The Ministry of Cantors

William Clayton Whittington

MUSC 4528: Sacred Music Internship

March 25, 2022

In *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song*, author Brian Wren explores the theological significance of what it means for a congregation to offer music as an act of worship.[1] He argues in favor of hymnody as an independent musical artform that contributes to the worship of God on equally spiritual, educational, and theological levels. As musicians in the church or synagogue, we are tasked with leading the "peoples' song," whether we serve as the organist, a chorister, or as a cantor. "Cantor," as it is commonly known today, is Latin for "singer" and is used to describe a person who leads music and similar acts of worship in Jewish or Christian tradition. The responsibilities of the cantor vary widely between and throughout the Jewish and Christians faiths. In some traditions, the title of "cantor" is used as a title for the music director. In other traditions, "cantor" is the title given to a vocal soloist who may assist in leading worship. In either case, the cantor serves in some capacity as a leader in congregational song.

Christian tradition requires little more than musical training or knowledge to serve as a cantor in worship, largely because the requirements of the position do not extend beyond the weekly worship service. In Jewish traditions, The Cantor is an ordained vocation, requiring a master's degree in sacred music from a Jewish seminary institution. The two major institutions in the United States which offer the required course of study are located in New York City. Hebrew Union College is primarily Reform Jewish in its traditions and the Jewish Theological Seminary is mainly conservative. The course of study for a Cantor includes at least one year of studies in Israel. For this reason, Hebrew Union College offers a campus in Jerusalem. Ordination as a Cantor is a fairly recent change to Jewish tradition as this was not a requirement prior to the 1970s. It should be noted that many congregations, especially small and rural synagogues, will

[1] Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 1.

hire a "cantorial soloist" if they do not have the means by which to employ an ordained Cantor. The history of Cantors in the Jewish and Christian traditions offered here will highlight some of the major events in world Judeo-Christian history that led to their modern-day formation as established, ordained and lay leaders and ministers in the synagogue and the Church, but will end with their presence in the United States alone.

I. History of the Cantor in Judaism

The Pharisaic-rabbinic law, called the "Mishnah," developed from the late Second Temple period to the first centuries of the common era.[2] The Mishnah does not include a designated definition or description of a cantor; however, many of these laws do include chapters and statements that allude to an individual leader, such as an elder or prayer leader. This is where the concept of the Cantor originated.

The first hint of this concept in the Mishnah can be found in the Mishnah Ta'anit, Chapter 2, Mishnah 1, referring to an "elder prayer leader." Tradition bases the need for such a leader on the following scripture from the eighth chapter of I Kings:

> [35]When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, and then they pray toward this place, confess your name, and turn from their sin, because you punish them, [36]then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk; and grant rain on your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance.[3]

In this period, famine and sin were interconnected and could only be countered with repentance and prayer. The Mishnah continues to call for an elder to lead this form of prayer: "The eldest of them exhorts them to repent."[4] The subsequent Mishnah (Mishnah Ta'anit, Chapter 2, Mishnah 2) dictates the requirements of this elder beyond age:

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[2] Wayne Allen, *The Cantor: From the Mishnah to Modernity* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 28.
[3] 1 Kings 8:35-36 (New Revised Standard Version)
[4] Allen, *The Cantor*, 29.

> They stood in prayer. They bring before the Ark and elder who is well versed in the words and who has children he cannot support so that his prayer will be wholehearted.[5]

According to these two passages, the best choice for a prayer leader must be the most competent elder with the deepest conviction. Further requirements would appear in the forthcoming volumes of the Mishnah, setting standards for the function of the Lector, competency of the Lector, and further standards which determine who is qualified and able to serve as a Lector.[6]

In the second, third, and fourth centuries of the common era are known as the Period of the Talmud. During this period, the Aramaic Gemara was introduced as a contemporary response to the Hebrew Mishnah. The Gemara rephrased much of the Mishnah, resolved many debates surrounding vaguely written laws, and added more to the Mishnah. The additions were called the "Talmud," particularly the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud expanded on the qualifications of a Lector by specifying the order of which a person could serve as Lector. According to the Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 16a, the Lector was chosen first among the oldest present, then the most learned, and finally a "man of stature." Alternately to the Mishnah, the Talmud continues explanations by defining the "oldest present" vs. the "most learned" as a search for the "oldest scholar" before selecting a younger scholar. If a scholar was not present, a man of stature in the community would fill the role of Lector.[7] The Talmud was emended and revised over three centuries, further defining the role of the Lector as a lay leader and its separation from the role of a rabbi. As these revisions appeared, further distinctions between laity and those allowed to serve in worship appeared, necessitating the creation of new leadership positions in the communities. A revision of the Jerusalem Talmud appeared in the

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[5] Allen, *The Cantor*, 29.
[6] Allen, *The Cantor*, 30-31.
[7] Allen, *The Cantor*, 33.

third century that describes the prayer leader with the Aramaic word “hazzan,” which directly translates to Cantor and is the earliest known description of such.[8]

As we reach the middle of the eighth century, ninety percent of the world’s Jewish population resided within the Islamic world. Coinciding with the rise of Abbasid dynasty’s rule over the Caliphate, the Babylonian Jewish community emerged as the dominant Jewish community in reference to moral and intellectual influence.[9] The Babylonian Jewish community was governed by two central institutions. The exilarch governed in secular and political affairs and the gaon served as the religious leader and supervised the academies in Sura and Pumbedita. It was here that the first prayer book and the earliest Jewish legal codes were created. At the height of his career, Sa’adiah ben Joseph al-Fayyumi (882-942) served as gaon and the head of the academy in Sura. Only pieces of his commentary on the Torah have survived, but his philosophical text, *Beliefs and Opinions*, written in 933 CE remains one of the great classics of Jewish philosophy. Near the end of this text, he included a narrative on the eight rhythmic modes and is the earliest known commentary on Jewish music.[10]

As the medieval period approaches, the Cantor commands a regular place of prominence in daily life and worship in worldwide Judaism. Many of the laws and stipulations surrounding Cantors are revised to allow younger singers to serve temporarily as a cantorial soloist so prayer may continue without interruption, and to allow blind men to serve as Cantor who had been previously barred by the Mishnah according to Rabbi Judah, who stated “He who has never seen the light of day from birth may not lead the *Shema* with its blessings.”[11] By the eleventh century, the evolution of the role began to establish laws requiring members of the community to

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[8] Allen, *The Cantor*, 40.
[9] Allen, *The Cantor*, 40.
[10] Allen, *The Cantor*, 41.
[11] Allen, *The Cantor*, 31.

contribute to the Cantor's salary. By the twelfth century, laws governing the lifestyle of the Cantor appeared, limiting their participation in secular music, barring "beardless" Cantors, and punishing "drunken" Cantors, specifically those whose drunkenness caused public embarrassment.[12]

Written by Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Samuel (1150-1217), *Sefer Hasidim*, or "The Book of the Pious," included much direction on the life and works of the Cantor. Notably similar to the medieval and Reformation-era laws enacted by the Roman Catholic Church which banned the use of secular and unauthorized melodies in worship, this text included strict prohibition of non-Jewish melodies in worship and the daily life of twelfth and thirteenth century Jews. As Christianity had reached a level of dominance in medieval Europe, it is no surprise that Christian tunes and melodies had made their way into the popular culture of the day. Rabbi Judah forbade the use of such melodies by members of the Jewish communities and prohibited a Jewish man from teaching Christians (specifically priests) the Hebrew language or Jewish melodies "lest the priest use the same melody in his foreign worship."[13]

Nearly all of these laws and writings went through multiple revisions over the proceeding centuries leading up to the seventeenth century and first Jews that landed in America. Judaism in America grew from the first twenty-three that arrived in 1654 to approximately five million today.[14] The Cantor has developed a place of stature within worldwide Judaism, which led to the development of music schools within Jewish colleges for the purpose of training and ordaining Cantors. Today, synagogues in the United States and all over the world employ qualified Cantors

[12] Allen, *The Cantor*, 54-62.
[13] Allen, *The Cantor*, 69.
[14] Mark Slobin, Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 3.

who serve as vocalists, musicians, prayer leaders, and spiritual guides for their respective communities.

II. History of the Cantor in Christianity

The origin of the Cantor in the Christian faith stems from the role of the Cantor in Jewish tradition in the centuries after the writings of the New Testament. Many sermons from the mid-second century to the seventh century have survived along with evidence of the use of music in worship, though music notation would not appear in a recognizable form in the Church until around the mid-ninth century.[15] Early Christians tried dissociating their music from that of paganism with attempts to prohibit the use of musical instruments and making unaccompanied singing the only form of music allowed in Christian worship. Of course, Christians continued the Jewish traditions of singing the Psalms, which frequently alluded to lyres, harps, flutes, trumpets, and other musical instruments, contradicting their desire to abstain from the use of such instruments.[16] The music of this period was sung in unison, often in a responsorial form with a cantor leading the music. Contrary to the traditions and requirements of the Cantor in Jewish traditions, monastic institutions in throughout Europe allowed both men and women to serve as armarius.[17]

Cantors were recognized as a legitimate ministry in the Church as early as the Carolingian Renaissance from the late eighth century.[18] Most of the surviving evidence of Cantors and their ministry in the Carolingian period through the late Middle Ages is in the Anglo-Norman English culture and tradition; therefore, much of what we know of their work in the Church during this period primarily reflects early English Catholic and Anglican culture.

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[15] James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 60.
[16] White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 60.
[17] White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 60.
[18] Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, *Medieval Cantors and Their Craft* (York: York Medieval Press, 2017), 2.

In medieval monastic life, the cantor, *armarius*, or *precentor*, was the one responsible for "keeping the time." These three titles were interchangeable titles in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries for the individual who held the office. The *Liber ordinis* of the abbey of St. Victor in Paris included one of the most complete job descriptions of the armarius, with surviving copies dating to the late twelfth century. According to this text, the armarius was charged with the supervision of all liturgy and music at the abbey. Duties of the position included the assignment of readings and chants and ensuring that the lectors and singers were prepared for these assignments. In addition to music direction, the armarius also served as the librarian and, by nature of this position, the historian for the abbey. Pending the cantor's skillset, the position may have also required the composition of tonaries and singing instruction.[19]

William of Malmesbury represents the perfect example of the medieval cantor doubling as historian. His writings include three major histories, extensive documentation of Marian miracles, and manuscripts accounting the lives of five saints. He is regarded as one of the greatest historians of the period.[20] William did not necessarily refer to himself as a cantor, though outside sources attest that he did hold the title. He primarily presents himself as a writer, librarian, and historian. William's service as a cantor greatly informed his duties as a historian in documentation and through the annual calculation of festal celebrations in assigning events to a timeline.

Music was central to medieval worship, both in the practical sense of worship and in a new fascination with theoretical aspects. As music radically shifted from the singular, unaccompanied melodies of chant to polyphonic choral works and the introduction of the organ, the primary role of the cantor as congregational song leader shifted to fill the role of the organist

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[19] Bugyis, *Medieval Cantors and Their Craft*, 3.
[20] Bugyis, *Medieval Cantors and Their Craft*, 222.

or choirmaster. Many choral directors and organists continued to hold the title of cantor in their congregations, a tradition which continues in a few liturgical denominations today.

Cantors have consistently led communal Christian worship and liturgy for nearly two thousand years. Even though their presence in worship has shifted in and out of necessity in some denominations through the centuries, many congregations continue to employ singers to fill the role. While the specifics of their responsibilities have changed, the general idea remains the same: lead congregational singing.

III. The Ministry of Cantors in Christian Worship Today and Some Practical Observations

Many churches throughout the United States employ a cantor or song leader on a weekly basis. The cantor may be a regular part of all of their worship services or just certain ones, and for various reasons. Many Roman Catholic parishes celebrate the Mass multiple times in a weekend, but may include a choir at only one or two. Other parishes may be too small to support a regular choir or have such little interest in maintaining one, necessitating a cantor to fulfill those requirements. However, not all parishes employ a cantor out of such necessity. Many parishes in both Protestant and Catholic traditions employ a cantor for further musical expression.

According to Jennifer Budziak, the cantor is required to fulfill three distinct functions in worship: the song leader, a member of the assembly, and the psalmist.[21] The first of these roles is what most people typically associate with the cantor; though this can be taken a step further to say that the cantor must also lead the entire worship experience, making sure all participants are invested with the knowledge of their given duties and know when to perform them. As the song leader, the cantor must animate the sung worship of the assembly.[22] This does not mean the

[21] Jennifer Kerr Budziak, *Guide for Cantors* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2021), 17.
[22] Diane Kodner, *Handbook for Cantors* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997), 5.

cantor must “entertain” the assembly, but must portray the various parts of the liturgy in a way that is meaningful to all in attendance. Essentially, the cantor must be a story-teller when reading or singing scripture and the liturgy.

As the song leader, it eventually becomes necessary to teach the congregation new hymns, service music, Psalm tones, and other parts of the liturgy. The quality of musical leadership from the cantor can determine the general openness of a congregation to new hymns, songs, and tunes. A cantor who can create visual and audible expression in new music will have more success in teaching it, thus confidence in the new music is necessary. In cooperation with the organist and choirmaster, the cantor must take charge in finding the best way to instruct their congregation in singing a new tune. New music can be introduced to the congregation in a variety of ways, namely through periodic hymn-singing events, a “pre-worship” run-through, or using the new tune in choral anthems or instrumental selections.

The second role of the cantor is to be a member of the assembly. As a lay leader, the cantor must effectively model what the laity is asked to do throughout worship. Just as the cantor expresses the music with confidence, so should the cantor remain fully engaged in the act of worship with the added intent of leading the congregation through the various parts of the liturgy. The cantor should promote the active participation of the assembly by encouraging them to take part in the acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs through actions gestures and bodily attitudes.[23]

The most influential text for the cantor in both Christian and Jewish tradition is the Psalter.[24] Most likely written anonymously by multiple people over several centuries, the Psalms

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[23] Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concillium* (December 4, 1963) (hereinafter, SC), ¶ 30.
[24] Budziak, *Guide for Cantors*, 13.

have been attributed to King David. The pattern of poetic verse and the general design of the book is reflective of modern-day hymnals. While it would be impossible to know for sure how the Psalms were originally set to music and sung, historians have gathered information about the instruments and languages of the period in an effort to reconstruct the sound.[25] The third and possibly most important function of the cantor is to serve as the psalmist, or the minister of the sung word, just as the lectors and readers serve as ministers of the spoken word.[26]

The words within the Psalms suggest that some verses were to be led by a single person, while others were meant to be led by a group. As in the case of Psalm 106, some Psalms were too long to permit singing from memory. Psalm 67 includes a refrain on the third and fifth verses of "Let the people praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you,"[27] indicating the verses are meant to be sung by a leader with the refrain sung responsively by the group. Other Psalms were written for use in different parts of worship, such as a procession or meditation, while others were based on a specific theme, such as "The Lord is my shepherd"[28] in the twenty-third Psalm. It is imperative for the cantor or music director to consider these aspects of each Psalm before singing them in worship. Many questions about the desired style and effect must be answered. What verses of the Psalm in questions should be sung loudly? Which ones should be softer? Will this verse be more effective is sung by a soloist rather than the choir? If the Psalm is accompanied by the organ, what registrations would best amplify the text of each verse and should I alter registrations to signal the cantor, choir, or congregation to join in singing? The possibilities for expression in the Psalms are seemingly endless with more options in cantors, choristers, instrumentation, and organ registration.

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[25] Budziak, *Guide for Cantors*, 13.
[26] Budziak, *Guide for Cantors*, 17.
[27] Psa. 67:3,5
[28] Psa. 23

In recent decades, the role of the cantor has grown increasingly necessary. Much of the deliberation at the Second Vatican Council regarding sacred music revolved around putting the liturgy back in the hands of the people. Prior to the 1960s, much of the mass was chanted or sung by the clergy, choir, or professional musicians. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium, of 1963 emphasizes the importance of the participation of "all the faithful" numerous times, not only through their right to do so, but as it is their duty:

> "Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism."[29]

Therefore, many musical compositions for the Mass have been written to encourage congregational participation. This can be seen in simple melodies for the parts of the Mass Ordinary, the inclusion of more hymnody, and new styles of responsorial Psalms. Examples of Mass settings which promote congregational participation include the works of Marty Haugen, Richard Proulx, and Michael Joncas. These composers have written Masses, hymns, and Psalm settings that are easily accessible to congregations of varying age groups and musical knowledge, many of which include "call and response" settings to be led by a cantor or choir.

The cantor must take note of when their leadership is required and when it is not. The "call and response" settings of the music are an example of when the form of the music requires leadership. Other examples include Taizé chants that typically have solo verses overlaying the repeated choral refrain, verse-refrain songs used during Communion (when people typically can't hold a hymnal or missal), and responsorial settings of the Mass. These forms are written with a cantor or soloist in mind from the start. Oftentimes, these parts can be allocated to

[29] SC, ¶ 14.

members of the choir or congregation. It is important to understand that the leadership of the cantor should be determined on a case-by-case basis. Questions to consider are whether the cantor's voice is right for the music or who knows the music to be sung best.[30]

If the form of the music does not necessarily call for the use of a song leader, the cantor must decide when their assistance is necessary. The two times when the assembly really requires the assistance of the cantor is when new music is being introduced or when the assembly lacks a competent keyboard accompanist to lead their singing.[31] This is especially necessary when the primary accompaniment instrument is a guitar, or an instrument that cannot effectively play the melody with the congregation.

Knowing when not to act as song leader is another essential responsibility of the cantor. Most of the elements of the worship and eucharistic service that require a song leader do not necessarily require the cantor to serve in this capacity and can be filled by a competent singer. The cantor should be vigilant of the places when another singer can lead as two problems can interfere with the cantor's ministry. The first problem is the danger of becoming too dominant a figure in the worship service. The second issue is that of safeguarding the cantor's role as Psalmist and minister of sung word. While the second issue seems contrary to the first, it should be noted that this is not to be an effort toward elevating the importance of the cantor in worship, but elevating the importance of the responsorial psalm.[32]

Noted choral composer Alice Parker best summarizes the duties of the cantor illustrated by three circles: "the singer allows himself or herself to be compelled by the music, those hearing feel compelled to listen, and those listening feel compelled to join in the song."[33] The top

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[30] Kathleen Harmon, *The Ministry of Cantors* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 60.
[31] Harmon, *The Ministry of Cantors*, 61.
[32] Harmon, *The Ministry of Cantors*, 61.
[33] Harmon, *The Ministry of Cantors*, 85.

priority of the cantor is to facilitate and lead the people's song. The goal should be to amplify the united voices of the assembly for worship. This responsibility is a call for the cantor to use their God-given gifts.

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