

# Psalmist

- A psalmist sings the verses of the Responsorial Psalm, like the lector who reads the Word of God.
- It is preferred to lead the psalm from the ambo, where the other scriptures are proclaimed.
- This part of the Liturgy of the Word is a dialogue between the assembly and the cantor.
  - It begins with an instrumental statement of the refrain, an intonation by the cantor, and its repetition by the entire assembly.
  - Sing your first refrain strongly, but back away for subsequent refrains, letting the congregation know that it's their turn, their response.
  - All psalm verses should be sung, each followed by the assembly singing the antiphon.
  - Remember, the primary focus is that the assembly hear God's message; digest it; and respond.
- Prepare yourself in three ways:
  - First, prepare your **mind** by studying. Understand the context of the psalm and how it relates to the other readings. Many online resources can be found; or an excellent one is *Living Liturgy for Cantors* published by Liturgical Press. To purchase one, visit [www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)
  - Second, prepare your **spirit** by praying the psalm. Before you try singing it, make sure you can pray it out loud. Pay attention to where you pause or stress something as you pray it.
  - Third, prepare your **body** by practicing it. Listen to a recording of it. Practice singing it aloud. Incorporate the pauses and stressed words you discovered praying it into your singing. Categorize the psalm into one of four moods, like the Mysteries of the Rosary, and practice reflecting that mood in your voice and facial expressions:
    - Joyful (happy, elated, instructing praise)
    - Sorrowful (lamenting, pleading, requesting mercy)
    - Glorious (majestic, marveling, proclaiming wonder or awe)
    - Luminous (tranquil, calming, reassuring God's grace)
- It's better to intone the verses on a single note or simple chant pattern reverently and in the appropriate spirit, than to sing the notes provided by some composer haltingly or timidly. The “melody” is of secondary importance to the text.

# Leader of Song

- A song leader helps all members of the assembly sing together, inviting their singing with gestures or expressions of encouragement. He or she is really a “leader of prayer,” a leader who **engages** the congregation in sung prayer.
- Help each music selection achieve its aim, whether it's a hymn, song or part of the Mass; reflecting its mood in your voice and facial expressions.
- Try to announce hymns in their appropriate mood.
- Process with the priest, deacon and other ministers. The purpose of the Entrance Hymn is to open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have been gathered, and introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgy. You can achieve this more strongly by walking and singing amongst them.
- Use gestures to clarify when the congregation is supposed to do something they're not doing automatically. Confusion takes them out of a prayerful place, so use your hands to help and guide them when needed.
  - Think of gestures as very simple conducting, which they only need when singing something new or unfamiliar to them.
  - It's OK to gesture when to cut off a note, or if they're supposed to hold a long note, or if the pitch is going to go up or down unexpectedly, or if there's a tricky syncopated rhythm.
  - Holding up your hands the entire time they're singing doesn't really help them.
  - If they're not sure when to start, gesture for them to begin.
  - If they're not familiar when to sit or stand at the beginning or end of music, gesture that. (This sometimes happens at weddings or funerals with a lot of non-Catholics present.)
- Whenever possible, your voice should not overly predominate, the singing of the assembly is the voice that should be heard. When they sing music they know well, get them started, then back off and blend in with them, though remain a visual presence for them.
- If you sense them struggling or not singing, try to engage them. You should be able to hear them. However, music isn't just making sound; it's hearing it as well, so if they're actively listening instead of singing, they're still engaged.
- Remember, the most important goal of liturgical music is to share faith. Performing well is secondary to that.

# History of Singing Psalms

- Though attempts have been made, based on knowledge of instruments and language, no one knows for sure how to reconstruct the music that the psalms first sounded like.
  - The texts suggest some were led by one person, others by a group.
  - Some (like 106) were too long for everyone to sing by memory.
  - Some (like 67) have refrains, indicating everyone sang those words while someone else sang verses.
  - Some (like 122) accompanied processions.
  - Some (like 119) are meditative.
  - Some (like 34) are an alphabetical acrostic: each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
- The backbone of Jewish worship, early Christians increasingly view the psalms as prophetic, foreshadowing the coming of Christ, his ministry, death and Resurrection; and incorporate them into their new liturgical celebrations
- In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, a council in Laodicea sets regulations:
  - Cantors must sing psalms at the ambo from specially prepared parchments
  - A *bona fide* clerical role, they must wear vestments, but not the same as other ministers
  - They may not patronize local taverns
- By the 6<sup>th</sup> century, an increasing number of monasteries with a wide variety of styles of psalm singing leads to the development of Gregorian chant.
  - A system of musical notation is devised
  - Chant melodies are simplified and cataloged
  - The musical training of cantors begins, supplementing their theological and clerical training
  - For the first time, written music is circulated throughout the Christian world
- Through medieval times, the cantor directs music; holding a high office in the church
- During the Renaissance of the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, musical styles develop from unaccompanied chant to intricate polyphony sung by choirs; clerical cantors are increasingly replaced by professional choir masters and organists
- Second Vatican Council expands the number of Sunday readings from 2 to 3, replaces the *gradual* (a couple lines of scripture with an Alleluia) with the *Responsorial Psalm*, and separates the *Alleluia* to become its own piece of music
  - The role of cantor as soloist is restored, levels of certification for laity are created
  - Psalms in the Lectionary are adapted to become responsorial; containing an antiphon to be sung by the people.
  - They are also abbreviated to maintain a similar length.

# How to Prepare a Sung Solo

- There are basically three “phases” to learning any vocal solo. You need to set aside time for all three, with breaks in between each phase. You can't master a solo in one or two rehearsals.
  - It starts with the “**discovery**” phase, or simply learning the text and melody.
    - First concentrate on the text. Before you try singing it, make sure you can say it out loud convincingly. Pay attention to which words or syllables you stress as you say it, so that you can stress the same ones when you sing, and not just the high or long notes!
    - To learn the melody:
      - If you read music, play it on an instrument.
      - If not, either listen to a recording, or ask someone who plays to teach it to you.
    - Avoid “vocal confusion” by hearing the melody clearly “in your head” before you try singing it out loud.
    - Do this in advance. If you wait until the last minute, it will sound under-rehearsed.
  - Next comes the “**exploration**” phase. This should be the bulk of your preparation.
    - You need to really know it before you can determine the best way to perform it.
    - Rehearse with a music director / vocal coach to eliminate any hurdles you've encountered.
    - Determine where you do and don't want to breathe.
    - Experiment with pace and speed; diction; dynamics and accents. Try stressing different words, altering your sub-text, changing your phrasing, etc.
    - Work out the emotional journey of the solo. Where's its climax?
    - Again, do this in advance; doing it at the last minute may cause you to sound “confused”.
  - Last comes the “**polishing**” phrase.
    - Make sure you can sing it the way you want consistently.
    - Rehearse it again with a music director, vocal coach or accompanist to learn how to relax into this solo.
    - Eliminate nerves by:
      - Knowing you've prepared yourself as thoroughly as possible.
      - Reassurance from another person or people.
    - Within a few hours or days of the performance, this last step is really the only thing a music director or vocal coach can do. If you don't truly know the solo, you've lost the ability to effectively rehearse at this point.
- A great music director once said, “The difference between an amateur and a professional performance has nothing to do with a paycheck. An amateur is satisfied if they merely get all the notes and words correct. A professional cares about the quality with which those same notes and words are delivered, and strives to make that delivery as effective as possible.”