

Ministry of Cantor

Beatrice Fleo



Imagine the composite of a training program effective in developing parish cantors. What process would solidly support that training program by both bringing the

right person into the ministry and providing ongoing support during the time of ministry? What happens at the conclusion of the ministry involvement to evaluate the effectiveness of the ministry experience for both the participant and the parish served?

Step one: Call forth gifts. Let us start by considering the first important step in the process. We must discern the gifts of a person and the individual's readiness to serve, and match the right gifts with the right ministry.

Asking for cantor volunteers among the music ministry or putting an announcement in the bulletin is a dangerous thing. It is easy to differentiate musical skills when you try to discern skills across musical idioms. For example, a classical guitarist would not be asked to take an organist position or a pianist would not be asked to serve as a choir director, etc. The skills involved are very different. My experience, however, has taught me that many guitarists, organists, pianists, and choir members have been asked to serve as cantors. Do all musicians a cantor make? All cantors should be good musicians, but not all musicians are good cantors.

Vocal ability is primary in selecting a good cantor. Trained or untrained, the voice should be pleasing and the person should possess all the characteristics one would look for in a solo performer (mu-

sical ability, sensitivity, and artistry as well as natural, gracious, poised, and attractive presence). But one cannot neglect that critical attribute a cantor candidate must possess: an ability to use musical artistry as a servant to prayer, not as a display of virtuosity. Therefore, beyond a good voice and musical performance skills, a cantor must possess a "love for the Scriptures" (in particular the psalms).

This is the text that must permeate their own prayer life, personal journey, and growing faith. Without this essential ingredient, a cantor will indeed be able to sing the psalm, but as for leading the assembly in prayer, I think not.

Knowing the qualities and characteristics a particular ministry demands will provide that essential information for discerning how to ask and whom to invite. There are several ways to extend this invitation. Individually seek out those people with whom you are in contact and ones you see as embodying the qualities or characteristics necessary. Don't forget to be equally attentive to the hidden potential that a person may have and their ability to grow and be trained in particular aspects of the qualities that may be "in the rough" at the time of the invitation.

Among the groups with whom you are involved, use your "want-ad" for membership as an opportunity to educate about the role of cantor, put forth the qualities and characteristics for which you are searching, and ask others to discern who among them or who they might know that would be a good candidate for the ministry.

Invite those whose names surface to consider entering the training process as a way of fully understanding all that is involved in the ministry. It is very important to make clear that you are not inviting them to the ministry but providing the training process as a way to discern if, in fact, this is the ministry for them. At the end of the training program, set aside time with each candidate to discuss readi-

ness, understanding of, and willingness to commit to the ministry. This aspect of the process accomplishes two things. After experiencing the training process, it gives the candidate a method of deciding if they really want to commit to all that is involved. Secondly, it provides the director an opportunity to evaluate strengths and weaknesses and consider if this person will enhance the ministry.

Step two: Provide training that is essential to the effective performance of the ministry. The most effective training programs I know are those that succeed in "lighting a spark" that will inspire a desire for continuing personal growth beyond that which the training program can provide. The goal of any training program should be to plant the seed of motivation and spark the desire for personal excellence and growth while putting forth the fundamental aspects, skills, and principles involved. An adequate training program that I have found workable takes a six-week commitment or a minimum of fifteen hours, and, even at this amount of time, it is hard to cover all the bases. In some



way, training needs to deal with the following:

- 1) FAITH SHARING AND GROUP PRAYER AND BONDING
- 2) WHAT IS LITURGY AND WHY?
- 3) ROLE OF THE CANTOR
- 4) UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURES/Psalms
- 5) VOCAL PRODUCTION
- 6) GESTURE AND ANIMATION
- 7) HOW TO CHOOSE REPERTOIRE

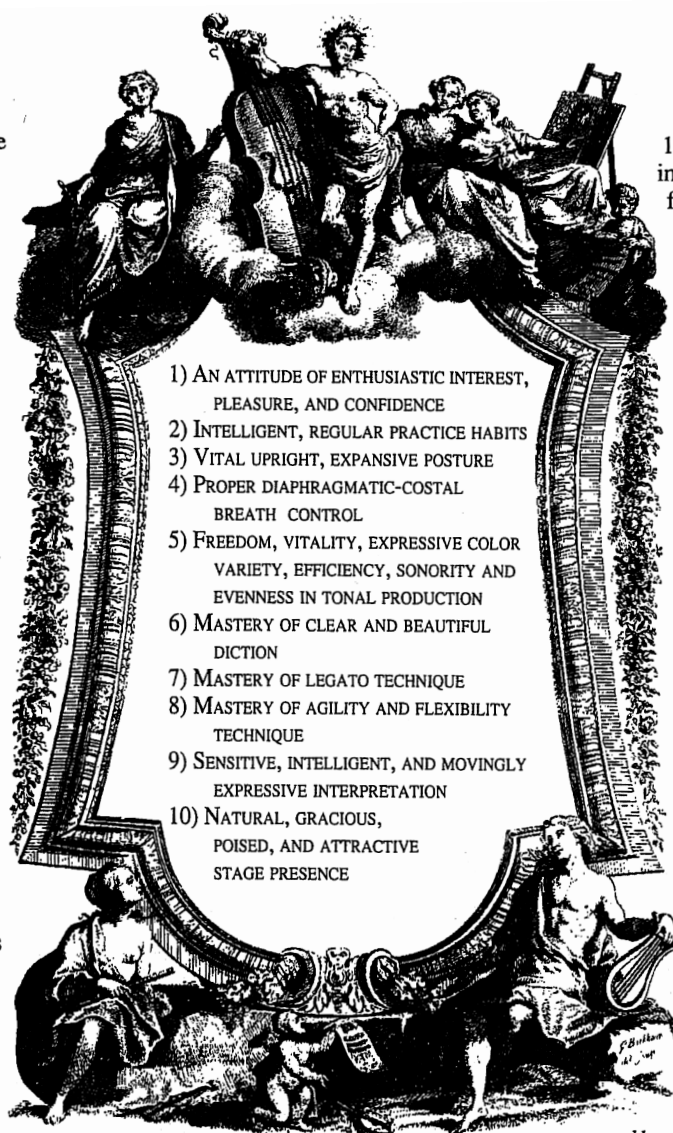
Through faith sharing and fostering prayer among the participants, all grow to know each other beyond name, rank, and social security number. My experience of taking the time to do this as a part of the training days allows participants to get new insights into each other's personal journey of faith and consequently into their own. These insights begin to build a bond of mutual respect, trust, understanding, tolerance, and compassion within the group. That relational bonding is essential to the future ability for the cantors to challenge one another's growth in the ministry, hold one another accountable, and provide the giving and taking of the many sacrifices necessary to serve the community and each other on behalf of the ministry.

"What is liturgy and why?" provides the opportunity to ensure a grounding in current eucharistic theology as well as a deeper understanding of one's own role in the celebration. Examining the eucharist through the role of the assembly is the starting point. Next, structurally walk through the Mass explaining each rite, how it has come to be, and the implications of the rite for the role of the assembly.

The role of the cantor then emerges from the role of the assembly and is explored in its relationship to the assembly and to its own uniqueness as a ministry.

Exploring the psalms, ancient Israel's manual of prayer, follows. This includes knowing the people who prayed the psalms, what the content of that prayer was, how that content is interpreted, and what criteria we set in preparing and choosing psalms for worship.

The basic principles of vocal production that are important to stress in this component of training are:



Gesture and animation deal with the many tools and techniques particular to this ministry. Specific aspects of this topic should cover how and when to use gestures; how to develop a gesture that is clear in its preparation, cue, and resolution; how being attentive to body language and movement can enhance prayer and interpretation of the psalm; and how and by what method the cantor rehearses the assembly and introduces new music, etc.

The last topic, "How to choose repertoire," concerns principles of building a common repertoire of psalms that the assembly will know well. When best to choose a setting based on the musical, liturgical, and pastoral judgements is articulated in *Music in Catholic Worship*.

Step three: Discern together—Called to serve or not to serve. Once the training is completed, it is critical to have a one-on-one conversation with each participant. The content of that discussion should include:

1) By what in the training were you most affected, what new insights, etc.?

2) The candidate should articulate from their own discerning, is this the right ministry for me?

3) The director should articulate candidly strengths and weaknesses, concerns, affirmations, and willingness to endorse this person's acceptance into active ministry.

4) Try, when possible, to negotiate a win-win if conflict arises in the discernment process. For example, after one of my training sessions, a candidate showed great enthusiasm, musical knowledge, desire to grow in understanding and praying with Scripture, was a prayerful person, and committed to

and known in the community.

Vocally, the candidate's voice was breathy, pushed, and when nervous took on an additional strident quality. It was clear in our discerning together that the person especially desired to enter the ministry, and I felt the person was not a strong candidate because of the vocal quality...a difficult realization to admit. We devised a plan for the person to study voice privately and enter the ministry at a future point when the vocal technique had improved.

5) Discuss expectations of the ministry made clear by reviewing the written ministry "job" description. The written description includes accountability order, qualifications and special requirements of the members, length of commitment, time commitment for rehearsals, responsibilities and duties, signature, date, and the duration of the agreement. People do appreciate the value you place on their personhood and their volunteer time, and that you take their offering of this gift

continued on page 39

MINISTRY OF CANTOR

[continued from page 11] seriously. They appreciate participating in a ministry that has clear expectations, high standards, clarity, and that treats everyone equally and fairly. When a signature is requested, it symbolically reinforces the seriousness of each party's commitment and accountability to each other and the ministry.

6) Participants should evaluate strengths and weaknesses of the training program itself, so that future participants will benefit from their insights.

Step four: Provide ongoing support during the time of ministry. This covers a myriad of things from providing materials needed such as cantor books (no photocopies!), rehearsal tapes, schedules done well in advance so preparation time is provided, rehearsals teaching new psalms, a reference library with resources to assist in studying the psalm texts for content analysis and interpretation, connecting cantors with various continuing education offerings locally and regionally that will enhance growth in the ministry, etc. Ongoing support can often take the form of playing together as well through such events as Christmas parties, birthday celebrations, day retreats for music ministers, summer bashes, etc.

Step five: Evaluate the effectiveness of the ministry experience. An important opportunity is missed when an exit interview is overlooked when a person chooses to leave active ministry. For the person who has participated, it is an opportunity to offer a critique from their experience concerning strengths and weaknesses of the program which can be valuable for the continual improvement of the ministry. (People sometimes share more candidly when they know they are leaving, and the emotional detachment has or is taking place.) Their insights are invaluable for the ministry to consider. For the director, it is a time to thank (one hopes not the only time) and show appreciation for the contributions the exiting cantor has made to the ministry. Affirm them in their gifts, and show real valuing by listening attentively and taking seriously their insights and comments. It allows closure and mutual respect for valued service.

For those cantors who find themselves at the end of their ministerial "job" description commitment period, a similar interview is done to discern, again, the person's ability to continue effectively in the ministry.

Now you may ask, is all this really necessary, or can anyone who likes to sing be counted among the vocation of cantor? Let me cite "The Vocation of Cantor" from *The Insecurity of Freedom* by Abraham Joshua Heschel ([New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1959, 1960, 1963, 1964, 1966] 244) and let you decide for yourself.

The right Hebrew word for Cantor is *ba'al tefillah*, master of prayer. The mission of a Cantor is to lead in prayer.

He does not stand before the Ark as an artist in isolation, trying to demonstrate his skill or to display vocal feats. He stands before the Ark not as an individual but with a Congregation. He must identify himself with the Congregation. His task is to represent as well as to inspire a community. Within the synagogue music is not an end in itself but a means of religious experience. Its function is to help us to live through a moment of confrontation with the presence of God; to expose ourselves to Him in praise, in self-scrutiny and in hope.

I have decided to stand with the assembly in musical prayer and daily reckon with the complexities and richness of the role of the cantor. Admittedly, we could not fully examine the depth and scope of all the material available, and at times it does seem overwhelming; it sometimes feels that way for the presenter trying to present and the participant trying to absorb. But if the ministry is going to mature, those who wish to speak of themselves as cantors must be made aware of the responsibilities that are theirs if they dare to transcend the music to an experience of the sacred encountering of God and one another.

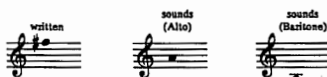
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WOODWINDS 101

[continued from page 19] line. Note that some contrabass clarinets are in Bb and some are in Eb. Check in advance with the player. All clarinet parts are written in treble clef.



The saxophone has had an image problem among "serious" musicians because of its association with jazz, and its lack of use in the standard orchestral repertoire. The saxophone was a favorite instrument of French composers in the early part of this century, so it is not surprising to learn that there is no shortage of music for saxophone quartet. The unique feature of a saxophone quartet is that it is comprised of four distinct instruments—soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone. Each instrument has its own unique sound. The ranges of all saxophones are the same. The alto and baritone are Eb instruments; a written F-sharp sounds an A on the alto saxophone and an A an octave lower on the baritone.



Note that although it is the bass voice, the part is still written in treble clef. The soprano and tenor saxophone are Bb instruments; thus, a written D sounds a C on a soprano saxophone and a C an octave lower on a tenor saxophone.



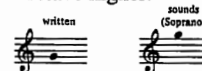
Tenor saxophone is likewise written in treble clef.



Although they are not a band or orchestra instrument, the recorders are the predecessors of modern woodwind instruments. Recorders are found in SATB voicings with soprano and tenor being C instruments and the alto and bass recorder being F instruments. Their ranges are two octaves.



Note that they sound an octave higher than written. A G on soprano recorder really sounds like a G an octave higher.



If a part is marked recorder, flute is an adequate substitute. The lower recorders possess a haunting sound, much like the alto and bass flutes. The recorder is well suited to Renaissance pieces as well as newer folk/contemporary pieces.

Other ensembles. Another ensemble for which music exists is the woodwind trio in various forms, including two flutes and clarinet, or oboe, clarinet, and bassoon. The woodwind quintet consists of flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, and bassoon. This combination can produce a number of colors and moods. It may be the most common of all woodwind groupings. For hymns and liturgical music, you may want to arrange parts in this manner:

Voice:	Instrument:
Soprano	flute (one octave higher)
	oboe
Alto	clarinet
Tenor	horn
Bass	bassoon

Remember to transpose accordingly! For an explanation of the characteristics and transposition of the horn, see the last issue of the *GIA Quarterly*.

Too often our creativity is limited to trumpets on Easter and strings on Christmas. The woodwinds provide a wide range of color and expressiveness. Explore the unique sounds of the woodwind family. It just might add a little more excitement to your musical program.

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