

SINGING ENGLISH CHANT

With a little practice, English chant is very simple to read and sing. It can also be polished to a very high standard.

It is easiest to explain the method of singing English chant with an example; so let us take the opening verse of Miles Coverdale's Psalm 54(55):

Hear my prayer, O God:
and hide not thyself from my petition.

You might find this shown in an Anglican Psalter with markings (or "pointing") like this:

Hear my | prayer, O | God: *
and hide not thy- | self from | my pe- | tion.

This should be sung as follows (using a Mode IV chant from this book as an example):

Single chant

IV

Hear my | prayer, O | God:

and hide not thy- | self from | my pe - | ti - tion.

The following rules should be obeyed when singing the chant:

1. The words should be pronounced clearly and with natural emphasis.
2. **The length of each note should be determined entirely by the natural pronunciation of the words.** Therefore, whether the note is shown as semibreve or as a minim (and so on) does *not* principally determine the rhythm of the chant; rather the music is almost always governed by the natural pronunciation of the words.¹
3. The chant should be delivered at speaking pace (it is essential that the chant is not sung too slowly or else it will become rather dirge-like!).

¹ N.B There may be occasions when the rhythm of the music should be considered when singing the chant – for example, when there is a dotted minim followed by a crotchet, rather than just the usual two minims, there may be a slight elongation of the syllable on the dotted minim.

4. At the double bar in the middle of the phrase, a short pause for breath should usually be observed. At the end of the phrase, a slightly longer pause should be observed.

When singing text that has already been pointed, the following rules are followed:

1. The vertical lines in the text (shown also as apostrophes in some Anglican Psalters) correspond to the bar lines of the music.
2. If a bar contains just one semibreve note (take, for example, the first bar of the music above) then singing is very straightforward – as is evident from the above example, one simply recites the words on that one note.
3. If a bar contains two notes then the final syllable is sung on the second note, with the rest of the text being sung on the first (unless otherwise instructed by a dot or hyphen inserted into the text). So in the example below from verse 17, the sopranos, or the cantor, when singing “call upon” sing all but one of the syllables on G (“call up-”), moving to A on the final syllable (“on”). If there is only one syllable then the minims are treated as slurred (for example “Lord” and “shall”, from verse 17 below).

As for me, I will | call upon | God:
and the | Lord | shall | save me.

Single chant

IV

As for me, I will | call up- on | God:

and the | Lo - - rd | sha - - ll | save me.

The reader will also note that, in this example, the bass line contains two slurred crotchets in the penultimate bar. Where these occur (and in this volume, such slurred crotchets will only ever occur at the end of the bar), the final syllable should be sung to the two slurred crotchets (so on the previous page, the “pe” from “petition” is sung by the bass over these two notes, and in the example on this page, “shall” continues to be sung slurred). (Experienced chanters may wish to treat such crotchets as unslurred, and instead decide on a phrase-by-phrase basis how a given phrase should be sung; however, the author considers slurring to be a more straightforward approach and so has used this here.)