

To Welcome, Encourage, Teach, and Praise: Working with New Chant Singers

By Mary Jane Ballou



recent experience with my schola painfully reminded me once again that singers can teach directors important truths. After spending the day producing a brilliant explanation of modes, I proudly showed it to a schola member, who handed it back after the first sentence and said, "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. And I don't see any way in which this will improve our singing." Ouch! After I got past being insulted, I recognized that she had a point. To wit, my rabid interest in chant may not be shared with the same intensity by those who want to sing with me.

If you read *Sacred Music*, chances are good that you are or want to be a church music fanatic. You've been bitten by the chant bug at a colloquium or workshop. Now you're starting a "garage schola" with a couple of friends or perhaps you're helping to help start up the music for a new extraordinary form Mass or you've gotten a shot at the 7 a.m. Sunday Mass that has no music. Excited and entranced, you cruise the internet for chant recordings and videos and enjoy puzzling out rhythms and arcane notation. And now you're going to share all you know and bring this music to life in your own place on the planet with a group of singers.

While you need not curb your enthusiasm, take a moment to consider your schola. Many people who want to sing chant don't want to join the cult of episemas, dominants of plagal modes, the history of the Merovingian empire, and the restoration of chant in late nineteenth-century France. They want to sing, thank you very much, and they're interested in knowing what will help them sing better right now—and not a great deal more. Your singers would rather sing a mode than listen to you talk about one.

Begin where you are—not where you wish you were.

FIND OUT WHERE THEY ARE

In Alexander Technique (a method of movement training popular with musicians and actors), there is an expression: "Begin where you are—not where you wish you were." With singers, your motto should be "Begin where they are—not where I am."

In order to do that, you need to know where they are right now. Make no assumptions about musical background, sight-reading skills, knowledge of Latin, ability to hold a part, vocal range, and quality of voice.

Obviously, if the schola in question is an auditioned ensemble, these questions were answered in the audition process. However, many scholas are open to all comers. In this case, insist on an individual "vocal placement meeting" with each singer. Reassure them that these are not auditions, but your opportunity to find the best place for their voices. You will find that many

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singers have limited skills or are very rusty, not having sung since the high school choir thirty years ago. Their Latin may have been laid to rest with the Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. However, if they can match pitch and have a reasonably pleasant vocal tone, you can find a place for them in the schola.

AT THE VERY BEGINNING

Now they are standing in front of you with binders or their new copies of the *Parish Book of Chant* and it's time to sing. It's essential for you to arrive at this moment with some initial decisions on language and notation.

First of all, choose a single ecclesiastical Latin pronunciation guide and make sure every singer has a copy in his or her binder (or use the one in the PBC). That will save quibbling about German vs. Italian pronunciation systems, a time-waster.

Do likewise with a listing of neumes and remember that knowing the names of each neume is not a prerequisite to singing the music. Introduce one a week and play an occasional game of "Spot the Salicus" with a new pencil as a prize. Your singers have taken time from their busy lives to work with you and a little levity can give them a breather before a difficult new piece.

Solfège will help you and your schola move through music more quickly and with greater assurance. Again, give them digestible bits of solfège that relate directly to a chant being rehearsed. Sing the mode to the syllables and then part of the chant. Before long, you may sail through music this way. Too much too soon and you'll be sailing alone.

Another way to help new schola members along is to use what they already know.

You can give your singers a break with vernacular plainsong. Remember that while you may dream in church Latin, many new singers will find the combination of language, notation, style, and just staying together exhausting. Adult singers also have to cope with feelings of incompetence and frustration. Children are used to endless correction and starting over. Adults are accustomed to being skilled in their actions and many find musical undertakings a surprising challenge.

Another way to help new schola members along is to use what they already know. Chances are good that they know a Kyrie, an Agnus Dei or the simple Salve Regina. Use these chants to show the simplicity of the notation and to teach singing with grace and subtlety. Always end your rehearsals with something that your schola knows and loves. This might be a Marian antiphon or an office hymn. Your singers should leave rehearsal both exhausted and inspired.

MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER

As you and your schola move forward, keep checking. Assume nothing. In one rehearsal I kept hearing extra notes at the end of the lines. One singer was singing each *custos*. She didn't know what it was. Just remind people of the *custos* and the clefs, the role of the various markings in the standard editions, and so forth. Quilismas can be difficult to see in some editions (and with some bifocals), so take a minute to point them out before you start the chant in question.

A brief reminder will suffice; singers do not want a history of Gregorian notation or the rhythmic controversy between equalists and mensuralists. This is where your enthusiasm can lead you astray.

An *occasional* anecdote or *bit* of history can enrich the singing. If there's a fellow fanatic in the ranks, you can share the details over coffee or after rehearsal. Don't use other people's time. How will you know if you're talking too much? Check for the glassy eyes or several people paging through their music. Find the pitch and start singing immediately.

Conversely, if you watch your words, your singers will listen and remember what you tell them. Train them to look to you, not the person next to them, for answers.

No matter how egalitarian you are, you are the director. You make the call when a question arises. This also saves time later correcting misinformation in the ranks. Be patient with the questions they ask, not quenching any smoldering wicks with an exasperated sigh. Provide the information needed and get back to singing. If you have a very "needy" singer whose questions grind rehearsals to a standstill, offer to address his or her problems individually *after rehearsal*.

Choose your repertoire carefully and realistically. Perhaps you are dreaming of the Gregorian propers from the *Graduale Romanum* or a solemn Vespers from the *Liber Usualis*. For many of us these are shining cities on the hill—and some distance away. Start your schola singers over their musical heads and you will risk dashing both your hopes and theirs.

Be prepared to make mistakes as a schola director. When you're wrong, admit it cheerfully. This teaches your singers that making mistakes in rehearsal is not fatal and that they should sing with sufficient volume that you can hear them. Neophyte chanters sometimes hedge their bets by virtually inaudible singing. Encourage the faint-hearted by showing that error is the way to improvement.

*Never forget that your singers are a gift
and end every rehearsal with thanks for
their time and attention.*

As you and your schola travel together, take advantage of every opportunity to learn—workshops, colloquia, the wonderful Musica Sacra forum, recordings, websites, even old-fashioned books. You may learn better ways to sing something or that you've just been wrong about a particular aspect of chant interpretation. Let your singers know that you have gotten smarter and make the change. You are human, aren't you?

Never forget that your singers are a gift and end every rehearsal with thanks for their time and attention. Mary Weaver, Director of the Pope Benedict XVI Schola in Knoxville, Tennessee, summarized her role beautifully: "My job is to welcome, encourage, teach, and praise them." You are bringing to life millennia of music loved by saints, aristocrats, and peasants. If you "begin where they are," you and your schola will do great things, even in small places. God will be glorified. ❧

