

RESPONSORIAL PSALMS / ACCLAMATIONS GUIDANCE FOR PERFORMANCE

Key

Italics indicate a change of pitch (e.g. after a reciting note).

Underlined words should be gently emphasised.

: = half verse.

; = breath (mid-verse).

(-) = omit reciting note.

Performance

Responses / Acclamations

- Responses / Acclamations should be heard twice at the beginning, initially sung by cantor or choir and repeated by all.
- Psalm Responses should be repeated (once) by all between verses or pairs of verses (indicated by final double bar lines).
- The Gospel Acclamation should be repeated (once) by all after the verse.
- Responses / Acclamations should be in strict time (especially the first time and its repeat). There should be no *rallentando* or pause on the last note. A predictable and consistent meter gives the congregation assuredness and confidence.
- Responses / Acclamations can be sung in unison or harmony.

Verses

- Chanting should be distinct and deliberate yet natural.
- The tempo should be even, with no rushing on the reciting note or hesitation at the inflexion.
- Gentle emphases should be placed on the most important syllables.
- There should be a *diminuendo* at the end of each half verse / verse, the last note phrased off rather than held or accented.
- If chanted by a choir, the verses should be sung antiphonally (alternating at the double bar lines). This could be SA/TB or Decani/Cantoris.
- There should be a slightly longer pause at the half verse (single bar line) than at the verse end (double bar line).
- Verses can be accompanied or unaccompanied.
- In certain seasons, there are optional *fauxbourdon* verses. The last bar of the *fauxbourdon* verse should be in strict time, the tempo matching that of the subsequent refrain (when the time signatures correspond appropriately).

Some of these points are elaborated upon below.

Recitation style

As prescribed by H. B. Briggs and W. H. Frere in their introduction to *A Manual of Plainsong*, the “recitation of a Psalm in monotone distinctly and deliberately, but yet naturally, will show that the words have a rhythm of their own, rather more regular than that which would be produced if they were read in a speaking voice, but quite distinct from the duple or triple time of modern measured music”.¹

There should be gentle (not overly dramatic) emphases on the more important syllables. Generally, the first note of the inflexion (after the reciting note) will have an emphasised syllable. When this is not the case, alternative syllables have been underlined to signify emphasis.

As a rule, there should be a *diminuendo* at the end of each verse or half verse, and the final syllable should be shaded off musically rather than held. As Briggs and Frere write “Unless these final monosyllables are sung softly as compared with the preceding syllables the effect will be given of a false accent”.²

Intonation

It is customary for the intonation only to be sung at the beginning of the first verse (apart from the *Magnificat* when it is sung every verse).

Pauses at the half verse / verse end.

Pauses are a flexible, interpretive element of plainsong that serve practical, spiritual, and structural functions. Ultimately, it is a matter of balancing clarity of the text, the flow of the music, and meditative intent of the psalm. To some extent, the length of pauses will come down to personal preference or house style. There are precedents and traditions, but no definitive right or wrong. Much will depend on the singers and the building.

When chanted by a group antiphonally, it is *generally* understood that there should be a longer pause at the half verse (single bar line) than at the verse end (double bar line). The *Use of Sarum* states:

Psalmody non nimis protrahantur: punctum nullus teneat sed cito dimittat. Post metrum bonam pausam faciamus. Nullus ante alium incipere et nimis currere presumat aut post alios nimium trahere uel punctum tenere. Simul cantemus, simul pausemus, semper ascultando.

Do not prolong the psalmody: let him keep the point [ending] but let it go quickly. After a mediant [end of the first half of the tone], let's make a good break. No one presumes to start before another and to run too far, or to pull too far behind others, or to hold a point. Let us sing together, pause together, always listening.³

¹ Briggs & Frere (ed.), “A Manual of Plainsong” (London: Novello 1951), xiv

² Ibid, xiii

³ Walter Howard Frere (ed.), “The Use of Sarum” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1898), 36.

The Book of Common Prayer of the U.S. Episcopal Church (1979) states simply:

An asterisk divides each verse into two parts ... a distinct pause should be made at the asterisk.⁴

There are two reasons for this historic custom: poetic and acoustic.

Structurally, almost all psalm verses are divided into two parts: a statement followed by a reflection on or elaboration of the initial thought. There are three broad categories of this structure, which is known as parallelism:

- synonymous parallelism, where both parts say the same thing, e.g. *The heavens declare the glory of God : The skies proclaim the work of his hands. (Ps. 19:1)*;
- antithetical parallelism, where the second part presents an opposing idea, e.g. *For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous : but the way of the wicked leads to destruction. (Ps. 1:6)*;
- synthetic parallelism, where the second part completes or expands on the first, e.g. *The Lord is my shepherd : I shall not want. (Ps. 23:1)*.

A longer mid-verse pause allows for (or at least represents) a moment of meditation on the initial statement before a (less profound) reaction.

Regarding the acoustic considerations, in their introduction to *A Manual of Plainsong*, Briggs and Frere write:

The division of the Psalm-verse into two parts also suggests that a definite pause should be made at the colon, long enough to cause an observable cessation of sound in the building, whatever its size. (A mental repetition of the last rhythmic foot has been suggested as a good measure of the pause.) The antiphonal singing of the verses implies, on the other hand, that there need be no more interval between them than is necessary to make the alternation of voices clear, and to prevent the effect of overlapping, or the drowning of the *sostenuto* on the last note of one verse by the beginning of the next.⁵

Here they suggest that the pause between verses need not be too long (or as long as the mid-verse pause) because the antiphony provides the necessary clarity and distinction.

Useful links

<https://archive.org/details/usesarumorigina00cathgoog/page/n114/mode/2up?view=theater&q=simul+cantemus>

<https://www.bcponline.org>

<https://yalebiblestudy.org/courses/psalms/lessons/psalms-of-poetry-study-guide/>

⁴ The Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church (1979), 583.

⁵ Briggs & Frere (ed.), xiii