

G R E G O R I A N C H A N T : M U S I C A T T H E H E A R T

Listen.

Can you taste it? Smell it? It has the feel of velvet. With eyes closed shut it sends you pictures of cathedrals and abbeys. It may enter your imagination through the ears, but it reaches to, and draws from, every sense, every intuition. It stirs the intellect, yet its entrée is at once transcendent and primal. Ancient, yet ageless.

Chant.

Perhaps the most ancient form of music (historically, the earliest documented form), the utterly simple, unadorned melodic lines of chant have survived (empowered?) the last 2500 years of human history.

What is it about ancient chant, and its most notable legacy, Gregorian Chant, that is so universally compelling? How can a form that developed into such a patently Catholic medium reach so far beyond its circle of influence to now rank with jazz and R&B as competitors in the modern record business?

A little music history helps make sense of this.

The pre-Christian Origins of Chant

We know that chant was the vehicle of choice for performing ancient Jewish, Sumerian, Greek and Roman poetic texts. But, because there is such little evidence of a formal system of musical notation, we don't know much about what pre-Christian chant sounded like.

What we do know from ancient texts is that the lyric quality and poetic sense of early poetry would demand smoothly undulating melodic lines and free-pulsing rhythms. This pre-Christian era experience set the stage for the two fundamental precedents of its post-Christian era offspring: the primacy of lyric, and the interdependence of lyric and melody.

The power of this simple formula can not be understated. It supposes the basic principle that the lyric is the foundation of the piece, the engine that drives the melodic line. So it would not happen that a chant composer would come up with a melody and say, "What lyrics would fit this?" Rather, the composer would take an existing poetic text, feel its natural cadence and pulse, and construct a simple melody that would carry the flow of the words.

Even more so, the melodic line would not just complement the lyric, it would reflect it.

It is this effortless flow, this synergy of sound (word) and tone (pitch) that marks the appeal and power of chant. In Gregorian Chant, it

is a marriage so effective that the words, in a language no longer spoken, still sing a reflective meaning far beyond the mere power of the intellect. The sound speaks to the soul.

Chant and the Church: 500-900CE

This chant style we call Gregorian (after Pope Gregory I, r.590-604AD) began being codified by the Benedictine monks of the early sixth century. At this time, there was no written musical notation. Each abbey developed a repertoire of melodic psalms and scriptural texts that, while becoming part of the each particular abbey's prayer life, through inter-abbey transfer and sharing became a significant volume of chants.

The raison d'être of chant was the Divine Office, the complement of psalm and New Testament readings that was, and is today, the round-the-clock prayer formula of monks and nuns. The Liturgy of the Hours as it is sometimes called is a set pattern of psalm and scripture readings arranged specifically for their appropriateness to the time of day. A typical 18-hour waking day would feature eight periods of designated communally sung prayer, from rising (Matins) to sleeping (Compline). Part of the power of these settings is their inherent ability, with lyric and music, to match the natural ebb and flow of the day.

This matching of meaning with sound is achieved through the use of seven musical modes, each based on a variation of the eight-tone diatonic scale that was to become the foundation of Western music composition to this date. Based on the Greek's Phrygian, Lydian, Dorian and Mixolydian tonal systems, these modes have distinct characters, each connoting a different emotion. Psalms of praise and rejoicing might, for example, be rendered in the strident Phrygian or Lydian mode, while those of supplication and contrition might be composed in the Dorian or Aeolian. What distinguishes one mode from the other is the combination of whole step (as in "Do-Re") and half step (as in "Ti-Do") tonal distances between the intervals of each scale. For example, in the Dorian mode, the tonal distances between the successive pitches run whole-half-whole-whole-whole-half-whole (D through D on the white keys of the piano). In the Lydian mode, the pitch-to-pitch run is whole-whole-half-whole-whole-whole-half (C-C on the white keys).

The second use of chant was for the Mass, the sacred commemoration of the Paschal Mystery of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection. In the musical genre of the Liturgy of the Hours, abbeys produced musical settings for the Mass, including a recitative style for the proclamation of all the scriptures and accompanying ritual prayers.

Chant and the Middle Ages: The Politics of Music

In the early middle ages, monastic worship continued to flourish, but two political factors came to broaden the development of chant.

In 800 CE, the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne conquered Europe, allied with the power of the Vatican States and established throughout Western Europe the Holy Roman Empire. As part general, part theocrat, more systematically than could any monks working on conversions, Charlemagne set the stage for Christianity (and its chant forms) to take root throughout Europe. Though labeled "Gregorian," the vast majority of the 3000 melodies that are extant are actually written by Frankish monks during and after the Carolingian Renaissance. Some historians read the insistence of the Church to identify chant with Pope Gregory I as an effort to reaffirm Roman power in the centuries following Charlemagne, times when there were actually two reigning popes, one ruling from Avignon, France, and the other, from Rome.

After Charlemagne's death, the vulnerable Empire was challenged, conquered and settled by pagan tribes from the north of Europe. These formerly nomadic tribes adapted well, very well, to the agrarian (and, by cultural assimilation, Christian) life of the people they conquered. Soon, abbey chapels began proving insufficient

for the burgeoning population of worshippers. Parish churches developed, and soon, ever larger cathedrals. The locus of Christian activity (and the ministry of many monks) shifted from abbey to cathedral, and with that, chant was introduced as the prayer vehicle not only of clerics, but of the general population. In addition, as a matter of practicality, musical presentation of texts proved to be a more effective way to fill the vast, reverberant halls where the faithful came to worship. In this light, it is important to note that, although certain Medieval iconoclasts like Hildegard von Bingen incorporated instruments into the music of worship, instruments were seen as profane, distracting, unfit for worship, and so, virtually forbidden from church use until the fourteenth century.

During the height of Gregorian Chant (900-1300 AD), nearly every word of the Liturgy was sung. In the Western world which recognized the bishop of Rome as the head of the church, the public prayer was conducted in Latin. In the countries which recognized the Patriarch of Constantinople as prelate (Greece and the surrounding areas of Asia Minor), Greek was the language of worship. Although Latin chant clearly dominated the liturgical repertoire, one present-day reminder of cross-cultural assimilation of the Greek language in Roman Catholic liturgy is heard in the sonorous melodic lines of the quintessential Greek prayer "Kyrie Eleison."

Chant: The Basis of Modern Music

More than standing the test of time, chant became the cornerstone of what we know today as Western music. The confirmation and development of the diatonic (do-re-mi, etc.) scale, (the seven-note tonal system which sets today's European-based scale apart from the 12 tone and quarter-toned scales of other cultures, the (at first rudimentary but progressively more complex and instructive) system of musical notation, the unity of poetry and music as inseparable arts, not to mention the inspirational settings of sacred texts to music, all these graces flow from the simple premise of letting the words speak their strength, their calm, their peace, their power. This deference to simple melody and flowing rhythm set the stage for the harmonic improvisations developed by the post-chant experimentalists and formalized in the Ars Nova, Baroque, Classical, Romantic and Modern movements of the centuries to follow

And all this in a language far from dead--the language of the heart.

Still observed in its traditional form, Chant remains as the ministry and spiritual practice of thousands of men and women religious all throughout the world.

Many abbeys have produced recordings of their prayer services. For a quick-pick review of the best recordings, please see this article's sidebar.

#1 DOMINICAN LITURGICAL CHANTS

Dominican French Choir, Fr. Andre Gouzes,
Director
22 Cuts: 69 Minutes
Milan Entertainment

Delivered in delectable bites of cantor and schola short texts, this presentation of psalms gives an excellent overview of the grace and power of authentic Gregorian Chant.

#2 CHANTICLEER MYSTERIA

Bay Area Vocal Performance Masters Chanticleer

15 Cuts: 58 Minutes
TELDEC

An experiment of sorts-An album of chant recorded by professional singers, not monks. What the listener gains in terms of pristine quality and pitch perfection, one loses in the too-perfect blending of voices (voices chosen precisely for their ability to blend). While this presents perhaps the most accurate intent of the composers, it simultaneously reduces the impact and human vulnerability of "imperfect" communal singing.