

Simple Psalter

for Year A

J. Michael Joncas



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Composer's Notes

My “simple psalms” project is intended to help worshiping communities with limited musical resources to sing the appointed Responsorial Psalm for the Sundays and Holydays of the Liturgical Year. I have set the texts as they appear in the English-language *Lectionary for Mass, Second Typical Edition* (1998) (antiphons) and the *Abbey Psalms and Canticles* (verses). All of the antiphons are set metrically (i.e., not in the free rhythm of chant) because I believe that in most cases in the English-speaking world this makes their texts more memorable and easier to sing for the assembly. The verses are set to rhythmic psalm-tones similar to those of Gelineau psalmody (i.e., speech-rhythm settings of the text over pulsed accompaniment [“sprung rhythm”]). Unlike the published Gelineau psalms, however, I have notated the way I propose that the texts to be sung since I find that it is sometimes difficult for cantors to sing the Gelineau tones as notated using only whole notes. A suggested tempo appears at the beginning of each psalm as a metronome mark; this tempo can be adjusted depending on the acoustic properties of the space in which the liturgy is celebrated.

Tones are assigned to each psalm based on the genre (*Gattung*) of the psalm-text, following the pattern of my friend and colleague, Art Zannoni, as follows:

Tone 1A: Hymn of Praise, Motivation from Nature

Tone 1B: Hymn of Praise, Motivation from History or Torah

Tone 1C: Song of Zion

Tone 1D: Processional

Tone 1E: Hymn of Praise to YHWH as King

Tone 2A: Royal Coronation or Anniversary

Tone 2C: Royal Song of Thanksgiving

Tone 2D: Royal Marriage Song

Tone 3: Prophetic Psalm

Tone 4A: Community Lament

Tone 4B: Individual Lament

Tone 4C: Prayer for the Sick

Tone 5A: Communal Thanksgiving

Tone 5B: Individual Thanksgiving

Tone 6: Psalm of Confidence

Tone 8A: Wisdom Psalm 1

Tone 8B: Wisdom Psalm 2

(Missing tone numbers indicate a psalm-genre that does not appear in the Sunday and Solemnity Lectionary.)

I would here like to acknowledge the influence of three church composers whose psalm settings have influenced this project. I have already mentioned Fr. Joseph Gelineau, S.J., whose groundbreaking creation of “pulsed” psalm-tones set to sprung-rhythm texts made one of the metrical characteristics of Hebrew biblical psalms and canticles available for vernacular singing. A second influence was Howard Hughes, S.M., whose assigning of particular tones to particular genres of psalms based in contemporary form-critical analysis of

the psalm-texts, has been eye- and ear-opening for me. Finally Paul Inwood was the first to call my attention to the idea of “psalm tunes” (rather than “psalm tones”). He showed how many English-language folk songs adjusted the fundamental melodic curves of their tones, eliding some syllables while assigning multiple notes to a single syllable based on the number of syllables needed.

Following the practice articulated in the *Lectionary for Mass*, these Responsorial Psalms would be performed as follows. After a period of silence to reflect on the previous scriptural reading proclaimed, a keyboard (or melody instrument) would play the melody for the Antiphon alone. The cantor would immediately intone the Antiphon with a keyboard providing accompaniment, if needed. The assembly would then repeat the Antiphon with a keyboard (and optionally other instruments) providing accompaniment, if needed. The cantor would then sing the assigned psalm verses with the assembly repeating the Antiphon after each verse.

While I believe these “simple psalms” can effectively be sung *a cappella* or with simple keyboard accompaniment, some communities might want to enhance their singing of the Responsorial Psalm with more elaborate music.

The optional harmony additions to the antiphons can be performed in a multitude of ways.

Vocally, the harmonies:

- 1) might be sung by soloists with the rest of the choir singing the antiphon in unison with the assembly.
- 2) might be sung by the soprano and alto sections of the choir with the men singing the antiphon in unison with the assembly.
- 3) If an SATB texture is desired, the soprano and bass sections sing the antiphon in unison with the assembly, with the tenors singing the higher harmonies an octave lower than written and the altos singing the lower harmonies as notated.

Instrumentally,

- 1) the SA harmonies might be played by C treble wind or string instruments, either as notated or an octave higher depending on where it best fits the instruments’ tessitura.
- 2) the keyboardist should keep the pulse constant under the singing of the verses, but might repeat the chords as quarter notes rather than half notes, or even arpeggiate the chords as eighth notes if desired.

My preference is that the Verses be sung by a solo cantorial voice since that seems to ensure that the psalm-text be clearly sung and understood. Most of the time I have set the psalm-text for two phrases on one breath; the cantor should feel free to take a breath at an appropriate place if singing both phrases on one breath is too taxing. It is also possible to alternate male and female solo voices on the Verses, possibly with both singing the final Verse in octaves. It would also be possible to have the choir sing the verses (or just the final Verse) in unison, as long as their articulation keeps the psalm-text intelligible.

As the *Lectionary for Mass* reminds us: “The working of the Holy Spirit is needed if the word of God is to make what we hear outwardly have its effect inwardly. Because of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and support, the word of God becomes the foundation of the liturgical celebration and the rule and support of all our life. The working of the Holy Spirit precedes, accompanies and brings to completion the whole celebration of the Liturgy. But the Spirit also brings home to each person individually everything that in the proclamation of the word of God is spoken for the good of the whole gathering of the faithful” [9]. I pray that my musical settings of these “simple psalms” may help Christ’s faithful, individually and collectively, hear the word of God and put it into practice in their lives. *Soli Deo gloria*.

(Fr. Jan) Michael Joncas
St. Paul, MN

Psalm 122: Let Us Go Rejoicing

First Sunday of Advent, Year A

Psalm 122:1-2, 3-4, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9

Michael Joncas
Tone 1C: Song of Zion

Antiphon

Strong, march-like ♩ = 100

Harmony

Melody

Let us go re - joic - ing to the house, to the

Let us go re - joic - ing to the house, to the house of the

(Capo 2:) (D) E (Bm) C#m (Em) F#m (D) E

house of the Lord. Let us go re - joic - ing to the house of the

Lord. Let us go re - joic - ing to the house, to the house of the

(E) F# (A) B (D) E (Bm) C#m (Em) F#m (A7) B7

First Sunday of Advent, Year A

Lord.

Verse 1

Lord. 1. I re - joiced when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the

(D)
E

(D)
E

(Em)
F#m

(A7)
B7

Ant.

LORD." And now our feet are stand-ing with-in your gates, O Je-ru - sa - lem.

(Bm)
C#m

(G)
A

(D)
E

(Em7)
F#m7

(D)
E

(A)
B

Verse 2

2. Je - ru - sa-lem is built as a ci - ty bond-ed as one to - geth-er. It is

(D)
E

(Em)
F#m

(A7)
B7

(Bm)
C#m

First Sunday of Advent, Year A

Ant.

there that the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD.

(G) A (D) E (Em7) F#m7 (D) E (A) B

Verse 3

3. As it is de-creed for Is-ra-el, to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

(D) E (Em) F#m (A7) B7 (Bm) C#m

Ant.

There were set the thrones for judg-ment, the thrones of the house of Da - vid.

(G) A (D) E (Em7) F#m7 (D) E (A) B

First Sunday of Advent, Year A

Verse 4

4. For the peace of Je - ru - sa - lem pray, "May they pros-per, those who love you." May

(D) E (Em) F#m (A7) B7 (Bm) C#m

This block contains the musical notation for Verse 4. It features a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a piano accompaniment in grand staff. The lyrics are: "4. For the peace of Je - ru - sa - lem pray, 'May they pros-per, those who love you.' May". The piano part includes chord markings: (D) E, (Em) F#m, (A7) B7, and (Bm) C#m.

peace a-bide in your walls, and se - cu - ri - ty be in your tow - ers. *Ant.*

(G) A (D) E (Em7) F#m7 (D) E (A) B

This block contains the musical notation for the antiphonal response. It features a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a piano accompaniment in grand staff. The lyrics are: "peace a-bide in your walls, and se - cu - ri - ty be in your tow - ers. *Ant.*". The piano part includes chord markings: (G) A, (D) E, (Em7) F#m7, (D) E, and (A) B.

Verse 5

5. For the sake of my fam-'ly and friends, let me say "Peace up-on you." For the

(D) E (Em) F#m (A7) B7 (Bm) C#m

This block contains the musical notation for Verse 5. It features a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a piano accompaniment in grand staff. The lyrics are: "5. For the sake of my fam-'ly and friends, let me say 'Peace up-on you.' For the". The piano part includes chord markings: (D) E, (Em) F#m, (A7) B7, and (Bm) C#m.

First Sunday of Advent, Year A

Ant.

sake of the house of the LORD, our God, I will seek good things for you.

(G) A (D) E (Em7) F#m7 (D) E (A) B

The musical score is written for a vocal part and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is G major (three sharps: F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line begins with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) followed by a half note (C5), a quarter note (B4), and a half note (A4). The piano accompaniment consists of a right hand with chords and a left hand with a simple bass line. The chords are labeled as (G) A, (D) E, (Em7) F#m7, (D) E, and (A) B. The piece concludes with an 'Ant.' (Antiphona) marking.

Psalm 72: Justice Shall Flourish

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A

Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17

Michael Joncas

Tone 5B: Individual Thanksgiving

Antiphon

With strength ♩ = 80

Harmony

Jus - tice shall flour - ish, flour - ish in his time, and

Melody

Jus - tice shall flour - ish in his time, and

D G D A

full - ness of peace for ev - er.

full - ness of peace for ev - er.

G A D Em⁷ A D

Ant.

more. He shall rule from sea to sea from the Riv-er to the bounds of the earth.

A SUS4 A G⁶ F^{#7} Bm D Em Em⁷ A SUS4 A

Verse 3

3. For he shall res-cue the need-y when they cry, the poor who have no one to

D D/C[#] D SUS² D Em⁷ Dmaj⁷

Ant.

help. He will have pi-ty on the weak and the need-y, and save the lives of the need-y.

A SUS4 A G⁶ F^{#7} Bm D Em Em⁷ A SUS4 A

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A

Verse 4

4. May his name en - dure for - ev - er, his name con - ti - nue like the sun. Ev-'ry

Chords: D, D/C#, DSUS2, D, Em7, Dmaj7, ASUS4, A

Ant.

tribe shall be blest in him, all na-tions shall call him bless - ed.

Chords: Em7, F#7, Bm, D, Em, Em7, ASUS4, A