (compare English "s" and "sh").

In Old Church Slavonic, just as in modern Russian or Polish, there are usually three different consonants compared to only two or even one in other languages. To illustrate this one should try to imagine that alongside English "s" as in "sell" and "sh" as in "shell" comes "sy", which might occur in the non-existent word "syell". In my semi-phonetic representation I shall use the apostrophe ['] to indicate the brief and light "y" sound that is pronounced simultaneously with the consonant written before it. In other words "sy" [s'] represents one single sound (compare English "sh" and "ch", which are also two-letter combinations for single sounds). The sound "sy" [s'] is therefore different from both "s" [s] and "sh" [š]. Within the range [s], [s'] and [š] , the first is the hard, non-palatalised consonant, the second is the soft, palatalised one while the third is the strongly palatalised consonant. In a similar way the transcription [t'] refers to "ty", which is different from both "t" [t] and "ch" [č] etc.

By far the biggest mistake the singer can make is pronouncing "sy" [s'] the same as "sh" [š]. In the former consonant there must be no lip rounding while in the latter consonant lip rounding is essential. Native speakers of English do not have the soft sounds such as [s'] in their own language, but they do have the other two, ie [s] and [š]. However, many languages do not even distinguish such pairs, which turns distinguishing even three closely related sounds into a major challenge. Speakers of such languages tend to use lip rounding everywhere (eg native speakers of Dutch) or nowhere at all (eg native speakers of Danish), which should be carefully avoided either way.

In the above example I have also introduced the caron [ˇ]. Placing the caron over a consonant indicates that it is strongly palatalised: [č] is similar to English "ch" as in "church", [š] is similar to English "sh" as in "shell" and [ž] is similar to French "j" as in "jour" or "g" as in English "massage".

Finally, the symbol [j] should be pronounced as English "y" in "yell", not as "g" in "gel". The symbol [ł], ie a small letter "l" with a stroke, denotes a somewhat fat "l" sound. Try to lower the tongue while pronouncing it. The symbol [v] represents a "w"-like sound without lip rounding. It should sound like German "w" as in "Wetter", not like English "w" in "weather". The symbol [x] stands for "ch" as in German "Bach", not for "ch" as in English "chin".