

Psalmody and Chant for a Renewed Liturgy
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Since the 1958 Instruction on Sacred Music, the “four-hymn Mass” has been the most familiar model for congregational song. But in Catholic tradition, since the earliest times, the psalms have provided the ideal for Christian music. The psalms were used to teach basic literacy, to structure Christian and monastic formation, to mold prayer and spirituality, to shape the liturgical year. A powerful, well-thought-out program of liturgical and educational renewal could restore the reading and singing of psalms to a central place in catechesis, sacramental formation, parish activities, and active congregational participation in the Mass and the Hours—but it must also provide a ready, practical answer to the question: “With what music?”

1. The psalms were central to early Christian music-making, but also to teaching. By the early Middle Ages they had also become central to teaching basic literacy and monastic formation.
2. Today, why shouldn't the psalms also be central to what *Sing to the Lord* calls “the musical formation of the assembly”?
3. I propose that learning to sing the psalms should be central place to parish liturgy, catechesis, sacramental formation, and even for teaching children to read.
4. But how should they be set to music? In general, there are at least four ways to set a text to music. Any individual piece may use more than one of them, of course. Music can emphasize and elaborate on the elements that linguists call: syntax, semantics, intonation, and resonance.
5. Gregorian psalm tones, the music proper to the Roman rite, emphasize the syntactic: Ex: psalm tone (mode 1): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcR17TzKl6c&list=PLoth48xsiR7-iAWnYWijYx8Ovms0R3x8H&index=49>
6. Problem: adapting Gregorian psalm tones to vernacular runs into differences in accentuation patterns.
Traditional way of handling this: Briggs and Frere, *A Manual of Plainsong*
<https://books.google.com/books?id=OEAWAQAAAMAAJ&dq=briggs%20frere%20manual%20of%20plainsong%201902&pg=PR3#v=onepage&q=briggs%20frere%20manual%20of%20plainsong%201902&f=false>
7. More modern way: last note should be on final stress, not final syllable.
St. Meinrad psalm tones: A partial demonstration <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TR-Md6GZdg>
Guimont, *Lectinary Psalms* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0wgvZJO0yw>
8. English is, in fact stress-timed, tending to fall into four beats per “line.”
Kindergarten Pledge of Allegiance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gn3a480wd1k>
A more semantic, expressive recitation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuRtrxpsKgw>
(see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZBTyTWOZCM>)
9. Traditional Anglican choral psalmody respects the stress-timed character of English
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdmYaixzDXs>
The Temple Church, London, 1958, rehearsal with George Thalben-Ball
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcF5O1M1jfU>
Four stresses per line are common even in Old English (*Beowulf*) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDXmxLDpb7c>
10. Romance languages like French are syllable-timed, even when there are regular stresses.
Paul Verlaine, “Il pleure dans mon coeur” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvS_jKi8yqk
Debussy, “Il pleure dans mon coeur” with Mary Garden, 1904 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4szOWyKMiiic>
11. The Gelineau psalms were composed for syllable-timed French texts.
Gelineau Psalm 23 in French
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GbHkrHJXVI&list=PL1nL8HRRj6UN5idYt7BeaVDT8orqxBHhS&index=23>
12. Adaptation of Gelineau Psalm 23 to Spanish illustrates syllable timing even when syllables are of different lengths.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCndkspL9gM> (see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0xuLDBIfNQ>)

An intonation setting of a psalm in Spanish: Psalm 103 with a Latin beat
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ1xz51MU1M>

13. The (Original) Grail Psalms with “sprung rhythm,” 3 beats + 1 rest per line.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ki_Ax-2MZds

14. But the Revised Grail Psalms are not sung that way, even at Conception Abbey where the revision was made.

Conception Abbey tone, “mode 5” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjkT9ArHEoY>

15. For the musical formation of the assembly, we need psalm tones that:

Naturally fit the stress-timed rhythms of English (or the syllable-timed rhythms of Spanish)

Are easily learned by people with little or no musical training

Can be sung in 1, 2, 3, or 4 parts when capable singers are available

16. Children and weak singers should be taught by rote to sing a specific text, not abstract rules of psalmody. Teach the psalm, not the tone.

17. Catholics who receive the sacraments of (adult) Baptism, First Penance, First Communion, or Confirmation should learn an appropriate psalm, and actually sing it at the sacramental liturgy. Thus children raised Catholic will have learned 3 or more psalms (and their tones) by adulthood. This should make it easier to learn other psalm texts and tones, and to think of the psalm as supporting personal prayer.

18. Psalmody, music as textual exegesis, can also offer a new approach to appreciating the classical Treasury of Sacred Music, including the texts and responses of the liturgy itself, Gregorian chant, and the sacred works of great composers.

Examples: Semantic: Handel, *Messiah*, “There were shepherds” and “Glory to God”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVB5r-ui-C8>

Intonation: Mozart, “Laudate Dominum” with boy soprano <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9rvyvssuI>

Resonance: Palestrina, “Exsultate Deo” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRmkj19i4Yk>