

Tridentine Community News

February 4, 2024 – Sexagésima Sunday

The Eight Tones of the Psalms

You may have noticed that the Gregorian Propers of the Mass – the Introit, Gradual, Alleluia, Tract, Offertory Antiphon, and Communion Antiphon – may be sung by the choir in one of two ways: the “long” way, which employs the full Gregorian setting as given in the *Liber Usualis*, the main book the schola members use, or the “short” way, using Psalm Tones. The Gradual from the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul (January 25) as given in the *Liber* will give you an idea of the complexity of the full Gregorian version:

Grad. 5.
QUI operátus est * Pétro in apo-
sto-látum, operátus est et mí- hi
inter gén-tes : et cognové- runt grá- ti- am
DÉ- i, quæ dá- ta est mí- hi.
V. Grá- ti- a DÉ-

Historically the Psalm Tone version was used when the full Gregorian version was too challenging for a particular group of singers to attempt. Books were published, the most famous being the *Rossini Propers*, which set the texts of the Propers to Psalm Tones. As this column reported in our March 11, 2018 edition, the main resource our choirs use these days, Benjamin Bloomfield’s Chant Tools app and web site, lets singer access both the full Gregorian and Psalm Tone versions of any Proper at the touch of a button. A Psalm Tone version of the same Gradual from the Conversion of St. Paul as given in Chant Tools is here:

GRAD. V.
QUI operátus est Petro in apostolátum, † operátus est et mihi inter gen-
tes : * et cognoverunt gráti-am De-i, quæ data est mihi. 2. Gráti-a De-i in me vá-
cu-a non fu-it : * sed gráti-a ejus semper in me manet.

Nowadays our experienced local choirs tend to use Psalm Tones not so much because they are easier to sing, but because they keep the Mass moving along. Many celebrants, and some host churches, are time-sensitive. For example, a schola might choose to use the full Gregorian Gradual coupled with a Psalm Tone Alleluia because the combined duration of them almost exactly

fits the time required for the celebrant to pray silently the Gradual and Alleluia, pray the *Munda Cor Meum* and *Jube, Dómine, Benedícere* at the center of the altar, apply the incense in the thurible, and wait for the altar server procession to make its way to the Gospel side of the altar. Using the full Gregorian Alleluia instead would require everyone to wait a few minutes before the Gospel could begin.

So what exactly are Psalm Tones? They are simple, standard melodies to which Propers may be sung. They are called Psalm Tones because their original purpose was to provide a setting with which to sing the Psalms in the Hours of the Divine Office. There are eight standard Psalm Tones, representing the eight modes of chant. A mode can loosely be thought of as the chant equivalent of a musical key in modern notation.

Some relevant elaboration is provided in the Psalm Tone explanation on brittanica.com:

“Because each psalm verse is divided into two halves, the psalm tones have a binary, or two-part, form. The first part consists of the initium, or intonation, of a melodic fragment; tenor, or recitation note; flexa, or downward inflection, used only if the first half of the verse is long; and mediatio, or middle cadence (resting point). The second part comprises the tenor, sung until the terminatio, or final cadence.

Each psalm is preceded and followed by an antiphon, a nonbiblical verse, the melody for which is composed in one of the eight ecclesiastical modes. The eight psalm tones are related to the ecclesiastical modes, having the same tenor and final note (except psalm tone 3, the final of which is ordinarily B instead of E, the final of mode 3). The psalm tone chosen corresponds to the number of the mode of the antiphon melody (e.g., psalm tone 4 and mode 4).

Differentiae (various endings) are used to make a smooth transition between the end of a psalm tone and the beginning of an antiphon. The differentia that makes the smoothest connection is chosen.”

Much of the above can be visualized in this simple depiction of the same Psalm Tone V employed for the Conversion of St. Paul:

Quintus Tonus.
Q UINTUS TONUS sic incí-pi-tur, sic flécti-tur, † et sic me-di-
Finalis unica. a
á-tur : * atque sic fi-ní-tur.

The full document from which the above example came, which contains similar examples for all eight Psalm Tones, can be found here:

<https://www.cappellapratensis.nl/wp-content/uploads/Worksheet-5-Psalm-Tone-Formulae.pdf>

Comments? Ideas for a future column? Please e-mail info@windsorlatinmass.org. Previous columns are available at www.windsorlatinmass.org.