

Singing the Psalms

The church has been singing the psalms since its very earliest days. It's clear from the gospels that Jesus knew and sang the psalms with his disciples, and the earliest church picked up the practice of psalm singing from the Jewish tradition.

Nowadays we tend to come into contact with the psalms in three ways:

- 1) The Response to the Reading in Mass (the Responsorial Psalm)
- 2) The psalmody in The Office (typically Morning and Evening Prayer)
- 3) In songs, hymns, chants and other types of music. These are often disguised, sometimes quite heavily – check the attribution to see if your favourites actually have their origins in a psalm!

These three categories each have their own character, although we often intermix them - for instance, by using a hymn in place of a truly responsorial psalm (common at weddings and funerals) or replacing a hymn (possibly at the Offertory or Communion) with an appropriate responsorial psalm. While this intermixing is acceptable in many pastoral contexts, it's also a good to keep the character of each in its own place. So psalms are best chanted, all together in common, in the Office; while it's good to keep the cantor/congregational response feeling of the Responsorial Psalm.

As singers we often forget one vital point about the psalms – the words. Yes, it's nice to have a great tune (especially in those hymns and songs) but in the end the message is conveyed by the words. It's always worth sitting down with the words before you sing them. Try choosing a word in each verse which you can emphasise to help convey the meaning (this may change each time you sing that psalm, depending on the context and the time of year, etc). Also remember to 'support' - give a bit weight to – the little words such as 'the', 'and', 'a'. This will keep your voice active and help to make the meaning clear.

Use a pencil (which you can rub out afterwards) to mark these things in your copy – it's all too easy to forget such details when you're actually singing with or for a congregation.

Take each verse or section of the psalm, and see if you can find a feeling or emotion for it. Joyful, triumphant, sad, desperate. Many psalm verses are constructed in two parts. The two halves may reinforce each other ("O Lord open my lips; and my mouth shall declare your praise") or form a contrast ("The Lord guards the way of the just; but the way of the wicked leads to doom"). Being aware of this structure can help you convey the meaning in a way that keeps the congregation engaged.

Having said all of this, here's one piece of advice: don't overdo it. Don't become too theatrical. Keep it simple and let the words of the psalm speak for themselves. And also notice that it's fine to think these things through beforehand: you have done your praying the psalm in preparation for singing it, so that others can pray while they are singing it and listening to it.

When you are singing with the congregation – either you (singular) as a cantor or you (plural) as a choir – remember that the congregation will be learning as they go. The first time you sing the response together in a responsorial psalm the people might need a bit of encouragement and leading; after the second repetition they will be getting the hang of it and you can be less of a teacher/leader and just sing with, rather than at, them.

Likewise, when chanting a psalm at Morning or Evening Prayer you can be more of a leader in the first few verses, until the tone or chant becomes established, then take more of a following role, preparing to step in if any uncertainty arises. When chanting, try to establish a pattern which makes the delivery of the words speech-like rather than sung.

Many of these ideas apply to hymns and songs which are based on psalms, too, although you may have to look harder for some of the psalm-style techniques. And the people may already know the tune, so there's usually less leading to do!