

## CREATING AND PERFORMING PSALMODY

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### Materials to use:

- Bible, such as King James, RSV, Grail, or other reasonably poetic translation
- Music manuscript paper (available free on the Internet). Print this without a staff, ten or twelve lines to a page.
- Pencil. Please do not write drafts in pen!

### Steps to use in creating your own Psalm chant, after hearing different styles:

1. Prayerfully choose a Psalm. This may be a favorite, or not. Allow the Lord to help you choose the Psalm He wants you to meditate upon and set to music. Print the Psalm out so you can write on it. Or, write lightly in your Bible with pencil.
2. Read the Psalm aloud until you feel the natural rhythm of the words. Meditate upon it so that the music you write will “fit.”
3. “Point” the Psalm: Write in the accents you use in speech. (If you do not know exactly how to do this, underline the stressed syllables.)
4. Decide which verse or phrase will serve as the Antiphon. **What is the theme of the Psalm?** Is one of the verses repeated throughout? Some Psalms have built-in antiphons!
5. Decide what style of chant you will use. You will create using something, at least roughly, for a model.
6. **Create the antiphon. Bring it to the next class.**
7. Using the style you have chosen for the antiphon, create a chant for the rest of the Psalm. Keep it simple. *You may even want your congregation to speak the verses and then you or your choir will sing the antiphon before, after, and between verses.*
8. Bring your Psalm and antiphon next week, so we can rehearse it together.
9. Extra credit: If you use a language other than English for your Bible study, find a Psalm in that language and point it (or underline the accented syllables). Share it with the class.

## PRINCIPLES OF PSALM CHANTING

At first glance, it might appear that Gregorian chant, Byzantine chant, and all other forms of Psalm chanting are unrelated. That is not true. Hebrew chant was the mother of all of them, and good chant takes into consideration the original governing principles for chanting the Psalms. By that I mean that good chant is based upon the rhythm of the words and the structure of the poetry.

Chant is based upon the *rhythm of the words*, which are not forced into rhyme. In a way, that makes them very modern, because contemporary music, with the exception of rap, often uses unrhymed, free verse. That means that you must listen to the words and *hear* the rhythm of the spoken language. Some translations really are easier to sing and to set to chant.

Hebrew chant is based upon a poetic device which Gerard Manley Hopkins, the English poet, referred to as “sprung rhythm.” That means that you have a strong beat but an unequal number of syllables, as in the lines from “Three Blind Mice,” which is in 4/4 time (the last beat of the first four lines is silent):

### **Three Blind Mice**

### **Three Blind Mice**

**See how they run**

**See how they run**

They **all** ran **after** the **farmer's wife**,  
she **cut** off their **tails** with a **carving knife...**

Now, read this excerpt from the RSV, which I have set to a very simple, Hebraic-sounding tune:

When **Israel** went **forth** from **Egypt**,  
The house of **Jacob** from a **people** of strange **language**,  
**Judah** became his **sanctuary**,  
**Is -ra-el** his **dominion**.  
The **sea** **looked** and **fled**,  
**Jor-dan** turned **back**;  
The **mountains** **skipped** like **rams**,  
**The** little **hills**, like **lambs**.  
What **ails** you, O **Sea**, that you **flee**?  
O **Jordan**, **that** you turn **back**?  
O **mountains**, that you **skip** like **rams**,  
**O** little **hills**, like **lambs**?

While you are noticing the rhythm of the words, also notice the *structure* of the poetry. This *parallelism* is very typical of the Psalms. In this case, the second line agrees with and completes the first, so you have an AA BB structure. I repeated the tune at the end of every two lines, trying to keep the Psalm sounding like Hebrew chant.

The next part of the Psalm had a freer structure, but you could still find a beat and use the same tune:

**Tremble**, O **earth**, at the **coming** of the **Lord**,  
at the **coming** of the **God** of **Jacob**,  
Who **touches** the **earth**, and it **trembles**,  
Who **touches** the **mountains**, and they **smoke**.

I also added a jubilation at the end, a rhythmic chant based upon the word, “Hallelujah.” This was common to both the Jews and the Early Church. Particularly, a syllable of God’s name, Ja, was used as a repeated syllable, or a syllable on which to create a melisma. But that is not part of your assignment, though you may do so if you wish.

Notice how simple the accompaniment is, if there is any! Just a chord or two suffices. If you do not create an accompaniment, that is fine. Here is the melodic base of the above Psalm chant. Rhythmically, the notes in capital letters are held longest, with extra syllables on them, as necessary. This is the “skeleton” of the chant, which (using music staff paper) you would write when you were teaching your Psalm chant.

a D E F, (ascending, with a skip of a fourth)  
F g f e d E, (ascend one note, descend four, ascend one)  
a E F G, (ascending, with a skip of a fourth)  
G a g f e F (ascend one note, descend four, ascend one).

This, by the way, is such a typical Jewish-sounding melody that Jewish people whom I know do not realize that I made it up. I simply applied the principles given above for the creation of Psalm chant. Create your own melodic formula for a Psalm, not identical to the one used above, but using a similar pattern. Notice how in the Gelineau Psalms, the composer used a similar structure, but a different melody.

Russian chant is wonderful to use as an example for what we are trying to do, because the antiphon is in 4-part harmony, but the rest of the Psalm is chanted. That is particularly obvious in the Psalm, “Arise, O God, judge the earth: For to Thee belong all nations.” Can you see how something like this might be set in a more contemporary style, but still using the same principles? That was the idea that Dr. Cherry had in *The Contemporary Psalter*. In that book, she attempted to bring old principles to modern practice.

You may have sung one of the Taizé chants in Chorale, “Laudate Dominum, Omnes Gentes, Alleluia!” The idea of Taizé is to keep the antiphon very simple, and again, to interpose verses, either of a Psalm or of a petition. *By keeping the antiphon simple, the composer makes it possible for visitors to Taizé to sing it in their own languages, which, of course, is very important and makes everyone feel at home.* Another fine setting by Taizé of the same verse is:

Laudate, omnes gentes,  
Laudate Dominum,  
Laudate, omnes gentes,  
Laudate Dominum.

Like the other praise verse, this one simply “gets in your blood.” It’s wonderful! Notice that it has an AB AB<sub>1</sub> structure, with B<sub>1</sub> being the ending phrase (in the Western world today, we like to close the phrase with a familiar cadence). Sometimes the phrasing of earlier chant seems to “leave us hanging” because we are not as familiar with the Church modes as they were.

I could go into the various modes and the eight tones which are characteristic of different chant styles, but we would simply run out of time if I were to do that. I suggest that you research these things on your own, remembering your early music history. There are many fine sites for Gregorian chant on the Web which simplify our understanding of that wonderful form of psalmody. And there is the “modified Gregorian,” which uses abbreviated, but recognizable, forms of the Psalm tones of Gregorian chant. It is quite easy to sing, restful, and the music does not get in the way of the words--which is one wonderful reason to sing it.

Byzantine chant is a little more difficult to get used to, but it is very appealing because of its strong rhythm. The Evlogiteria, for example, which is sung every Sunday, uses a Psalm verse between the dramatic Easter story, as an antiphon. Like the ancient Byzantines, you can use antiphons as a bridge in a story you are telling in song! Listen to the antiphon:

**Bles**-sed are **You**, O Lord: (E-F#-E-D E-F#-G)  
**Teach** me Your **sta**-tutes. (F#-E-F#-G F#-E-E)

It takes some “getting used to” to set the rest of the story to Byzantine Tone 5, but I have learned to use the tones as the basis for many songs and chants because I have had to do so for the work I do once a month in the Greek Orthodox Church. If I don’t have the music, I must use the Tone of the Day to set whatever song I am given. But that is another story!! Please let’s not get too “Byzantine” here, but just use the simplest chants you can think of between your antiphons. You can almost chant on one pitch, though that is not very interesting. The Russian style is easy but gives a little more variety than that. For example:

(chanting tone: Eb) I will praise the Lord at (change) **all times** (chant on F, Eb)  
(chanting tone: Eb): His praise will continually be (change) **in my mouth** (chant on D, C, Eb).

I hope this will give you some ideas as you prayerfully prepare your Psalm chant. Feel free to work together with another member of the class, but each student must present a different Psalm.