

How to Sing Gregorian Chant

The following describes how to sing plainsong (*cantus planus*: here, Gregorian Chant); “a way” might be more appropriate than “how”, as, historically speaking, there is no single “correct” method.. Described here are the conventions of monastic Chant, codified over a century ago by the monks of Solesmes (France). Included are some practical suggestions from this author's experience. It will be “noted” that these directions are similar to those for public speaking, to which the Chant bears a close relation, indeed closer than to the “art” song of succeeding centuries. (There is a spiritual point here, which is left to the reader to consider.)

POSTURE

Stand up straight, but do not lean back. The proverbial “book on the head” is a convenient way to determine this. Leaning the head back constricts the wind pipe. The eyes should look right ahead, at a 90° angle from the body. Straighten the shoulders; this is best done by pushing them down and only slightly back. Do not expand the chest. Do not contract the abdomen. Rather, relax, without slouching. Also relax the base of the spine and keep it stable, but not stationary.

In sum, obtain an alert, dignified bearing, without restraining any of the muscles involved in singing. These muscles are distributed throughout the entire body. Hold the music with both hands, about midway between the abdomen and the eyes, high enough and at an angle not to require the head to incline, but low enough not to block the voice. This allows the singer to look at the music when necessary, without changing the position of the head.

BREATHING

This is the most important point, in Chant, and singing in general. Breathe from the abdomen, not from the chest. Control the release of air from the abdomen. A small, quick breath is permissible at pauses in the text, and a full breath should be taken only at a full stop (in a psalm tone, at the mediation; see below). Do not “gulp” for breath. If running out of breath while singing *ensemble* (with a group), pause for a moment to take a breath, and resume singing discreetly. If singing *solo*, pause briefly before running out of breath, and resume at the same pace and timbre. The operative factor here is continuity.

SINGING

Open the mouth; otherwise the sound cannot escape. Open the back of the throat wide enough to expose the nasal passage. This not only facilitates the flow of air, but opens the sinuses, thus producing a fuller and more resonant sound. Sing from the throat rather than the palate. *Vibrato* is to be avoided when possible, or at least not cultivated. Above all, an operatic or “crooning” style is not to be done; with regard to chant, both are contrary to religion. Face straight ahead (see POSTURE, above). Sing at a moderate volume, just loud enough to be clearly audible throughout the church; when singing *ensemble*, no single voice should be conspicuous over the others.

Whatever a singer hears internally, if not “properly” articulated and projected, will not be audible to the congregation. NOTE: this manner of singing usually does not require electrical amplification. If a microphone is used, these guidelines can be modified to achieve a similar effect.

ARTICULATION

Be very sure that the singers all agree in pronunciation.

Pronounce the consonants distinctly. Release (the tongue or lips) final consonants before proceeding to the next word. Especially, do not “swallow” consonants at the end of a verse. Pronounce double consonants separately, but without inserting a stop (the “uh” sound) between them.

Pronounce the vowels clearly and crisply, without slurring. When a word ends in a vowel and the following word begins with the same or a similar vowel, the two vowels may be *elided* (n. *elision* – merged into a single syllable). Elision may or may not be indicated by the symbol ̣ between the two vowels. There is no single rule governing the practice.

RHYTHM AND PHRASING

Generally speaking, the rhythm of plainsong is that of speech, of which it can be considered a particular type. The text is not superposed on a preëxisting melody, nor *vice-versa*; rather, they are both parts of the same thing. Sing at a moderate and consistent pace. Avoid “expression” as well as monotony, the latter including the rapid “singsong” stereotype of this music. Phrasing, including pauses and stops should be done discreetly, and reflect the divisions of the text. Excessive modulation of the voice is to be avoided, for example, in commands and questions *etc.* Subtle inflection is sufficient.

The basic rule of phrasing is *crescendo* < > *decrecendo*, applied first to the chant as a whole: gradual increase in pace and volume at the beginning, and gradual decrease in both towards the end. The method can be visualized as a bell curve. The same manner applies in turn to each section, to each phrase with a section, to each word within a phrase, and finally to each syllable within a word.

Of course, the above is almost impossible to achieve in detail, and on occasion does not fit the text (*decrecendo* on a final accent is a challenge, but it can be done). With practice the general principle becomes habit, which is the intention of the rule. This obviates the careless, declamatory style which can occur otherwise.

CONCLUSION

Conscientiously applied, these directions become habitual, enabling focus on what is done, rather than technique; thus “performance” becomes more an act of prayer. Patience is counseled, as it can take some time to acquire the breath control recommended above.