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# Sing something simple:

## Guidance for those who cannot find a cantor

Allen Morris

Song is such an important element in the celebration of the Liturgy. If you are reading this sheet, you probably agree.

I recognise the importance of song, and value it. However, I do not read music, and in my ministry as a priest it has been very rare for me to be blessed with parish musicians confident in singing, ready to lead others in singing, and willing to serve as cantors to promote the liturgical song of the assembly.

So for very many years, and despite looking, even advertising and being willing to pay the going rate for such musicians I have developed a *via minimis* which I feel has worked well enough for me over recent years for me to commend it to others who find themselves in the same sad situation. I would describe it as 'leading the singing' of the congregation, rather than serving as a Cantor. I sometimes introduce new settings before Mass, but during Mass my role is simply to announce (for example for a hymn) or to start (for example a *Sanctus*).

### Less is (often) more

Start by recognising that not infrequently communities that sing more at Mass do not necessarily pray the Mass better. This is not to cast aspersions on the oft-repeated assertion that he who sings prays twice, simply to recognise that quite often what people sing at Mass is peripheral to the Mass itself and sometimes even a distraction.

The song that most directly promotes deeper and fuller participation in the Liturgy is the song which is integral to it. A very useful guide to what this song consists of, and what to prioritise is given in *Singing the Mass*.<sup>1</sup>

It is when we sing the Mass songs themselves, rather than singing supplementary songs at Mass, that our participation in the Mass is most direct and focused. Other song can have its place and be welcomed, but without good music resources this is something you will have to do without.

But if the choices you make help 'your' congregation sing and pray the Mass well, take heart, for you will be doing a great thing.

### Something to avoid

If you lack an accompanist do not be tempted to use pre-recorded music as a substitute for congregational song, or as a backing track to congregational song.

It is not a help in the long-run, and it compromises the authenticity of what is been done in the short term. It draws attention to what you lack, rather than simply helping you make the most of what you have.

Pre-recorded music can be a help to you to become familiar with a tune — and I've found it a boon to use such resources to learn some of the new chants in the Missal and to learn some new Mass settings.

There is a noble simplicity to *a capella* singing. You may feel a little exposed if you are not used to it, but very quickly people will rise to the opportunity when they hear you trying, and can hear one another trying, and are not drowned out by, for example OCP voices or a backing track that is at the wrong pitch and the wrong tempo...

### The Missal Chant

Plain chant has served the Church well and for many centuries, and for the good reason that it is (at least the simpler settings are) easy to sing, and does not intrude on the celebration. We sing our prayer, rather than singing for the sake of it. There is lots more interesting and attractive music, but I have yet to get tired of the simple Missal tones.

### Variety for the Seasons

Repetition is a good principle for liturgical prayer and for liturgical song. However, this does not mean the music should be unvarying. Changing things to mark the seasons establishes a reasonable balance. A setting of the Acclamations for Advent, another for Lent, one more for Christmas and Easter, and another for Ordinary time, or two if you must, seems to get things right. At present we use a Latin setting for Lent, which brings in a bit more variety.

### Familiar Repertoire

For such other songs as you think helpful and can manage, build up a simple repertoire — worthy texts, noble melodies. Go for quality and it will bear repeating. Ostinatos suit *a capella* singing better than do rather than long narrative hymns, but these too can have their place.

In all this, make the most of what you can do, and do not fret about what you cannot manage.

### Endnotes

1. <http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Music/Singing.shtml>

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*Sing something simple* is part of a resource produced by the Society of Saint Gregory to help communities develop the ministry of Cantor.

Other resources to support the ministry of Cantor can be found at the website below.

The website also offers information about the Society of Saint Gregory, the national Catholic Society for liturgy and music, its meetings and *Music and Liturgy*, the Society's journal.

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