

## A Cantor Prepares:

*Exploring the common psalms of Advent  
and the Christmas season*

BY JOE SIMMONS

The common psalms of the liturgical year allow worshipping assemblies and cantors to deepen their familiarity with a repertoire of psalms. Since they are used repeatedly throughout a season, the common psalms lend themselves to learning by heart.

This first of a series of articles is intended to help cantors and those who train or accompany them to prepare the common psalms more attentively. Each installment will feature selections from a newly released collection of through-composed settings for the common psalms from the new *Common/Seasonal Lectionary Psalms with Through-Composed Verses* (WLP 003381), part of the *Psalms and Ritual Music* series. This article focuses on Psalms 25 and 85 for Advent and Psalm 98 for the Christmas season.

### Preparing to proclaim a psalm

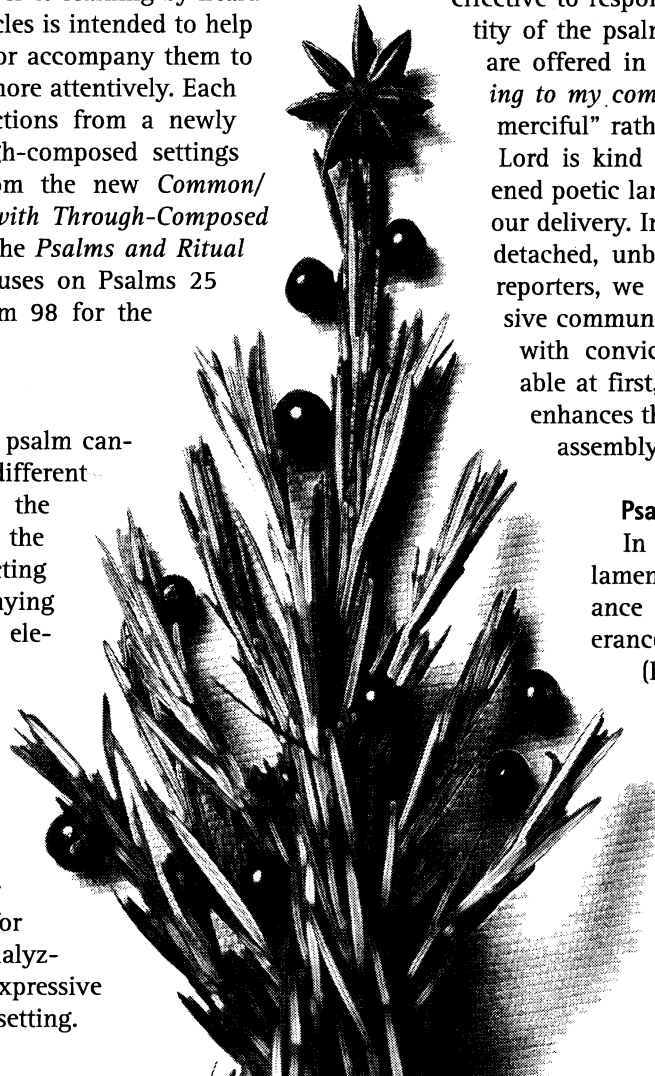
Thorough preparation as a psalm cantor involves a number of different steps, such as praying with the psalm, learning the notes of the setting, analyzing and reflecting on the text and accompanying readings, identifying poetic elements (e.g., simile, metaphor, and parallelism), comparing the Lectionary version to the complete text in the Bible, consulting commentaries or other references, and exploring expressive choices. Let us consider two of these components for each of the three psalms: analyzing the text and considering expressive choices based on the musical setting.

To analyze a psalm text, we must ask some questions about each word and phrase: 1) To whom am I speaking? 2) What am I/what are we saying? 3) Am I/are we asking for something and, if so, what? 4) Am I testifying, complaining, proclaiming, exhorting, and about what? 5) What does this psalm mean to me or make me think about? It's most effective to respond to these questions in the identity of the psalmist, so the examples that follow are offered in that voice (e.g., "*I am proclaiming to my community that the Lord is kind and merciful*" rather than "*The psalm says that the Lord is kind and merciful*"). Also, the heightened poetic language of the psalms must inform our delivery. Instead of emulating the somewhat detached, unbiased manner of television news reporters, we need to cultivate a more expressive communication style to sing these prayers with conviction. This may feel uncomfortable at first, but this type of delivery greatly enhances the manner in which the rest of the assembly is invited into prayer.

### Psalm 25—Advent

In its complete form, this individual lament combines pleas for God's guidance and help with appeals for deliverance from the psalmist's enemies (R. Clifford, *The Collegeville Biblical Commentary*, Vols. 22 & 23. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986. 22:29). As a common psalm for Advent, it reflects our prayer that the Lord reveal the path to truth and proclaims God's justice and compassion to those who follow in God's ways.

James Chepponis's setting of the response, "To you, O Lord,



I lift my soul,” is eminently singable, and the three-note progression in the last two measures reflects the idea of lifting up the soul. Convey this in your voice by clearly enunciating the words “lift my soul” and keeping your eyes energized and the soft palate raised to invigorate your sound.

RESPONSE: Psalm 25:1a

Cantor/All

D A Bm Bm7 Gm Bb C7 D

To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.

In the first verse, I speak directly to the Lord, pleading with God to “teach me your paths.” In the second, I speak to an assembly and affirm that the Lord is good and upright and offer examples: God shows sinners the way, guides the humble to justice, and teaches them the way. What does this mean to me? This says to me that God invites me to humility and openness to forgiving mercy. How can my delivery convey my faith that this is indeed true? I can use the haunting and restless melody of the verse to gently reassure those I am leading (and myself) of this promise.

VERSE 2

Cantor/Choir

D A Bm Bm7 Gm Bb C7 D

2. Good and up-right is the LORD; thus he shows sin-ners... the way. He

A Bm Bm7 Gm Bb C7 D To Response

2. guides the hum-ble to jus-tice, and teach-es the hum-ble... his way.

In verse three, I convey a similar message from a broader perspective, which is reflected in the melody as it becomes slightly more varied and introduces larger intervals. I testify that the path to the Lord is one of kindness and constancy if we keep God’s covenant. What in my own life compels me to proclaim this news assertively, rather than just state it matter-of-factly?

Psalm 85—Advent

This psalm is a communal lament. Reading the entire psalm in the Bible as well as a commentary clarifies that it is Israel’s prayer to God for forgiveness of their sins and restoration of their land and fortunes as God has done before (Clifford, 23:22). As a common psalm for Advent, it reflects our longing for the Messiah to renew our hope and help us to live peacefully with one another.

The response, “Lord, show us your mercy and love,” is a plea. Avoid intoning it in a singsong manner that might

obscure that. Try using a slight crescendo on “Lord,” then emphasizing “show us” to underscore the insistence.

Capo III: J=96

C Am G/B C Dm C/E F C  
E C#m B/D# E F#m E/G# A E

Cantor/All

Lord, show us your mer-cy and love.

Throughout the verses, I pray with and on behalf of the community. I affirm that we have faith that the Lord will respond to our plea, that God will hear us if we are faithful and maintain hope. How strongly do I believe this myself? Consider how emphasizing important words such as hear, proclaims, peace, salvation, fear, glory, and land will not only reinforce the message, but possibly even enhance your own commitment to it.

In verse two, I metaphorically proclaim our faith that God will restore us and our land. We shall know kindness, truth, justice, and peace. How is this relevant to my own life and that of our world? Give weight to these words and make sure you understand the metaphors (“Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss”). Really proclaim that “truth shall spring out of the earth” by stressing the verb spring.

VERSES

A little faster

Cantor/Choir

1. I will hear... I will hear what God pro-claims, the LORD, for  
2. Kind-ness, kind-ness and truth shall meet; jus-tice and peace, jus-  
3. The Lord him-self will give his ben-e-fits; our land shall yield, shall

C Dm/C G/B Am7 G Am7 G/B Am Em/G Dm/F  
E F#m/E B/D# C#m7 B C#m7 B/D# C#m G#m/B F#m/A

1. he pro-claims peace. Near in-deed is his sal-va-  
2. -tice and peace shall kiss. Truth shall spring out of the earth,  
3. yield its in-crease. Jus-tice shall walk, walk be-fore

C/E C G/B C Dm/C G/B Am7  
E/G# E B7/D# E F#m/E B/D# C#m7

Also, notice the repetition of words like shall yield, walk, and prepare in verse three. Don’t just repeat them; re-emphasize them.

Get very secure with the rhythm of the words in each verse—especially in the final four measures—so that you can focus on the text. This allows the melody to emerge as a beautiful foundation for the poetry.

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### Psalm 98—Christmas season

This psalm is a hymn praising God as victorious king and just judge. As Christians, the psalm proclaims for us “the saving power of God” fulfilled through the birth of Jesus.

Throughout the verses of this hymn, I sing with joy not only to an assembly, but to the entire world. My delivery must reflect this. While Steven Janco’s irresistible musical setting supports this and drives the psalm forward, it is important to avoid being carried away by the melody to the detriment of the message.

In verse one, I exhort people to “sing to the LORD a *new song*.” Why? Because God “has done wondrous deeds!” Try using a crescendo on “Sing to the LORD a new song” to lead you to a more assertive delivery of “for he has done wondrous deeds”.

#### VERSE 1

What wondrous deeds? “His right hand has won the victory for him, his holy arm.” What does that mean? This refers to “the conquest of all threats to the peaceful existence of Israel” (Clifford, 23:36). How do I experience God’s wondrous deeds in a way that compels me to urge others to “sing to the LORD a new song”?

Verse two tells specifically of the benefits of those victories, such as God’s revelation of salvation and justice. In addition, I tell how God remembers—or cherishes—Israel with kindness and mercy. What does this mean to me?

Verse three restates what the world has seen, but in a climactic way that bursts into an exhortation to “sing joy-

fully to the LORD” and “sing praise” to God. How willing am I to allow this prayer to infuse me so that I proclaim these words with confidence and enthusiasm?

#### VERSE 3

In verse four, imagine praising the Lord “with harp and melodious song,” and “with trumpets and the sound of the horn.” This will help you to paint this picture vocally.

Adding a crescendo to the end of each verse can help to propel the response and reinforce its celebratory feel. As you rehearse, try singing the psalm with tremendous enthusiasm to notice how that feels. Though you won’t proclaim the psalm in a liturgy in this extreme manner, it is useful to exercise your expressive range in this way.

### Faith is in the questions!

This process might leave you wondering about your own conviction or dedication to these prayers. Don’t despair. Spiritual leadership requires constant discernment. No one expects us to be perfect or free from doubts. That’s not church! Continue to ask questions in your preparation so that you know deeply what you are communicating. Questions strengthen our faith and our leadership.

Finally, remember that a cantor leads prayer with the heart of a poet. Leave the news reporting to CNN!

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