

HISTORY OF GREGORIAN CHANT

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The following "History of Gregorian Chant" was written as a 3 part series for Oriens, the journal of the Ecclesia Dei Society.

PART I: LITURGICAL CHANT - THE AGE OF COMPOSITION

Looking at the Gradual and Alleluia texts a few Sundays back during Mass, I found myself thinking, rather bored, how alike all the texts were; I wondered idly why the Church hadn't used some of the more searing phrases from the psalms: "I have spent my years like a sigh" - phrases which toll with a pang in our hearts.

After a moment's comparison, however, I realized that the Church had chosen texts whose subject was God, not human experience; and I felt rather embarrassed. Long ago, somebody more godly was sufficiently inspired by these texts to set them to music: a Levite in post-exilic Jerusalem; or a Christian, writing from some cold, war-damaged monastery. Most likely, both played a part.

For the chant used in the Mass today is a child of the chant that Christ would have heard in the Temple and synagogues. The early Christians neither composed commissions to revise the liturgy, nor commissioned composers to recast the chant. They brought to the Christian liturgy the prayers and chant of the Jewish liturgy, and the style of music changed little during Christianity's catacomb years. Etheria, a Spanish nun on pilgrimage to the holy places in about 385, mentions hymns, psalms, responsories and antiphons as part of the Easter liturgy at Jerusalem, the first three being forms familiar from Jewish liturgy.

Antiphons are short pieces of prose set to music and placed like sentinels at either end of the psalm. Today, the bulk of the Latin Office is antiphonal psalm singing, and, at Mass, you hear antiphonal psalms when the priest enters (the Introit); during the Offertory (the Offertorio) - although the music for the antiphon has been embroidered to such length and complexity that the psalm itself is usually omitted; and during the reception of Communion (the Communio) - again, without the psalm.

Following the legalisation of Christianity in 313, different forms and flavours of chant began to develop by region. Roman Spain produced Mozarabic chant, whose title refers to the Moorish rule over Spanish Christians after the invasion of 711. In fact, the chant was composed and complete by the 7th Century, and altered little thereafter. From Milan came Ambrosian chant, named in honour of St Ambrose; from Gaul, or what is now France, Gallican chant; from Rome, Old Roman and Gregorian; from England, the Sarum; from the Church in the East, Syrian, Byzantine, Coptic, Ethiopian and Armenian. Some of these chants were suppressed by Roman

pontiffs striving to establish a unified liturgy and music for the Church. Others were abandoned when the region resolved to adopt what it considered a superior chant or liturgy. By these paths Gregorian chant came to dominate liturgical music in the West by the 8th Century.

The one fact almost invariably known about Gregorian chant is that Pope Gregory had something to do with it. In fact, a number of musical popes before him had contributed to the development of chant in Rome, forming chant schools, founding monasteries to preserve and maintain the chant or even composing chant. Pope St Gregory the Great (540-604), however, gathered together the different forms of chant; chose, adapted and ordered them; and had them transcribed into an Antiphonary, which in later centuries travelled long distances to bring Gregorian chant to other countries. He not only organised the chant but also took a firm hand in the chant school. "There today", wrote John the Deacon, a 9th century biographer of Gregory, "is still shown the couch on which he reposed while giving his singing lessons; and the whip with which he threatened the boys is still preserved and venerated as a relic." Despite the famous medieval picture of the Holy Spirit singing melodies into Gregory's ear while he attentively transcribed them, we don't know whether he composed any chant.

If Gregory did not write them, who did? Unfortunately, for the most part, the composers are unknown. Scribes sometimes attributed hymns to mediaevally renowned poets: St Ambrose (d.c. 397), Aurelius Prudentius (d.c. 405), Caelius Sedulius (d.c. 450), Venantius Fortunatus (d.c. 610), St Isidore of Seville (d. 636). But these writers may have set their lyrics to popular tunes, rather than compose original melodies.

The chants of the Mass and Office are largely anonymous. Most Proper chants - those intended for a specific Sunday or feast day (Introit, Gradual, Alleluia, Offertorio and Communio) - were composed between the 5th and 8th centuries; although the composition of new Propers, to accompany new feast days, continued until the post-Vatican II period. The Ordinary chants - those common to every Mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei) - that we sing today were composed in the second wind of chant composition, from the 9th to the 12th century. As in Judaism, the anonymous composers were probably clergy, religious or cantors from the Church's chant schools.

The anonymity of chant composers may be a product of inherited beliefs about music and the techniques of composition these generated. Greek philosophies about the cosmic origin of music and its ethical effect on man, handed on to both medieval West and Byzantine East, resulted in strict principles on combining notes and a reverence for existing melodies, which, in the words of Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500), "transmit to us the echo of the divine hymns which are sung in heaven and can only be passed on through divinely inspired men". Where modern art prizes originality and, in pursuit of individual expression, rejects prohibitions, medieval composers were expected to combine and adapt the divine ingredients, not to replace them. The medieval art of composition therefore consisted of embroidering melody, patching together patterns from different sources to form a new chant (a process called centonization, also the central technique in Byzantine hymnology), or adapting chants to new texts. The Lenten Tracts are one familiar example of a single melody adapted to multiple texts.

Whether by instinct or by obedience to the Church principle that music should express text, the medieval composers also brought to the text an intense responsiveness that produced word-painting or deeply atmospheric chants. The outcome was a repertoire of melodies built with such an eye to balance and beauty, such sensitivity to the text, that they were mined for musical material for ten to fifteen centuries afterwards. From these melodies, too, were developed the basic rules for writing melodies still taught in musicianship classes today.

While discussing litanies, a friend once remarked that she had never heard a tune she liked. One of the difficulties modern ears have with chant is the love of a catchy tune: look at pop music, folk songs, country music, hymns... Even in classical music, don't you like best the bits you can hum? Another difficulty is our desire for harmony, the vertical richness of many notes sounded simultaneously. In chant, there is no harmony and rarely a catchy tune. Chant is pure melody, and its richness lies in subtle variation of the melody. Only ears accustomed to listening horizontally readily perceive its patterns and changes. The modern listener who wishes to appreciate chant must switch his desires to a different channel, turning from the satisfaction of tunes and harmonies towards the sort of beauty found in shifting shades of light or the ripening of seasons.

PART II: THE SILVER AGE OF CHANT

The period from 900 to 1300 has been labelled the Silver Age of chant for four musical achievements. First, most of the Ordinaries were composed in this period. Only a few fragments of Ordinaries from the Golden Age remain, their neumatic (one note per syllable) style distinguishing them from later Ordinaries, which are more likely to lavish multiple notes on a single syllable (the melismatic style).

Second, the Silver Age gave birth to hymns and Propers still sung, as well as to a portfolio of music (tropes, sequences and conducti) closed to Catholics since the Council of Trent (1563) pruned back the liturgy. Sequences and tropes may have started life as a singer's memory aid. In the introduction to a collection of his sequences, Notker Balbulus (the Stammerer, 840-912), a monk of the St Gall monastery in Switzerland, tells the story of a French monk who sought refuge at St Gall in 862, following the Norman sacking of his monastery at Jumieges, in Normandy. Notker noticed that the monk's antiphony (chant book) showed new words fitted to melodies that St Gall sang on a single syllable. Struck by the notion that words might help him to memorise the long wordless melodies, Notker revised the St Gall chants accordingly. The melody lines with new words were called tropes.

Most trope texts commented on the meaning or implications of the original chant text, a type of gloss common in medieval law and literature. Although liberally applied to Mass chants (even the Epistles!), tropes are most strongly associated with the Kyrie. The titles given to Ordinary Masses (for example *Missa Dominator Deus*, *Missa Cunctipotens Genitor Deus*) tend to be drawn from the opening words of exiled Kyrie tropes.

Sequences were sophisticated tropes, exclusive to the Alleluia. Instead of just filling in the jubilus that long burst of song on the last syllable of the word "Alleluia" sequence composers were inspired to trope the whole Alleluia! Doubling each line of the Alleluia created a series of couplets, to which the composers added freshly created text. Being born of prose rather than verse, the couplets in early sequences were irregular lengths (see *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, page 14). But later sequence texts were metrical poetry, with a melody adapted from the Alleluia or from a popular tune, and rhymed couplets of equal lengths. St Thomas Aquinas, for example, set his sequence for the new feast of Corpus Christi to a popular tune by Adam de la Halle. The sequence was soon accepted as an independent chant, but retained its position directly after the Alleluia.

One of the most popular of all forms of liturgical music, sequences became a standard part of the Mass. There were sequences for the Season, for the Saints, sequences unique to a region. Their popularity did not preserve them from ruthless pruning at Trent, which prohibited all but four: *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, *Dies Irae* (attrib. Thomas of Celano, d. 1250), Aquinas' *Lauda Sion Salvatorem*, and *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. *Stabat Mater* (attrib. Jacopone da Todi, d. 1304) was authorised in 1727. Tropes were also prohibited at Trent, a ruling which unfortunately rendered unuseable many early polyphonic Masses that had been troped.

Conducti were Latin songs marked chiefly by their liberation from any standard characteristic. They might be rhymed, rhythmic, metrical - or not; some resembled hymns (in stanzas), some sequences (in couplets), some had refrains, others used different music for every line, like 16th century madrigals (a technique called 'through-composed'). The only regularities were that the lines tended to be the same length and, like hymns composed in this period (for example, *Gloria Laus et Honor*), the music was more melismatic than syllabic - possibly an attempt to harmonise stylistically with the other chants in the Mass. Conducti were used during liturgical processions or whenever the priest or other parties were 'conducted' from place to place. Conducti were quickly adopted by the secular sphere, and appear in medieval dramas, at the entry and exit of characters.

Famous composers from the Silver Age, besides those already mentioned, were: Adam of St Victor (d. 1192), writing from the Abbey of St Victor just outside Paris; Hermannus Contractus (the Cripple, 1031-54), from the monastery at Reichenau, who produced a *Salve Regina* as well as the *Alma Redemptoris Mater* (popular enough in the Middle Ages to rate a mention in Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale*); Abelard (1079-1142), who composed a book of hymns for the use of Heloise's nuns and his own monks; and Hildegarde of Bingen, also writing for her own nuns. St Thomas Aquinas wrote not only *Lauda Sion* (adapting music from a popular song by Adam de la Halle) but also the hymn *Anima Christi*, still familiar to Catholics.

Chants were differentiated not only by form (sequence, trope, conductus, hymn) and the number of notes per syllable, but also by style. Hildegarde's smooth flow of notes, with relatively few pauses or jumps to notes much higher or lower, contrasts with the Gregorian style of chant, which is marked by comparatively short, repeated melodic phrases and by frequent fourths. The different religious orders also fostered different styles: Benedictine chants were more elaborate than Dominican chants and generally sung at a higher pitch than Carthusian chant. Then there

were melodic and rhythmic divergences - a note added here or held longer there - in the chant sung at different monasteries, especially at musical centres like St Gall, St Martial of Limoges in France or Reichenau in Germany.

We know of such differences partly through musical notation, the third great contribution of the Silver Age. Some form of notation probably existed from early medieval centuries - it is hard to imagine how Pope Gregory could codify the chant without writing it down or how the vast Gregorian repertoire could be faithfully transmitted to distant lands solely by memory. Moreover, a manuscript from the Council of Cloveshoe (Glasgow) in 747 refers to a sample of 'the method of chanting' received in writing from Rome. However the earliest surviving manuscripts with notated music date from the 9th century. That notation indicates only the general shape and grouping of the melodies (up or down, fast or slow, notes to be sung as a group), so singers must have known the year's chant by heart and simply used the notation (called neumes) as a reminder. The notation differed from monastery to monastery (and scribe to scribe!). Some of the best known varieties are Sangallian, Aquitanian, French, Norman, Beneventan, PaleoFrankish, Messine and Gothic.

This type of notation lasted until the 14th century in some countries. But by the High Middle Ages, the experiments of dissatisfied music theorists had produced a more precise form of notation. Early staff notation suspended neumes on invisible wires around a real or imaginary line. The distance between each note indicated the interval, and the line was designated as F and coloured red. Later, another line (yellow or green) was added to indicate C, and then another two, to form the standard chant four-line stave. By the 12th century, Italian, French, Spanish and English monasteries commonly used staff notation. A century later, neumes had developed into the square shaped notes we use for chant today.

The fourth contribution of the Silver Age is, like habited nuns, more often found on film than in the cloister. Organum was Christendom's first taste of harmony and chant's last flourish before the attention of the medieval world wandered on to polyphony. Organums open fifths were, indeed, the doorway to polyphony. Organum replicates a chant note for note (or punctum contra punctum, from which derives the term 'counterpoint'), but a fifth or a fourth above or below. The effect is a hollow, brassy harmony, prone to sneaking unnoticed into the exercises of music students. Although condemned by modern musicianship, to ears that had never heard harmony the sound of parallel fifths enriched the plain chant, making organum specially suited to feasts and celebrations.

The last rapid steps to polyphony were taken with the development of rhythmic modes and notation (metre); the addition of independent text to each organum part; and the independence of the harmony parts from the text, rhythm and melodic shape of the plain chant. These developments made harmony parts no longer an accompaniment to chant but melodic lines in their own right. Central to these developments were the Monastery of St Martial at Limoges and the choir of the newly built Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris.

With the development of polyphony began the Church's continuing battle to maintain or restore chant to its central place in the liturgy. From the 13th century on, chant sank into a downward

spiral of disuse and misinterpretation, not halted until the opening of the 20th century. monies towards the sort of beauty found in shifting shades of light or the ripening of seasons.

PART III: CHANT IN THE MODERN ERA – THE BATTLE BETWEEN MELODY AND HARMONY

From the first stirrings of man's fascination with harmony, chant lost its ascendancy. We, reared in the age of recorded music, take harmony for granted; but in the 12th and 13th centuries, it was literally unheard-of.

Harmony was therefore of absorbing interest to musicians from the first moment its potential was sensed, while pure melody slipped back in the queue for the musician's heart.

As a result, the history of chant from the 16th until the 19th century resembles some Dickensian tale of an abandoned child: callously stripped of her own charms by disapproving retainers intent on making her look like the other children; and subsequently clad in a panoply of fashionable outfits in an attempt to render her characterless features attractive.

The first of the chant's charms to be lost was rhythm. Between the end of the Silver Age and the Council of Trent (1542-1563), the pace at which chant was sung seems to have slowed. Perhaps it was because organum (a line of melody sung simultaneously at pitch and a fifth or octave above and/or below that pitch) required a slower pace to ensure the singers kept in time with one another.

Perhaps it was because early polyphonic composers constructed their pieces upon a cantus firmus or tenor (a piece of chant with the rhythm subtracted), so that in early polyphony, the newly composed parts bubbled freely past a plodding foundation of chant.

Whatever the cause, by the time the Council of Trent took place, Europe had come to view chant as a measured form of music, like polyphony. The first complete chant book published after the reforms of Trent presented chant in proportional notation: the ordinary square note was allotted a value of one beat, diamond-shaped notes were presented as half beats and a pause sign over a square note meant the note had two beats. (See Example 1.) This stolid singing style rendered chant most unattractive to listeners. Imagine humming Beethoven's 5th Symphony with one note per beat, and you will get some idea of how tedious the chant sounded.

Next to suffer substantial change were the melodies.

Between 1577 and 1613 various Roman polyphonic composers were asked to realign the chant melodies so that they fitted the texts adjusted by the Council of Trent. The composers entered zealously into the spirit of the thing (as reformers are wont to do) and, going well beyond their brief, modified the music to make it conform to the rules of 16th century polyphony.

Changes included cutting out long melismas (many notes sung on a single syllable of text), adjusting the length and number of notes per syllable to conform to short and long accents in the Latin text, altering the cadences (or closing notes of a musical phrase) and adding musical

patterns or cliches to represent certain words. These reformed chants were published as the Medicean edition and accepted by the Church as the official version of post-Trent Gregorian chant.

(See Example 2.) It is therefore not surprising that in some regions during the 17th and 18th centuries, chant seems to have dropped out of use altogether, replaced by more enjoyable and up-to-date works.

In Italy and France, baroque and operatic sacred music, marked by trilling solos and instrumental accompaniment, was popular; in Germany and Austria, during the 18th century, many congregations were devoted to symphonic Masses, such as those composed by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. The story goes that when the Emperor Joseph II (1741-1790) implemented liturgical reforms such as forbidding Masses to last for more than three hours, Catholics that lived near the Austrian border travelled on Sundays into Bavaria, where they could still enjoy the liturgical spectacles they preferred.

At the opposite end of the musical spectrum were the congregations fond of vernacular German songs.

Finally, there were some regions, such as Mainz in Germany, which remained committed to chant, refusing modern compositions.

Where the Medicean chant continued to be used, it was decked out in frills designed to conceal its rather drab character.

Figured chant, based either on new melodies or Gregorian chant that had been further trimmed back, was elaborately ornamented by the singers, accompanied by the organ or doubled by a bass instrument, and often tossed between solo singers and a choir.

Introduced in France in association with the 18th century neo-Gallican movement (which instituted many changes to the liturgy as part of its rejection of the papacy), figured chant later spread to Germany and the Netherlands. Counterpointed chant was a sort of improvised polyphony, in which the standard chant melodies served as a stem around which singers wove impromptu lines of counterpoint.

Accompanied chant was supported by chords on the organ.

Chant also continued to be used for a time by the Lutherans in 16th century Germany, although (like all the post-Trent forms of chant) it was made metrical, like a hymn, to facilitate congregational singing.

The Church seems to have largely put up with the changes to liturgical music, merely laying down principles to preclude practices that seriously impeded the liturgy; for example, she insisted repeatedly that the orchestra should not dominate the voices of the choir and that the music must serve the liturgy, rather than vice versa.

The 19th century, with its crop of liturgical movements, ushered in an entirely different attitude to music of the past. In Germany, the Caecilian movement was formed to improve church music

in Europe and the Americas. Its primary aim was to promote the use of 16th century polyphony and reform of the chant.

The Caecilian movement was strongly supported by the Church, one of its chief representatives, F. X. Haberl (1840-1910), being employed by the Church during the 1870s to edit a revised version of the Medicean chant books, the Ratisbon edition.

In France, post-Enlightenment anti-papal feeling declined and was followed by a period of spiritual renewal. It was widely felt that the Church in France should adopt the Roman liturgy once more, but the merits of the Medicean edition were subject to considerable debate. New medieval manuscripts were discovered; scholastic studies of the chant began to appear; and some attempts were made to produce new chant books based on the manuscripts.

However, no consensus as to the correct melodies and rhythm of Gregorian chant was achieved until the work of the monks of Solesmes emerged from the shadows of their scriptorium.

... but what we have, we give you.

The Abbey of Saint Pierre de Solesmes was founded in 1833 in the province of Sarthe, France, on the ruins of a former priory. The founder was a 28-year-old former diocesan priest, Dom Prosper Gueranger (1805-1875). Like St Francis, Gueranger seems to have had a special calling to restore ruins, for the other great work of his life was to revive Gregorian chant. His purpose seems to have been to put together a functional set of Roman liturgy chant books for use in his own monastery. In the end, however, he not only instigated the retrieval of the Golden and Silver Age chant from the sea of misuse, disuse and new uses into which it had sunk in the preceding centuries, but, by means of his writings on the liturgy, he also gave a vital impulse to the movement to re-adopt the Roman liturgy and Gregorian chant in France.

Gueranger and his monks approached the task of restoring the original melodies by photographing and collating all the versions of each chant that could be found in medieval manuscripts throughout Europe.

(Subsequent events proved this to be a happy policy, for the Solesmes photographs remain the sole testimony to the content of many manuscripts destroyed by bombs during World War II.) The monks then compared the photographs, taking for each chant the melody and text presented by the majority of manuscripts to be the correct version.

The early work of restoration proceeded under the direction of Dom Joseph Pothier (1835-1923) and resulted in the publication during the 1880s of a series of chant books for use by the Solesmes Congregation. Pothier also published a treatise in 1880 explaining the principles used in restoring the chant and expounding his then-radical accentualist theory: that chant should be sung non-metrically, at a moderately slow speech pace, and using accents in the Latin text to determine which notes should be emphasised in the music.

Both these publications, being implicit criticisms of the chant published in the Medicean and Ratisbon editions, aroused vehement protests from the German publisher of the Ratisbon edition, Pustet, to whom the Sacred Congregation of Rites (SCR) had in 1868 granted a 30-year

publishing privilege and an official approval of the Ratisbon edition as authentic Gregorian chant. Resistance to the Solesmes theories also came from the Caecilian movement: notably from Haberl, who had developed a quite different, metrical theory about the rhythm of the chant.

Following Pothier's departure from Solesmes to serve as prior of another monastery, Dom Andre Mocquereau (1849-1930) directed the publication of a series of facsimiles of medieval manuscripts, the *Paleographie Musicale*.

Successfully designed to prove that the Medicean/Ratisbon melodies were not authentic Gregorian chant, the *Paleographie* led to widespread acceptance of the Solesmes research from musicians, clergy and, ultimately, the Church.

Between 1905 and 1908, a new Vatican edition of the chant books, based on the Solesmes version of the chant, was published by the Church. Later Vatican editions included signs developed by Mocquereau as rhythmic aids. (See Example 3.) Later still, the ancient graphic musical notation from particular manuscripts was transcribed above and below the chant, so choirs could follow the same written signs that their counterparts long ago used to prompt their memories. (See Example 4.) Use of the Vatican edition throughout the Church was made obligatory by Pius X, who had followed the work of Solesmes with interest from its earliest days. Pius X's affection and concern for sacred music dated back at least twenty years, to the early years of his priesthood.

Previously, as Archbishop of Venice, he had instituted a reform of sacred music that claimed for chant the position of foremost music of the Church and encouraged the singing of chant, not only by choirs but also by the congregation.

Almost immediately after becoming pope, he introduced a similar reform for the universal Church in his 1903 document, *Tra le sollecitudini*.

Pius X's initiative was not universally well received. Lovers of baroque, classical and modern sacred music were aghast at the directive to return to a predominant or exclusive use of chant and polyphony in the liturgy. Pius X seemed pleased with the fruits of his reform and, in letters and other documents, remarked on the re-emergence of chant throughout the world. Yet common liturgical practices from the first half of the twentieth century - the continuing presence of vernacular hymns and the prevalence of low masses - stand like question marks at the end of his reform. The aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, above all, leads us to question how widespread, deeply rooted or comprehended the reform was.

The Second Vatican Council closed Pius X's effort to graft Gregorian chant onto the 20th century. Whatever the intentions of the Council, the references to sacred music in the Council documents effectively legitimated the replacement of chant with vernacular hymns and folk music. A new chapter in the history of chant is perhaps now taking shape through the thrust of the traditional rite movement and the thirst of a secular world ... but like all nows, the promise of the present remains for the moment no more than a whisper through the darkness.

The Gospels tell us that, after Christ's death, when Peter and John were confronted by a cripple begging for money, Peter said to the cripple "Gold and silver we have none but what we have,

we give you", and stretching out his hand, he healed the cripple. We, today, may still not sing the chant as it really was in the Golden and Silver Ages, but we have the best restoration that scholarship can give us; and although chant, like the other gifts that traditional rite Catholics have to offer to the Church, may not be what the rather crippled Catholics of modernity are seeking, it may turn out to be a gift that can help the Church to get on her feet once again.

THE END

Veritatem Facientes in Caritate

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