HELPING YOUR DEACON, PRIEST, OR CANTOR LEARN THE EASTER PROCLAMATION • EXSULTET

LEGEND HAS IT that Mozart would gladly have traded all his works if he could claim to have written the first line of the Exsultet. Even Wikipedia states, “Here the language of the liturgy rises to heights to which it is hard to find a parallel in Christian literature.”

But singing this can be intimidating! Six pages of endless notes and words? As singing the Exsultet is the rightful role of the Deacon, it may also be sung by a priest or a cantor. What if your deacon, priest, or cantor is not a professional musician? Here is an opportunity for music directors to work closely with them. Meanwhile, let’s break it down and “de-mystify” some of this as to better proclaim the mystery.

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TO BEGIN • A PRACTICE VIDEO sung by Fr. Jonathan Gaspar • You can see the words and music in this video:

- * YouTube • Fr. Jonathan Gaspar “Exsultet”
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVwuc_CNswY

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SUNG ONLY ONCE A YEAR at the Easter Vigil, the Easter Proclamation (Exsultet) is found in the Roman Missal. It can also be downloaded here: http://www.icelweb.org/musicfolder/openpdf.php?file=ExsultetLong.pdf

Additionally, at the end of this document is a copy with some casual notes I wrote in the margins (with non-technical terms). They are referred often to in the following:

EXULT, LET THEM EXULT

The first page, which evokes great rejoicing, consists of three “verses” or “psalm tones” (labeled in my notes) that are exactly identical in form. Learn the first two and a half lines, and you have now learned nearly the entire first page! Furthermore, the characteristic leap of a fifth, unique to this section, evokes the joyful fanfare of the trumpet—“...let the trumpet of salvation sound aloud our mighty King’s triumph!”
INVOCATION OF GOD’S BLESSING

Next (in parenthesis, which is skipped if sung by a cantor—N.B. the rubrics on Pg. 1) the deacon or priest invokes the mercy of God so that he may worthily proclaim “this candle’s perfect praises.” This parallels the Orate, Fratres which prays that our efforts will be worthy and pleasing to God. Labeled in my notes as “V1A” and “V2A” it uses the same melodic elements of the previous three “verses.”

THE NATURE OF A PREFACE

Have you ever sung the Preface? Have you heard it sung? Then the rest will sound very familiar! The next section is taken verbatim from the Preface Dialogue. It serves to introduce the main body of the proclamation, the “Praeconium Proper” which takes on the nature of a Preface. In fact it even begins “It is truly right and just…” Again, the parallels to the Liturgy of the Eucharist are unmistakable and point to heightened solemnity.

As such, this section uses the same melodic formula as a Preface. This Preface tone continues throughout the rest of the chant. Jumping off from “A”, the reciting tone is on “C”. There is an accent on “B”, which is frequently used as an alternate reciting tone. This sets up the characteristic cadence of the Preface tone. Therefore, it may be helpful for non-musicians to think of “A” as a landing spot—the chant’s strongest gravitational pull, along with “C” and “B” as additional points of gravity. (See my notes on page 2.)

I’ve marked what appear to be three “verses” or phrases. Quite remarkably, the third “verse”/phrase (page 3) describes Christ’s sacrifice as the Passover Feast—connecting the Old Covenant with the New: “These then are the feasts of Passover, in which is slain the Lamb, the one true Lamb, whose Blood anoints the doorposts of believers.”

THIS IS THE NIGHT

Halfway down page three, I’ve marked what I like to call the “Litany of This is the Night.” This is the night is referenced no fewer than seven times, often heightened with melismatic phrases. This emphasis is warranted, as this section conveys some of the most extraordinary implications of the Exsultet.

Again, the Old Covenant is connected with the New, from liberating Israel’s children from slavery in Egypt, to present day: “This is the night that even now, throughout the world, sets Christian believers apart…from the gloom of sin, leading them to grace…..” In this light of the present day, be especially mindful, that for Elect and Candidates of the Church, this indeed is the night of great importance in their lives!

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Exsultet follows shortly: “Our birth would have been no gain, had we not been redeemed.” This leads to a dramatic admission of God’s mercy through Christ’s redeeming power with this astounding assertion:

O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed completely by the Death of Christ! O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!
ACCEPT THIS CANDLE
As a bookend to the invocation to worthily “sing this candle’s perfect praises,” the Exsultet concludes with prayers that God may “accept this candle, a solemn offering...this gift from your most Holy Church.” In conclusion, there is a prayer for perseverence for the candle, that it may serve to “overcome the darkness of this night” and that “this flame be found still burning by the Morning Star: The one Morning Star that never sets...”

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SOME FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS: Most every line is a gem. But while trying to concentrate on the notes, make sure you allow the boundless blessings of this text to supersede all that you communicate to the faithful. Here’s how:

• Patience. Revel in the text and do not worry about mistakes. Make them and move right past them. Even the best of singers will make plenty of errors on this holiest of nights.

• Sing it a few times for the music director who should listen in various parts of the church for pacing and diction. Diction will be much more important than singing each note perfectly. If you feel your pacing is too slow, your diction over-enunciated, it is probably just right!

• Take the long view: The Easter Vigil comes around every year. You may have opportunity to sing this again in the future. It will get better and more comfortable each time. More importantly, the text will take hold of your heart for the rest of your life!

It is an honor to sing this. Anyone who does will be indelibly changed in spirit. For those who listen, allow its breathless beauty to steal your heart!

Soli Deo Gloria

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If anyone has questions or might even like to meet to sing through the Exsultet, email me at richard_clark@rcab.org.

Richard J. Clark
Director of Music & Organist
Archdiocese of Boston
Cathedral of the Holy Cross
The Deacon, after incensing the book and the candle, proclaims the Easter Proclamation (Exsultet) at the ambo or at a lectern, with all standing and holding lighted candles in their hands.

The Easter Proclamation may be made, in the absence of a Deacon, by the Priest himself or by another concelebrating Priest. If, however, because of necessity, a lay cantor sings the Proclamation, the words Therefore, dearest friends up to the end of the invitation are omitted, along with the greeting The Lord be with you.

The Proclamation may also be sung in the shorter form.

Exult, let them exult, the hosts of heaven,
ministers of God exult,
and let the trumpet of salvation sound a-loud our mighty King's triumph!
Be glad, let earth be glad, as glory floods her, ablaze with light from her eternal King,
let all corners of the earth be glad, knowing an end to gloom and darkness. Rejoice, let Mother Church also rejoice, arrayed with the lightning of his glory, let this holy dwelling shake with joy, filled with the mighty voices of the peoples. (Therefore,
dearest friends, standing in the awe-some glo-ry of this ho-ly light,
in-voke with me, I ask you, the mer-cy of God al-might-y,
that he, who has been pleased to number me, though un-wor-thy,
among the Le-vites, may pour into me his light un-shad-owed,
that I may sing this can-dle’s per-fect prais-es.)

(V. The Lord be with you. R. And with your spir-it.)

V. Lift up your hearts. R. We lift them up to the Lord.

V. Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. R. It is right and just.

It is truly right and just, with ardent love of mind and heart and
with devoted service of our voice, to acclaim our God in-vis-i-ble,
the al-might-y Fa-ther, and Jesus Christ, our Lord, his Son, his
Concluding phrase

On-ly Be-got-ten. Who for our sake paid Adam’s debt to the e-
ter-nal Fa-ther, and, pouring out his own dear Blood, wiped clean the re-cord of our an-cient sin-ful-ness. These then are the feasts of Pass-o-ver, in which is slain the Lamb, the one true Lamb, whose Blood anoints the door-posts of be-lievers. This is the night, when once you led our fore-bears, Is-ra-el’s chil-dren, from slaver-y in E-gypt and made them pass dry-shod through the Red Sea. This is the night that with a pil-lar of fire banished the dark-ness of sin. This is the night that even now, throughout the world, sets Christian believers apart from world-ly vic-es and from the gloom of sin, lead-ing them to grace and
joining them to his holy ones. This is the night, when

Christ broke the prison-bars of death and rose victorious

from the underworld. Our birth would have been no gain,

had we not been redeemed. O wonder of your humble care

for us! O love, O charity beyond all telling, to ransom

a slave you gave away your Son! O truly necessary sin of

Adam, destroyed completely by the Death of Christ!

O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!

O truly blessed night, worthy alone to know the time and

hour when Christ rose from the underworld! This is the night

of which it is written: The night shall be as bright as day,
dazzling is the night for me, and full of gladness. The sanctifying
down power of this night dispels wickedness, washes faults away,
restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to mourners, drives
out hatred, fosters concord, and brings down the mighty.

On this, your night of grace, O holy Father, accept this candle, a
solemn offering, the work of bees and of your servants' hands,
an evening sacrifice of praise, this gift from your most holy
Church. But now we know the praises of this pillar, which glow-
ing fire ignites for God's honor, a fire into many flames
divided, yet never dimmed by sharing of its light, for it is
fed by melting wax, drawn out by mother bees to build a torch
so precious. O truly blessed night, when things of heaven are wed to those of earth, and divine to the human.

Therefore, O Lord, we pray you that this candle, hallowed to the honor of your name, may persevere undimmed, to overcome the darkness of this night. Receive it as a pleasing fragrance, and let it mingle with the lights of heaven. May this flame be found still burning by the Morning Star: the one Morning Star who never sets, Christ your Son, who, coming back from death's domain, has shed his peaceful light on humanity, and lives and reigns for ever and ever. R. Amen.

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