

CHANTS OF A LIFETIME

The Gregorian Gaudeamus!

Today's debates and *détentes* over Gregorian Chant make us wonder how music a thousand years old can cause arguments among modern people. But its mere mention can launch an avalanche of strong opinions.

So, what is this "Gregorian Chant?" Why is it in any way important, and why so divisive? Amazingly, why do young adults find the Chant more expressive to them than some very carefully thought out and prepared contemporary Catholic Liturgy? What are they looking for? And who is fostering this surprising new movement?

Why, indeed, the very name, Gregorian Chant, is ironic. This music can't be "Gregorian." Pope St. Gregory the Great died in 607. Nearly all this music is from after his time, most some 400 years later. And only a part of it is a type of vocal music that can be correctly called, "chant."

Real chant is a practical singing of psalms and canticles on steady musical tones that clothe the text but have almost no melody. Most of these "psalm tones" date from well *before* Gregory's time. These tones were already ancient by the time of Jesus' public life; and yes, he himself certainly would have chanted scriptural texts to them. They're wonderful, and are in our chant books; but theirs is a specific musical style within and by no means the totality of what we day call "Gregorian" and "chant."

Most of this music is, however, *plainsong*, to use the English term – unaccompanied vocal melody, that over centuries developed into the Church's *magnum opus* of choral and congregational singing.

Nonetheless, the papal appellation fits: Pope Gregory the Great was a principal deacon and cantor in Rome prior to his election as pope. He did foster the development of what now has the name, "Gregorian Chant."

The Gregorian repertoire does embody musical elements from Gregory's time, but also earlier and later. So comprehensively that in the Twentieth Century the *avant garde* Austrian composer Anton Webern called Gregorian Chant, "the Urmusik (music at the root) of Western Civilization."

So from the point of view of a musicologist or historian, Gregorian Chant is very significant. And it still inspires composers. Jazz musicians find something “basic” about the Chant, including expressive freedom. Motion picture composers have built complete movie scores on short phrases from famous Gregorian Chants. The chant is not only “first cousin” to the folk music of Western Europe but akin also to the ancient basic music of many world cultures -- Semitic, Indian Dravidic, Asian including both Chinese and Japanese, even African and Native American musical expression. Their primal elements in Gregorian Chant exactly like similarly ancient musical “structures” these cultures, all suggesting for one thing, a common origin, but also interestingly able to be harmonized and performed together seamlessly in fascinating arrangements showing just how universal a “basic plainsong” there is that is shared by the human family as its innate musical unity.

Still the question: Why a growing popular interest in this chant if it is so ancient? The answer is, it is also contemporary. The developed chants of the 12th century are far closer to modern popular music than to the primal chants of world civilization. The chant is both “nova et vetera,” “new and old.” Ageless, and to many, a revelation warm and wonderful.

Youth today – a plurality of them, well-educated young men, have an unabashed craving for something unchanging, established, wise, more fully relevant. Gregorian Chant symbolizes and expresses it for them.

These young are interested in the Classics of the Western World, in general, and to some definite extent, “cousin cultures” worldwide. So their interest extends to world music – the Indonesian gamelan, the Indian raga, the American Indian incantation to nature, just as much as St. Francis’ hymn to the sun. But they need a “particular music” in which this can be practically found – and used, since we are “talking Liturgy.” Hence, the Chant.

The Gregorian *opus* bespeaks Wisdom and Stability. That can’t be found in the fleeting hits of popular music, the commercialism of entertainment, and regrettably, even some carefully prepared contemporary Christian prayer. Something still is missing in the “renewal” music created after Vatican II that now prevails in Roman Catholic Worship. This is initially puzzling, but it is not about the *new* Liturgy or its music. It is about something different in kind, also needed.

Gregorian Chant bespeaks and teaches a *philosophia perennis*, an ageless Philosophy of Living that can last a lifetime and can grow; “Music as Wisdom.” This is a generation hungry for Wisdom. And as the Country-Western song has it: “Gold is where you find it.”

Hearing is believing. Visit a cavernous cathedral-like Catholic church in an “older part of town,” and listen to the total acoustic of the church nave. Try to arrive at a time when Confessions are heard and the PA is playing quietly in the background, Victor Red Seal 1931 recordings of the monks of Solesmes monastery near Bordeaux, France. Listen to the acoustic affect of this unaccompanied song – no guitar, no organ, certainly no orchestra. And yet, symphonic. The cavernous echo, the “splattering” and ricoches of the harmonics of the lower notes of the recorded young male voices, and how this creates a natural harmony and perfect “accompaniment” throughout the church interior. Nothing more is needed. And time is standing still.

Gregorian Chant is *not* the sumtotal of the “inestimable treasure” of Sacred Music. Renaissance polyphony forms an essential part of the Magnum Opus. So do Mozart Masses and hymns in a legacy of styles from over centuries. And new music is being added. But the Church, guarding Gregorian Chant, gives it what Vatican II called, “price of place.”

There is an ecumenical aspect. The treasure of Sacred Music contain outstanding contributions from Protestant sources, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Greek “Patristic Chant” from well before St. Gregory’s time. All that said, the hallmark of Catholic Music is its Gregorian Chant.

One might think that modern young adults would find more inspiration in what Vatican II called, “the particular genius of peoples.” For there are many style of Christian Church Music; all play a part. Spirituals like, “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” and jazz-inspired Masses such as Mary Lou Williams’, “Mass in Honor of Saint Martin de Porres” play a quintessential part in today’s treasury. Many a vernacular Mass since Vatican II can be cited as exemplary in the conveyance of Catholic, and Christian, spirituality of music as prayer today.

Yet somehow the “Latin Mass” has a special current appeal, and to such extent that the hard-to-find “Extraordinary” (Trinitarian) Form is cultivated in entirety. Additional irony, insofar as the Novus Ordo of Vatican II restores wonderful liturgical practices pre-dating the Council of

Trent, which for the needed international Catholic unity were no longer allowed. So while the Tridentine Mass is a type of Latin Mass, it is not *the* Latin Mass. That is the New Order when celebrated in Latin. What we see increasing now seems pastorally quite sound, a vernacular Mass with great Latin Chant using one of the new editions for this purpose.

The young Catholic might likely add: “There is yet more.” “We are looking for something that will ‘stay the same’ in our lives, that we can again and again find our Faith expressed within, can learn from, to last us permanently. We don’t get that from all regular Sunday Masses, though many can be relevant and yes, inspiring. But in a Gregorian Mass we have found an entirely different world – the one we need the most.”

Notice how similar this need is to the one which is the hallmark of Eastern Orthodoxy – when you do *not* change, so as to maintain a moment that can be reentered again and again.

This does not mean that the chant is always performed well. Far to the contrary, many of its best teachers just “gave up” after Vatican II, retired. Today most Gregorian Chant still quietly rests in the remaining copies of the once-universal Gregorian “Liber Usualis” (literally, “usual book”).

Many monasteries have let go of the Gregorian Latin and replaced it with English plainsong. A contribution of great importance is coming about with these efforts and publications. But these new compositions cannot bespeak the Living History or become the tried and proven musical beauty of some of the greatest melodies ever created for the human voice.

Gregorian Chant is no panacea. It can complement, even reenforce vernacular singing in Modern Liturgy. It *never* replaces it. The young people who love the chant soon also realize that for understanding, the vernacular is still needed and normative.

In later essays we will go into some of the historicity of this prayerful vocal art. This is simply an attempt to describe at the Chant does occupy a pride of place that is not just nominal but relevant to the times, and practicable: An accessible, immediate experience of our Ageless Faith.

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