But I Can't Understand the Cantors or 'Say What?'

Michael Connolly

It's Sunday morning and Mass has just finished. People are greeting one another and making the usual small talk about friends, family, recent activities, and the just-completed liturgy. "That cantor certainly has a beautiful voice and a pleasant personality, but most of the time I simply cannot understand the words." Or, "I'm sure glad they still have the missalettes. I need one to follow the text of the responsorial psalm because that cantor never sings clearly."

Cantors and parish music directors may be aware of the problem but not know how to solve it. Cantors communicate both verbally and non-verbally with the assembly. Verbal communication between the cantor and assembly is essential and it assumes basic concepts of diction for singers.

Communication between cantor and the assembly. The verbal communication between the cantor and the assembly is critically important. Singing is a heightened form of speech which can communicate much more than the basic, literal meaning of the words employed. The musical elements can emphasize certain key words and phrases by using higher/lower, louder/softer, or longer/shorter notes. Joy, sorrow, consolation, penitence, assurance, and mystery are intangibles which music can express more clearly and elegantly than words alone—and what words cantors have to sing! The ancient psalms which have been prayed for thousands of years, beautiful hymns of the early Church such as the Gloria, key phrases of the New Testament in the gospel acclamation verse, fine poetry and prose which have been set to music—these are the words cantors sing, and they are worth singing well! These sung texts are part of the assembly's spiritual formation. The music helps make the texts memorable. No doubt, many of us find ourselves humming antiphons as we go about our day. We remember the text and continue to draw inspiration from it. Liturgical songs are just as much a part of the spiritual formation of the community as are the homily, readings, eucharist, artwork, and liturgical environment. Light and sound contribute much to the community's awareness of God's presence.

To be of value, however, the texts must be understood. Just as a homily must be carefully prepared and delivered to have proper impact, so, too, the music sung by the cantor. Ministers of hospitality make sure that all are welcomed and comfortable; the cantor continues the hospitality by making it possible for the assembly to participate in attentive listening.

Singing is heightened speech. Singing uses the same mechanism as speech. Simply put, the lungs and diaphragm provide a controlled stream of air to the larynx which vibrates to produce a pitched sound. This rather neutral sound is modified by the throat and mouth to form what we understand as words. The primary physical difference between speech and song is that the vowels are held longer, enabling the listener to more easily hear the pitch. Since vowels are magnified, consonants must be altered in order that they remain in proportion to the vowels. This heightening of speech in singing must be handled carefully, in balance and moderation. Extreme emphasis on the consonants, such as heavily rolled *r*'s, seems affected, as if the person is singing into an opera house with three thousand seats instead of a small church. On the other hand, a singer who does not magnify consonants to an appropriate level risks producing a beautiful tone which is virtually unintelligible. The vocal goal of the cantor is to produce a beautiful sound with a clearly understandable text. Vowels are the basis of the singing tone, and consonants provide the clarity of the text.

Vowels. "But John always sounds like a country singer. How can he get rid of that twang?" The parish liturgy director who spoke with me was very frustrated. Her best cantor was very experienced in theater. He was a wonderful, natural leader, self-assured and comfortable in front of the assembly. You could always understand the words he sang but the sound of his voice was annoying. After listening for a while, it was clear that he had a pleasant singing voice to complement his wonderful speaking voice. Theater had taught him about speaking clearly, with clear consonants, but he didn't understand that vowels were the basis of the singing voice. For a beautiful, sustained vocal sound, good vowel production is essential.

For good singing, it is necessary to form *ee, ey, ah, oh,* and *oo* properly. Well-formed vowels, an open throat, and good breath management are the keys to a beautiful vocal line.

For amateur singers, the biggest challenge with vowels often comes when two of them are pronounced in succession—a *diphthong*. If you say the word *noun* very slowly you will hear the diphthong: NAHoon. Other examples include *bait* (BEHeet), *I* (AHee), *pray* (PREYee). Notice that a diphthong does not occur every time a word is spelled with two vowels in succession. The words *bought, seat,* and *boot* do not contain diphthongs. On the other hand, many words which have diphthongs spell that sound with only one consonant. Examples include *fly* (FLAHee), *cake* (CAYeek), and *type* (TAHeep).

[redacted]g diphthongs in the commonly ac[redacted]ted vocal style, it is necessary to ho[redacted]ut the first of the two vowels until th[redacted]ry end when the second is added briefly. If the second vowel is allowed to slide in early, the twang typical of country music is produced. That's fine for Nashville, but the country vocal style is not commonly used in liturgical music. Poor handling of diphthongs was the cause of the problem for the cantor I mentioned above. Once he understood the idea, he quickly improved on the problem.

A rich treasury of diphthongs is found in the chorus of the familiar hymn by Stuart H. Kline, "How Great Thou Art" (which, by the way, this author *does not* recommend for use in liturgies!) If the singer flips into the second vowel of the diphthong, an exaggerated twang is the result. Imagine a country singer singing this passage, emphasizing the syllables in capital letters:

> Then sings mahEE soOOL, mahEE
> seyEEvior God to thee,
> HahOO greyEET ThahOO art.

Now imagine an operatic diva singing, including almost none of the second vowel:

> Then sings MAH(ee) SO(oo)l,
> MAH (ee) SAY(ee)vior God to thee,
> HAH(oo) GREY(ee)t THAH(oo) art.

This opposite extreme is also in an inappropriate style for this gospel song.

The ideal vocal style for diphthongs in liturgical music is closer to this second example, but not to an extreme which will draw undue attention to itself. The first vowel should be held until nearly the end, when the final vowel is added. The latter, however, must be heard for the word to be understood. This example is from Psalm (121) 122:

> I (AHee) rejoiced (reJOHeeced)
> when I (AHee) heard them say (SEHee):
> Let us go to God's house (HAH-oose).
> And now (NAHoo) our (AHoor) feet are standing
> within your gates (GEHeets), O Jerusalem.

Consonants. Consonants give articulation to the tone produced on the vowels. If they are handled in a sloppy way, the text will be unintelligible. Both vowels and consonants must be magnified when sung, in comparison to their use in everyday speech. A lot of Americans tend to be very casual in everyday speech patterns. Initial consonants are often unclear, and final consonants are frequently dropped altogether. For example, "I'm going to go to the store" is usually pronounced *um gonna gohduthu store*. The first two words will be pronounced incorrectly, and the next three are melded into one. If cantors are to be understood, they must take great care with the text, beyond what they do in everyday speech.

The most frequently overlooked consonants are those at the ends of words. This sentence from the Gloria provides good examples: "You are seated at the right hand of the Father." The bold-face consonants are almost always slighted in speech it helps to think of this sentence with a different spelling: *You are seateh d'a t'the righ t'ha nd'ah v'the Father*. This looks more complicated than it is. Simply think of the closing consonants as being attached to the beginning of the next word. This reminds the singer to pronounce each one instead of dropping

[redacted]e most troublesome closing conso-na[redacted] are those which are called *plosive* be[redacted]se a small burst of air between the lips, tongue, teeth, or some combination is required to produce the sound. In common speech we often delete this small burst by simply stopping the air. When this occurs the word *and* becomes *an*, *Lord* becomes *Lore*, and *God* becomes *Gah*. Caution: poor diction can approach blasphemy!

Identical back-to-back consonants (such as *life force*) are a challenge. Many musicians prefer to pronounce the consonant only once, but it is much clearer to do it twice. This is easier for cantors than for choirs. Combining the two consonants can lead to misunderstanding. In Vaughan Williams's cantata *Dona nobis pacem*,

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[*continued from page 11*] one movement ends with the words *this soiled world.* If the *s* is not repeated, the text is heard as *this oiled world.*

While they must be heard, it is important not to overdo consonants. Consonants must be pronounced, but not accentuated by adding *uh* to every consonant (*Lorduh, Goduh*) as in a parody of operatic style.

The consonant *r* gives constant challenge to singers. People in the United States emphasize this consonant in everyday speech. The reason is that the typical United States pronunciation closes the mouth, especially at the back, producing an unpleasant tone. In desperation, choir directors constantly tell singers not to sing the *r*. For the text to be understood, however, that consonant must be present, but in a much smaller quantity and modified so that the mouth is more open.

Careful listening to good recordings can be helpful. In liturgical music, I suggest listening to Michael Joncas's *No Greater Love* recording to hear examples of clear consonants. Popular singers also can provide insights on consonants. Linda Ronstadt's *What's New* and other albums of jazz standards, Frank Sinatra's recordings of the fifties and sixties, and Barbra Streisand's *Funny Girl,* among others, clearly demonstrate careful handling of consonants. One understands every word!

Interpretation. The technical skills I have discussed are not enough to insure communication of the meaning of the text. Unless the meaning of the text is brought out, it is just a series of words with little impact. Not all words in a given text are created equal. The important words must be emphasized. These lines from Psalm 16 can serve as an example:

> O Lord, it is you who are my
> portion and cup,
> it is you yourself who are my
> prize.
> . . . . . .
> I keep you, Lord, ever in my
> sight;
> Since you are at my right hand,
> I shall stand firm.
>

The words in italics give one example of how the text can be brought out. Remember, the consonants in boldface must be heard.

> O *Lord,* **it** is *you* who are my *portion*
> **and** *cup,*
> **it** is *you yourself* who are my *prize.*
> **I keep** *you,* **Lord,** *ever* in my *sight;*
> Since *you* are **at** my *right hand,* I
> shall stan**d** *firm.*

This concern with interpretation of text is especially critical when cantors chant texts on a psalm tone. A mechanical recitation of the words provides no life, no meaning, to the text, but when words are treated carefully, chant (which is literally heightened speech) can bring profound depth to the text. This is true not only with the mechanics of diction and word emphasis, but also tempo. The phrases of a chant must move at a speech pace and use speech inflection. The common, deplorable habit of slowing down at the end of every phrase of a chant takes all the life out of the musical line and text.

With careful attention to vowels, consonants, and interpretation of the cantor's music, the conversation overheard after Mass will surely be different. "I always liked the cantor's voice, but it seems even better now," or, "I understand the words now. It's so nice to be able to listen comfortably instead of struggling to decipher each word." The assembly probably won't be aware of the techniques. All they will know is that it's easier to hear and easier to pray. Isn't that what our ministry of cantor is about? ■

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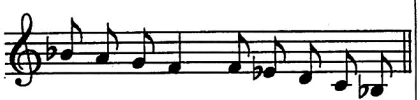
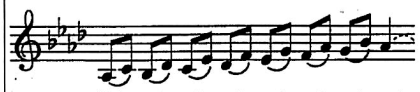
[*continued from page 13*] that I have had particular success in establishing good breathing, blending, tone production, and intonation.

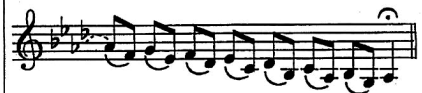


Yah yah yah yah yah yah yah yah yah

This exercise gets things going. The *y* helps propel the vowel. I normally start on a B-flat and go up half steps from there. I constantly listen for the half steps between 8 and 7 and 4 and 3, making sure they are in tune. I rarely take this above f^1 (men) and f^2 (women). This will depend on the day, the time of the day and the nature of the choir itself.

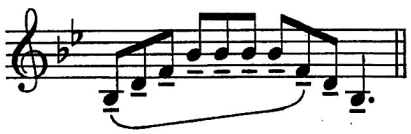


Noh nah noh nah noh nah noh nah
Nee nay etc.
Nah noo etc.



noh nah noh nah noh nah noh nah

I will often get this started on A-flat and change vowel combinations as we ascend. Blending can be addressed in this exercise. Listen for uniform vowel production. Taken at a fairly fast tempo, I find that all singers can ascend higher than they would suspect—up to $f\#^1$ (men) and $f\#^2$ (women), especially if the whole line is taken in one breath. I also will do this imitatively, starting with men and then bringing in the women after the first four notes, or vice versa. On a good day, I will do this in four parts similarly and in random order—e.g., bass, alto, tenor, soprano—or whatever choice seems to be more advantageous. This exercise is great for increasing breath control.



Piz - - za pie.

This is a wonderful exercise for getting folks out of their chest voices. I used to do this warm-up with the "ya-ya-ya" stuff until I heard Carl Stam warm up the Notre Dame Chorale with "piz---za pie." It works. The *z* after the *ee* vowel keeps things forward and bright. (Thanks, Carl!) Take all voices up to the stratosphere, raising the pattern by half steps. No need to worry about register changes and such. Things just happen. Voices are freed and its lots of fun.

Finally, a few salient rehearsal guidelines—ones I actually use myself!

1. If you are dealing with a volunteer choir, you must try to make certain each member feels important at all times. A little personal attention goes a long way.

2. Remain energetic. No rehearsal should ever become laborious. Dead horses don't sing well.

3. Start off and end well with success, i.e., something you are confident will sound good, and the choir in turn feels good about itself when singing.

4. Think about vocal health in planning rehearsals. Alternate soft and loud, difficult and easy, and so forth. If the choir is not filled with exuberant youth, then try to make them feel exuberant anyway. Have them stand as often as possible. Always be prepared to enliven your act. You, as a conductor, are also an actor who must motivate and inspire.

5. Know the score. If you don't know it, the choir can't learn it.

6. Choose music you really like or can learn to appreciate. You must be able to convince others of your intentions.

7. Church choirs are often filled with the widest variety of personalities available within any particular parish. Know that you'll get the best results with patience, understanding, and kindness. ■

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