

## THE KEY TO GOOD CANTORING

### PART THREE: THE GESTURE

BY MARY LYNN PLECZKOWSKI

This is the third in a four-part series on the various elements of animation. Animation is that element in cantoring that separates the beginners from the more advanced. In the first two articles we explored the importance of memorizing music and of using appropriate eye contact and facial gestures. In this article we examine the gesture.

The gesture is an important yet often overused physical motion that cantors employ when signaling to the congregation that it is their turn to sing. We will examine three basic aspects of the gesture in this article: when, what type, and how often. For our purposes, we will combine the roles of psalmist and cantor in this discussion. Keep in mind that these notes are primarily suggestions; each parish will have its own specific needs for a cantor's gesture particular to that situation and environment.

**When.** When do the documents suggest that the cantor stand at the podium and bring in the congregation? The revised *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* states that the cantor's role is to "lead and sustain the people's singing" (GIRM, 104). Though the specifics are not spelled out, the presumption is clear that, like a choir director (GIRM, 104), the cantor will be using gestures as well as voice to "lead and sustain." Note, however, that the cantor's supportive



role is limited when there is a choir, which "exercises its own liturgical function" by singing the parts proper to it and by supporting the congregation (GIRM, 103). Only when the choir is not present does the cantor lead all the chants, "with the people taking part" (GIRM, 104). In other words, in Masses at which a choir is present, the cantor need not stand at the podium for every piece of music. In this situation the most important times for the cantor to go to the stand and gesture would be during the responsorial psalm, Gospel acclamation, and any other piece of "responsorial" music—that is, a chant or song in which the congregation does not sing the verses.

No official church documents state clearly when a cantor should gesture from the cantor stand. Any decision must therefore be made based on local custom or need and the traditions of each parish.

**Type of Gesture.** The debate about whether to use a one- or two-armed gesture is longstanding. Generally speaking, a two-armed gesture is preferred because it is perceived as more open, warm, and welcoming than a one-armed gesture. However, a one-armed gesture is sometimes necessary, for example, when there is no cantor stand and the cantor needs to hold a hymnal. Whether with one arm

or two, the gesture needs to be done in time with the music, and it takes place just before the congregation begins to sing. It is important that the arms be lowered once the assembly begins singing. Do not leave the arms in the air for an extended period of time: The purpose of this gesture is to help the congregation know that it is its turn to sing. Once the congregation has started singing, there is no need for a cantor to keep any arms aloft.

**How Often.** Many cantors debate how often one should use the gesture to bring in the rest of the assembly. As mentioned earlier, there are certain times (responsorial psalm, Gospel acclamation, and other responsorial music) when a gesture is certainly needed or useful.

For other liturgical song, the general consensus is that less is more. Consider a traditional opening or closing hymn such as "Amazing Grace." The organist plays the first and last line, and the song is familiar, so there is not much question about when the people are to sing. A gesture here is unnecessary. Another time at which we can eliminate some gesturing is when there is a repeated response from the congregation. Sung responses to the general intercessions and the litany of the saints are examples of this. Once we have brought the congregation in a few times in

