

Conrad von Zabern

De modo bene cantandi (1473)

[published 1474]

Translated by

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Introduction

According to the *Grove Dictionary* Conrad von Zabern achieved a distinguished career both as a theologian and preacher and also as a music theorist. The standard modern edition of his works, edited by Karl-Werner Gumpel, credits him with three treatises, including the present one, which also exists in German translation. Little is known of his lifespan except that he received the baccalaureate from Heidelberg in 1428, which he could reasonably have received as early as the age of 16 but more likely no later than by twenty. He dated the *De modo bene cantandi* as 1473, though it was published in 1474, and *Grove* suggests that he died prior to 1481, making him reasonably close to the three score and ten.

Von Zabern gained the reputation of an excellent teacher, though one who could be somewhat prickly, as Joseph Dyer notes in his article on von Zabern.¹ Certainly von Zabern mentions in the present text some of his remarks to others on their faults, which comments would have been less than tactful. In this connection it should be noted that Dyer's article includes an English translation of the complete sixth precept, which constitutes about forty percent of the total treatise, excluding the two appendices. The present translation is, however the only available English translation of the entire treatise. Dyer's concentration on the sixth precept is understandable, for in it is concentrated the most information directly related to performance practice. The previous five precepts are not at all without merit and are particularly valuable for understanding the total picture of why von Zabern has been credited as the first extant author on the subject that we would consider modern vocal pedagogy. To say that he is the first extant author on the subject is probably tantamount to saying "the first" without further qualification. Nothing recognizably equally modern in conception appeared again until Maffei's *Lettere* of 1562, almost a full century later.

¹ Joseph Dyer, "Singing with Proper Refinement from "De Modo Bene Cantandi" (1474)," *Early Music* 6, no.2 (1978).

Von Zabern was apparently well aware of the novelty of his approach, for he clearly felt compelled to defend it preemptively. Prior to the first precept he addresses a putative opponent who objects to von Zabern's claim to teaching singing in some special way when his treatise says little about teaching singing, i.e., that he claims to teach the method of singing well but says nothing about teaching singing as traditionally understood. The hypothetical criticism arises from a consciousness of what had previously been considered vocal pedagogy in the medieval treatises; this had less to do with the modern concept of vocal pedagogy than with music fundamentals. Drawing both on the treatises and on contemporary descriptions of singing instruction it is possible to reconstruct that Latin diction, memorization of chant repertoire, music notation (when that ultimately became widespread in use), the nature of the modes, the ratios and proper intonation of intervals, and perhaps some rules for text setting formed the core of vocal pedagogy. Later with the spread of polyphony, cathedrals and larger collegiate churches began to train choristers in mensural notation and a variety of improvised contrapuntal techniques. This view of vocal pedagogy is what von Zabern intends to enlarge by his remarks on vocal production and aesthetics, so that his argument for teaching how to "sing well" seems amply justified, thus earning him an important place in the history of the field.

Von Zabern refers on more than one occasion to those in the "reformed" tradition, which he does not clarify but which is worthy of notice. The most likely candidate for this reform would seem to be that promulgated at the Council of Basel (1431-1435), particularly those decisions issued in Session 21, June 9, 1435. Not only does von Zabern show interest in many of the same areas of the reform—pacing of the services, performance of chant, distinguishing feast from ferial days, choral demeanor and deportment, proper diction—he even echoes the concern particularly with choirs in cathedrals and collegiate churches. It is also worth noting that the Council took place during the papacy of Eugene IV (1431-1447), who would reform the chorister schools in Italian cathedrals. Von Zabern's reference to the distinction between regular and secular clergy, which I have found often mystifies people, especially

American students, I have explained in a footnote, with another explaining the nature of a collegiate church.

I find von Zabern's treatise potentially very interesting to voice teachers and students as well as to choral directors and choir members. Much of his advice is equally relevant today. In order to render the treatise easier to use, I have provided a brief outline of its contents. I have also translated the two appendices that von Zabern added. Dyer reasonably omitted them from his translation since they are not part of the sixth precept, but the first appendix is devoted to proper performance of psalmody and the second deals with the interesting related subject of proper lection for service.

As always, I have made my own translation without prior reference to any other, in this case only Dyer's own. Also as general practice, I confirmed a very few questionable passages against Dyer's translation, with the result not of retranslation but more intelligible rewording. Dyer's is presented in smoother English, mine is, I believe, closer to the Latin for good or ill. Von Zabern's Latin proved to be not too difficult, the main difficulties resulting, I believe, from the intrusion of his native German syntax. Otherwise there were few problems.

Outline of the Treatise by the Translator

- I. The first precept is to sing in good ensemble, which is to sing in such a way that the voices of all the singers proceed in the same movement of time equally and simultaneously.
 - a. This requires mutually diligent attention from all members of the choir.
- II. The second precept is to sing with correct rhythm so that no more time is spent on one note than on others.
 - a. Do not draw out the higher notes of the song.
 - b. Mistakes are most frequent and greater among the higher notes.
 - c. Do not sing the higher notes with a louder voice.
 - d. Do not extend rests contrary to the measure.
 - e. One chorus must conform itself to the other in measure.
- III. The third precept is to sing moderately, which is to sing neither too high nor too low.
 - a. When the song is in high range, start the initial pitch lower.
 - b. When the song is in low range, start the initial pitch higher.
- IV. The fourth precept is to sing variably, which is to execute the song according to the demands of the [specific liturgical] time.
 - a. Sing variably in regard to speed.
 - i. On festivals sing very gradually.
 - ii. On ordinary Sundays and small feasts sing in a moderate measure.
 - iii. On ordinary days sing more quickly.
 - b. Sing variably in regard to character. On festive days sing higher and more joyfully for the sake of greater liveliness.
 - c. Sing different types of services on the same day in different ways.
 - i. On the same day a high office should be sung more solemnly than a private service.

- ii. The office of the dead and vigils and vespers should be sung lower and less joyful than the other offices not concerning the dead.
 - iii. Offices of joyful matters should be sung more joyfully than those of sins and tribulations.
 - iv. When a holiday falls on an ordinary day, whose office is special and ought not be omitted,² it is fitting to sing a double office, as in the case of Advent, Lent or Ember Days, with the feast sung more solemnly and the ordinary day more freely so as to preserve a proper difference.
- V. The fifth precept is to sing with fidelity, which is to sing so that anyone of those singing together should remain in the form of the notes as transmitted by the fathers.
 - a. Follow traditional performance practice.
 - i. Do not break up the notes into [ornamental passages].
 - ii. Do not go off in any way a fifth above or a fourth below.
 - iii. Do not perform in the manner of discant.
 - b. Maintain proper decorum.
 - i. All should uncover their heads at the same time when it is properly to be done.
 - ii. Likewise, all should bow the head and kneel at the same time.
 - c. Secular melodies should never be introduced and sung to sacred texts.
- VI. The sixth precept is to sing with refinement, which is to sing without coarseness, for which constant self-criticism is the required foundation.
 - a. Do not aspirate vowels that have no “h.”
 - b. Do not sing through the nose.
 - c. Distinguish different vowels carefully.

² It should be noted that the Latin is potentially ambiguous here, but this represents Von Zabern’s syntactic order.

- d. In melismas retain the same vowel constantly throughout.
- e. Do not allow the voice to go off pitch in ascending or descending.
- f. Do not strain or force the voice.
- g. Sing appropriately to the range of the voice.
 - i. Do not sing with an open throat or strong voice on higher notes.
 - ii. Do not sing with one uniform voice throughout the range, low, middle, and high.
 - 1. Use a heavier voice for the low range.
 - 2. Use a medium voice in the middle range.
 - 3. Use a light or subtle voice in the high range, which enables the singer to sing higher.
 - iii. Failure to adapt the voice to the range leads to injury.
 - 1. It burdens and fatigues the voice.
 - 2. It induces hoarseness and makes the voice unsuited for singing.
- h. When songs correspond to each other make sure that the ending of one corresponds to the beginning of the next.
 - i. Such as the last Kyrie eleison to the Gloria.
 - ii. Such as the antiphon to the psalm.
- i. Do not sing lethargically but with life and feeling.
- j. Pay attention to proper deportment.
 - i. Stand still and do not move around or lean in one direction.
 - ii. Do not raise your head too high or incline it or prop it with your hand.
 - iii. Do not deform your mouth.

Von Zabern has already reduced Appendices I and II to outlines and so require no further reduction here.

DE MODO BENE CANTANDI³

Preface

The reason why the following little work had to be issued in print in preference to a thousand others is that because, among the many subjects necessary for ecclesiastical or scholarly men, scarcely a single one can be found that is of such general concern as is this that is treated in the following little book. For it is the business of all secular⁴ priests and clerics who hold benefices⁵ in collegiate churches,⁶ from the largest to the smallest, who no less than the regular clergy from the institution have to pursue the divine office and also of all those in parish churches, at least singing on the obligatory feast days. It is nonetheless emphatically the business of all teachers and their students or assistants, by whatever name they be designated, especially of all students striving for a status of this kind,⁷ who by the instruction of this little book in the future will be better able to inform and guide their own students in all the requirements for singing well and effectively and quickly to check, draw back and restrain by all

³ This translation is based on the text found in Karl-Werner Gumpel, *Die Musiktraktate Conrads von Zabern* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1956).

⁴ To the many not familiar with this distinction it can be very confusing. The “secular” clerics were those who were not in monastic orders and who served in churches within the lay community, mostly but not exclusively those who possessed a “cure of souls.” The “regular” clergy were those in monastic orders who lived communally, sequestered in monasteries. In truth, it wasn’t this tidy, but this is the basic difference.

⁵ Von Zabern is again detailing an important difference. The benefice was a grant of certain properties to be administered by the recipient, who then received the “benefit” of the income from them for the tenure of his office. Later a different system was expanded greatly, to which von Zabern refers below, that of prebends. Prebends were stipends of cash awarded to the recipients from the institution’s income in lieu of a disposal of property to manage. Unlike the benefice, which required residence for the administration of the property and ministerial duties, the prebend allowed non-residence. The prebend was originally intended to allow clerics the freedom to travel for education for finite periods of time. Unfortunately, over time it became much abused. The origin of the term “sinecure” is related to this system, one who holds an office without “cure” or cure of souls, i.e., specific responsibilities.

⁶ The collegiate church was a large church, not of cathedral authority, served by a multiple body of clerics. The origin and nature of this type of church changed over time. At first they were mostly “regular” institutions connected to and served by a monastic order. Later they developed into secular institutions, some originating from the unification of a large number of separately endowed chapels or chantries each with its own priest in service. Some were founded as bequests by wealthy individuals, who provided funds to build the structure and an endowment to support a body of priests, whose main service was to offer prayers for the benefit of the benefactor’s soul. The parish churches were the small local establishments served by a single priest who was often very poorly educated. Von Zabern does not use the term prebend here but does so later near the end of precept one.

⁷ Von Zabern probably means those aspiring to become singing instructors themselves.

necessary restraints of any kind, not only in youth but even afterward their entire lives, to whatever position they may attain, that they may contribute more usefully in choir. Truly, it is a matter of inestimable harm that the method of singing, well reported here, up until now has been unknown to teachers, because from this it comes about that innumerable priests today are ignorant, so there is little wonder that they sing so badly for good stipends and prebends.

A Small Work Recently Compiled on the Method of Singing Well

Choral Song in Large Choirs⁸

AD 1473

To the favor of all the clergy and to its honor and increase I declare that I have compiled this present little book and have published it, in order that all, to whose practices it pertains, may sing choral song in that method of singing well. This method up until now has been unknown to innumerable clerics, even who properly understand singing, because of the fault of their instructors who neglected to instruct them in this in their youth, seemingly for the very reason that they were ignorant of it. On which account even today more teachers are ignorant of it, even if they know something of music compared to many others. Nor was I ever instructed in this method of singing well by any of my teachers, however much they knew about music. Indeed, I want to make this method clear in this present book to the most ecclesiastics possible, just as they command in the holy scriptures that it should be done first and mainly more pleasing to omnipotent God, and second more to the credit of those singing, since God is the paymaster not of nouns but of adverbs⁹ and also third to the greater

⁸ Von Zabern's Latin looks a little odd, but it is clear in the following that he is speaking of unison choirs for plainchant, not polyphony.

⁹ This may be a quote or saying with which I am not familiar. The sense seems to be of qualities rather than of material things.

service of the faithful listeners, since without doubt a work of this kind done well becomes more than otherwise an incitement and increase of devotion.

Therefore, it must be noted that for singing choral song well six things altogether in number are required of the singers, which here below follow in their proper places, given in upper-case letters,¹⁰ their explanation always soon joined in lower-case letters for the sake of simplicity. Those who stand in greater need of such explanation and who sometimes can be more useful in a choir than those older and more learned than themselves, or at least so much the more as the more fully they will have been instructed here by the following concerning singing well. So, the things necessary for singing well in choir I will now in this first place only simply enumerate summarily, afterward I will follow them up with explanations appended in the best order I can.

These, therefore, are the six things that are required, namely: to sing with good ensemble, in rhythm, with moderation, with diversity, with devotion, and with sufficient sophistication. The first of these is the foundation for all the rest, indeed the ultimate ornament of all the others because if it [this first precept] is lacking in the remaining five, then the song itself cannot sufficiently deserve praise. These six in the enumerated consideration are most worthy because without these one cannot sing appropriately for a chorus, however trained in song. For although many up until now have thought that he was considered to know how to sing well, who knows how to sing quickly and correctly the same notes both in ascent and descent from one to the other of them without obvious error or deviation, nevertheless this is nothing except knowing how to sing.¹¹ For singing well, however, truly more is

¹⁰ The original titles for the precepts were in all upper-case letters but the body of the text is lower-case.

¹¹ His point lies in the omission of *bene* "well," i.e., such a person knows the mechanics or fundamentals of singing but not how to sing well. Von Zabern's *De modo bene cantandi* is the earliest surviving text on vocal pedagogy in the modern sense: Tess Knighton & David Fallows, *Companion to Medieval & Renaissance Music* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 314, which is, perhaps, tantamount to saying the first work on vocal pedagogy, Previous to von Zabern instruction in singing was what he has distinguished here as "how to sing" as opposed to his "how to sing well." Earlier, singing instruction, as in evidence from the texts and documentary descriptions, included reading aloud for proper Latin pronunciation, memorization of repertoire by rote in earlier times then later from books. Also later were included solmization, mutation, notation, modal identification, sometimes text setting and other information. In other words, it was essentially the musical fundamentals of the time. Von

demanded, namely the observation of those six already enumerated and consequently to be explained in order. If someone were to reply to me that surely it is proper for someone to know how to sing before being able to sing well, in what way, then, would I be able in the present work to treat the method of singing well, in which I instruct not even one single note about singing in regard to the demand of proportions,¹² the ready response is: in this work I address churchmen who have long sung in their own churches, whom I suppose somehow know how to sing either from practice or somehow else, desiring to teach these same ones, that in the way—the very same—that they have long and often sung, they ought and are capable of singing in the future by far better than up until now, even apart from the expense of more time and without the aggravation of labor. For those for whom, indeed, instruction in singing according to the rules of musical rudiments up to now has been a necessity, these latter I leave to my other labors made in this subject, but I do invite them to my public lectures on music, which I am always prepared to give, when the supply of listeners is not lacking. Now I proceed to the explanation of the six before enumerated.

The First is to Sing with Good Ensemble

To sing in good ensemble is to sing in such a way that the voices of all the singers at once proceed in the same movement of time equally and simultaneously, so that none of those singing at the same time gets ahead with his voice or tarries after them perceptibly to any degree whatever. Of this thing we have a double example worthy of imitation. One is the angels in heaven, of whom it is sung in the sequence of the feast of the Nativity of Christ: The angels in heaven sing with one voice in unison. Let these words be considered: “voice in unison.” Let us imitate these angels of God, if we wish to attain

Zabern, however, gives attention to vocal production and issues of vocal aesthetics, which justifies the identification of his book as in the modern tradition of vocal pedagogy.

¹² The word used here is *proportio*, which might seem peculiar in the context, since von Zabern’s advice relates only to plainchant choirs, not to polyphonic music, making an allusion to proportions in mensural notation unlikely. *Proportio* is, however, the term used for what in English are called the Pythagorean ratios of the intervals, which would then make sense of the passage. Von Zabern’s putative antagonist is saying “how can you say you are teaching singing when you don’t so much as even mention the ratios of the intervals?”

to their fellowship in singing perpetually with them the praises of our founder and redeemer. We have another notable example of boys placed in the burning furnace, concerning whom it is written in the third chapter of Daniel: These three as from one mouth were blessing and praising God. Now! Who is so simple as not to understand that these three boys had three mouths? But even so, the scripture says distinctly “as from one mouth,” because their three voices sounded so concordantly together, as if they had issued forth from one mouth. We ought to propose these boys as deserving imitation.

But in order for that to become not only possible, but even easily doable in a remarkable multitude of people throughout the entire breadth of the choir of people standing distant from each other, this one thing is required by absolute necessity, namely a mutually diligent attention, which unfortunately up until now was something all too unaccustomed in many churches, but without which it is not possible to maintain the proper measure of time in a large number of people singing together with accurate ensemble of voices. But, when this same moderating diligent attention of those people is highest, who in every choir are specifically designated to it, just as is sufficient to the need, this thing without doubt is easily doable when only the people of the choir in this work of God—to which nothing is permitted to take precedence “over song” according to the blessed Bernard—will have been such as they truly ought and are obliged to be in deserving of good will. For this reason this work of God is like their labor in the fields, whence they have dignity and their livelihood, for which they have been selected according to that in the canons of St. Peter: “You are a select people,” for which they have been made worthy, especially even far above princes, specifically because of the association with holy orders, for which as a third reason are the stipends for prebends or ecclesiastical benefices and daily assistance. Pray? What difficulty obtains for people of good will—since any person at all has two ears for listening to others—to use these [ears] diligently in the work of God already mentioned, in order that it may be done blamelessly and well for the glory of this same omnipotent God and for the honor as well for the spiritual improvement and security of those singing and listening.

The Second is to Sing with Correct Rhythm

To sing with correct rhythm is to sing so that no more time is spent on one note than on others, whatever measure¹³ is sung, either longer or shorter according to the demands of the time, just as will come to be seen in the fourth of the precepts.¹⁴ For measure [rhythm] is defined by measuring and consequently the song itself has a proper measure [rhythm] and is measured correctly when one note is neither drawn out nor shortened more or less than another, which all churchmen both regular and secular, who have praise of singing well before other things are accustomed to observe inviolably. By contrast, in many collegiate churches many people without number often do so as to draw out one note more than the remainder and abbreviate another or others too much and by much more than the remainder.¹⁵ This is one of the most common abuses in singing among the greater part of the clergy. Rather, most especially and far too frequently do they draw out long all the higher notes of the song, then right afterward they shorten the following ones too much, just as is conspicuously apparent in the festival "Patrem." I will be silent now on innumerable other examples.

Since I have mentioned here the higher notes of the song, I ought not to pass over this one worthwhile remark, of which, nevertheless, from all my instructors I have never heard mention made, even though without doubt it is most worthy of consideration. This is that among the higher notes of the song there are mistakes not only more frequently but even greater, by a fault specifically of skill, so

¹³ Von Zabern's terminology is vague and inconsistent. He distinguishes here between duration of notes and their overall speed or tempo. The problem seems to arise from his apparent use of *mensura* to mean both duration of individual notes relative to each other, or rhythm, and also to mean overall speed or tempo of the notes. He is saying that whatever the tempo, the duration must be uniform. It is not at all uncommon to find that earlier authors do not clearly distinguish distinct concepts that we do today and so combine reference to them under one term.

¹⁴ As it stands without amplification this statement would be very misleading in English translation. In the fourth precept von Zabern discusses varying the overall speed, faster or slower, of the piece according to the liturgical purpose, whether high or low; thus, by "the time" he apparently means according to the place in the temporal cycle of the liturgy.

¹⁵ There may well be no issue regarding plainchant that is more debated than that of the value of individual notes. Some primary sources appear to say that different values were employed whereas others do not. Among modern scholars the same difference in opinion obtains. Von Zabern is clearly asserting here that, with few exceptions to be mentioned later, the note values should be uniform.

that by means of lack of discernment and inept singing a fault is made contrary to many of the [precepts] enumerated, especially contrary to the first, second and sixth requirements for singing well. Truly, so very often is one solitary higher note thus sung ineptly, that at the same time there is a fault against three of the requirements already enumerated, so obviously that the perception of it cannot be hidden. This I thus declare, because if anyone should draw out some higher note more than the others singing with him, as is so often done, he errs against the first precept, since he tarries behind the others singing with him and so departs from good ensemble. When he prolongs, as by consequence, the same higher note more than the following notes, according to the very common custom with innumerable ecclesiastics, he sins against the second precept because he obviously violates measure. If he should sing this same higher note with a loud voice, just as so customarily happens without number often among the greater part of the clergy, so also does he violate the sixth precept, since, as will be explained below in the sixth, higher notes may be sung with a lighter voice and are not to be sung out with an open throat or stronger voice.

This now must be noted, that all extensions of rests are entirely to be avoided because it is a fault against measure.

This must be guarded against, let no rests be made where they are not to be made because this also would be contrary to measure, which must be continued uniformly up to the appropriate place of the true rests. Contrary to this, innumerable ecclesiastics make little delays after the manner of making rests in a thousand places in the song where no rest or retardation is made, not at all infrequently do they do it after singing any word whatever, which is easily explained by examples.

This also pertains to singing in rhythm, one chorus should conform itself to the other in measure, for it benefits nothing that one chorus is faster than the other or would preserve a more

drawn out measure in singing, when they sing anything in turns or alternately as hymns or the sequence “Et in terra” and others of this kind, certainly not while it is played on the organ.¹⁶

The Third is to Sing Moderately

To sing moderately is to sing neither too high nor too low, which is entirely fitting because a moderate song is less onerous for most people than a higher or lower,¹⁷ since there are always some in the group who are not able to sing high or low without much physical difficulty, in want of whose assistance the chorus is diminished when it would be sung either too high or too low. But, when it is sung moderately, anyone can faithfully aid the chorus without impairment and without his own difficulty. Likewise if in other things the mean is commendable, not less is it in choral song.¹⁸

For the laudable preservation of continual moderation of this kind in song, this one thing is quite necessary, namely the prudent and discerning initiation of the directing precentor, especially when the song ascends much above its beginning note or descends much below the same in any of its sections. So that when it proceeds to the same place high or low, it may be able to be sung by the majority of people of the choir without difficulty. Concerning which discerning initiation practical direction to hearing and explanation in the songs can easily be given, particularly the ones who, before others, more stand in need of prudent beginning, as there are those songs that ascend beyond their initial note to eight or nine even more notes in any part,¹⁹ according to which this befits beginning lower to the degree that it ascends higher. On the contrary those songs that descend below the initial note by much in any place, it

¹⁶ Von Zabern apparently refers to the performance practice of dividing the choir into two sections in order to create an alternating character, as in different verses of the sequence. The reference to the organ is not clear as to whether he means with the organ accompanying the choir simultaneously or in an alternating manner, as in the alternation of psalm verses with organ versets, a practice that began around 1400 and became increasingly popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

¹⁷ This does not refer to dynamic level but to pitch level. Since there was no such thing as standard pitch at this time, the choral leader, the precentor or other official, set the pitch and the chorus, knowing the mode of the piece, adjusted accordingly.

¹⁸ This is, of course, a reference to Aristotle’s advocacy of the mean in all things.

¹⁹ This is almost the classic definition of an authentic mode.

is fitting to begin higher to the degree that they are found to descend more. Songs, indeed, that fit neither of the definitions require less forethought in beginning, for in them choirs easily avoid trouble.

The Fourth is to Sing Variably

To sing variably is to execute song according to the demands of the [specific] time²⁰ and difference of the offices in the first way, in order that it may be sung quite gradually in festivals, but on ordinary Sundays and for small feasts in a moderate measure, and on ordinary days a briefer may serve. There is both authority and reason for this. I say the authority is the holy Council of Basel,²¹ whose specific ruling, *De divino officio rite peragendo* says thus: making a proper difference between solemn and ordinary days of the office. The reason, indeed, is whereas for a large number of feasts the same measure quite rightly may be sung in the same way, longer or more drawn out, nevertheless, on ordinary days for both clergy and laity it would become onerous to keep the measure in song other than short and expeditious. For the clergy, both regular and secular, must do various things for their own need, not only in books but also in such other activities as are appropriate to them, which is not permitted on feast days, but on ordinary days they would certainly be less able to do, if they had to sing equally prolonged on ordinary days as well as feasts. Those more devout laity, who not seldom desire out of devotion to hear the office of the choir even on ordinary days, would be too much impeded in their own labor, by which they must support themselves and their families, if it were sung in a drawn out way; and for many it would become occasion of totally absenting themselves or withdrawing from the office. On the contrary, completely for the devotion of these is it [i.e., the character of the service] lowered by the song proceeding more expeditiously, for which reason we encourage the devout and the religious reformed²² to do [so] in the own congregations.

²⁰ "Time" refers to the specific season of the liturgical year.

²¹ The Council of Basel took place 1431-49.

²² The reference is somewhat obscure today. Von Zabern more than once refers to "reformed," which likely refers to the reforms promulgated during the Council of Basel (1431-45), which he has already mentioned. The papal encyclical for June 9, 1435 records these reforms as to the celebration of the divine office. Some of the directions,

Since I have mentioned different measures here, for this reason I say that in the fourth precept also a discernment of beginnings is required, by preserving properly the needs and differences according to the times, because the precentor ought always to begin a measure²³ such as must be continued for whatever proper time [i.e., season] comes,²⁴ lest in the detection of his negligence it may justly behoove him immediately to change this [measure], if the proper measure ought to be sung according to the demands of the time.

Second, it must be sung in a varied way, so that on festive days it may be sung higher and more joyfully for the sake of a display of fuller liveliness than on ordinary days, but even so absent notable departure from moderation.

Third, in a varied way so that on the same day the high office of the choir may be sung with greater solemnity than a private service.

Likewise in a varied way so that the office of the dead mass as well as vigils and vespers may be sung lower and less joyful than other offices not specifically concerning that for the dead.

Likewise offices of joyful or rejoicing matters ought to be sung more joyfully than an office for sins or tribulations and others of this kind.

Likewise when a holiday falls on an ordinary day whose office, which is special, ought not to be omitted, it is fitting then to be made a double office, in such a way as Advent, Lent or Ember Days frequently it is customary to be done. Then certainly more solemn and prolonged ought the office of the feast to be sung, but that of the ordinary day more freely in order that among the diverse offices of this kind the proper differences may be preserved.

judging from the English translation, are quite similar to those found in von Zabern's treatise in regard to singing, reciting, and "decorum" during the office.

²³ The word is *mensura* and von Zabern apparently means something like the "pace" or tempo of the music.

²⁴ As a reminder, von Zabern is talking about the liturgical "time," the season in the church calendar. The word "season" is not quite precise enough, but at least it serves to alert the reader to the difficulty in English translation.

The Fifth is to Sing with Fidelity.

To sing with fidelity is to sing so that anyone of those singing together should remain in the form in those notes that were transmitted by our devout fathers, so that no one breaks them up into many or goes off in any way into a fifth above or a fourth below, or by leaping to another interval or by wandering off in the manner of a discant and deviating from them.²⁵ For all such departures from the devout melodies of the holy fathers impedes the listeners more than it produces devotion, nor is it a sign of devotion in the singers, but rather seems to be evidence of a blameworthy levity. What is more, there are those in the chorus sufficiently prejudiced—because they often are or become the occasion of error in singing—that the rest taking care to remain in the true notes or prescribed melody, not only because of this straying beyond the accurate note in the manner of those [prejudiced ones], these [faithful ones] are impeded in their own purpose, but also are deceived by the assistance of those others who are straying, who, if they would remain with them [the faithful] in the true notes and faithfully assist them, then they would be preserved better reciprocally from confusion, just as no one can doubt.

Further also, it is necessary to sing with fidelity, in order that all those singing together upon the same song may uncover their heads where and when it is fitting or is customarily done, and also as well the same heads bowed and knees bend, and so in the case of other indications of devotion, all of which work together toward devotion, which ecclesiastical song ought to engender both in the singers and also in the other faithful when hearing it outside the church.

Further, it must be sung with fidelity so that no melody that has not been transmitted to us by the devoted holy fathers be introduced by the servants of the devil, as is explained below, should ever be sung among the songs of divine praise. Adulterine melodies of this kind are absolutely to be rejected from divine service. Alas, even so in many churches they are as if in daily use. I will give as an example

²⁵ Von Zabern seems here to be referring to a variety of improvisatory techniques that not only were in common usage but were actually part of the standard training of choristers. His descriptions apparently include diminution, parallel organum and discant, improvisation on a chant tenor.

so that I will be understood: Quite a few teachers desiring to please I know not whom but no doubt serving the devil by means of it, even if they do not realize, have taken melodies of these same secular songs and in preference to those that are preferable among the songs of divine praise, that is over the angelic hymn *Gloria in excelsis* and over the Nicene Creed and over the *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*, as they were able [to do so] they fitted these by singing the texts to these same secular melodies, with the devout melodies of the holy fathers prescribed for us thrown out. These melodies of secular songs, so long as they are sung in the office of the mass, not only scandalize many of those faithful in Christ, as I myself know, but also make especially many youths and carnal men think more of the dancehall than of the realm of heaven, a not insignificant impediment to devotion, with little wonder because melodies of this kind or those similar do they often hear in the dancehall. In truth, I have particularly heard complaint from no few of the laity to the confusion of the clergy, and I note that bishops and prelates rightly ought entirely to prohibit these kinds of melodies throughout the entire extent of their jurisdictions, quite deservedly calling them diabolical, which I intend to exclude here according to the letter of fidelity.

Sixth is to Sing with Sufficient Refinement

To sing with sufficient refinement is to sing without those coarsenesses that are worthy of blame, concerning which I explain below, which are commonly and frequently committed in singing by those also who seem to be somewhat beyond others, and not at all infrequently also by those who are found to observe the preceding five, which is assuredly worthy of note. It is to be noted as intelligence, which quite deserves the word “sophisticated” as far as is the present case—that because a city is called a civil thing, and men in civil life are usually more refined than in the country and villages, for this reason “refined” is used to the purpose as subtle or skillful,²⁶ hence the qualifier “with refinement.” Therefore,

²⁶ Von Zabern’s term is *urbanus*, translated here as “refined” rather than “urbane,” which latter seems not quite appropriate to music and has gained in some contexts a slight connotation of “effete,” or “overly refined.” The choice of “refined,” however, precipitates other troubles for the translation when von Zabern uses words that

to sing sufficiently with refinement is to sing sufficiently subtly without coarseness, so I want here to the letter of “with refinement” to exclude all coarseness, especially at this point after the observation in the context of the five previous requirements in singing. For as long as some such coarseness is committed, truly it is not refined enough but is sung in a coarse manner. If there are so many coarsenesses of this kind, that I could not possibly enumerate them all, even so I want to enumerate and sufficiently explain in full number the more important and notable ones that are committed more frequently, so that they be all the more recognized and be better able to be avoided in the future, for it is difficult to avoid unless recognized.

Before I can proceed to the enumeration of the kind of coarsenesses, however, I must not pass over this one, namely that—because many of the clergy have long held such kind of coarsenesses in a distorted usage—for this reason if they should like to withdraw themselves from them sufficiently in the future and refrain—their own self-reflection will be absolutely necessary,²⁷ which is required in this case as a foundation by necessity. Surely this is demonstrated—because in all our actions self-reflection is so necessary according to St. Bernard, that it should be considered that no one could be saved without it—then by how much more in the work of ecclesiastical song, to which according to the same man nothing is permitted in preference, since negligence in this work would deservedly earn condemnation, as Jeremiah 48 makes clear, where it is written: “Condemned is he who is negligent in the work of God.” One ought, therefore, to sing well and sufficiently refined, wishing to consider himself and his voice diligently and never to sing without attention and without reflection. In that case it will be possible for him then to avoid the coarsenesses enumerated.

would also most naturally translate as “refined.” The word translated here as “coarseness” is *rusticitas*, “rustic” or “countrified.”

²⁷ The awkwardness of the phrase “*valde necessaria erit eis consideratio sui*,” indicates how unusual was the concept of self-reflection of self-criticism. Von Zabern is quite remarkable for his awareness of it. Sylvestro Ganassi in his famous *Regula Rubertina* (1542-43) demonstrates the power throughout his work and in his closing of the *Letzione Seconda* (1543) even discusses self-awareness of language and its use.

Number 1.²⁸ The first coarseness in singing, then, is to add “h” [an aspirate] to the vowels when the words to be sung do not have “h” in them, which indeed is a very common coarseness in a large part of the clergy as cannot be denied. This is most obviously apparent in singing *Kyrie eleison*, where those without number often sing he-he-he just like executioners leading sheep to pasture.²⁹ It is obvious also in many other songs where many thousands of times they sing ha-ha, ho-ho, etc., whereas the words that are sung have absolutely no “h,” which without doubt is not singing with enough refinement, but we have to say is excessively coarse. This is proof: “h” is a sign of aspiration and is itself asperity as contrasted to smoothness, which a song ought to have, for by the mouth of the prophet Micah a word is of the holy spirit. Point two: A song will be sung with smoothness; therefore, aspiration of this kind disrupting the song and destroying its smoothness, it results that there must be an abstention.

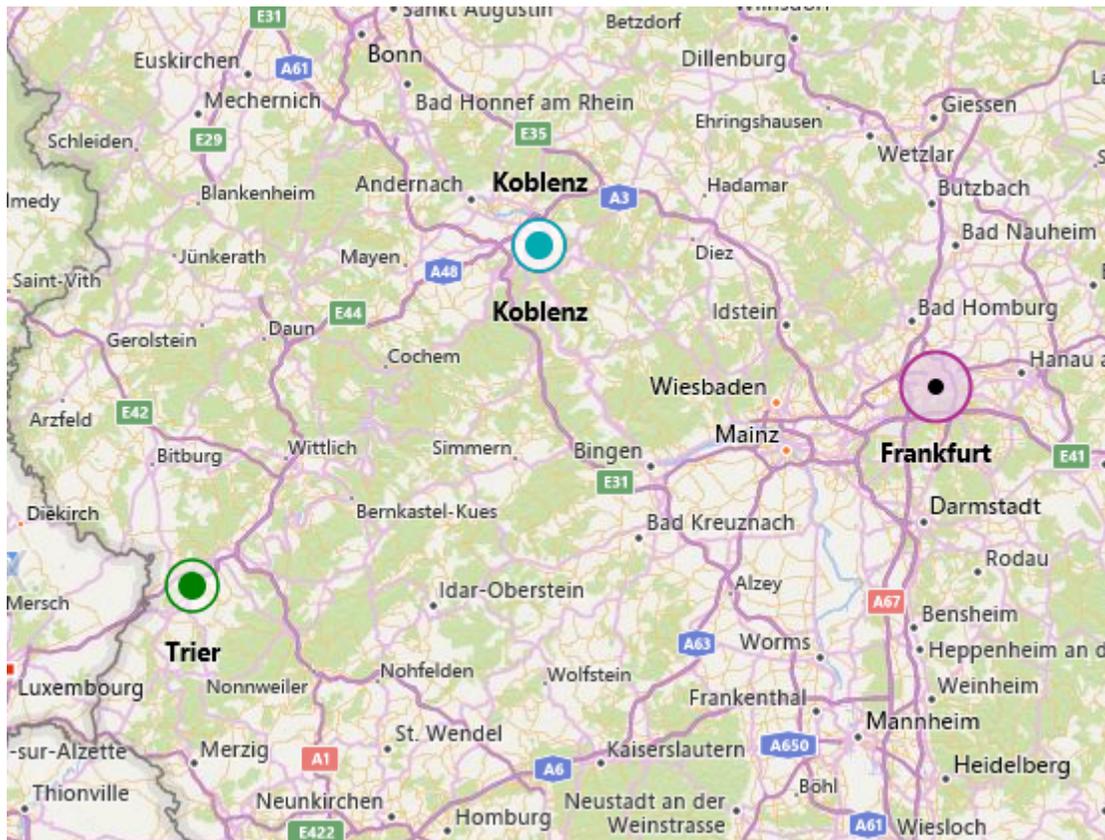
Number 2. Another coarseness is to sing through the nose, which must so deservedly be guarded against because it produces a discordant voice. Since, therefore, among all the natural means required for the formation of the human voice noses are never included, it is not a little coarse that anyone not content with the mouth and other natural means issues the voice through the nose, whence it is generally agreed sounds not better but worse, just as no one doubts, who has known to have correct evidence of it.

Number 3. Another coarseness in singing is not to pronounce sufficiently distinctly the vowels according to their own proper sound, for this produces songs less intelligible to the listeners in regard to the words, since there is no wonder that a confused and scarcely perceptible differentiation of the voices does not aid understanding very much. Many clergy are found culpable in this, who, as if they had their food in their mouths, are accustomed to make little difference between “e” and “i,” or between “o” and “u” and also between syllables composed from the same vowels, so that I have heard

²⁸ For the sake of easier reference I have provided the numbers for the coarsenesses.

²⁹ The image is so sudden and gruesome as to cause wonder whether von Zabern has chosen the wrong word for shepherd, but ecclesiastical and classical Latin both recognize only this sense of the word.

some singing “*dominos vabiscum aremus,*” so that I would say to those next me “let him go plow!”³⁰ Truly, from the Francfordia³¹ to the confluence at Coblenz³² and from there over to Trier³³ I have noted this very often, especially among students, by means of which they confuse all their songs, that they are accustomed not sufficiently distinctly and [so] less well to pronounce the vowels “e” and i,” so that it produces no small displeasure for me. From this their teachers ought rightly to restrain them daily, lest they should continue it on into old age.



Map detail from <https://www.bing.com/mapspreview?>

Number 4. Another coarseness is that the sound of one vowel that must be continued upon many notes to which it is set is not preserved in its own identity but is changed or varied, which certainly

³⁰ This is a pun on the mispronunciation of *oremus*, let us pray, as *aremus*, let us plow.

³¹ This is one of very many permutations of the city known today as Frankfurt am Main.

³² The word *confluens* in classical times was associated with the meeting of the Rhine and Moselle rivers, and specifically at the site of the modern city of Coblenz.

³³ This seems the most likely identification of von Zabern’s *Treverim*, the German city on the Moselle River near the Luxemburg border.

sounds quite bad. Nevertheless, this coarseness is so common with many ecclesiastical persons that it would be worthy of derision. To those who pay attention diligently it is daily sufficiently obvious, and it is easy to give a great supply of examples.

Number 5. Another coarseness quite odious is the divergence in the correctness of the voice [i.e. going off pitch] by a dissonant ascent or descent,³⁴ both of which are the more detestable as they are the more noticeable because choral song is easily perturbed. So much so that it confounds what is done well in singing by the others, just as one dissonant string confounds the sound of the entire clavichord. He who has this specific defect more advisably should remain completely silent than sing until such time as he can take care to remedy it, which he ought not neglect, so long as there is hope of remedy, which defect I have remedied in no few.

Number 6. Another coarseness is to issue or force the voice with strain or vehemence. This is certainly a coarseness because with ample smoothness is the contrary, concerning which smoothness the word of the prophet Micah was previously adduced: the song will be sung with smoothness. Truly, I have known people better instructed in song than others who nevertheless produce every one of their songs according to this coarseness alien from praise, even though it seems to them that they sing well, it is no wonder, since it has never been made known to them just how blameworthy this coarseness is and how deserving to be avoided.

Number 7a. Another coarseness more notable than the rest is on acute or higher³⁵ notes of the song to sing with an open throat or strong and emphatic voice, which among the previous others called to attention above is quite undiscerning, as will soon become clear below. When this is done by people

³⁴ As so often, the lack of standard terminology makes for obscure descriptions. What von Zabern means is the common defect of going off pitch when ascending or descending.

³⁵ The phrase is "*in acutis sive altioribus notis*," which two adjectives could have different meanings and might be a reasonable conclusion were it not for von Zabern's use of "*sive*," which in Latin means that the two items are not contrasted but are alternative means of expressing the same thing. If any doubt persisted, von Zabern later specifically clarifies that both terms mean high notes.

who have a trumpet-like or loud voice, it is extremely disturbing and confuses the song of the entire chorus just as if cows' voices were heard among the singers' voices. Yet even so I have heard in a notable college³⁶ that singers who have trumpet-like voices with powerful voices were singing with all their might on the acute or higher [notes] just like they wanted to break or at least move the windows of the sanctuary, so that I wondered greatly at their ignorance and so was moved to making this aphorism³⁷ "As cows in a pasture, so you in the choir bellow." By this aphorism in a friendly way in my works and lectures on the method of singing well I mean to criticize all those presuming to sing in a forceful voice in order that they may fully learn to acknowledge their undiscerning coarseness and after this recognition recoil from this they practice.

Number 7b. For acknowledging this coarseness more fully, therefore, it must be known that whoever wishes to sing discerningly and well ought to use the voice in three ways, namely in this way: heavy or trumpet-like in the bass, which is on low notes, in a middle way in the middle range, and more subtle on acute or higher notes, and this even more so the higher the song goes. He who does otherwise conducts himself undiscerningly in singing, whatever and however much it may be. There are, even so, innumerable churchmen who in singing follow this indiscretion as if by rule. Let each consider, then, how well and reasonably I have spoken about following the three ways of the voice with diversity in singing. For everyone of any knowledge knows that an organ, whether large, medium or small, has triple reeds or pipes, namely large, medium and small. The large sound the low notes of the song, the medium the middle, and the small the upper or higher notes of the song. Of these reeds or pipes every intelligent person knows how threefold is the sound, namely heavy, medium, and graceful

³⁶ At this time the term *collegium* could refer either to the members of a collegiate church or to a college connected with a university, especially in England and France. Singing services were maintained in both, but were mandatory in the collegiate churches and usually of a secondary nature in the university college, making the former the more likely intended reference here.

³⁷ The word translated here as "aphorism" is "*rigmum*," which does not appear in the classical or ecclesiastical Latin dictionaries, nor in my more limited sources for Vulgate and medieval Latin, nor is it a Greek loanword. The conjecture seems safe because it refers to the following quip.

or subtle. Since, however, a man has only the one throat, by means of which the voice issues, which has to fulfill in place of the diverse reeds of the organ—at one time large and at another small—how great a lack of discernment will it be to want to do this by a uniform use of his own voice, even though the voice of a human has no correspondence to such threefold sound of the diverse reeds of the organ, obviously as already stated.

Let us take another example in a string of the monochord, which existing unique and of its own quantity, nevertheless produced a triple sound in the upper and lower part, clearly a heavier one lower, medium in the middle and much more graceful and subtle higher.³⁸ Why, therefore, does the human not inflect his voice three ways in imitation of that string, since the monochord may be the best instrument for teaching and learning church song by means of it? Let each who wants to sing blamelessly take care, then, that he not further in the future presume to sing with full strong voice on acute, that is higher notes,³⁹ since in the first place it deforms the song and in second it burdens and fatigues the singer to no point, and third it quickly makes him hoarse and in consequence unsuited for singing. The human throat is delicate and easily is injured when it is strained, which certainly happens when it is used on high notes with powerful voice, when this injury has happened, soon hoarseness follows, such as each has experienced for himself. But on the contrary, when anyone sings with a refined voice on notes, the voice has a proper correspondence to graceful sound of the small reeds of the organ just as the higher parts of the strings of the monochord itself. Then second he sings without fatigue. Then third there is no doubt he will be able to sing much higher than he would in any way be

³⁸ Von Zabern does not refer to the single string monochord used for teaching by means of Pythagorean ratios. It is a keyboard instrument, about which he wrote a short treatise *Opusculum de monochordo*. He believed the instrument was very useful in teaching voice. The interested reader will do well to consult *Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, s.v. "Clavichord." The distinctive characteristic of the instrument is that the striking mechanism was such as to be able to vary the length of the vibrating string so as to produce different pitches from the same string. The manuscript treatise (ca 1440) of Henri-Arnault de Zwolle gives an early detailed description from von Zabern's own time (modern edition by Bärenreiter, 1972).

³⁹ As referred to earlier, this is the point at which von Zabern makes clear that *acutus* and *altior* mean the same thing.

able with full, strong voice, so that in songs of particular high range he could aid the choir faithfully and well without trouble and without incurring hoarseness, which could not be possible with strong voice.

Number 8a. Another coarseness is in the beginning to sing those things without a correspondence that ought to correspond to each other, especially where and when the correspondence properly could be preserved without trouble to the chorus. For example, the *Kyrie eleison*, when [it and] the *Gloria in excelsis* are written with each other, and also the *Et in terra*, ought to be sung in correspondence. From what other cause is this *Kyrie* [associated] with that *Gloria* and other ones to other ones in the chant books? When the final *Kyrie* ended in a definite way and the celebrant begins the *Gloria* in a melody irrelevant to that same *Kyrie*, when even so it were possible to do it in a corresponding way without his or the choir's trouble, truly that is a coarseness.⁴⁰ Yet, I have often heard without number even among reformed regular clergy⁴¹ that, when the final *Kyrie* has ended, the celebrant out of his own head as if he had not heard the *Kyrie*, begins the *Gloria in excelsis* without any correspondence of its melody to the preceding *Kyrie* itself and that the cantor of the chorus, no less undiscerning, of his own will begins the *Et in terra* irrelevantly to the *Gloria*, as if he had not heard it sung by the celebrant, so that truly because of this more than once I was hindered in the oration and was moved not infrequently to thinking or saying "what bunglers are these monks!"⁴²

Number 8b. Let us take another example. The first part of an antiphon, which is presented before the intonation of the psalm itself, and this same intonation of the psalm or beginning according to the requirement of the psalm tone to be sung ought also, when it can be done properly, to have a correspondence. Why would it be ordered from a different place in regard to the little part of the first

⁴⁰ Von Zabern never really makes his meaning clear, probably because to readers of his time there is really only one thing he could mean, the failure to sing immediately successive portions of the mass in corresponding mode.

⁴¹ Von Zabern has previously referred to the "reformed" regular clergy, which of course cannot refer to the much later Reformation.

⁴² The word translated here as "bunglers" is "*grobiani*" which is not found in either classical or ecclesiastical Latin dictionaries. This is a pure conjecture but one that seems entirely consistent with the context.

antiphon before the beginning of the psalm? When beginning the psalm in a way indifferent to the consequence this makes, without correspondence to the preliminary part of the antiphon or to its melody, it is a coarseness worthy to be scorned.⁴³

Number 9. Another coarseness is to sing drowsily and less lively and without emotion like an old woman near death, which deprives the song itself of its proper agreeableness and makes it less heard and so that it has the manner of a groan rather than a song. Against singing thus the blessed Bernard says in the sermon *Super cantica*,⁴⁴ where he speaks about ecclesiastical song: “Reverently such as attending upon the Lord with alacrity, not reluctantly, not drowsily, not yawning, not sparing of voice.” Then a little further on: “but virile as it deserves, both in sound and feeling bringing forth voices of the holy spirit.” Thus did he say. Truly, one must sing in a way that is lively, with feeling and fully agreeable lest it fall upon the other extreme, so that it is too distracting for some who are singing out, as has been said, and others who sing as barely to be heard. And so the old adage is proven: “*Zu lutzel und zu vil verderbt al spil*” [Too little and too much spoil all pleasure.] It is blessed to hold the mean.

Number 10. This last coarseness now to be enumerated is to have inappropriate manners in singing, as for example not standing still but to move here and there, or to raise the head too high or conspicuously to incline it to the one side or to prop it up with your hand or to deform the mouth to the other jaw,⁴⁵ or open the same far too wide. And the same with many other inappropriate manners, which it would be far too tedious to enumerate all, these are for this reason to be avoided lest they provoke to laughter those who are watching, who ought to be moved to devotion by means of the song.

⁴³ Von Zabern appears to be describing the opening partial statement of the antiphon followed by the psalm tone; thus, this cannot be the issue of the choice of differentiae leading back into the final statement of the antiphon. The matter here seems to be the choice of an antiphon and psalm tone for the recitation of psalm that match each other. *Grove Dictionary* s.v. “Antiphon” offers what is probably the explanation of von Zabern’s point. “The antiphon ends with a clear cadence on a final note, which then determines the choice of the reciting note for the psalm The psalm tone ending (*differentia*, *diffinitio*, or *varietas*) can be chosen with the first notes of the antiphon in mind to ensure a smooth progression between the psalm and the recurring antiphon.”

⁴⁴ Perhaps this refers to one of the eighty-six sermons on *The Song of Songs*.

⁴⁵ The image seems to be to lean or prop the head to one side and so open the mouth as to shift the jaw out of place in the other direction.

But so much for these coarsenesses, which here by means of the sixth and last of the precepts for singing well do I want to exclude and keep excluded.

So now completely, therefore, are presented in order what from the beginning I took up to be dealt with and explained. Would that they should be taken to heart by those reading this compendium, so that they may take care daily to sing better than previously. Even so now they have been instructed by these present writings more and more fully than ever up to now they have been concerning the true method of singing well, which by no small labor I have gathered into this arrangement and for simplicity's sake in a clear style, desiring a common ecclesiastical purpose, in order that for my sake, Conrad von Zabern, they may all entreat the highest one, they who will profit from my labors in the future.

Appendix I

On Performing Psalmody Blamelessly

Since it does not suffice for the good regimen of the choir in song that it sings according to the six precepts for singing well, which in this specific little work are explained lucidly, if the psalmody itself is not sung well and blamelessly, whereas the greatest part of the seven canonical hours are performed in this. For this reason I have decided here to add something by which they seem sufficiently lacking in large part.

These things, then, follow, which come in psalmody to be diligently observed.

- Let not the following verse begin before the end of the preceding one.
- Do not omit making the accompanying rest in the middle of the verse.
- Do not read by word but by syllable.
- Never at all abstain from the closing in the middle and end of the verse.
- Preserve the measure uniformly throughout,
- Excepting the first syllable of the verse, which is slightly extended.

- Do not sing too fast or too slow.
- Nevertheless, proceed in varied way according to the demands of the time.
- Never neglect the correspondence of choir to choir.
- Guard against a perceptible decline [in intonation] in all intervals
- Let the work never be made so as to begin too high.
- The manner of intoning must be provided for correctly.

He who desires to have a broad and clear explanation of these here enumerated, let them not be sluggish to go to the lectures of Conrad von Zabern, which to the glory of God he is always ready to do on this subject, when a supply of auditors is not lacking for him.

Appendix II

On the Manner of Blameless Lection in Choir

Whatever is Assigned to be Read by One Only

Since for the good order of a choir in singing, everything up to this point is not sufficient, since by observation of the six precepts for singing well the psalmody may be sung well, according to the method treated above, except this third also be taken care of, that specifically all such things as are assigned to be read by only one person in the choir should be read blamelessly, lest when it is done otherwise it would bring ignominy upon all the choir. For this reason here I append this summary and quite specific instruction on the subject.

Thus, some precepts for this follow.

- Preserve well a single pitch throughout, apart from the places for rests.
- Make breaths appropriately in suitable places where there are no true rests.
- Read words completely, distinctly, clearly and syllabically and without haste.
- Separate the closes on rests and at the end completely.

- Do not ascend too high nor tend too low but maintain in the proper range of the voice.
- Perform all this in a full voice but even so not too clamorous.
- Read neither too slow nor too fast.
- Do not violate the measure noticeably either in rests or beyond them.
- Do not utter rests more strongly nor with any emphasis than the others.⁴⁶

By these nine well preserved innumerable ones will avoid confusion in the choir.

If anyone desires to be informed more fully about these enumerated, let them come to the collector, Conrad von Zabern, who will be found more ready for explaining sufficiently broadly and clearly what anyone may be found desiring of this kind.

⁴⁶ I am uncertain of the meaning of this phrase, or how it is possible to utter a rest, the words being *pausas vociferare*. The word *vociferare* clearly indicates something audible. Had von Zabern used the verb *pronuntiare*, which by this time had come to mean “perform,” it would have been more nearly understandable. Instead he has chosen the verb more closely related with the production of an actual sound.