

Chapter 1

Gregorian chant in the service of the church

1.i Singing music in church in the Middle Ages; the function of Gregorian chant; levels of musical elaboration in the declamation of sacred texts; sacred sound for sacred space

Gregorian chant is the single-voice ('monophonic') music sung in the services of the Roman church. It was first recorded in writing, that is, with musical notation, in the ninth century. A great number of its Latin texts can be traced back for another century before that, but the melodies first become tangible, so to speak, in the ninth century. Gregorian chant is the earliest music preserved in such quantities – for we are talking about thousands of items. Much of the medieval corpus has dropped out of use, but it is still the music with the longest reconstructible history sung today. It is an inspiring thought that we can not only stand in an early medieval church like Charlemagne's Palatine chapel at Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle), built 792–805, but also perform the chant sung at the time the chapel was built or soon after. Inspiring in more ways than one: most obviously because something embedded deep in our history becomes audible. Admittedly, music does not survive in notation alone and there is, alas, no unbroken line of performance practice between then and now. When we sing Gregorian chant today we cannot ultimately be sure how close we are getting to the way it was done in Charlemagne's time. Nevertheless, the written link between then and now is longer than a millennium.

The function of Gregorian chant

Gregorian chant is liturgical chant. 'Liturgy' is a word used very often in this book. It is the usual word for the cycle of services as a whole in the worship of the Christian churches. Liturgical chant is therefore chant sung during Christian services. The term comes from the Greek word *leitourgia*, late Latin *liturgia*, meaning simply 'service' in the public good, without restriction to religious worship. The modern English term 'service' is to be understood here as 'the service of God', things done in his service. Compare the German term 'Gottesdienst'; while French 'office' and Italian 'ufficio' relate to the term 'office' in the sense of the performance of a

2 *Gregorian Chant*

duty. 'Office' is usually restricted in Latin Christian worship to refer to the Office hours, that is, the services other than Mass. Liturgy usually refers to everything performed, in both the Mass and the Divine Office. In the Eastern churches the term 'liturgy' is restricted to the Eucharist, the part of Mass where bread and wine are given to the believers. (The Greek word *eucharistia* means 'thanksgiving'.) The word 'liturgy' can be used in conjunction with other terms to refer to something more specific. So the 'Good Friday liturgy' refers to the services performed on Good Friday.

Chant functions principally as a vehicle for the ceremonious declamation of sacred Latin texts, whether by a single soloist, a small group or a choir. Chanting the texts in a measured, disciplined manner is a good way for the group of worshippers to act together; the more harmonious the singing, the more inspiring the communal act. When soloists exert their full powers in singing, say, a tract or offertory at Mass, they add a dimension to the religious experience commensurate with all those other things beyond the Latin text that enhance worship, such as the ceremonial actions, the vestments of the participants, and the architectural setting, including such features as stained-glass windows. Music is one of many non-verbal elements in worship, none the less essential for being difficult to describe in words.

In the liturgy mankind gives thanks and praise to God, who is present during the liturgy. Moreover, through the liturgy God acts to bestow his grace on mankind. He is praised because he is above all things, transcendent, distinct from the universe. He is thanked for creating the world and saving mankind through the gift of his son, Jesus Christ. Praising, thanking and asking for God's mercy are done in prayers, while lessons (readings) recall important events in the history of salvation. In chants, selected sentences are given a special musical setting which enhances their spirituality. This is especially appropriate because God is a spirit, not material.

Over the centuries since Christianity was declared the state religion by the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (324–37) a complicated cycle of services was developed in which the praises of God were sung and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were commemorated. Each day had its round of services, and each service had its own particular form and content; and the services were performed each day throughout the year. Some days were more important than others. Sundays were more important than ordinary weekdays, and so too were special days in Christ's life, and days when holy men and women of particular significance for the history of the church were commemorated. What was sung, and how much, depended on the importance of the day. But even on an ordinary weekday with no special occasion to be commemorated, the full cycle of services took up most of the day and part of the night.

Text box 1.1 Gregory the Great on the Eucharist

The role of Gregory the Great, pope from 590 to 604, in the creation of ‘Gregorian’ chant is not as clear as one would like, but his status as a theologian, the last of the four Latin ‘Doctors of the Church’, is unchallenged. His *Dialogues* tell of the lives of St Benedict and other early saints.

What right believing Christian can doubt that in the very hour of the sacrifice, at the words of the Priest, the heavens be opened, and the quires of Angels are present in that mystery of Jesus Christ; that high things are accomplished with low, and earthly joined to heavenly, and that one thing is made of visible and invisible.

From *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great*, trans. P. W., ed. Edmund Gardner (London, 1911), 4.58. Original text in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia latina*, vols. 75–78 (Paris, 1878–1903).

Levels of musical elaboration in the declamation of sacred texts

There are four basic categories of sacred text. Readings from the Bible and other chosen literature (such as the sermons and homilies of the Church Fathers), and prayers addressed to the Almighty, are two of these categories. Both are performed by intoning the texts on a single note with slight inflections at the ends of clauses. During the performance of the Office (the cycle of services other than Mass), a large number of psalms are sung, each and every day; these are performed by a choir using simple intonation formulae not very different in principle from the way prayers and lessons are intoned. The fourth category is made up of verses for more elaborate singing.

Even the very simple intonation of lessons and prayers lends to them a special quality, compared with plain reading. It sets them apart from everyday speech and ‘depersonalizes’ them, since the same formula is used over and over again regardless of the semantic content of the text, regardless of whether it is joyful or sorrowful, narrative or hortatory. The priest praying or the deacon or other official intoning the lesson is a vehicle, an instrument whereby the words become audible, rather than an actor delivering a personal statement.

Much of this holds good for the more elaborate forms of Gregorian chant as well. They have a much more varied melodic vocabulary than the formulae for intoning prayers and lessons, and can therefore respond in infinitely subtle ways to the text being sung. However, this subtlety is not a matter of more ‘expressive’ singing, of the sort we know from romantic and modern music. That would bring the chant down to the personal level when it should partake of the divine. But the elaborate musical style reflects the syntactic structure of the text in a great variety of ways, giving it musical shape at the level of the sentence, the clause, down to individual words.

4 *Gregorian Chant***Sacred sound for sacred space**

Gregorian chant creates a sacred sound to match the sacred space in which it is sung. This is something which religious music of many kinds, outside Western Christian society as well, has always done. Therefore, while Gregorian chant is undoubtedly a means of making the sacred Latin text audible, it does so in ways whereby the text sometimes seems almost secondary. The sacred sound is more important than the sense. It is part of a ritual where most of what is done has symbolic significance, far removed from the mundane actions of everyday life. Gregorian chant contributes in its own special way to the quality of the ritual experience.

What do we mean by ‘ritual’? Ritual is here understood as a system of traditional actions to be carried out in the presence of what is sacred, following established rules. Such systems are active in all human societies where the ‘sacred’ has any meaning. They typically comprise actions of symbolic significance, a special form of language and a special body of texts to be recited or sung. The rituals attached to the Christian religion are particularly rich in form and content, not least in their musical components. When trying to understand the ritual of which Gregorian chant is a part, it should be remembered that music is not its only non-verbal component. There are others: church architecture and stained-glass windows, images and church furniture, the dress of the performers and the objects they hold and use, the bells and the incense. It is fair to say that these things have a stronger cumulative impact than the Latin texts being recited.

Words and music

Much depends on the degree of musical elaboration. Simple antiphons, which frame the Office psalms, enhance the text quite delicately, in a concise and restrained manner, so that the words are perfectly audible. In other sorts of chant, such as the gradual or offertory at Mass, the proportion of notes to syllables is much greater, and the melody transcends its role as a vehicle for the text. As far as understanding the text is concerned, this musical richness might be thought an obstacle to comprehension, but that is actually a minor consideration. The great majority of the texts were excerpted from the Book of Psalms, known by heart in its entirety and sung more or less complete every week. The chants themselves were performed from memory. It is important to understand that the Latin texts are not being presented to an audience, as a story-teller might address a group of listeners. They are more like a reference point for a religious musical experience, for a reaching out to the deity, who is no more to be comprehended in words than is music itself.

It might be objected that ordinary people in the Middle Ages did not know the Latin Psalter by heart, that in fact they did not understand Latin at all. But a religious

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-69035-5 - Cambridge Introductions to Music Gregorian Chant

David Hiley

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Gregorian chant in the service of the church* 5

community performed the liturgy in the manner (including the language) established as the right way for praise and commemoration. The religious community did this both for itself and on behalf of the rest of mankind, for those who had mundane occupations and no time for praise and commemoration but who needed to know that the religious were acting for them, in the proper manner.

Many of us come to Gregorian chant from the standpoint of classical music. At school and university, chant is often presented as Chapter One, as it were, in the long story of the History of Western Music, probably in a programme of required reading and listening. We might easily gain the impression that chant, monophonic music, is hardly more than a primitive forerunner of more sophisticated and interesting polyphonic music, in a progression moving steadily onward and upward. Or we may simply have heard a lot of classical music in our formative years. It may take some time to realize that chant does not 'work' in the same way as music from at least the sixteenth century onwards. When William Byrd writes a motet on the text *Defecit in dolore* (*Cantiones sacrae*, 1589), or Schubert a song such as *Erstarrung* ('Ich such' im Schnee vergebens', *Die Winterreise*, 1827), they match words and music (to varying degrees, of course) in such a way that the music only makes expressive sense with that particular text; there would be no reason to write this particular music if the text were a different one. The relationship between melody and text in Gregorian chant, on the other hand, is much more like that of a motet of the thirteenth century, or a chanson of the fourteenth century by Guillaume de Machaut. In many of these chansons the same music carries different verses of text because of the strophic form or repetition scheme. Individual words will not be matched by a unique melodic gesture, and individual turns of phrase in the music have none of the expressive connotations they were later to carry.

This has two obvious implications for Gregorian chant. The first is that the same text could be delivered in different ways according to the liturgical context, and the same music could be used for different texts.

Here is an example:

'Eripe me de inimicis meis, Deus meus' is the start of Psalm 58 (Psalm 59 in the King James Bible): 'Deliver me from mine enemies, O my God'. The whole psalm will be chanted to a simple tone, with the same melodic formula for every verse, on Tuesday each week during the Night Office (if not displaced by the different selection of pieces needed for a special feast day). The first verse of the psalm alone is sung as the central section of some of the great responsories of the Night Office, such as *Adiutor et susceptor* and *Ne perdas cum impiis* on Passion Sunday. In this context *Eripe me* is sung to a more elaborate tone than a simple psalm. These tones, one for each of the eight modes, are used hundreds of times in the course of a year. Elsewhere in the Office hours, *Eripe me* turns up in some manuscripts as the beginning of a simple antiphon sung at

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-69035-5 - Cambridge Introductions to Music Gregorian Chant

David Hiley

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Gregorian Chant*

Lauds on Friday each week. Turning to the Mass, we find it as a gradual, coupled with other phrases of similar import from Psalm 17. Here it is sung on Passion Sunday to an elaborate mode-3 melody, which shares melodic phrases with other mode-3 graduals. But this is by no means all. An alleluia in mode 2 sung on one of the summer Sundays of the year has *Eripe me* as its verse, and two offertories also begin with the same phrase, one in mode 7 for the Wednesday of Passion Week, and one in mode 3 for the Monday of Holy Week. All these very different ways of declaiming the text are appropriate for their liturgical purpose. It goes without saying that none of the melodies, from simple psalm tone to ornate offertory, express in a modern, personal way the feelings of a man oppressed by his enemies.

The other side of the coin, so to speak, is a matter of compositional technique. Many turns of phrase in Gregorian chant are associated with particular modes (that is, tonalities) and particular types of chant (responsory, gradual, etc.). The opening melodic phrase of the gradual *Eripe me* is used for at least four other graduals in mode 3, the next phrase in three others, while two graduals besides *Eripe me* use the same final phrase. The second part of the chant, the verse, has more examples of this sharing of melodic phrases. Recognizing this technique is of crucial importance for understanding how it was possible to learn, perform and pass on thousands of melodies to many generations of singers, largely without written aids. The traditional melodies, many composed of the same well-known phrases, were fixed in a framework made up by the structure of the text and the norms of melodic movement (established ways of starting and ending a chant, how to get to and from important points in between, and how to halt the musical motion in order to deliver lengthier passages of text). Knowing how graduals like *Eripe me* were sung as a type was more than half way to knowing how to sing *Eripe me* as an individual piece.

Just as phrases from sacred texts recur again and again, setting up a network of associations across all of sacred history, so also musical phrases recur. Just as the Latin texts are drawn again and again from the inexhaustible riches of holy writ, so the chant seems to be drawn out of a divine well of music, eternally renewed, ever present, resonating in the sacred space from one end of the year to the other.

Further reading

The study of religious worship in its wider sense, and not restricted to Christianity, involves the very large subject areas of anthropology and theology, waters too deep to enter here. Christian worship is treated in a wider context in Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. See also the opening chapters in Senn, *Christian Liturgy*:

Catholic and Evangelical, and *The Study of Liturgy*. Dictionaries which contain at least brief information on many aspects of liturgy are *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* and *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*.

1.ii Where chant was sung, and by whom

Chanting the round of services each day was a major, indeed the most important activity in the life of religious communities in the Middle Ages. These communities were of several types, the most notable being those of cathedrals and collegiate churches, on the one hand, and of monasteries and convents for monks and nuns on the other.

Gregorian chant is performed today both by trained church musicians and in religious groups and communities whose members have learned to sing chant not as professional singers but as worshippers. In the Middle Ages this was also more or less so, with two general differences. The trained singers in, say, a medieval cathedral choir would perform very little music other than Gregorian chant, whereas today's singers are expected to master a great deal of polyphonic music of widely differing types and styles, from several different centuries. Furthermore, in the Middle Ages the singers' duties would take up much more time than today, when it is usual for a cathedral singer to have other part-time employment. Something approximating more closely to the medieval system can be found today in English cathedrals with a choir school, where a singing man (choral vicar, lay clerk, or whatever he is traditionally called) may be a member of the teaching staff for the boys attending the school (who will also be singing in the cathedral choir). For those who follow a contemplative life as monks or nuns circumstances have not changed as much since the Middle Ages, although the performance of the Divine Office does not take as much time. The Night Office was already being shortened in the fifteenth century, and since then has rarely been performed with its full sung complement of lessons and great responsories.

As just said, in the Middle Ages those chiefly responsible for singing chant were members of an ecclesiastical community. They were attached either to a cathedral, collegiate church or parish church, where they were free to interact with the non-ecclesiastical population, or they belonged to an order of monks or nuns and lived withdrawn from the world. The different forms of liturgy which these two types of community follow are referred to as 'secular' and 'monastic', respectively. When the order of the services is set out in more detail in section 1.iii below a distinction is therefore made between two models. On the one hand we have the secular or 'Roman' arrangement, for which the practice of the Roman papal chapel was the ultimate model. On the other hand there is the monastic or 'Benedictine' arrangement; the

8 *Gregorian Chant*

Benedictine monastic order, following the Rule of St Benedict, was one of the oldest orders and the largest.

Cathedral and collegiate church

The term ‘collegiate church’ refers to a church with a large staff who lived together in a community (*collegium*) and were bound by rules of conduct for their common life. The Greek word for rule is *kanōn*, taken up in Christian Latin in several senses, giving rise to the word *canonicus*, a canon, one who lives by a rule or rules of conduct. The chief purpose of the collegiate church was that of prayer and praise. Pastoral care of the population was left to the priests of parish churches, which did not usually have the resources to perform the liturgy in its full musical splendour. Cathedrals are, in effect, large collegiate churches; their special importance derives from the presence of a bishop, who is the spiritual leader of an ecclesiastical diocese and has a throne (*cathedra*) in the church. The administrative head of the collegiate church (or cathedral) was the dean (*decanus*), his chief support in liturgical matters being the cantor or precentor (*praecantor*). The duty of directing and performing the liturgy was often shared with an assistant cantor, the succentor (*subcantor*). Many members of the college would be in holy orders, in descending order: bishop (*episcopus*), priest (*presbiter*), deacon (*diaconus*), subdeacon, and the minor orders of porter, lector, exorcist and acolyte. The term *clericus* (cleric, clerk, hence the collective term ‘clergy’) could refer to anyone in holy orders but usually meant those from subdeacon downwards. (Since training for the clerical life invariably involved learning to read and write, it became common to call ‘clerk’ someone employed as a writer of documents, a scribe, whether in holy orders or not.) An important official of the church was the sacrist, who would be in holy orders and who had care of the sacred vessels, vestments and other objects needed for the services.

The prayer and praise which was the chief business of the college followed the liturgical round of the Office hours and Mass (outlined in section 1.iii below). All members took part, the better singers being appointed to sing chants (or parts of them) reserved for soloists or small groups. Many important churches had a school where boys received an education fitting them for a religious life or administrative work in the service of the crown or the local lord; but performance of the liturgy was the most important part of their lives, and particular chants (or parts of them) were assigned to them as well.

Monastery and convent

Monks and nuns spent most of their lives enclosed within the walls of their monasteries and convents, leading a life of prayer and contemplation which was dominated

by the performance of the liturgy. St Benedict called this the *opus Dei*, 'the work of God'. Their way of life also followed a 'rule'. The most important of these was the Rule of St Benedict; those who followed it thus belonged to the Benedictine Order (the Black Monks). Two other important orders were the Carthusians and Cistercians (White Monks), both to a large extent conceived as reformed Benedictines. Another important rule was that of St Augustine, but this was less specific in many ways, so that a number of groups evolved within the Augustinian order, the Premonstratensians being one tightly knit congregation. Augustinians are usually referred to as regular canons (Black, or Austin Canons) rather than monks; the designation 'regular' indicates that they followed a *regula*, a rule.

The head of a monastery was the abbot (derived from Aramaic *abba*, Greek and Latin *abbas*, 'father'), elected by his brethren, the election being approved by the bishop of the diocese. (The influence of secular powers on elections, particularly in monasteries endowed by them with lands and wealth, was a recurrent problem.) Since the abbot of an important monastery was often called away on ecclesiastical or other business, one or more priors deputized for him in the administration of the monastery. The cantor or precentor was responsible for the performance of the liturgy, hence also the training of the monks in singing chant. Very often he had charge over the liturgical books and therefore the scriptorium (writing room) of the monastery. The fabric of the church, especially its valuable relics, was the province of the sacrist.

Friars (from Latin *frater*, a brother) and sisters in the orders of the Franciscans (the Grey Friars), Dominicans (Black Friars), Carmelites (White Friars) and Augustinians (Austin Friars), among others, had important work in the secular community as preachers, teachers and pastors. They, too, were committed to strict rules of conduct, including a life of poverty (hence their collective denomination as 'mendicant' or begging orders), and the performance of the liturgy.

The liturgies observed by the monastic and mendicant orders had the same basic structure as that in secular churches, while differing to a greater or lesser extent in detail. This might involve differences in the structure of individual Offices, including the number of pieces to be sung, as may be seen in Table 1.3 in the next section, where the Roman or secular 'cursus' (order of services), observed in cathedrals and collegiate churches, is compared with the Benedictine cursus. While the Cistercians followed the Benedictine cursus, Augustinian monasteries used the secular form, as did the mendicant orders.

The celebration of the Mass was different for nuns, because no woman could be admitted to holy orders. An ordained priest had to administer the Eucharist, and other ministers might be required to perform other liturgical functions. This did not much affect the singing of the chant, which could obviously be performed just as well by nuns as by monks.

Text box 1.2 The Benedictine Rule

Although the form of the Mass can be traced back over many centuries, few of the exact texts used are precisely documented before the seventh century. It is therefore all the more astonishing that in the Rule of St Benedict of c.530 the form and much of the content of the Office is already set out, and has remained unaltered to this day. The following extracts are (1) part of the order for singing the Night Office in Chs. 8–10, (2) the order of the other Office hours in Ch. 16, and (3) an exhortation to sing in the right spirit in Ch. 19. (References to the ‘prophet’ are to David as composer of the psalms, regarded in this context as a prophet.)

1

Chapter VIII Of the Divine Office at Night

In winter time, that is, from the first of November until Easter, the brethren shall rise at what may reasonably be calculated to be the eighth hour of the night; so that having rested till some time past midnight, they may rise having had their full sleep. And let the time that remains after the Night-Office be spent in study by those brethren who still have some part of the Psalter and lessons to learn. But from Easter to the first of November let the hour for the Night-Office be so arranged that, after a very short interval, during which the brethren may go out for the necessities of nature, Lauds, which are to be said at day-break, may follow without delay.

Chapter IX How many Psalms are to be said at the Night Hours

In winter time, after beginning with the verse, ‘O God, come to my assistance; O Lord make haste to help me’ [Ps. 69:2], with the *Gloria*, let the words ‘O Lord, Thou wilt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Thy praise’ [Ps. 50:17] be next repeated thrice; then the third Psalm, with a *Gloria*, after which the ninety-fourth Psalm is to be said or sung, with an antiphon. Next let a hymn follow, and then six Psalms with antiphons. These being said, and also a versicle, let the Abbot give the blessing: and, all being seated, let three lessons be read by the brethren in turns, from the book on the lectern. Between the lessons let three responsories be sung – two of them without a *Gloria*, but after the third let the reader say the *Gloria*: and as soon as he has begun it, let all rise from their seats out of honour and reverence to the Holy Trinity. Let the divinely inspired books, both of the Old and New Testaments, be read at the Night-Office, and also the commentaries upon them written by the most famous, orthodox and Catholic Fathers. After these three lessons with their responsories, let six more psalms follow, to be sung with an *Alleluia*. Then let a lesson from the Apostle be said by heart, with a verse and the petition of the Litany, that is, *Kyrie eleison*. And so let the Night-Office come to an end.

Chapter X How the Night-Office is to be said in Summer Time

From Easter to the first of November let the same number of Psalms be recited as prescribed above; only that no lessons are to be read from the book, on account of the shortness of the night; but instead of those three lessons let one from the Old Testament be said by heart, followed by a short responsory, and the rest as before laid down; so that never less than twelve Psalms, not counting the third and ninety-fourth, be said at the Night-Office.