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Gregorian Chant as a *Fundamentum*
of Western Musical Culture:
An Introduction to the Singing
of a Solemn High Mass

by William Peter Mahrt

The following communication was presented as part of "An Evening of Gregorian Music," at the March Stated Meeting of the Western Center, held at the University Lutheran Chapel, University of California at Los Angeles. William Peter Mahrt is Professor of Music at Stanford University. After the talk, the Votive Mass of the Holy Ghost was sung; the Propers and the Sequence were sung in the original Gregorian chant, and the Ordinary consisted of polyphonic elaborations of the chant from fourteenth and fifteenth century English sources. The program was planned for the Academy by Wilfried F. H. M. Mommaerts, Professor of Physiology at UCLA.

In the last century Richard Wagner proposed a new theory of opera and set about putting it into practice. He proposed that opera should be a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a synthesis of the arts. For his operas he drew upon medieval legends and poetic styles, and he made music the synthesizer of the arts, the principle of continuity which delineated the action and bore the main expression of the dramatic work. This was hardly the innovation some have made it to be, for the Middle Ages already had its own *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The liturgy of the Christian Church was every bit as much a synthesis of the arts as was Wagner's opera, for it included the arts of poetry, music, painting, and architecture. Through the liturgical arts the senses aided the mind in turning itself to the worship of God. The colors of the vestments articulated the seasons—purple for the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, red for Pentecost and for feasts of martyrs, white for the festive seasons of Christmas and Easter and feasts of other saints, green for the intervening Sundays, and black for mourning. The precious metals and stones in the vessels befitted the service of the most high God. The architecture delineated the

sacred precincts, and the windows bestowed upon that holy place the gift of light which was the image of God. The incense, whose rising column of smoke was a symbol of the ascent of prayer, conveyed an odor of sweetness which was proper only to sacred places. The music articulated the service in time, providing extension and elaboration to the sacred texts, conveying them in an elevated style, and expressing through them a sacred affect. Even the sense of taste had a place, for though the bread and wine were turned into the Body and Blood of Christ, they retained the properties of their elements, and by their taste recalled the symbols of the natural nourishment of which they had become the higher spiritual kind. As in the opera, music was the art most intimately connected with the action—it provided the basic continuity to the service, while delineating its different parts according to their function. I propose to show some of the elementary ways in which Gregorian music delineates particular liturgical functions, but first a few words are necessary concerning the nature of the liturgy and its functions in general.

The Latin liturgy has sometimes been called a drama, and it is well known that the roots of European drama are to be found in the liturgical dramas of the Middle Ages. Further, many aspects of the liturgy are “dramatic” in the sense of being striking, impressive, or moving. Yet there is an essential difference between drama and liturgy at its root. Drama is fictive, and its depictions before an audience carry that audience in an imaginary way to the time and place being depicted; the drama supplies details sufficient to this task. Liturgy is not fictive, but deals with things which a congregation takes to be real; in the Mass, the central event is the reenactment of the Last Supper, but not in a dramatic way, rather in a liturgical way—the congregation is not taken back to the year 30 AD or so; rather, the mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ is brought into the present time. In this “reenactment” there are no twelve apostles; there is very little narration

of the actual event. The priest holds up the sacred elements and the people adore them, because it is the real presence of Christ. Were the presence of God to be depicted in a drama, no one there, not even the most fervent Christian, would think to worship Him in that depiction, because there it is understood to be imaginary, but in the liturgy it is understood to be real.

From this point of view, there are several levels of liturgical action. The first is the act as a whole: the action of the Mass is the act of Christ, carried out by the priest, in which He renews here and now His eternal sacrifice on the cross. The second is the series of discrete acts which support and surround this whole: the acts of giving praise (as in the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*), of petition—asking for mercy, of profession of belief (*Credo*), of hearing a lesson, of taking communion. The third is the series of actions which are done in relation to these former, that of procession, that of incensation, that of standing or kneeling, that of participating in common vocally, that of attentively listening. All of these contribute to the whole and are delineated by Gregorian music.

Gregorian music is functional music; although remarkable for its beauty and art, its styles are differentiated according to the purpose of the text which they set. For each kind of text, there is a particular style of singing which has its own rhetoric, differentiating and identifying that text and giving it suitable expression according to its function.

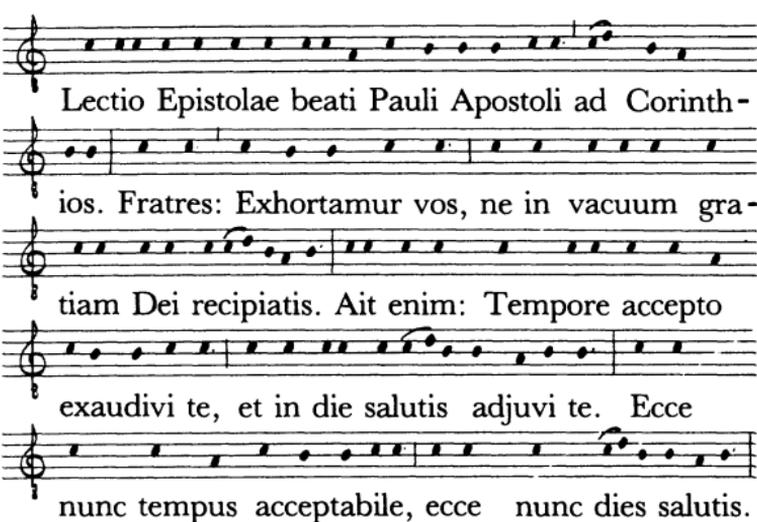
The priest or other cleric sings two kinds of texts—lessons and prayers. For each of these, simple formulae serve to deliver the text clearly and effectively, and at the same time to suggest something of its character. These simple melodies set the grammatical structure of the texts, providing for a comma at mid-sentence and a period at the end. The tone for the first lesson, usually from the Prophets, has a certain harshness, and something of the character of a prophecy in the trumpet-like interval of a fifth; its astringent half-step comma gives it an ascetic, even harsh quality we might associate

with a prophet. It is emphatic and direct.



Lectio Joelis Prophetae. Haec dicit Dominus:
Convertimini ad me in toto corde vestro, in
jejunio, et in fletu, et in planctu. Et scindite
corda vestra, et non vestimenta vestra, et con-
vertimini ad Dominum Deum vestrum: quia
benignus et misericors est, patiens, et multae
misericordiae, et praestabilis super malitia.

The tone for the second lesson, usually an Epistle of St. Paul, is hortatory, giving a persuasive melodic cadence to underline the pattern of accents characteristic of the cadence of a periodic Latin sentence.



Lectio Epistolae beati Pauli Apostoli ad Corinthios. Fratres: Exhortamur vos, ne in vacuum gratiam Dei recipiatis. Ait enim: Tempore accepto exaudivi te, et in die salutis adjuvi te. Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile, ecce nunc dies salutis.

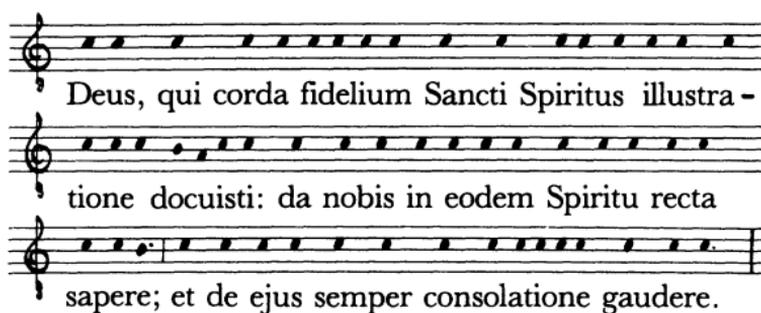
The final lesson, from the Gospel, is sometimes sung to an extremely simple tone, sometimes to a more attractive melody. In either case, the melody distinguishes the Gospel from the previous lessons.

The prayers also receive a characteristic setting; they all relate to the same recitation pitch, but are elaborated according to the function of their texts. The collects are short, single sen-

tences, logically conceived and concisely and effectively stated. For example,

O God who dost illuminate the hearts of the faithful by the Holy Spirit; grant that through that same Spirit we may rightly know, and ever rejoice in his consolation.

They are set to a melody which leads the pitch of the first statement directly into its consequent.



Deus, qui corda fidelium Sancti Spiritus illustratione docuisti: da nobis in eodem Spiritu recta sapere; et de ejus semper consolatione gaudere.

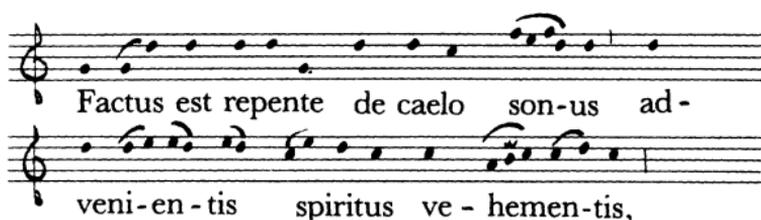
The more solemn prayer is the preface, the prayer immediately preceding the canon of the Mass when the consecration takes place. It is a longer prayer, more ornate in its rhetoric, and it is concluded by singing the hymn *Sanctus*; the tone to which it is set is also more ornate, providing a greater emphasis on the line by changing pitch at its end, having two different reciting notes, and giving more melodic turns upon the cadences.



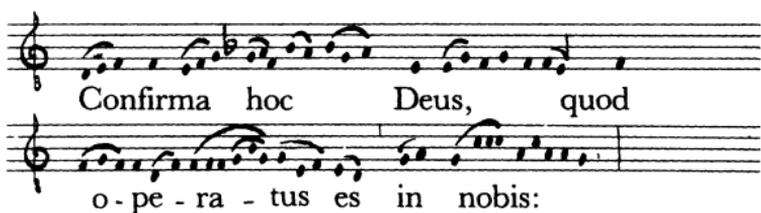
Vere dignum et justum est, aequum et salutare, nos tibi semper, et ubique gratias agere: Domine sancte, Pater omnipotens, aeternae Deus: per Christum Dominum nostrum. Qui ascendens super omnes caelos, sedensque ad dexteram tuam, promissum Spiritum Sanctum in filios adoptionis effudit. . . .

The Lord's Prayer which follows the canon is the most elaborate of the prayers, now setting the whole text to a melody without recourse to reciting many syllables on one tone; this melody is yet the elaboration over the basic pitch structure it has in common with the preface and the collect.

These melodies all set texts which are in themselves liturgical actions—the reading of the scriptures, and the delivery of prayer. Of the chants which the choir sings, on the other hand, several are not liturgical actions in themselves, but are meant to accompany other actions—processions, incensation, and so forth. They are the most syllabic and rhythmic as they accompany a procession—the communion procession is the most active (if the faithful all move to receive communion), and it is the simplest and most emphatic:



The introit is a bit more elaborate, and the offertory is yet somewhat more so; for example, the offertory *Confirma hoc*:

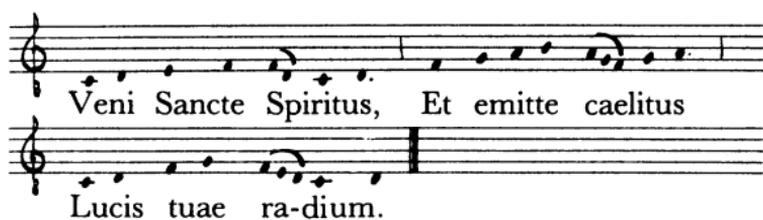


The gradual is considerably more melismatic, and the alleluia is even more so:



The gradual chants, those that come between the singing of the lessons, are of an extent that far exceeds any activity that they accompany. Rather, their function is as a complement to the lessons; while the lessons project relatively long texts to the most simple music, and the words prevail, the opposite is true of the gradual and the alleluia—rather short texts are set to elaborate music. While the music of the lessons is set with respect to the accent of the text, often the gradual shows a different way of adding music to text; the most extensive melodies of these chants are the alleluias, in which a large portion of the melody falls upon the final unaccented syllable; here the function of the music exceeds the clear presentation of the text, and the music itself becomes rather a semi-wordless jubilation. This is the musical high point of the Mass; its effect, however, is not to detract from the lessons, but rather to enhance them. The hearing of too many words can be taxing to the ears, and the function of those melismatic chants is recollection and refreshment for the listener. The following lesson can be heard with considerable attentiveness after a melismatic chant.

The melismatic chants before the Gospel were the subject of considerable elaboration in the Middle Ages, in the form of additional poetry set either to the music of the alleluia melisma, or at least to music related to that melisma. For example, the melody of the sequence *Veni sancte spiritus* is clearly related to the alleluia which precedes it (the alleluia above):



The function of these chants can be seen in the overall form of the service. There are two parts of a Mass. The first part centers upon the readings; preeminent among them is the Gospel, being the words of the Lord himself. The second part centers upon the offering and con-

secrating of the bread and wine and the giving of it in communion. The ordering of the musical parts serves to highlight these central parts. For example, the placement of the most elaborate music immediately before the Gospel creates a musical climax to the whole first part of the Mass. While the musical setting of the Gospel is simple, it is emphasized as the center of attention by the attendant ceremonies; the priest moves to a more prominent place, incense is used, the people stand up—all of these create the climate of respect and honor given to the Gospel.

Most of the features which I have described refer to a body of music whose practice has remained relatively constant and stable for over a millennium, throughout Western Europe and its extension to other parts of the world. In fact Gregorian chant is a traditional art in the sense the famous Indian art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy defined:

it has fixed ends, and ascertained means of operation, has been transmitted in pupillary succession from an immemorial past, and retains its values even when, as in the present day, it has gone quite out of fashion.

It has fixed ends—its functional purpose in the liturgy. It has ascertained means of operation—the distinction of styles, as well as the eight ecclesiastical modes and the equal-note rhythmic theory (which gives it its generic name, plainsong). It has been transmitted in pupillary succession—we have learned its singing by working with those people who were already its practitioners. It comes from an immemorial past—its writing down was begun in the ninth century although its use is documented as early as the sixth or seventh centuries, and traces of it can be found in the melodies of Yemenite Jews who have been cut off from the outside world since the time of Christ, for example, the Yemenite eulogy of the Haftara

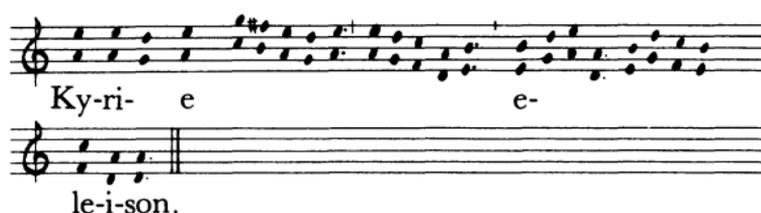


can be compared with the Gregorian canticle for Holy Saturday:

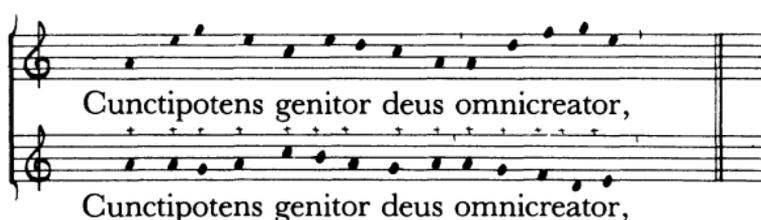


And it retains its values even when, as in our day, it has gone quite out of fashion—presently, some of the best work of musicologists in our country is being devoted to research in Gregorian chant, just at a time when the official Roman Church seems to have thrown it aside.

The culture of Western Europe is what one might call a progressive culture; each generation is conscious of the tradition which it has received, but is aware that it is a changing tradition, and sees its role not as preserving the tradition intact, but as making a contribution to that tradition, even as leaving one's own mark upon it. In this context, the Gregorian melodies formed a fundamental stratum over which was built, according to the artistic means of each age, superstructures of quite different sorts. Polyphonic pieces in the style of each period were composed over the specific Gregorian melodies. For example, the earliest sort of addition was in the form of parallel voices, as in this example:



A contrasting melody in a like rhythm could be added:



A musical score for two voices. The top staff has a treble clef and the bottom staff has an alto clef. Both parts feature a simple, stepwise melodic line with a dotted rhythm. The lyrics are 'e-ley-son.' with a period at the end of the phrase.

The Gothic manner was to elaborate by introducing a variety of rhythms:

A musical score for four voices. The top staff has a treble clef, the second staff has an alto clef, the third staff has a tenor clef, and the bottom staff has a bass clef. The melody is highly rhythmic and elaborate, featuring many eighth and sixteenth notes. The lyrics are 'Rex vir-gi-num a-ma-tor de-us ma-ri-e de-cus e-lei-son.' with hyphens between syllables.

More parts could also be added:

A musical score for three voices. The top staff has a treble clef, the middle staff has an alto clef, and the bottom staff has a bass clef. All three parts have a similar melodic line with a dotted rhythm. The lyrics are 'Ky-ri-e e-leison.' with hyphens between syllables.

By the Renaissance the Gregorian melodies might be shared by all the parts in turn, for example:

A musical score for five voices. The top staff has a treble clef, the second staff has an alto clef, the third staff has a tenor clef, the fourth staff has a bass clef, and the fifth staff has a double bass clef. The melody is shared among the parts, with each voice entering in turn. The lyrics are 'Ky-ri-e' with hyphens between syllables.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece, likely a Kyrie. It consists of five staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics '-ri-' and 'e'. The second staff is a vocal line with lyrics 'Ky-ri-' and 'e'. The third staff is a vocal line with lyrics '-ri-' and 'e'. The fourth and fifth staves are instrumental accompaniment. The music is in a Renaissance style, characterized by its harmonic structure and melodic construction.

Here the Renaissance ideal of harmony and proportionality of parts is realized in quite a different kind of piece from the medieval pieces, yet the underlying melody remains the same.

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, most of the prominent composers had a clerical schooling and profession—part of their daily occupation was to sing the offices in the great cathedrals and chapels, and what they sang was Gregorian chant. Small wonder that the modes in which they composed their pieces bore a close resemblance to those of the Gregorian pieces, and that the style which was the culmination of the late Renaissance, that practiced by Palestrina, embodied the principles of melodic construction held in common with Gregorian chant. As the new styles of the seventeenth century came to be used in the churches, the style of Palestrina was yet kept as a normative church style; it was called the *prima prattica*, while the new styles were called the *seconda prattica*. The new styles included the extensive use of instruments, while the ecclesiastical style was basically a vocal style. As this was the traditional style of the Pope's Sistine Chapel, it came to be identified with that place, and eventually the name *a capella* was seen to refer to the Sistine Chapel. The unaccompanied vocal style was held to have a special place in the sacred services because of its more intimate relationship with the sacred texts.

The common conception of the history of Gregorian chant has been that it was over-

shadowed by polyphonic music sometime about the Renaissance and fell into oblivion. This is far from the truth of the matter. Since the traditional repertory was a very extensive one, there was little need for the composition of new pieces, and it was in general not the subject of the ongoing composition of new pieces. Yet the singing of it continues to this day. The French dioceses were particularly active in the printing of excellent books of chant in the eighteenth century, and the published record of its cultivation is extensive. The spirit of the revival of the ancient art is manifested throughout its whole written history from the time of Charlemagne through the Second Vatican Council; in this spirit the monks of Solesmes have contributed an immense amount of scholarship in providing the modern scholarly readings which are sung today.

But what of the present? Has Gregorian music been dropped by the Roman Church and must it now be relegated to museums and concert halls? While one must lament the cultural regression that is the result of the dropping of the chant in most churches, it remains alive and well in a few places; it has the solemn decrees of the Second Vatican Council in its favor, and the celebration of the Mass in Latin is, contrary to the newspapers, not forbidden. On the authority of the Council, a revision of the Latin Missal was published in 1969; in form it differs only little from the older rite. The English Mass now being said in the churches is based upon this Latin Missal of 1969, and when we sing a Latin Mass, what we sing is not, as some now think, the English Mass translated back into Latin. For the present it is the norm for the Roman Church, and it is for refusing to use the revised form, and not for using the Latin language, that certain traditionalists have fallen under ecclesiastical censure.

In the academic institutions of our own country much attention is paid to the Latin liturgy; it is studied by students of drama, literature, music, art history, political and social history, anthropology, and the like; in the

seminaries and theological schools, it is studied by dogmatic theologians, canon lawyers, or even religious propagandists; but there is very little of the proper study of liturgy itself—what the Germans call *Liturgiewissenschaft*; those of us from the various other disciplines who do study it must constantly be aware that it is a whole, and seek to transcend the limits of our disciplines when we study it.