

How Psalmists and Cantors Prepare for Worship

BY ANDREA GOODRICH

Helen Kemp offers this mantra to singers: "Body, mind, spirit, voice . . . it takes the whole person to sing and rejoice." While this is good advice for all singers, it is especially important for psalmists and cantors. To be an effective minister of the Word of God, one must embody not only the music but also the texts that are to be proclaimed. This can be a challenging task for busy music ministers. The spirit is often willing, but the busyness of life can get in the way.

We Are Our Instruments

Let's begin with the body. We are our instruments: We need to take care of our voices with proper nourishment, hydration, exercise, and rest. Eating healthy, well-balanced meals throughout the day provides fuel for the body to function. Excessive amounts of refined sugar, fat, and salt should be avoided. Dairy products can cause mucous in some people and should not be consumed on performance days. Eating sporadically during the day upsets the rhythm of the digestive system and can lead to acid reflux disease, which can wreak havoc on a voice. Drinking plenty of water keeps the body hydrated and in good working order. Dehydration can lead to fatigue and vocal problems. (A speech therapist recently told me that for every cup of coffee or glass of wine we consume, we should drink two glasses of water to balance the dehydrating effect of caffeine and alcohol!) Smoking and secondhand smoke are not singers' friends: Avoid them at all costs. Using a humidifier in your home and office when the air is very dry helps keep the vocal folds in good working order. Exercise strengthens the body, improves breathing, and reduces stress. Walking, yoga, Pilates, tai chi, and chi gung are gentle, powerful ways to move the body and increase breath support. A good night's sleep is a necessity, not a luxury. It rejuvenates the body, restores

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Tai chi class in a public park

the brain, and regulates normal functions of the body including boosting our immune system.

Daily practice maintains a healthy voice. Taking the time to warm up properly is central for vocal health. If you are feeling tired, you need to energize yourself to provide proper breath support for singing. Begin with simple stretches to warm up the body and release tension. Then, with both hands, massage your forehead, beginning at the center, making small circles moving towards your temples. Let your jaw become slack, releasing all tension as you massage your temples, then massage around your ears and behind the jawbone. Sigh or gently moan, releasing tension from these areas. Move your hands to either side of the bridge of your nose and massage along the cheekbones then to the masseter (chewing) muscles under the cheekbones. Gently massage your neck and the base of your skull. Breathe deeply and sigh on the exhale, releasing all stress and tension. Gently hum gliding fifths to warm up the voice. You might want to try skeletal humming developed by Dr. Alfred Tomatis: With your lips slightly forward, gently hum for about ten minutes. This humming stimulates the vestibular system, bringing clarity and balance to the practitioner. Your warm-up continues with vocalizing in the middle range of the voice and gradually extends to the higher and lower ranges.

When practice time is over, be sure to cool down. Athletes spend time cooling down after a training session; so should singers. Vocalizing on "ooo," gentle humming, and

light massage are good endings for a practice session.

Good vocal health means using proper breath support for your speaking voice as well as your singing voice. Keep conversation to a minimum in noisy environments, and avoid speaking in the lowest pitch range of your voice in everyday conversation.

Study Is Required

Voice lessons from a respected teacher are invaluable. We cannot accurately hear how we sound, but a trained teacher can spot vocal problems and correct them before they cause long-term damage. My parish has a well-known voice teacher come to the church once a month to give voice lessons to parish music ministers. The singers appreciate the convenience of only having to travel to the church to work with a world-class teacher, giving them an opportunity to fit voice lessons in their very busy lives.

The study of the psalms and the Scriptures of the day are important in preparing to sing the responsorial psalm at Sunday Mass. Take advantage of the many courses and

written resources available. At least one week before you are scheduled to sing at Mass, read the psalm text and the Scriptures for the day. Then go to the Bible and read the psalm in its entirety. Use a commentary to understand the historical and cultural dimensions of the passage. Read the psalm and ask yourself if this is a psalm of lament, thanksgiving, trust, or praise. Read the psalm text out loud. Feel the rhythm of the words. Pray the text aloud daily. Ask yourself who is speaking: Is God speaking to the people through the psalmist? Is the psalmist speaking to God? Is the psalmist proclaiming God's deeds to the people? How does this text relate to what's going on in your own life? Draw upon your own life experiences and feelings. Relate this text to a time in your life when you felt joy, thanksgiving, or despair. You might want to write these thoughts in your journal. Let this psalm become part of your prayer for the week.

When preparing the psalm, learn the melody thoroughly. It's impossible to proclaim God's Word with conviction if you are fishing for the right notes. Sing the melody on an open "ah" as you learn the notes. Hear how they relate to one another and to the harmony. As you sing the melody on "ah," feel where the melody resonates in your body. Then add the words. Experiment with phrasing, accents, and various expressions of the text. Recall the feelings of joy, gratitude, praise, repentance, or sorrow that are expressed in the text, and sing those feelings. Remember your reflections; bring them into your song. When singing chant melodies, be mindful of the text. Sing whole sentences and complete thoughts! Don't pause at the bar line if you are in the middle of a sentence: The melody is servant to the text when singing the psalm. Write the phrasing, accents, and breathing marks in your copy of the psalm. Erase bar lines if you need to. Sing the psalm as if you were sharing these words with a loved one. Don't be afraid to bring your life experience to the psalm texts.

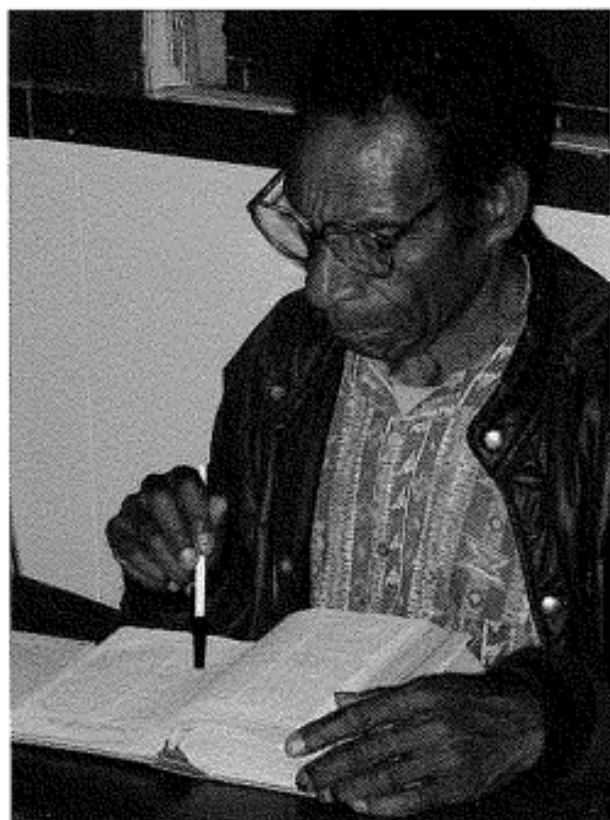
Transparent Proclaimers

Make sure your diction is clear. No matter how beautiful the melody, it means nothing unless the assembly can understand what you are singing. We must be transparent proclaimers of the Word—allowing the Word to come forth without getting in the way by being overly dramatic or dull and lifeless. Remember, we are called to bring the Word of God to life!

Become comfortable with gesture. Know when your hands go up and when to bring them down. Practice in front of a mirror at home. Check to make sure the gesture comes from the center of your body and returns to the center of your body. Poor gestures (too small, abrupt, or contrived) draw attention to the psalmist, but secure, open gestures lead the assembly confidently in prayer.

Get to know your church's sound system. Practice with the microphone and your accompanist during the week with other cantors. Listen to each other and offer helpful feedback, checking each other's diction and sound levels. Make sure you and the accompanist are on the same page

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(literally)! You both should know well in advance of Mass the introduction used and if there are any interludes between verses. Mark them in your scores.

During your personal prayer time during the week, give thanks for the precious gifts of music and music ministry. Sometimes life is so busy we find it hard to pray the way we would like. Become aware of your breath, the life force given from God. As you breathe in and out become aware of the presence of God in your breathing.

Now It Is Sunday

You have prepared well, and now it is Sunday morning. You arise two to three hours before vocalizing. Once you wake up, drink a glass of water, take several deep breaths, and reflect on your call as a music minister: You have been called to bring God's message to the world through music. Move your body, gently stretch, and give thanks for the ability to be a vessel for the Word of God as the psalmist this day. Nourish your body by eating a healthy breakfast. Begin your vocal warm-up with the face and neck massage, humming, and vocalizing. Give yourself plenty of time to get to church, drink more water, and make sure your music is in order. Check in with the accompanist, check the sound system, and await the beginning of Mass. Scan your body for tension. Release tension by breathing deeply and centering yourself. At the end of the first reading, stand, breathe, and walk to the ambo with awareness and confidence. As you begin to sing, the Word of God resonates through your body, your spirit, and your voice to the rest of the assembly gathered for worship. Let each song reflect the psalmist's assurance: "I will sing your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations" (Psalm 89:1, NRSV).