

Point

Mary Lynn Pleczkowski is the Associate Director of Music at St. James Parish, Sewickley – cantoring is her first ministry.

Counter-point

Richard P. Gibala is director of music ministries at the Cathedral of St. Thomas More in Arlington, Va.

Mary Lynn served as cantor and Rick as a director of music ministries at St. Winifred Parish Community, in Pittsburgh, PA., from 1982-86. They reflect on their ministries, past and present, in this article.

Personal Reflections

Mary Lynn: Rick, have you always worked with cantors in your music ministry?

Rick: Quite the contrary! When the ministry of cantors was introduced into the liturgy soon after Vatican II, I was very resistant! As an organist, I thought it was my job to lead the assembly in song, and not some “song leaders!” Over the years, I have come to realize the importance of the cantor’s role in the liturgy.

Rick: Mary Lynn, when you serve as a cantor, the assembly responds and participates fully. What are your secrets?

Mary Lynn: One of the most important things I do each week is to memorize the psalm. There’s nothing worse than attending a Mass where the cantor has his or her head in the sheet music! If I don’t practice and prepare enough, I’m nervous. How can you focus on the assembly if you’re too busy focusing on the notes? I think it’s extremely important to look at the congregation, smile if it’s appropriate and use a lot of eye contact/expressive eyes. I’m also very grateful and honored when an assembly participates. It’s no secret, but I also pray a lot when I’m cantoring, not only to serve the assembly well, but for my own personal intentions.

Expectations

Mary Lynn: Rick, what do you expect of your cantors?

Rick: One, to be persons of prayer who embrace the Paschal Mystery in their own daily life – cantors can truly lead their assembly as a “master of prayer” only as they themselves struggle in living their faith; two, to understand the ritual of our liturgy, and to take ownership in their role as cantors; three, to work at refining the musical requirements of a cantor: vocal production, sight singing, good posture, gesturing liturgical presence, and the ability to animate the assembly.

Rick: Ok, Mary Lynn – so what do you expect of your music director?

Mary Lynn: As a cantor, I expect and look for leadership in my music director – both musical and liturgical. It is not enough for a music director to simply be an accomplished musician. He or she must also be a person who can help me learn my ministry as a cantor as well the vocal elements. Technically speaking, I look for a music director who is an accomplished organist, who understands vocal techniques and who is a master of understanding the liturgy.

Roles

Rick: Mary Lynn, how do you see your role as a cantor in preparing for liturgy?

Mary Lynn: First, I sit down and go over the liturgy sheet, which explains and lists the musical selections for the day. Next I review the responsorial psalm, the hymns and the mass parts, marking my hymnal accordingly. If a psalm setting is new to me, I take the time to learn it, ideally at least two weeks before the psalm is scheduled to be sung. To be honest, the amount of time I take to prepare varies; depending on whether or not I know the psalm, and how many baseball games and Cub Scout meetings my son has that week!

Mary Lynn: Rick, how do you see your role as a music director in preparing your cantors for their ministry?

Rick: As a music director, it is my responsibility to coordinate all aspects of the music program to serve as the “glue” for the liturgy. That includes working with the presiders; other liturgical ministers, choirs, instrumentalists and cantors. I make every attempt to make sure all cantors have their schedule, music

selections, and their music in enough time to prepare. I rely on my cantors to assist and support one another.

Frustrations

Mary Lynn: Rick, over the years, what are some frustrations you have experienced with cantors?

Rick: My greatest frustration has been with cantors who presume the assembly does not want to sing. With that attitude, no wonder congregational participation is so poor! There are also cantors who get upset because a particular piece of music is not in their “range.” Sorry – but if “I Am The Bread of Life” is appropriate for a specific Sunday, we’re going to sing it, whether a tenor can hit that low note or not! Also, if you truly understand the Roman ritual, you know that here is no place in the liturgy for solos!

Rick: Mary Lynn, what are some frustrations you have experienced with music directors?

Mary Lynn: My greatest frustration has been when a music director doesn’t understand what it’s like to be down front. The cantor is very visual to the assembly and carries a big responsibility for the reputations of a parish’s music program. If I’m not prepared, or if I make a mistake, the congregation thinks, she didn’t do a very good job. They don’t think, boy, that music director didn’t rehearse the introduction to the Gloria with her. Music directors need to understand what that feels like. It’s true that the cantor is only one part of a music ministry team, but he or she is an important part.

Wish List

Rick: Mary Lynn, if you could have one wish as a cantor, what would it be?

Mary Lynn: If I could have only one wish, it would be to get the music ahead of time. A few days in advance – one week in advance would be nice – is that too much to ask? If cantors would receive their music ahead of time, then we could take responsibility for whether or not we are prepared. There would be no one else to blame. In addition, if we had time to prepare then we could spend more time and energy focusing on the ritual and our role in it.

Mary Lynn: If you could have one wish about cantors as a music director, what would it be?

Rick: Quite honestly, I wish cantors would put the liturgy first before all else. Become familiar with the liturgical documents, the lectionary, and the liturgical year. Your role as a cantor is key in our liturgy – not as a solo performer, but as one whom truly helps in the assembly pray in song.

In conclusion, we hope that our point-counterpoint can serve as a catalyst for the ongoing dialog among your music ministry team.