

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?

Indeed, the very name Gregorian Chant, is ironic. This music cannot really 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 the type of vocal music that can be correctly labeled, "chant."

Real chant is a practical singing of psalms and canticles on steady musical tones that clothe the text but have a cadence rather than a melody. Nearly all these "psalm tones" date from well *before* St. Gregory's lifetime. They were already ancient during Jesus' public life; and yes, he himself certainly would have chanted scriptural texts to them. They're wonderful. They are still in our chant books; but theirs is a specific musical style and only a part of we now call "Gregorian" and "chant."

"Gregorian Chant" is, however, liturgical *plainsong*, to use the Anglican term, unaccompanied vocal melody that over centuries developed into the Church's *magnum opus* of choral and congregational unison singing.

And in all fairness, the appellation, "Gregorian" is appropriate: 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 became our "Gregorian Chant."

Today's Gregorian repertoire does embody basic musical elements from Gregory's time, and even earlier. 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 “basic” musical elements in the Chant, including an expressive freedom. Motion picture composers have built complete movie scores from short phrases found in some of the more famous Gregorian Chants. The chant is not only “first cousin” to the folk music of Western Europe but is akin also to ancient music worldwide -- Semitic, Indian Dravidic, Asian including both Chinese and Japanese, even African and Native American musical expression. Primal elements in Gregorian Chant are very similar to these other ancient musical “structures,” suggesting for one thing, a common origin, but also consonant enough to be harmonized and performed together seamlessly in fascinating arrangements showing how universal a “basic plainsong” there is, shared by the human family, an innate musical unity.

Still the question: Why this fresh interest in a musical style so ancient? The answer is that it is also contemporary. The developed chants of the 12th century are far closer to modern classical music than to the primal chants of world civilization. Gregorian Chant is *nova et vetera*, “new and old.” Ageless; to the young, a revelation warm and wonderful.

Youth today – an increasing number of very bright young adults, curiously mostly men, have an unabashed craving for the unchanging, the established, the wise and still relevant. For them, Gregorian Chant bespeaks the Catholic “ageless philosophy -- the *Philosophia Perrennis*.

These youth are interested in the Classics of Western Civilization, and to some extent, “cousin cultures” worldwide. So the interest extends somewhat to world music – the Indonesian gamelan, Indian raga, American indian incantation, just as much as St. Francis’ hymn to the sun. They want to “zero in” a particular music in which the classical in Liturgical Prayer can be found. Hence, the Chant.

The Gregorian *opus* is a sung Wisdom and Stability that simply cannot be found in the fleeting hits of popular music, the commercialism of entertainment, not even in much otherwise carefully prepared contemporary religious song.

Many persons of all ages and educational backgrounds agree that “something is still missing” in the “renewal” music after Vatican II that currently prevails in Catholic Worship. The criticism isn’t about current Catholic Church Music. The *musica perennis* needed is different in kind, complementary with, not competitive against, modern Church Music.

Gregorian Chant is an active symbol of this Catholic *philosophia perennis*, a definitely ageless Philosophy of Living for a lifetime, “Music as Wisdom.” For a generation hungry for Wisdom, the Classic Country song title fits: “Gold is where you find it.”

And hearing is believing. Enter the cavernous church in the “oldest part of town” at Saturday evening Confessions time, and hear playing in the background Gregorian Chant, those 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, no orchestra. Yet symphonic. The cavernous echo, a “splattering” and ricochet of the higher harmonics of those young male voices, how this creates a natural harmony and perfect “accompaniment” throughout the church interior. Nothing more is needed. Time, and Music History, are standing still.

Gregorian Chant is *not* the sumtotal of the Church’s “inestimable treasure” of Sacred Music. Renaissance polyphony plays an essential part in the Magnum Opus. So do Mozart Masses and hymns in a continuum of styles over centuries. And new music is being added. But the Church guards Gregorian Chant, accords it what Vatican II called, “pride of place.”

Finally, there is also an ecumenical aspect. This treasure of Sacred Music has an Œcumenical aspect. The Catholic Church has taken in some of the finest contributions to Christian Church music by our Separated Brethren, specially from Lutheran and Anglican sources, but also from the Bible Churches. And elements of the profound chants of Eastern Orthodoxy are represented actively in Catholic Church Music. Still withal, the hallmark of Catholic Music remains Gregorian Chant.

One might think that modern young adults would find more inspiration in what Vatican II called, “the particular genius of peoples.” There are so many styles represented in Catholic Church Music: Spirituals like, “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” Jazz-inspired Masses such as Mary Lou Williams’, “Mass in Honor of Saint Martin de Porres” or

the legendary Missa Luba Latin Mass from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, by Fr Guido Haazen, have telling part in the treasury. Many recent vernacular Masses effectively support Catholic Liturgical Prayer today.

No. Somehow the Chant still beckons. And with it, the hard-to-find “Extraordinary” (Trinitarian) Form of Latin Eucharistic Liturgy.

It must be pointed out that this Extraordinary Form is not *the* Latin Mass. That is an older Ordo that must be celebrated in Latin. The New Ordo of the Mass is still officially worldwide in Latin, but with translations into languages already so numerous and effective pastorally, that an actual celebration of the New Ordo in Latin is rare. What we see increasing seems more pastorally sound, a vernacular Mass with great Latin Chant using one of the new editions for this purpose.

A young Catholic might add: “Don’t forget. We are looking for something that will ‘stay the same’ in our lives, that we again and again find in a Gregorian Chant Mass.”

This does not mean the chant is always performed well. Far to the contrary, many of its best teachers “gave up” after Vatican II, and retired. And today some accessible Gregorian Chant languishes in remaining copies of the once-universal Gregorian “Liber Usualis” (“usual book”).

Many monasteries have let go of the Gregorian Latin and are replacing it with English plainsong. But these compositions do not bespeak the Living History nor necessarily contain the tried, proven, musical beauty of Gregorian chants that contain some of the greatest melodies ever created for the human voice.

Gregorian Chant is no panacea. While it certainly can complement, even reenforce vernacular singing, it *never* replaces it.

In later essays we will go into some of the historicity of this prayerful vocal art. This essay is only an attempt to describe why the Chant occupies a pride of place, not just nominal but a relevant, accessible musical experience of our Ageless Catholic Faith.

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