

Outline History of Liturgical Music

BY

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Music has been associated with Christian Worship since the very dawn of Christianity. Our Lord, Himself, showed His delight in Sacred Song when on the very night of His Birth, though He forewent almost every other human comfort, would not let this first occasion of Christian Worship pass without the accompaniment of sweetest music. He summoned the Heavenly Choirs and as the shepherds heard the first Gospel message, there followed immediately the glorious chant of those angel voices which filled the vault of the Heavens (Luke II – suddenly there was with the Angel a multitude of the Heavenly army praising God and saying ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will’).

We read in the Gospels that Christ frequented the Temple and the Synagogue. He celebrated the Pasch according to the Mosaic Law, which implied Chant of the Psalms. And so it was at the last Supper when He had instituted the Blessed Eucharist, having sung the last psalm he left the cenacle and went out to Mount Olivet to pass the night in prayer as a preparation for His Sacred Passion – *Et Hymno dicto exierunt in Monte Oliveti* (Matt. XXVI.30).

We read in St. Luke that after His Ascension the disciples “were always in the temple praising and blessing God”. But, there was also a new liturgy outside the Temple, a new central act of worship, viz. the “Breaking of Bread” – The Eucharistic sacrifice. We read in Acts II-46-47 “Breaking bread from house to house, they took their meat with gladness and simplicity of heart; praising God, and having favour with all the people.” For prudence sake the “Breaking of Bread”, however, often had to take place without singing or ceremonial, due to unfriendly pagan surroundings.

Persecution at Jerusalem along with the missionary impulse dispersed the Apostles and disciples in various directions. Christian communities with Christian cult and worship grew up at Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Antioch, Constantinople, Alexandria, even in Ethiopia. St. Paul exhorts the Ephesians to be “filled with the Holy Spirit speaking to themselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles – singing and making melody in their hearts to the Lord.”

Obviously, during the first three centuries the Chant and Liturgical rites of the Early Church took on many different styles and forms according to the various languages and customs of the localities where important churches were

established. In the middle of the second century Origen states that the Greeks in Greek, the Romans in Latin, each nation in its own language prayed to God and sang Hymns to Him with all their might. St. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea (370-379), when criticized for his manner of singing the psalms defended himself thus – “If this be the reason why you separate yourselves from me, then you must likewise separate from the Egyptians, Libyans, Thebans, and from the inhabitants of Palestine, Arabia, Phoenicia, Syria and from those who dwell on the Euphrates – in a word from all by whom the vigil services and common psalmody are held in honour.” Even to this day in the Catholic Church there are 16 Eastern rites as well as the three western rites – Roman, Ambrosian, and Mozarabic – all of them recognizing the Pope as their spiritual Father and Ruler, not to speak of the Schismatic branches that have broken away from unity. Our rite is the Roman Rite. Our traditional Chant is the Roman Chant.

The Roman Chant during this formative period developed discretely. A Latin Chant couldn't develop fast since even at Rome the predominating language of the Liturgy was Greek. Rome conquered Greece 146 B.C. but by culture and language the Greeks conquered the conquerors. The population was overwhelmingly pagan. Persecution retarded external flowering of the liturgy.

The liberation of the Church under Constantine (Edict of Milan 313) marked the beginning of great development of a distinctive Roman Chant. It is true that in its beginnings Hebrew, Syrian, Greek, particularly Byzantine chant, offered their influence but what a tribute to the spirit and devotion of the Roman liturgists, that, despite the variety of influence, they cultivated a chant that is clearly Roman. It is chant with its own scale system – its own adaptation to the accentuation of its own Latin Language. It is a chant developed from the Liturgy and for the Liturgy. It is the chant we inherit from the Fathers of the Church. St. Ephraem, St. Gregory Nazienzen, St. Basil, St. Ambrose, St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine, all had a part in its inspiration, many of them even in its composition.

But outstanding as an organizer, promoter and probably as a composer of some of its melodies is the illustrious Pontiff from whom the Chant takes its name, Pope “Gregory the Great” (590-604). Since his day the traditional chant of the Roman rite has been called Gregorian Chant. It has been held as a tradition for over 1,000 years that Pope Gregory I compiled what is known as the *Gregorian Sacramentary*, that he brought the existing liturgical Chant Books into order, codified them in conformity with his other liturgical reforms, and even that he composed many of the melodies. Although a few investigators such as George Eckhart (18th C) and the great Belgian musicologist Geveart (19th C) tried to give credit for the Gregorian reforms to Gregory the 2nd or 3rd instead of to Gregory the Great, the general conviction of the best authorities remains in confirmation of popular tradition.

A Manuscript of the 10th or 11th Century at Verona introduces the Introit of 1st Sunday of Advent with the following text “The saintly Gregory while he prayed to the Lord that He should send him from above a melody for his song, then the Holy Ghost came down in the form of a dove and lighted up his heart and he began to sing ‘Ad te levavi’, etc.” On the front page of a 10th Century Antiphoner by Hartker, famous copyist of St. Gall, St. Gregory is pictured seated among his scribes who copy down the melodies he dictates under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who seated on his shoulder whispers the inspired melodies in his ear.

Historians base their arguments, however, not on this legend but on the testimony of John the Deacon, Gregory’s Biographer, who wrote in 870 “He compiled with great care for the singers a most useful ‘Centonem Antiphonarum’. . . He likewise founded a Schola Cantorum which still performs the chants in the Holy Roman Church according to his rules – To this day, near the Lateran, the couch from which in his illness he directed the chant, also the rod with which he chastised the boys, along with the authentic Antiphonary are conserved with fitting veneration.” Egbert, Bishop of York (732-766) – *Dialogue de institutione Catholica* – writes “We observe the fasts as our teacher and master blessed Gregory ordained in his Antiphonarium and Missale which he sent us by our teacher blessed Augustine” – *Migne Patrologia Latina* 89, 441.

St. Gregory had a special affection for England. In 597 he sent St. Augustine along with 40 monks to evangelize the country. These missionaries brought with them the first copies of the Gregorian Chant books. St. Augustine established an important Schola Cantorum at Canterbury. In 678 Pope Agatho sent John, chief chanter of the Papal court to teach the Roman chant in England. He taught at Wearmouth monastery – Pupils flocked to him from all parts. After two years he returned to Rome with glowing praises of the Chant in England. An important Schola Cantorum grew up at York under Bishop Wilfred. Two famous chanters from Canterbury – a certain “James” and another named “Stephen” brought the Canterbury Chant to York.

Turning to Ireland, we find St. Patrick bringing probably the Gallican Chant to Ireland a century and a half before St. Augustine came to England. On Easter Sunday 433 – Dubhthack Maclugair, chief bard and poet of Ireland pronounced his allegiance to the Christian Faith as preached by Patrick. The minstrels almost to a man followed his example. Celtic psalmody and Celtic hymnody grew with vigor and blended with the chant of the Latin Liturgy imparting as well as receiving a new character. They learned the new hymns and melodies but they also contributed new and original ones. The *Carmen Paschale* by the Irish Sedulius (Shiel), written in the fifth Century, was, according to Dr. Sigerson, “The first great Christian epic worthy of the

name.” He is also credited with the hymn, “A solis ortus cardine”, and the Introit to Our Lady’s Mass, “Salve Sancta parens”.

Missionaries from Ireland and England, as they carried the Faith to the provinces of Germany, were apostles of the Chant as well. About the year 653 St. Gertrude of Brabant in Belgium sent for two Irish monks, St. Foillan and St. Ultan, to teach psalmody in the abbey of Nivelles. Most worthy of note is the fact that “The Monastery of St. Gall” in Switzerland, perhaps the most famous of all centres of the chant in the middle ages, from which the clearest ancient manuscripts come, was founded by the Irish Saint Cellach – latinized as St. Gallus or Gall.

Grattan Flood in his History of Irish Music tells us of Marcellus and his pupil Tutilo, inventor of the tropes – both of them Irishmen, their Irish names being Moengal and Tuathal. Tutilo was at once poet, orator, painter, sculptor and builder, a skilled performer on the cruit and Psaltery.

Peter Wagner – famous musicologist of Freiburg, Switzerland, says of Marcellus “It is not without importance that the oldest known artist of St. Gall is of Irish origin... One of the oldest manuscripts of Franco-German origin, if not the oldest, the so-called autograph of the Tonarius of Regino of Prum in the Leipzig city library is written entirely in Anglo-Irish neums. The monks from the Island kingdom who christianized Germany certainly taught in the monasteries founded by them no other order of liturgy and chant than the one which was current among them. The foundation of St. Gall, in all that concerns Church chant, stands in close relation to the English and Irish Churches.”

In France the Roman Chant was not propagated until one and a half centuries after the death of Pope Gregory the Great. Preceding it was the Gallican Chant and the Gallican Liturgy. The Gauls had their own style of Psalmody and a particular feature was the psalmody as sung by boys. Walafid Strabo tells us that in the Gallican Church there were talented and enthusiastic musicians and that many of their own compositions were combined with the Roman Office after its adoption. Though the Ambrosian Liturgy strongly resisted the change to Roman Chant and perseveres even to this day, the Gauls under the leadership of Pepin and Charlemagne accepted the Roman Chant and gave it an unprecedented development.

Pope Stephen II went to France to crown Pepin in 751 at the Cathedral of St. Denis on the Seine. The retinue of the Pope brought with them the Roman rites and chant, and during the solemnities the contrast between the Gallican and Roman chant was so marked that Pepin resolved to have unity. The Bishop Chrodegang of Metz made a trip to Rome and was so much impressed with the Roman Liturgy and Chant that he at once introduced them into his Cathedral. The Choir School at Metz was manned by teachers trained in Rome and grew into one of the greatest centres of Gregorian Chant. The great Liturgist Amalarius did most of his work there.

But it was the Emperor Charlemagne, son of Pepin, who strove most effectively for the union of all Christians by means of Liturgy and Chant. In 789 he addressed a decree to all the clergy of his Kingdom ordering them to learn perfectly the *Cantus Romanus*. Strictest directions are given how to sing the Psalms of the Office and the chants of the Mass. His own famous Court School at Aachen (Aquisgrana) – taught the chant with meticulous care. Alcuin, the great English scholar, was the Emperor's liturgical adviser. All chant books had to correspond with the Roman books. Along with arithmetic, geometry and astronomy, music formed the "quadrivium" of the school curriculum. By the emperor's command singing schools were established in the Cathedral towns, at the monasteries, and at the Palaces of the nobility and superb choirs of boys were the pride of them all. Chartres, Dijon, Lyon, Cambrai, Nevers were famous among these schools. Royal envoys travelled throughout the land with instructions to see to the observance of his commands regarding the chant. Charlemagne extended his kingdom eastward till it embraced Germany and northern Italy, so that all the monasteries and singing schools, previously founded by the Irish Monks, including the great monastery of St. Gall, were now to benefit by the direct contact of the Roman Liturgy. The Roman chanters and the Gauls often disagreed vehemently and criticized each other's style of singing.

The Romans were more adapted to the ornate style of melody, with long melismas, requiring vocal agility. The Gauls and Germans had their own taste and their own style of melody, which they defended against the criticisms of their Roman teachers. Despite all difficulties, the Gauls finally proved docile to the Roman influence. In return the Roman Liturgy accepted many additions from the Gallican usage. Gallican feasts were put in the Roman calendar. Original Gallican melodies were likewise included, so that the Roman Liturgy, from then on, might be called Gallico-Roman.

The Spanish or Mozarabic Chant, closely related to the Gallican and showing certain Byzantine features imported by the Goths, was used in the parts of Spain dominated by the Moors or Arabs. Sts. Leandro and Isidore of Seville, St. Ildephonsus of Toledo and St. Julian were all promoters of the chant in Spain. Like the Gallican Chant, Mozarabic gave way to the Roman Chant from the eighth Century onwards. To-day only two Cathedrals, Toledo and Salamanca, conserve something of the Mozarabic Liturgy.

Ambrosian Chant antedated St. Ambrose as Gregorian did St. Gregory. Although the general forms are the same, compared with the Gregorian Chant Ambrosian has more of an oriental flavour. The simple melodies are more simple than the Gregorian, the ornate parts more ornate. The two famous Italian monasteries Benevento and Monte Cassino at one time used the Ambrosian but gave it up in favour of the Roman.

We have followed the chant through its first two periods : (1) The period of formation up to St. Gregory's time ; (2) Its golden period of codification,

development and diffusion. Extending this period to include the twelfth century we find two new forms developing, viz. sequences and tropes. Only five of these sequences are still used in our chant books (Dies Irae, Lauda Sion, Stabat Mater, Veni Sancte Spiritus, Victimae Paschali), though hundreds were composed and used in the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries. Notker [^] 912 invented the sequences. He wrote 50 of them. Adam of St. Victor of Paris [^] 1192 also wrote an equal number. These compositions showed the desire first to get less long vocalises in the chant and more text with a syllable for each note, and later a freer, more developed melody. The urge toward novel expression of piety showed itself also in the tropes, which took the form of introductions, interpolations, or additions to the Kyries, Introits and all Mass Chants except the Credo, and many Office chants as well.

As we said above Tutilo, the Irish Monk of St. Gall is credited with their invention. These tropes grew to fantastic proportions and number. They were often sung outside the Church as Sacred folk songs apart from the Liturgy. They sometimes became secular or jocose in content. Wandering singers and “ne’er-do-weels” sang them for gain. The tropes in the Church grew to be independent of the Liturgical text, and along with the Sequences contributed to the rise of Mystery Plays. Their abuse led gradually to their being prohibited for Liturgical use.

These developments of tropes and sequences along with the rise of Polyphony – i.e. music sung in parts – many melodies sounding at the same time, take us into the third period in the history of the Chant. It is the period of transition to new forms. Musica mensurata or measured music begins to overshadow the free rhythmed Gregorian. The perfecting of the musical staff by Guido D’Arezzo, led to a new notation and consequent rigid and unrhythmic interpretation of the Chant.

Two periods remain – the period of decadence 15th to mid 19th Century and the period of restoration from the latter half of 19th Century to this very day. It would take several conferences to deal with these last three periods. We can only summarize here.

As Polyphonic Music developed, it became intensely interesting. The Chant took second place in the popular mind. Gregorian Melodies were used as basic themes sung in long, slow notes, with elaborate Polyphonic melodies interwoven about them. Gregorian Chant was then called Plain Chant.

Sacred Polyphony went through successive stages, from primitive organum or diaphony to descant and falso hordone, to motet and canon. Naturally, fantastic experiments ran their course before the style reached its highest perfection under Palestrina of the Roman School. Palestrina was a layman. He was a devoted protégé and friend of St. Philip Neri. Though surrounded by the spirit of the Renaissance and exaggerated humanism,

Palestrina disciplined his talent, confined it almost exclusively to Church Music and attained such perfection of technique and such mystic quality in his masses, motets, hymns, lamentations, etc., that his works have been declared worthy of a place in Liturgy alongside Gregorian Chant.

This approval would include many of Palestrina's contemporaries. Vittoria, a priest of Spanish origin, studied in Rome, perhaps as pupil of Palestrina. He is considered by many as equal to Palestrina in mystic quality and even to surpass him in fervent expression, though Palestrina stands alone for general clarity of form, dignity of melodic line and magnificence of style.

The Netherlands, the British Isles, France and Spain, Italy and Germany, all produced masters of this style. We mention a small number such as Josquin des Pres, Orlando de Lassus, Morales, Arcadelt, Nanino, Soriano, Wm Byrd, Jacobus Handl.

Composing Gregorian now became a lost art. Even the classic Polyphony soon began on the way of decadence. The same composers who wrote for the Church tried also to write in the style of the secular madrigal, chanson, or in the style of the operatic theatre. Thus the highly emotionalized humanistic appeal entered into the compositions for the Church with consequent lack of dignity and devotion. The later development of the so-called classical style of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven was quite detached from the Liturgy. When these masters wrote for the Church, they changed but little from their secular style. Their compositions were usually too long to fit into the liturgical framework. They did violence to the order and sense of the Liturgical text.

The increased use of Instrumental Music and Instrumental Accompaniments did much to secularize Church Music. Richard Wagner, though not a Catholic, recognized the truth of this: – “The first step towards the decadence of Catholic Church Music was the admission of Orchestral Instruments into the Church. With them came a sensual appeal in the expression of Religious sentiment which did a great damage and had a disastrous influence on the Chant itself. The virtuosity of the instrumentalists tempted the singers to show a similar virtuosity and soon the profane taste of the opera penetrated the Church”. – (*Gesammelte Schriften* – Leipzig 1871 t. II, p. 335.)

The Romantic period which followed, only emphasized this lack of fitness. Reaction against this abuse was manifold. The Cecilian societies of Germany and Italy demanded a revival of the Chant and a return to sobriety in the field of part music. The Chant was found still to be necessary for daily Church use. Classic Polyphony and later styles of Part Music were far from organized into Liturgical order.

Various editions of the Chant were issued:

Medicean edition in Rome	1614	France
Nivers edition	1658	France

Rennes edition	1853	France
Dijon edition	1858	France
Malines	1829	Belgium
Ratisbonne	1871	Germany

Some of them erred by abbreviating the melodies, others in their rhythm, accentuation and notation, but all tried to serve the Liturgy.

Another school of thought was led by the Benedictines of Solesmes with Dom Gueranger as their leader in what has been called the Liturgical revival. Dom Gueranger's principle was "return to the ancient sources". If we use Gregorian Chant, let it be the genuine Gregorian. The Benedictines sent their scholars to hunt for all ancient manuscripts they could find in the libraries of Europe from Sicily and Italy in the South to Spain, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the British Isles. Their paleographic studies led by Dom Potier and Dom Mocquereau were approved by the Church and in 1903, on St. Cecilia's day, Pope Pius the Xth issued his famous *Motu Proprio* on Church Music, proposing the restored Gregorian as the supreme model for Church Music, declaring Palestrinian Polyphony to be worthy of a place in the Liturgy along with the Gregorian, and offering encouragement to modern composers in the following words: – "The Church has always recognized and favoured the progress of the arts, admitting to the service of religion everything good and beautiful discovered by genius in the course of ages – always, however, with due regard to the liturgical laws. Consequently modern music is also admitted to the Church, since it, too, furnishes compositions of such excellence, sobriety and gravity, that they are in no way unworthy of the liturgical functions."

Everywhere we see signs of reviving interest in proper Church Music as outlined in the *Motu Proprio* of Pius Xth. Modern Composers are learning to adapt their technique to the spirit and form of the liturgy. If history of Church Music has taught us anything, it is this: – "Liturgy is a dynamic, progressive movement as well as a matter of tradition. It can never remain merely static. Every age of sincere devotion, and every people can contribute but they must do so under discipline of a supreme authority and in the spirit of zeal and piety ; with great respect for traditional forms and practice."