

Cantor Master Class
NPM Fall Meeting; October 8, 2022
Tammy Schnittgrund, Presenter

PHRASING/BREATH

- Breathe after the phrase ends. Do not breathe in the middle of a phrase.
- Fill your lungs with air for five seconds. Hold it for five seconds and let it out slowly for (you guessed it!) five seconds. Let the breath out in a sizzle.

TONE QUALITY/INTONATION

- Tone Quality – Avoid a breathy or unstable tone. Move the sound forward and away from the nasal area.
- Intonation – Is the note projected above or below the pitch. Can often be fixed with proper breathing techniques.

DICTION

- What can you do to make sure the congregation understands the words? Move the consonants to the teeth. But avoid chewing consonants.

TEXT INTERPRETATION

- You're praying with the congregation. Understanding the text is of utmost importance.
- Avoid overly dramatizing the words. Prayerfully sing the text over and over.

STANCE & GESTURE

- The gesture begins the moment you enter the space.
- Use two arms and work with your breath.

EYE CONTACT; ENGAGEMENT

- The refrain of the psalm must be memorized.
- Your eyes do as much as the arm gesture to engage the congregation.

Guide for Cantors - The Liturgical Ministry Series
budziak, ferraro, laughter, Tate

the text moving at speech rhythm and with the inflections and pacing of the spoken word as much as possible. By this point, you should be able not only to chant these texts clearly and with confidence (with the text as your main focus), but you've also engaged in enough repetition that you should be able to move beyond the notes and words on the page into the area of truly praying the texts. This may seem like a lengthy process, but it does not take as long as it sounds, and it is worth every minute.

The Cantor as Musician

Until this point, this book has looked primarily at the nonmusical aspects of being a cantor. It should go without saying that there must be a solid base of musicianship at the core of your ministry, or nothing can be accomplished. This base must be secure enough and your preparation extensive enough that you can be attentive to the other aspects of your ministry and to those to whom you minister.

TRAINING

Before everything else, a cantor should have a pleasant voice and the ability to use it to its best advantage.²¹ You don't need to have formal training, but should be able to sing in tune, in the range required of the music (usually quite modest since most of the cantor's repertoire is in the same range asked of the assembly), and with enough clarity of pronunciation and vocal strength to proclaim the text well. While for some this comes naturally (or more likely has been a part of a person's life since childhood), for others additional study may be needed. Most parish music directors or music ministers, if they are not able to provide assistance themselves, are happy to recommend voice teachers or workshops for their cantors to work on their vocal techniques; the music departments of local colleges or even high schools can often help a singer locate a good teacher.

The ability to read music is also valuable; any cantor who has not had the chance to learn in the past should pursue it at first opportunity. The ability to acquire a piece of music on your own fosters independence and confidence, and it saves a lot of time and work when learning a piece of music. It cannot be said more plainly than this: if you cannot read music, it is worth your time to learn. That said, not being able to read music does not necessarily exclude you from

21. Obviously, "pleasant" is a highly subjective term. The fact that opera houses and rock concert stadiums tend to have radically different clienteles is testament to that! But a parish does not have a "clientele"; it is a community of faith where people gather each week to pray, give praise to God, and take part in the Eucharist. As has been mentioned before, the cantor's voice should draw attention not to itself but to the assembly it leads and the Word it proclaims. Therefore, while musicianship is paramount, it would be a mistake to assume that the most skilled and professionally trained singers will always be the best cantors. Hardworking volunteers are the backbone of the cantor ministry in the Church and not only serve their people admirably but may sometimes do a better job in the ministerial role of cantor than their professional counterparts.

cantor ministry. If you can't read music, but have a good ear, you will need to allow for extra rehearsal time when learning new music. Recordings of published liturgical music are increasingly available and can make the process easier, or you can record cantor rehearsals or choir practices for later study. Please note that recordings can be equally valuable tools for those who do read music; they can give a sense of the character and style of a particular piece and help you grow more comfortable with how your part works with the accompaniment instrument.

The Cantor's Preparations

Anyone who has ever served as a cantor knows the many layers of work involved in the preparation and execution of this ministry. This section of the book will examine the physical, mental, and spiritual preparation involved in serving as a cantor.

Care of the Human Voice

Of all musicians, singers are the ones whose instrument is a part of the body and not an external contraption of metal or wood. Any instrument needs good care and regular preventative maintenance; the vocal instrument is no exception. Complicating this issue is the reality that we cannot easily examine the inner workings of the instrument for stress or damage; all we can do is evaluate based on how we feel at any given moment. Medications to treat illnesses, effective as they may be for their intended purpose, sometimes have a negative effect on the voice itself. Therefore, preventative maintenance is by far the best route to take—take care of your body, head to toe, and your vocal instrument will in most cases take care of itself. You have doubtless heard it before, many times: Eat a sensible and balanced diet, and avoid excessive caffeine, refined sugars and starches, and alcohol. Exercise regularly. Get plenty of rest. Avoid stress. Mental and emotional anxieties have profound and immediate effects on the body in general and tend to manifest very quickly in the voice and throat. Be aware of how you use your voice in non-singing situations. The best vocal singing technique can be completely undone by abuse of the vocal cords and poor vocal speaking technique. Above all, stay well hydrated, all the time, not just when you are singing. It cannot be stressed too much: you cannot care for your voice without caring for your whole self.

Warming Up

If you were to get into your car on a cold February morning, back out of the garage, and immediately pull onto the expressway at sixty miles per hour, you

Suggestions for Healthy Singing

- Eat a balanced diet.
- Avoid caffeine, refined sugar and starches, dairy, and alcohol.
- Keep physically fit.
- Avoid stress.
- Drink lots of water.
- Warm up.

would probably not be surprised to find that your automobile did not perform as well as it should. Nor would an athlete simply leap out of bed in the morning, swallow a quick cup of coffee, and immediately run a marathon. Yet far too many singers attempt the exact vocal parallel to these situations on Sunday mornings, especially at an early morning liturgy. You owe it to your instrument (and yourself) to prepare your voice for the work it needs to do, if you are to do it well and without doing damage to your instrument.²²

Many singers are reliant on a bottle of water beside them at all times while singing. Often this reliance is due to the fact that they do not hydrate consistently, all the time, 24/7. Consistent and steady hydration should correct this need to sip water after every song, even in dry spaces.

STRETCHING

Stretch both arms over your head. Reach up very slowly with one arm at a time, as though you were climbing a rope ladder; feel the stretch down your sides all the way to your waist. From the same position, slowly reach your left arm sideways over your head to your right, as though making the "C" from the well-known "YMCA" dance. Hold this stretch for a few moments, and then return to center.

Repeat to the left. Gently shake out your arms and shoulders.

Drop your arms to your sides and slowly roll your shoulders. Take them forward, then up, then back, then down. Repeat this motion a few times, and then reverse. Drop your head down to the front (just your head; keep your shoulders comfortably upright and relaxed). Let your head roll gently to the side until your right ear is over your right shoulder, being careful not to raise the shoulders. Feel the gentle stretch down the left side of your neck. Let your head roll back to center front, and then repeat the stretch to your left, so that you feel the stretch down the right side of your neck. Repeat this back and forth several times. End with the head dropped to the front; inhale slowly, lifting your head as you breathe, and then exhale, staying upright.

Some people prefer to do these head rolls all the way around, first to the left, then to the back, then left, and finally forward again. This can cause discomfort to the back of the neck if not done properly, and the stretch to the back does not accomplish much more than the simple back and forth front stretch.

Take a few minutes to gently massage your facial muscles, concentrating especially on the cheeks and jaw. Stretch and scrunch your whole face a few times, to open up and release any lingering tension in these muscles. A gentle neck-and-back rub (self-administered can do a wonderful job if there is no one to assist!) to the neck and upper shoulders can work wonders for releasing tension to the face and head.

²² While each person will have their own approach to warm-ups, the basic components will usually be the same: stretching, breath work, basic phonation, low-range singing, high-range singing, and mobility of enunciators.

Obviously, only do these stretches to the extent you are physically able to do so, and stop if you feel any pain. Pain is your body telling you you're trying to do more than it's able to do. Listen to it!

BREATH WORK

The muscles of the rib cage and back, which primarily assist our breathing, also should be gently worked into action. Breathe deeply, either through the nose alone or through the nose and mouth together, feeling the breath fill your ribcage and expand it all the way down to your waist, and then slowly exhale. Do this several times. (For many experienced singers, this deep breathing can be combined with the physical stretching exercises, in which each enhances the other and a small amount of time is saved.)

BASIC PHONATION

Most singers, before moving into specific vocal warm-ups, will engage in some very simple and basic phonation, depending on their voice type. A series of gentle hum, sighs or "siren" sounds on a neutral "ooh" or "oh" vowel help to awaken the vocal cords and get them moving.

LOW-RANGE SINGING

Having access to a piano or keyboard is helpful for these exercises. Simple note patterns (such as the one below), sung each time lowered by a half-step, help to awaken the lower registers:

Zee - ee-ee-ee-ee Zee-ee - ee - ee-ee Zee - ee-ee-ee - ee

Proceed down by half steps, in a gentle neutral volume (do not over-sing, especially when waking and warming the voice), as far as your voice is comfortable; try to stretch your range a little as time goes by, but don't overdo! It also can help to vary the vowels you sing; generally when singing lower, it is easier to use the "brighter" vowels, such as "eeh" or "eh." Once you're well warmed up on an "eeh" vowel, try challenging yourself by singing the same exercise on an "aah" vowel, or in alternation.

Zee - oh - ee - oh - ee

HIGH-RANGE SINGING

Just like the low-range warm-ups, singing some simple patterns on different vowels, ascending by half steps, can be a good way to awaken the higher registers of the voice.

Law law law law law law law law law
Mah mee mah mee mah mee mah mee mah

law law law law law law law law law
Mah mee mah mee mah mee mah mee mah

Zee-ah _____ Zee - ah _____ Zee - ah _____

Zeh-oh - eh - oh - eh Ze - oh - eh - oh - eh

Ze - oh - eh - oh - eh Ze - oh - eh - oh - eh

Yoh yoh yoh yoh yoh yoh yoh
Mah _____

yoh yoh yoh yoh yoh yoh yoh
Mah _____

yoh yoh yoh yoh yoh yoh yoh
Mah _____

As with the low-range exercises, while we do want to challenge ourselves to expand our range over time, we should not overdo. Singing to the point of pain or uncomfortable tension is never a good idea, and in warm-ups it is especially counterproductive.

MOBILITY OF ENUNCIATORS

These last sets of exercises are designed to get the “enunciators” moving—those parts of our mouths which enable us to proclaim text clearly (diction). Our lips, tongues, cheeks, and jaws are as sluggish as any part of us early in the morning, and they need gentle waking up as well. There are countless options. Some singers will choose a particular passage of poetry (“Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll is a mouth-twisting favorite) or song (“Modern Major General” from *Pirates of Penzance*, or the final count-down of “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” for example). Any of a hundred children’s rhymes or tongue twisters can serve, as long as the mouth gets moving!

LEARNING YOUR MUSIC

This should go without saying, but it is imperative that cantors know their music inside and out. This is the “mental” part of our “physical-mental-spiritual” preparation. You should rehearse or review every piece of music in the liturgy before standing up to sing, even if you think you are familiar with the song, hymn, or chant. Sometimes a familiar tune will have a different text; sometimes the text underlay of verse 3 may be different from verse 2; sometimes a hymn may be in a higher key than you are accustomed to singing; sometimes a song you know very well may not have crossed your lips in a year or two. This is twice as important for new music—if a piece is unfamiliar, sufficient time must be given to its learning that the cantor can sing it, not just accurately, but with complete confidence and assurance in order to lead and sustain the singing of the assembly.

Do not simply mentally scan through the texts and music you are going to sing; it is crucial that you physically sing through the music you are preparing. Researchers have long been aware of the concept of “muscle memory” in repeated activities—neural pathways created by repetition, that make the action easier to repeat; the more repetition, the stronger the pathways. Even if it is difficult to find an opportunity, it is important that a singer find a place and time to rehearse full voice,²³ without feeling the need to hold back.

Unless the words, pitches, and rhythms of the music you are singing are absolutely well-known and familiar to you, it will be impossible to free yourself from the music and engage the other layers of this important and substantial ministry.

23. This term means to sing not deliberately soft; sing with your whole voice.

MUSIC OUTSIDE OF THE LITURGY

It's easy to get so involved in life as a liturgical music minister that we forget how to simply enjoy good music, of whatever kind. Make sure, as you work at being the best cantor you can possibly be, to remember that the best cantor will always be someone who loves music. Enjoy your ministry, yes, but broaden your musical horizons to enjoy different genres and styles of music. If you love classical symphonic music, get tickets to hear the symphony, but also open your mind and heart by listening to a jazz radio station, downloading an MP3 of West African traditional drumming, or going salsa dancing. If you dare, ask your teenagers for their playlists and enter into the music they enjoy. The best way to gain appreciation for any cultural or age group is by learning to understand its music. Keep your experience as a lover of music alive and well, and you will never burn out or lose your sense of wonder as a minister of music.

The Cantor as Song Leader or Animator

When you think of the cantor's ministry, the image of the song leader or "animator" is probably the first one that comes to mind. The "how" of the animator role is not a single event, but a process that develops over time. The process is a dynamic one, taking into account the assembly present in any given parish at any given moment. There is no one correct way to lead an assembly in song. Your responsibility is to learn and know your assembly the same way you learn and know your music, and to nurture the musical instrument that is their voice with the same care you give your own. In this, you are truly more a "minister of hospitality" than simply a music minister. You are there to offer gracious assistance and comfort to those whom you serve, and to help them feel not just warmly welcomed but truly at home in the liturgy.

Facial Expressions and Gestures

While many of the factors which will decide whether an assembly decides to sing the liturgy are outside of your control, one factor is entirely up to you: your own face and persona as you sing and lead. It is your manner that will help people feel welcomed and empowered to sing the liturgy. If you can consistently approach your public ministry with warmth, openness, accessibility, and confidence, and let these be seen on your face, people will not be able to help but respond over time.

Once your smiling face and warm, confident voice have engaged people's willingness to sing, your remaining major work in the song leader's or animator's role centers around the gestures you use to encourage and empower assembly singing. The repertoire of gestures a cantor uses is wide and will depend at every turn on a series of variables:

1. **Musical concerns:** What is the musical form of the piece of music? Do the people sing throughout, or only on refrains, or is the song a call-and-response dialogue between the cantor and the assembly?
2. **Hospitality concerns:** How well does the assembly know this piece? What is the “personality” of the assembly at a particular time of day? Does this assembly sing comfortably on their own, or do they rely heavily on the guidance of the musical leadership?
3. **Spatial concerns:** How big is the worship space? How big is the assembly? How tall is the cantor? Where is the cantor located in relationship to the rest of the assembly? Is the cantor positioned in a place of leadership?
4. **Microphone and stand concerns:** How live is the sound system, and how close to the microphone does the cantor need to be to achieve optimal (but not overbearing) amplification? (Bear in mind that the answer will be different for every cantor, as each person’s personal vocal quality, microphones, and church acoustics will determine this factor!) Is the placement of the microphone such that consonants are carried clearly, without loud popping on “p” or other explosive consonant sounds?²⁴ Is the music stand at an appropriate height for reading the music, or does the cantor need to hold the music in hand in order to see it clearly, and what can be done to address this? Is the arrangement of microphone, stand, and music such that a cantor can safely gesture and turn pages without bumping music or microphones?

Practices to Remember

Here are some helpful practices to remember for gesturing and moving away from the microphone.

1. The gesture happens *before* you sing; the assembly should not just be able to sing with you, they should be able to *breathe* with you. You should only need to gesture to alert the assembly that it’s their time to sing. Your arms should come down after the first note or two.
2. Only gesture when you believe the gesture will accomplish something. If people do not need your gesture to facilitate their singing, then don’t gesture.

24. A general guideline for microphone placement, especially for wider-ranged condenser microphones, is to never have the microphone pointed directly into the mouth—this will almost invariably cause the popping “p” problem to explode through the system. If this problem is occurring, try pointing the microphone a little higher or lower. For a shorter cantor, a microphone pointed exactly between one’s eyes usually works well, and for a taller cantor sometimes the microphone pointed at the chin will solve this problem. Trial and error is the only way to find the best solution.

3. The decision of how and when to move away from the microphone should be made in conversation with the music director of your parish; especially in communities with multiple cantors, consistency is very important. A good rule of thumb is this: if the community is singing with full voice and do not need a lot of support, you may back off from the microphone.
4. Implicit in a cantor's preparation is the assumption that the cantor is on time and early enough to rehearse everything needed and have plenty of time at the end to pray.

These are just a start. The more you start paying attention to nuances, the longer this list of variables becomes, and the more your gestures and presence to the assembly will reflect each individual group. The basic gesture will look something like this: on the last beat or two before you are to enter singing, as you inhale, let your intake of breath be the impetus to raise your arms in a gentle curve similar to the orans posture used



Your breath should be the impetus to raise your arms in a gentle curve.

by the priest celebrant at many moments in the liturgy—arms raised and extended to the sides, a little over the head. On the first beat you sing, let the hands extend a bit, as you bring the people in. The height of the arms will depend both on the size of the room and the size of the cantor. A tall cantor singing in a small space may only need to bring the arms up to shoulder level in a gesture similar to inviting someone forward for a hug. A petite cantor in a larger room will probably need to raise the arms much higher into almost a “V” shape in order to be seen. In smaller worship spaces, or in groups where the music is quite familiar, a one-armed gesture may be perfectly sufficient. On music that is especially well known within a more intimate assembly, the gesture can sometimes be accomplished simply with one's facial features: a lift of the head and a moment of inviting eye contact. The important factor to remember with a gesture of any size is that it must come enough before the singing that the people have time to breathe. Remember that you're not just inviting them to sing with you, you're inviting them to breathe with you first. This is the only absolute; almost everything else about a cantor's gesture—when, how big, how often—will relate directly to your ability to respond to what you hear from your assembly. Consult with your parish music director; experiment a little. If you pay attention to your own gestures, you will soon figure out what works best for you and elicits the best response from the people.