

# HEM Challenge – Chant Basics

By Caroline Langfeld

## What is Chant?

- There are many types of chant. Chant is simply a kind of speaking that involves pitch. It moves at the tempo and with the rhythm of ordinary speech.
- Most chant forms have no fixed rhythm, so the music conforms to the pattern of language and moves to the words of Scripture.
- The first Christians chanted aloud books of the Bible through oral tradition.
  - The simple melodies helped bring out the meaning of the words
  - Scripture was more easily remembered
  - The text was more easily heard in large gatherings, and
  - It added beauty and dignity to the reading
- The earliest chant melodies were simple, called **plainsong** or **plainchant**.
  - These were sung without instruments; called accapella.
  - Voices sang the same notes together, in unison, called monophonic (one voice).
  - This type of chant can be sung in English or in Latin. We use plainchant today when singing parts of the Mass or Liturgy of the Hours.
- Other types of plainchant include **psalm tones**, or **metrical psalms**. We often hear this version of chant sung as the Responsorial Psalm during Mass and Liturgy of the Hours. These are flexible tones which can be adapted to fit stanzas with two or more lines.
- Later, chants were sung to more elaborate melodies called **Gregorian Chant**.
  - Gregorian chant also moves to the rhythmic flow of the text.
  - It uses a technique called melisma, which means singing several notes one syllable of text. This makes the melody more ornate and beautiful.
  - Later, other voices were added to create more depth and beauty, called polyphony (many voices). When this harmony is sung a 4th or 5th below the melody, it is called organum.
  - Gregorian Chant is almost always sung in Latin.
  - It gets its name from Pope Gregory who reigned from the year 590 to 604. He helped create the Gregorian tradition by establishing a Song School called the Schola Cantorum (sko'-la kan-to'-room), in which choir singers and teachers received training in chant.
  - Sometime after the year 1000, a man named Guido de Azeppo recognized that music is a language, so the ability to read it would allow more people to enjoy it. He invented the first written musical notation using 'neumes' (square-shaped notes) and a 4-lined staff, using the tones do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do. Gregorian Chant still uses this musical notation today!

## Why is Chant the Norm?

- Free rhythm: Chant typically has no fixed meter, so the music can bend to the words of Scripture as it is written; the music itself obeys the words of Scripture. The tones conform to the pattern of language, rather than imposing their own rhythm on the words.
- One line of music: A single bending line is how a text set to music is most clearly understood by the human ear. Chant is straightforward and simple in texture. Essentially ornamented spoken prayer, it does not need harmony from a choir or organ accompaniment.
- Variety of form: Perhaps the most-cited objection to chant is its assumed difficulty. In fact, there exists a large repertoire of chant, much of it accessible to non-musicians.
- Timeless beauty: Chant is not bound to any time and place, so it can serve as a unifying form of sung prayer. In one musical style, we are offered a bridge among all peoples and generations of the Latin rite. It remains faithful to the original intent of both Jewish and Christian chant, which is to adorn liturgical readings with a beauty and dignity befitting the word of God.

## How to Sing Chant

- Anyone can learn to read and sing chant!
- Many of us feel self-conscious about our voices, but have confidence that the voice you have is your instrument given to you by God and you can use it to glorify Him.
- “Support your tone” with proper breathing.
- To stay on pitch, re-energize each note (even if it is the same pitch over and over) by supporting it with breath and attention.
- Keep the tempo of the chant flowing, the same as if reading the Psalm, so it doesn't drag.
- These chants are all beautiful prayers. As you learn and sing them, offer your efforts to God. You can do it! Practice, sing and enjoy!
- St. Gregory, pray for us! St. Cecilia, pray for us!