

# Who's Singing the Exsultet This Year?

## Music for Holy Week and Easter

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### Introduction

The *Exsultet* is part of the ancient tradition of Easter. It contains both story and history, and it is traditional to tell these at key celebrations of salvation history. It connects us to past liturgies reaching back to the very earliest people of the Church, and in reaching back, it makes that past and all that went between present again in this time. It makes present all those historical connections and resonances from its own time – the psalms, the great songs of Moses and Miriam, the prayers of praise of the early Church. It embodies the concept of a preface: a specific prayer evoked by and tailored to a specific liturgy; and it has the function of a preface: to expand on the people's consent, enlarging on their reasons for praise and thanksgiving, reminding them of the meaning and breadth of the occasion.

It is unique and beautiful, a piece of design perfection in its own time so well-made that it is still treasured and valued. It fills a unique role, and does it so well that it has never been replaced. It does, however, undergo development, if not in its text then in the mode of its presentation and its reception by the assembly, through its musical setting. It must be continually evolving but it must never change, since we are alive and always changing and growing but our identity, our connections through time and through cultures are our anchor point, our defining characteristics.

### Singing the Exsultet

The challenge of finding someone capable, to sing what is one of the highest points of the liturgy on the most important night of the year is a serious one, especially challenging because

- a. the *Exsultet* is a single very long sustained song of praise, with little repetition, requiring something like an Olympian effort on the part of the cantor to maintain pitch, and the interest of the assembly<sup>1</sup>
- b. the language is quite archaic<sup>2</sup>, the content is quite abstract and the mode of expression complex, especially in the 2010 ICEL translation<sup>3</sup>, making it more difficult to convey its full sense meaningfully
- c. it is often sung in the dark, presenting further challenges to the cantor and no diversions or other focus points for the assembly, making it even harder to sustain their attention.

### Challenges

- The *Exsultet* presents its own challenges, but it represents many of the challenges which liturgical musicians face regularly:
  - ⤴ it should be sung well, with clarity and musically competently
  - ⤴ it should be sung joyfully, even ecstatically, as the first outpouring of joy and excitement on the night of nights – that is, it should be sung meaningfully according to its unique meaning and purpose
  - ⤴ and it should be sung in such a way that the whole assembly is fully engaged.

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1 The *Exsultet* or Easter Proclamation should be sung by the celebrant, or failing that, the deacon, or a lay cantor(s) or choir; participation by the assembly is at least desirable (Peter Elliott)

2 Text has an extremely ancient connection to the early Church, which still resonates after centuries of adaptation and translation. It is also closely connected to Scripture, hence its retention for catechetical as well historical reasons.

3 Unaltered ICEL translations have the advantage of being universal in the Latin rite. The new (2010) translation is backed by most current research. Its style of language is meant to contribute to its solemnity and grandeur.

- Different parishes have different musical resources available to them. Some may have actively singing clergy; some may have a trained four-part choir, some make do with a single cantor and organist. Many parishes call on a 'pop-up' choir for major celebrations, a fluctuating group of volunteers with varied skills and experience with limited time and uneven levels of commitment. Most parishes face challenges in terms of resources and rehearsal time when approaching Holy Week and Easter, if for no other reason than the large amount of music which needs to be prepared, placing heavy demands on rehearsal time.
- The *Exsultet* embodies the perennial problem of places in the liturgy that
  - ✘ demand music which is only sung once a year [eg the Litany of the Saints; acclamations for blessing the Easter water; the Reproaches; Adoration of the Cross; Pange Lingua; Sequences];
  - ✘ have a difficult and unalterable texts;
  - ✘ may not be replaced by an easier well-known song;
  - ✘ inspire a burning desire to do liturgy and music well, and celebrate with beauty and grace.

## Strategies

- What strategies can we use, and are we using to deal with this broad range of music with the limited and varied human resources available to us? As with all liturgical music, we need to:
  - ⤴ address the text with music which speaks to the current generation while remaining in keeping with the ancient traditional character of the text and its position in the liturgy [A 'map' of the *Easter Vigil* is provided to show the order of rites and music that is needed.]
  - ⤴ use music as an opportunity for the assembly to participate as fully as possible, so that they engage with the text and express its joy and excitement with their own voice, listening, responding and lifting their hearts in song
  - ⤴ optimise our limited musical resources by providing flexible options for soloists, choir and assembly.
- We need to **choose well** and select music that works for our particular circumstances at any given time. For instance, if the priest is not prepared to sing the *Exsultet* and no deacon is available, then it falls to a lay cantor, and in the absence of a trained cantor, whatever singers are available. This particular setting of the *Exsultet*, 'This is the Night', provides a range of options for cantor(s), choir (trained or untrained) and assembly:
  - ⤴ it is melodic and relatively easy for cantors to learn; dividing the text between two cantors means that each only has to learn half; the repetitive melody and consistent rhythm helps cantors to cope with differing line lengths and fitting syllables to notes
  - ⤴ it works equally well with two cantors and unison choir/assembly, or a single cantor and SAB choir, depending on available resources and rehearsal time, or it may be sung by unison choir divided into two sections
  - ⤴ it uses the ICEL text (shorter version)
  - ⤴ it provides variety to help keep the assembly engaged, in the number of voices, cantors and choir, and in the way the melody passes from one cantor to another and is supported by the growing volume and excitement of the choir parts
  - ⤴ is based on a limited set of musical phrases, making it easier for the assembly to learn so that they can join in the repeated *ostinato*.
- We can **multi-purpose** melodies and texts, using a single thread, woven and re-woven.

The antiphon, 'One Lord, One Faith', is used to welcome candidates for Reception into the Church. It is very simple and repetitive, but only sung once or twice. The setting of 'Veni Sancte Spiritus,'<sup>4</sup> sung while the anointing of Confirmation is carried out, uses the same melody with a different text. By the time this text is sung, the assembly is already familiar with the melody. This antiphon is usually repeated more times, so optional SSAB parts are provided to add interest. The two liturgical moments, welcoming candidates for Reception into the Church and conferring the sacrament of Confirmation, are notionally connected by using the same melody.

- With limited human resources and time, we need to **invest wisely**. With limited rehearsal time, it makes sense to invest your time and energy so as to optimise your returns, such as learning two songs which can be used together to create harmony. For instance, 'Springs of Water' is sung only once or twice when the Easter water is blessed during the Easter Vigil. Later in the Easter Vigil, the antiphon 'I Saw Water Flowing' is sung during the Sprinkling Rite after the assembly renews their Baptismal promises. It usually needs to be repeated many times while the sprinkling rite continues. If we take the time to learn 'Springs of Water', we have an interesting descant for 'I Saw Water Flowing', which also expresses a strong connection between the blessing of the Easter water and the Baptismal asperges rite. 'I Saw Water Flowing' has a repeated 'Alleluia' part for low voices. This may be used as a Gospel Acclamation later in the Vigil or at any time during the Easter season. The sprinkling rite with its antiphon and descant may replace the penitential act at any time during the Easter season, carrying these connections through the whole season.
- Another strategy we can use which both optimises our use of resources and maximises participation by the whole assembly is to take a familiar chant or melody and adapt it, adding other parts to add interest or create harmony: we can **sing smart**. 'Adoration of the Cross' is built on the familiar chant melody, adapted to fit a regular three/four beat. The response melody is given to the assembly, so that they can continue the repetitive chant while the choir begins to add complexity with two other melodies, each simple in its own way but when added together, they make a whole that is challenging, interesting, complex and powerful in conveying the message.
- It makes sense to use music wherever possible that can be used in a variety of liturgies. We can **re-use and recycle** music that we have learned for one context in other liturgies throughout the year. 'One Lord, One Faith' can be sung at parish celebrations of baptism and confirmation, and other liturgies, 'Veni Sancte Spiritus' at Pentecost and Confirmation. A good setting of the Easter Sequence could be sung as hymn throughout Easter season.<sup>5</sup> 'I Saw Water Flowing' can be sung at the dedication of a church or the anniversary of the dedication. 'Ubi Caritas', sung at the Preparation of Gifts at the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, can equally be sung throughout the year during the Communion procession or preparation of the gifts. Its text also makes it appropriate for celebrations of marriage.
- It also makes sense to choose music that allows for flexible arrangements. We can **adapt and adjust**: for example, 'Adoration of the Cross' can be sung in different arrangements, in two parts or three parts, in unison, accompanied or unaccompanied, depending on the size

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4 It is not essential to sing while the sacrament is being conferred, but it can have the effect of unifying the assembly in prayer for the Holy Spirit. Care must be taken not to obscure the words of the rite. The Sequence of Pentecost could also be sung here.

5 Just as the Easter Sequence can also function as a hymn which can be sung at any time during the Easter season, the Sequence of Pentecost while ancient in origin can be sung at Pentecost, at Confirmation, and even at funerals.

or level of expertise of the singers. For an inexperienced choir, a simple arrangement can be used this year; next year the same choir will be able to tackle it again, with perhaps an added level of complexity. This year the *Exsultet* may be sung by the choir in unison singing the cantor parts; next year two choristers may take the cantor parts and the choir may tackle the harmony parts, and as time goes on, the assembly may be encouraged to sing the *ostinato* chant.

### **More Ideas**

- More flexible ideas to optimise our resources and meet the growing number of challenges for liturgical musicians:
  - ⤴ think creatively: adapt music and texts that we know already and love, eg. using the familiar text of 'Sing My Tongue' (*Pange Lingua*) set to a new melody;
  - ⤴ use repetition to reassure the assembly and guarantee success;
  - ⤴ don't be afraid of heavy pruning of outdated music and fearless introduction of new music;
  - ⤴ occasionally introduce an excellent soloist, a single brilliant instrumentalist or a piece for choir only, to give the assembly a rest;
  - ⤴ assign specific roles in the liturgy, eg the litany, or the responsorial psalms at the Easter Vigil, to specific groups such as a youth group or a specialist choir.

### **CONCLUSION**

As pastoral musicians we have a responsibility to provide nourishment spiritually, pastorally, musically and liturgically to the whole People of God. Facing the challenges of making celebrations as beautiful as possible for major celebrations such as the Easter Triduum, we can use a range of strategies to make the most of our musical resources and optimise the participation of the assembly. As we have seen with the *Exsultet*, if we can meet this challenge, we can solve anything. When we realise that every liturgy is new and fresh, an opportunity to try new things and to learn, then we are allowing the Holy Spirit to do all the work, which is as it should be.

## Easter Vigil Music Outline

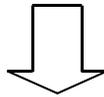
		<i>Notes</i>
<b>I. THE SERVICE OF LIGHT</b>	<b><u>Easter Proclamation</u></b> <i>(Exsultet)</i>	May be sung by priest, deacon, cantor(s), and/or choir and/or assembly
<b>II. LITURGY of the WORD</b>	Readings	Minimum of 3 readings, up to seven (Exodus 14 reading is never to be omitted).
	<b><u>Responsorial Psalms/ Canticles</u></b>	Cantor(s) and/ or assembly NB: may not be replaced by 'trivial songs' Each psalm is followed by a prayer.
	<b><u>Gloria</u></b>	Lights and bells
	Epistle [ <i>Romans 6:3-11</i> ]	
	<b><u>Responsorial Psalm/ Gospel Acclamation</u></b>	Solemn Alleluia – may be intoned by celebrant, by cantor or by choir
	Gospel	
	Homily	
<b>III (i) LITURGY OF BAPTISM</b> <i>(i) Where there is a baptism</i>		
<b>A. RITE OF BAPTISM OF THE ELECT</b>	<b><u>The Litany of Saints</u></b>	Sung by one or more cantors with assembly responding Note: Revised ICEL (2010) translation
	Blessing of Baptismal Water <b><u>Acclamation</u></b>	At the end of the blessing prayer an acclamation which is Baptismal in character is sung, eg. 'Springs of water bless the Lord'
	Profession of Faith by Elect	
	Baptism(s) <b><u>Acclamation</u></b> Clothing in white garment Presentation of Baptismal candle	An acclamation may be sung after each Baptism, eg 'Rejoice you newly-baptised' or 'You have put on Christ'

<p><b>B. RITE OF RECEPTION</b></p> <p><i>(if there are candidates for Reception into the Church)</i></p>	<p><b><u>Song/Acclamation</u></b></p> <p>Profession of Faith</p> <p>Act of Reception</p>	<p>A suitable song or acclamation may be sung as candidates for Reception into the Church come forward, eg 'There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism'</p>
<p><b>C. CELEBRATION OF CONFIRMATION</b></p>	<p><b><u>Song/Acclamation</u></b></p> <p>Laying on of hands</p>	<p>A suitable song or acclamation may be sung as candidates for Confirmation come forward, or between baptisms and Confirmation if no-one has been received into the Church, eg 'You have put on Christ'</p>
	<p>Anointing with Chrism</p> <p><b><u>Song</u></b></p>	<p>A suitable song may be sung during the anointing, 'Veni Sancte Spiritus'</p>
<p><b>D. RENEWAL OF BAPTISMAL PROMISES BY THE ASSEMBLY</b></p>	<p><b><u>Sprinkling Rite</u></b></p>	<p>Antiphon which is baptismal in character eg 'I Saw water flowing from the temple' is sung throughout the rite</p>
	<p>Prayer of the Faithful</p>	
<p><b>III(ii) LITURGY OF BAPTISM</b></p> <p><i><b><u>(ii) If there are no Baptisms</u></b></i></p>	<p><b><u>The Litany of Saints</u></b></p>	<p>Sung by one or more cantors with assembly responding</p> <p>Note: Revised ICEL translation</p>
	<p>Blessing of Baptismal Water</p> <p><b><u>Acclamation</u></b></p>	<p>At the end of the blessing prayer an acclamation which is Baptismal in character is sung, eg.'Springs of water bless the Lord'</p>
	<p>Renewal of Baptismal Promises by the Assembly</p>	
	<p><b><u>Sprinkling Rite</u></b></p>	<p>Antiphon which is baptismal in character eg 'I saw water flowing from the temple' is sung throughout the rite</p>
	<p>Prayer of the Faithful</p>	
<p><b><u>IV. LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST</u></b></p>		

# Easter Vigil

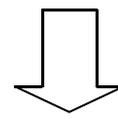
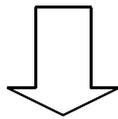
## Service of Light

C: Christ our Light R: Thanks be to God  
Easter Proclamation: *Exsultet*



## Liturgy of the Word

Readings (between 3 and 7)  
Responsorial Psalms (after each reading)  
GLORIA  
Epistle  
Gospel Acclamation: Alleluia Psalm  
Gospel  
Homily



*If Baptism is to take place*

### **A. RITE OF BAPTISM**

Litany of the Saints  
Blessing of Baptismal Water  
Profession of Faith by the Elect  
Baptism  
Clothing in white garment  
Presentation of Baptismal candle

### **B. RITE OF RECEPTION**

Profession of Faith by candidates  
Act of Reception

### **C. SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION**

Laying on of Hands  
Anointing with Chrism

### **D. RENEWAL OF BAPTISMAL PROMISES BY THE ASSEMBLY**

Sprinkling Rite

*If no Baptism is to take place*

Litany of the Saints  
Blessing of Baptismal Water  
Renewal of Baptismal Promises  
by the Assembly  
Sprinkling Rite



Prayer of the Faithful

## Liturgy of the Eucharist