For Musicians: Liturgy

The Animating Cantor

BY TOM STRATMAN

The cantor aids the assembly by leading its response. When declaiming the Responsorial Psalm, the cantor's forte lies in expressing the subtle meaning of the words by adapting the music to the text. "Meaning" here includes not only logical and grammatical sense but also feeling tone or affect—the symbolic as well as the sapiential. The cantor brings this meaning out through the use of virtuoso techniques, which are not an end to themselves (as the MCW document warns us in #35), but a means of expressing the significance of the Word. S/he can improvise, ornament, alter rhythm and dynamics, dwell on certain passages and speed up others. S/he may respond instinctively to the atmosphere of the moment, especially with a good accompanist, or when singing unaccompanied. This gives flesh to the action of the Holy Spirit, much as a good lector or homilist does.

The Roman Rite reserves certain texts to one feast or season, which, because of the cyclic use, stir in us meanings that are unique to the occasions on which they are used. "This is the day the Lord has made" might well be said of any feast, but the text is reserved to Easter, and so it shouts Easter to our hearts. Likewise, certain melodies have been used cyclically in the liturgy. The Gregorian alleluia proper to the Easter Vigil Mass is a tune that has a powerful effect on those who have sung it year after year. Because of this repetition and the restriction of the melody to a certain rite, we experience the feast anew each time we hear the music.

In addition, our liturgy has linked certain special melodic patterns to certain texts. In other words, texts have had their own tunes, or common tunes specifically adapted to their prosody (as opposed to being sung to a Psalm or lesson tone). Among these are the Responsorial Psalms and the Gospel Acclamations. These parts of the Mass, along with the lesson responsories of the Hours, have been deliberately set to very demanding and florid music, music that vividly proclaims their importance to the rite. Indeed, the music is designed for a cantor.

The cantor, with this unique melody and text and through virtuosity itself, becomes the ecstatic proclaimer of the Word, stimulating the assembly's response in a style of declamation. The virtuoso style endowed with unique melody and text is evidenced especially by the highly melismatic Gregorian settings of these texts. The brevity of text with duration of sound in these settings provides time for reflective response. The response is

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not perceived as more text to be “gotten through.” Rather, it is a form of directed meditative prayer, recognizing and proclaiming inadequacy before the one whom heaven, earth and, a fortiori, these words cannot contain.

Saints Augustine and Jerome both laughed the jubilus, the long line of notes sung to the last syllable of alleluia, a line so florid as to be virtually textless. Both of them were quite staunch in their opposition to anything that might distract from awareness of the presence of God in worship. Yet they praised melismatic singing.

Jerome, writing in about 375 AD, says: “The jubilus is declined, because no one can either proclaim or express with words, syllables, letters or phrases how much one ought to praise God” (from Brevarium in psalmus, psalm 32; in Migne, Patrologie Latina (PL) 26, 970 B; translation mine.) Augustine adds that the psalmist tells us:

Blessed the people who understand jubilation. Let us therefore attend to this blessedness; let us understand jubilation....For it is a sound of the heart...The one who jubilates does not speak in words, rather it (the jubilus) is a certain sound of joy without words: it is the expression of a soul filled to the brim with joy, expressing the affect without holding back its feeling. A person rejoicing in his own exaltation over certain words that can be neither spoken nor grasped, bursts forth into that kind of expression of exaltation which is without words. So it is that all can tell he is celebrating in some kind of sound, but as if filled with too much joy, he cannot explain in words what is making him so glad.

(From florilegio in psalmus 99; found in PL 37, 1271 D-1272 A; translation mine.)

Note the abandon of Augustine’s words, how hard put he is to express the wonderful excitement of melismatic singing. The cantor is praised for “too much joy,” for “rejoicing in his own exaltation.”

This sort of delivery stimulates the assembly’s response only when it is well done. The cantor can be seen. If s/he is not taken up with the work at hand, it will be evident. If the Word is not exciting the cantor, those gathered may as well pay attention to something else. If the cantor is merely showing off, s/he may alienate those s/he is supposed to involve in praise. A halfhearted, disembodied delivery with little or no musical or emotional interest is not worthy of celebration. One in which all manner of vocal technique and musical skill or dramatic feeling are displayed out of proportion to the word at hand or in a style for which the assembly is not prepared is offensive. The delivery must be exciting, warm, and must invite a response from those present. This response should be an entering of mind and heart into the divine; in other words, it is prayer coupled with a desire to express that prayer in song. A cantor who excites to sung prayer in response to the Word is doing well.

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Variety to the cantor’s role can be obtained by using choral and cantorial settings of the responsorial chants on different occasions. Some large communities may make effective use of choral, cantor and assembly in combination, thus avoiding mediocrity and tedious repetition. The cantor frees the choir and assembly by declaiming the large bodies of text, especially the ones that are responsorial in nature. The choir then has more time to work on less literature of higher quality. The assembly can sing shorter chants and music that is repeated often enough for the congregation to retain it in its repertory.

Cantorial and choral singing enhance each other by contrast. Choral sound is all the warmer when heard alternately with solo imbrèbe, and solo sounds seem more vigorous and exciting in context with a choir. The two in alternation, then, are able to continually refresh the ear and sustain attention.

Responsorial settings and parts of the ordinary can make use of this principle. For example, the French are fond of Kyries using the following format. The cantor sings Kyrie, eleison, often in a Gregorian setting. The assembly repeats it. The choir then sings a third Kyrie, which is tonally and thematically related to the former but in a polyphonic setting. Responsorial psalms that have a repeated text within the body of the psalm, such as that of Easter Sunday (Lectionary #43), can be done in a similar way. The cantor sings a refrain; the assembly repeats it. To “Let the sons of Israel say,” “He’s love endures forever” becomes the choir refrain. The cantor can work on individuating the unremarked lines; the choir can get good mileage out of a part setting of the repeated words. The overall result has variety and declaim the text in keeping with its nature as a litany.

 Longer texts are particularly amenable to this practice—the chants for the washing of the feet on Holy Thursday, the reproaches during adoration of the cross on Good Friday, and penitential rites. In the reproaches there are too refrains, My people and the Trisagion. One can be an assembly chant, the other a choral refrain; the rest may be sung by one or two cantors (hopefully not on a Psalm tone). At the washing of the feet, one of the antiphons may be an assembly refrain; the others, sung alternately by choir and cantor. If the cantor is a competent musician, and properly compensated for the extra effort, s/he can efficiently work out music for large bodies of text and thus help prevent the tedious abuse of Psalm tones.

Finally, the musical form of a gradual or tract may be used now and then. The General Instructions of the Roman Missal (#36) allows for great freedom in the responsorial chants. When sung, they may be taken from the Lectionary of the Graduale Romanum and may be sung with or without refrain. The assembly may take part in the singing or participate by listening. There is no need to do the same thing all the time. The chants of the 1974 Graduale still use gradual form in the Paul VI rite. Cantors who are gifted in composition may work out florid settings using these shorter texts. If careful attention is paid to prosody, speech rhythm and accent, such settings are quite effective in English. At times, the Latin Gregoriangraduals, tracts and alleluias may be sung by two alternating cantors or by cantor and choir. The congregation can be given a translation or summary in the bulletin.

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Solo cantorial singing is one of the rich heritages of the Western Church. It has been developed to the glory of the Church and the service of Her members. Used well, it enriches the liturgy by making use of the many options of the present rites and brings the solemnity of music to the Word, music fashioned to proclaim the meaning of the text and its significance to the ritual actions that build up the Church.