

# THE CATHOLIC HERALD

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## Cantate Dominum (Advice for choirs)

by Jeremy de Satgé

*In the third of a series of occasional articles on music and the liturgy, singer and composer Jeremy de Satgé offers practical suggestions for priests, organists and music directors on how to improve church singing.*

In July 2001 I wrote an article entitled **Why Catholics won't sing** for the *Catholic Herald*, which looked at the history of why it is so difficult to get Catholic choirs and congregations to sing and offered some suggestions as how to improve liturgical singing.

For the past year I have had the privilege of working as Music Director of a large (and indeed expanding) parish in South London (Holy Ghost Church, Balham) where I have an enthusiastic choir of amateur singers to train, many of whom cannot read music. I have been lucky to have received tremendous support from the two priests of the parish and from members of the choir, eager to sing better. As someone who writes choral music particularly with the amateur choir in mind, this hands-on experience has been invaluable for me as my ideas concerning liturgical music develop. I therefore feel it a good moment to share some reflections on my experience of this past year and make some further suggestions as how to improve parish music. I hope the following proves useful - please excuse me if much of it sounds obvious!

In the first instance, it should be stressed that music should be appropriate, reflecting the liturgical season and helping to amplify the "theme" of the Sunday in question. This means looking at the readings and antiphons for the Sunday in advance, before selecting what music to perform.

**The Introit** - In most parishes a hymn suffices at the beginning of Mass. It is, however, worth looking at the Introit verse set for each Sunday. The introit sets the theme or "flavour" for the Sunday in question and can be very effectively sung on a monotone or simple 3-note chant, making a dignified entrance to the Mass and also giving pause to the faithful as they meditate and consider the words of the Introit. It is particularly effective if the Introit is first sung in Latin and then in English - as this makes an obvious connection with our Latin heritage and emphasises the "Catholic" (world-wide) nature of the Church. I would recommend this particularly during the penitential seasons (Lent & Advent) but also during Ordinary Time, although perhaps not each week.

**Hymns** - I have to admit to not being particularly keen on hymns and I suspect that this is partly because they are so often tediously and badly sung! During the past year, I have been pleasantly surprised at our hymn singing and I think that the secret is mainly a question of getting the right speed. There is a "natural speed" for most hymns, which is largely based on speech rhythm. In general, slow hymns should be played faster than one might suppose (Soul of my Saviour is a good example, which is often played excruciatingly slow!); and faster, particularly syncopated hymns (at best avoided) should usually be played slower. It is also important to use the punctuation correctly, the effect of which is to make greater sense of the words. The other difficulty arises in the vocal range of hymn tunes. Tunes which go lower than Middle C and higher than D of the octave above are not that easy for most congregations to sing and can sound quite strangulated as a result! Do not be afraid to transpose hymns if it makes singing easier.

**Psalms** - I have always had a problem with Responsorial Psalms, finding them not particularly effective. Part of the problem lies with the modern translation, which is less than poetic and,

frequently, difficult to set to music. Psalms are most effective when sung by a choir as a whole (better still with the congregation). Anglicans have centuries' experience of singing psalms in the vernacular; and I soon started experimenting with adapting Anglican chant to fit the Catholic translation. On the whole, this works well - you need to take care when pointing the psalm verses (setting syllables to notes) but the result is worthwhile. The second half or last quarter of the chant may be used as the response, depending on the length of the response. The advantage of using this method is that the response is easy to sing by the congregation and the verses may be sung by a cantor or by a choir in unison or full harmony, depending on the resources available.

**Mass Settings** - Finding appropriate Mass settings is more difficult than one might suppose. Many modern English settings designed for congregational singing are rather trite and boring, particularly when sung week after week. I find this particularly the case with the Gloria, that great song of praise and jubilation, which is also a surprisingly difficult text to set to music. I was saddened to learn that in France this has frequently been reduced to being sung as a strophic hymn, which does nothing to enhance the words - rather the opposite. There is, of course, a rich resource of Mass settings within the reach of most choirs, namely the Plainsong or Gregorian Chant settings and, with the risk of being accused of being reactionary, I would recommend these highly, perhaps alternating plainsong settings with English settings of the Mass.

It is perhaps surprising but gratifying that most congregations will remember and sing the Missa de Angelis (Mass XIII) with confidence, especially when given a copy to follow. There are other Mass settings as well, so why not alternate? Orbis Factor (Mass XI) is appropriate for Sundays of Ordinary Time as well; and Lent and Advent have their own Mass setting (Mass XVII). Then there is the debate as to whether or not the Plainsong setting should be accompanied by an organ. As a purist, my own inclination is that the settings should be unaccompanied, but I have to confess that realistically an organ accompaniment can be very effective, particularly if there are no strong voices to lead the choir and congregation. As a choir's confidence increases you could try other polyphonic settings for Feast Days and gradually increase the choir's repertoire of Mass settings.

**Motets** - A Communion motet or something sung at the Offertory is highly appropriate and gives the choir a chance to perform on its own. It is good to keep introducing new pieces in order to increase a choir's repertoire - pieces can then be performed in rotation. Unaccompanied motets are best avoided (sadly), especially if there is not a strong voice per part to lead. Organists may choose to play a quiet accompaniment if appropriate. However, there is still a great deal to choose from. Please remember that something simple sung well is infinitely better than something difficult sung badly!

**Vocal Training** - This is of course a huge subject and, sadly, there is neither time nor space to discuss this here. It is also a subject not best described in writing! At this year's *Towards Advent Festival* in Westminster Cathedral (15<sup>th</sup> November 2003) I led a choral singing workshop, which put into action many of the subjects contained in this article. The feedback from this was most encouraging with several parishes asking if I would visit them to take further choral workshops. As a result of this, if any *Catholic Herald* readers might be interested in a music workshop for their parish or deanery, they are warmly invited to visit [www.themusicmakers.org](http://www.themusicmakers.org) and to follow the links for more information.

*Jeremy de Satgé's liturgical music publishing company, The Music Makers, which aims to help improve Catholic liturgical music, may be found at [www.themusicmakers.org](http://www.themusicmakers.org)*

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