

The Role of the Cantor

A **cantor** is an experienced singer who, while remaining a part of the congregation, leads the people's singing of the liturgy – that is, the formal, public worship of God. This article explains the role of the cantor in the Byzantine (Ruthenian) Catholic Church.

In Eastern Europe, from which the founders of this Church came, the *kantor* or *diak* was an important member of the community. In many cases, he was the village school teacher, and taught catechism as well. But his primary role was to begin the singing in church, and remind the faithful of the music for each hymn. The musicologist Johann von Gardner described the liturgical singing of the Carpathian mountain region between the First and Second World Wars:

... in all village churches... congregational singing of all the services in their entirety has been practiced exclusively, including the hymns of the “proper,” utilizing the full range of tones and melodies... The cantors – the more experienced chanters among the parishioners – who stood on the kleros, began the chanting. As soon as those present recognized the melody, the whole church sang: they sang all the stichera, all the troparia, all the irmoi – in a word, everything that the typikon indicated was to be sung. They sang in unison, and whoever was able added a parallel melody line or improvised a bass line. The impression produced was one of extraordinary power. But the main thing was that those present were not passive listeners, they were not “the public,” but were aware that they themselves assisted at the performance of the divine services.

Note: although only adult men are ordained to the minor clerical order of lector/cantor, many women and young people have provided distinguished service as lay cantors. In this article, the words “cantor”, “he” and “him” should be taken to refer to cantors of either gender.

The cantor leads the singing of the faithful

The cantor is **not a soloist**. Almost all the parts of the service that are chanted or sung by a single voice are assigned to other individuals:

- The bishop or priest chants the blessings and prayers of the service.
- The deacon chants the petitions of the litanies, as well as directions to the assembly (e.g. “Wisdom! Be attentive!”), and the Gospel reading at the Divine Liturgy.
- The lector chants the Old and New Testament readings (other than the Gospel), the verses at the prokeimenon and alleluia, and those psalms that are assigned to a single voice.

The cantor, on the other hand, sings **with the congregation**. By beginning each hymn with a firm, clear voice, at a reasonable pitch and an appropriate tempo, he indicates the melody, pitch and rhythm to be used, enabling all those present to **sing together**.

(There are a few points in the services at which the cantor does sing alone. For example, at Vespers and Matins, the cantor sings the psalm verses or *pripivy* which set the melody for the next hymns that follow; and at Christmas, he sings the troparion of the Nativity in the middle of the church, holding a lighted candle. But these are exceptional cases.)

The cantor is a skilled liturgical singer

First and foremost, the cantor must be a man or woman of **prayer**. Liturgical singing that is not prayer is a useless endeavor. The cantor should strive to develop and foster an active prayer life and a regular rule of prayer.

The cantor must have a **voice** that is adequate to be heard in church, to carry a tune, to sing tunefully, and to lead the singing of the congregation, while being neither a soloist nor a follower.

The cantor must have a **knowledge of the liturgical services** – both the text and music of each service, and the basic theology and meaning behind the service. This also requires a familiarity with the **liturgical books** that contain the hymns for each service, feast and commemoration, and a knowledge of those places where exceptions occur – for example, during the Paschal Season.

The cantor must have a **knowledge of the Church's plainchant and any other music to be used**. In our churches, this consists of the traditional *prostopinije* or plainchant of our tradition, along with with some additional music which has become accepted in our parishes, or in the particular parish where the cantor serves.

The cantor must possess a certain amount of **general musical knowledge**. Though the ability to read musical notation “at sight” is both commendable and recommended, it is more important that the cantor be able to read, follow and sing a variety of already-learned music, with one melody following another in immediate succession.

The cantor must **pay attention** to what is going on in the church and in the service, and **adjust the singing appropriately**.

The cantor assists the clergy in the care of the parish

The cantor will interact on a regular basis with the priest and deacon, and on an occasional basis with other clergy (at funerals, special events, and so on). He may be called on to assist in house blessings and at special events, and may also help the pastor stay aware of what is going on in the parish. He needs to take responsibility for the church singing, while deferring respectfully to the decisions of the pastor, the leader of the parish.

The cantor is a teacher

Through his singing, the cantor helps the faithful learn the services, theology, and tradition of our church. He should be able to answer their questions, and be willing to learn more when he is uncertain.

In taking responsibility for the singing in his parish, the cantor should also instruct those, especially the young, who might become cantors. Rather than holding on firmly to the role of “the cantor”, he should encourage others to assist in singing the services, train church readers, encourage prospective cantors, and teach the next generation of cantors all that they ought to know.