The cantor: from soloist to song leader

BY VINCENT PATTERTON

As the role of music has grown in the Catholic Church over the ages, so have the roles of people in the liturgy. Today's cantor was first the Jewish hasan, who chanted prayers in the temple. Early Catholic writings refer to the cantor as psalmista, the singer of psalms. With the liturgy becoming more formalized, cantors were assuming the role of deacon. By the end of the sixth century this position so overshadowed other elements of the Mass, that a papal decree was necessary to separate deacon from cantor, and subordinate him to minor orders.

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When the schola cantorum began to flourish, the cantor became precentor—the one who pre-intones the psalm before the choir entrance. From this he soon became choir trainer, episcopus chori, and appointed sub-cantors, succentores, to assume his old role of solo singer.

By 1723, the cantor was choir director, librarian, composer and general administrator of music. This official position made the Cantor of Leipzig one of four superiores at Thomaschule, a highly coveted rank. It is doubt-
It is the cantor's job to sing the text in a way that fills the pastoral, liturgical and musical needs of the congregation while permitting the Word to be reflected on and absorbed by the congregation.

ful, indeed, if this Cantor ever intoned a psalm at Mass.

The cantor's role, along with the music of the church, has been changing for two thousand years. The twentieth century cantor has evolved to where he was before the time of Pope St. Gregory. He is back at the ambo intoning psalms, and leading the people in responsorial singing.

All ancient Christian music was vocal. Around the year 200 A.D., St. Clement of Alexandria said, "We need one instrument: the peaceful word of adoration, not harps, or drums, or pipes, or trumpets." This peaceful word of adoration was performed by priests, cantors, and the congregation.

The office of cantor in the Catholic Church continued an old synagogal institution and in many cases employed musicians who first received their education in Jewish musical practice. Greek and Latin texts were used interchangeably until the eighth century. By the sixth century their art had been fully introduced into Christian liturgy. Popes such as Sylvester (314-336), who initiated daily psalmody practice for monks, increased the importance of the cantor's office.

Further enhancing the cantor's position, the Council of Bishop's meeting at Laodicea in 367 decreed that, "besides the appointed singers who mount the ambo and sing from the book, others shall not sing in church." This served to defend the professional cantor against encroachment from untrained people. Although this decree solidified the cantor's role, it also meant the first step toward the ultimate elimination of active participation by the congregation. This lamentable situation went unchanged for fourteen hundred years.

In the sixth century, "High Mass" was divided among the celebrant, lector, and cantor. Each person had his own ritual book; the sacramentary for prayers by the priest at the altar, the lectionary (Gospel Book) for scriptural readings and the antiphonary for the singers. In Rome there were two distinct music books, the cantatorium, a richly illuminated text from which the cantor sang the gradual and similar chants and the antiphonarium, the text for the schola cantorum. The cantor traditionally intoned the songs from the ambo, while the people answered with a short verse of response. These were either the gradual (so called because it was intoned from the steps of the altar), the alleluia, or the tract. Only a few such cantatoria have survived, such as the Gradual of Monza, believed to have been written in the seventh century. Among the six oldest-known manuscripts giving Mass chants, this example is the only one devoted entirely to solo songs.

The responsory itself was, to an extent, inherent in the text of the psalms, a legacy borrowed from services in the temple. Only the cantor had any continuous text to sing. The people answered by repeating after each passage an unchanging verse. This simple antiphonal procedure was effective in gaining congregational participation, since neither special preparation nor a written text were available for the people. It is here that the historical base was formed for today's cantorial role.

The antiphon as an independent form has its origin in the repetition of one psalm verse as a refrain sung by the congregation, alternating with another verse by the soloist. The next step was that the melody of the antiphon was intoned before the singing of the psalm, and chanted in its entirety afterwards. A further development occurred in the monasteries where antiphonal practice was routine. Some monks felt they ought to prolong the psalms themselves by the melodies of the antiphons and by adding certain melismata. Between 450 and 550 there occurred an abbreviation of a longer, original, responsorial psalm between the readings to one or two verses, which was accompanied by the introduction of rich melismatic formulae, a direct forerunner of the Gregorian Gradual.

By St. Augustine's time cantors had shown a tendency to enhance the chant with richer melodies. Melisma was the result of virtuosity of professional singers, imitation of musical instruments and expressions of religious ecstasy. As St. Jerome stated, "I venture to put forward my own conviction that the whole concept of pure, wordless, melismatic jubilation should be considered the last, jealously guarded remnant of an organized musical form."

Melisma could be heard mainly in the soloist's psalmody or in laudatory and supplicatory prayers. The tract and offertory were embellished, as was the alleluia. Performance of the tract was strictly a cantorial function and was another carry-over from the synagogue. When congregational singing of psalmody gradually disappeared and relinquished its place to professional singers and the remaining seated and listened. The psalm is an integral part of the liturgy of the word and is taken from the lectionary. Ordinarily, the congregation takes part by singing the response. This refers to the seasonal refrains from the Simple Gradual and to the psalms arranged in responsorial form.

The cantor also properly proclaims the litanies when the format is appropriate (the Lamb of God, the Prayer of the Faithful, and Penitential Rite).

In addition to these primary responsibilities (the responsorial psalm and the litanies,) the cantor may effectively utilize his musical skills for enriching other moments within the liturgical celebration. The changing verse of the Alleluia lends itself well to a solemn cantorial style, leading the congregation into a simple or solemn sung Alleluia, depending on the feast and the festival.

The Processional chants (the Entrance, the Presenta-
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The sixth-century cantor was now relegated to singing with the schola cantorum, training other singers, and gradually developing the choral art beyond monody. And so it was to remain until modern times.

After fourteen centuries of idle watching and listening, the Catholic congregation in the twentieth Century was restored to its proper role in the liturgy and along with it, the role of the cantor. In 1903, Pope St. Pius X stated, "active participation in the sacred liturgy is the source of the Christian spirit." Then in 1928, Pope Pius XI said, "we should attend Mass as active participants, and not as idle spectators." Pope Pius XII gave additional liturgical principles in 1955. Congregational participation was re-emphasized. Finally, Vatican II instituted the change that made these earlier pronouncements fully attainable.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, (CSL, December 4, 1963) devoted an entire chapter to sacred music. "No council has ever given so much attention to sacred music, or considered the problems so deeply." The key principle of this document was the active participation of the people in the Mass. "Mother Church earnestly desired that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious and active participation in the liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. ...and which for the Christian people... is their right and duty." (CSL, #30). "To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons and songs." (CSL, #30).

To fulfill these instructions, three groups work together: the celebrant (with deacons), the cantor (with choir, organist and instrumentalists), and the faithful. Detailed directives are to be found in the Sacramentary of the Roman Missal.

Of specific interest is Paragraph 36 regarding chants between readings, "the cantor of the psalm sings the verse at the lectern or other suitable place, while the people the cantor should slow things down at times and inject a little emotion into the liturgy."

Musicians have found real joy in the clarification of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Music is no longer to be considered a mere decoration or handmaid of worship, but rather an integral part of it.

The cantor must be aware of his/her critical role in the liturgy. Through music s/he is able to bring unity to the celebration and through this unity the cantor finds purpose to his/her historical role.