What is Gregorian chant, and where does it come from? What purpose does it serve, and how did it take on the form and features which make it instantly recognizable? Designed to guide students through this key topic, this introduction answers these questions and many more. David Hiley describes the church services in which chant is performed, takes the reader through the church year, explains what Latin texts were used, and, taking Worcester Cathedral as an example, describes the buildings in which chant was sung. The history of chant is traced from its beginnings in the early centuries of Christianity, through the Middle Ages, the revisions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the restoration in the nineteenth and twentieth. Using numerous music examples, the book shows how chants are made and how they were notated. An indispensable guide for all those interested in the fascinating world of Gregorian chant.

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For Meg and Cathy
Contents

List of illustrations .......................................................... ix
List of musical examples ................................................. xi
Note on the musical examples ......................................... xiii
List of tables ..................................................................... xiv
List of text boxes ............................................................ xv
Preface ............................................................................. xvii
Note on front cover illustration ........................................ xx

Chapter 1 Gregorian chant in the service of the church 1
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 1
1.ii Where chant was sung, and by whom 7
1.iii The structure of the church year and the daily services. Mass and Office, processions 22
1.iv The sacred word 34
1.v The principal forms and styles of Gregorian chant 41

Chapter 2 The beginnings of Gregorian chant; other rites and other sorts of chant 83
2.i The Christian church in the late Roman Empire; Rome and the Franks 83
2.ii Learning chant in an oral culture, establishing models for performance, centres of excellence; Old Roman and Gregorian chant 100
2.iii Chant in the Latin West outside the Roman tradition 108
2.iv Chant in the East: the Byzantine and other traditions 116
Chapter 3 Tradition and innovation in medieval chant: from the ninth to the sixteenth century

3.i Adapting the model to suit present needs: local enhancement of the repertory, new types of chant

3.ii Historiae, sequences, tropes, new Latin songs, ‘dramatic’ ceremonies

3.iii The later Middle Ages

Chapter 4 Thinking about Gregorian chant in the Middle Ages, and notating it

4.i Situating Gregorian chant in the harmonious universe; classical Greek music theory and Gregorian chant; the modal system

4.ii Medieval theory and medieval chant: composition according to theoretical principles?

4.iii Representing Gregorian chant in written signs; neumes, the invention of the staff

4.iv Medieval chant books

Chapter 5 New chants for new times: from the sixteenth century to the present; aspects of performance

5.i Chant in the age of humanism; the ‘Editio Medicaea’; neo-Gallican chant

5.ii A phoenix rising from the ashes? The attempt to recover medieval chant

5.iii Performing monophonic chant

Map of places from which important medieval chant manuscripts are preserved
Chronological table
Statistical table of chant categories by mode
Original manuscript sources for musical examples
Glossary
Bibliography
Index
Illustrations

The author and publisher are grateful to be able to include the following illustrations.


1.1 Ground plan of Worcester Cathedral Church, adapted by permission from Ute Engel, Worcester Cathedral: An Architectural History (Chichester, 2007), p. 295. Copyright © Catherine Anne Hiley.


4.1 The medieval gamut

4.2 The ‘Guidonian’ hand. Copyright © Catherine Anne Hiley.

4.3 The principal notes in the modal scales according to Hermannus Contractus

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4.5 St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 359, p. 7–27, reproduced by permission from Paléographie musicale, vol. II/2 (Solesmes, 1924)

List of illustrations

4.7 Benevento, Biblioteca Capitolare, MS 34, fol. 2v, reproduced by permission from *Paléographie musicale*, vol. I/15 (Solesmes, 1937–57) 188

4.8 Worcester Cathedral, Chapter Library, MS F 160, fol. 29r. Photograph by Mr Christopher Guy, Worcester Cathedral Archaeologist. Reproduced by permission of the Chapter of Worcester Cathedral (UK). 189

4.9 London, British Library, Cotton MS Caligula A.xiv, fol. 38r. © The British Library Board. All Rights Reserved 2009. 190

4.10 Clefs in London, British Library, Cotton MS Caligula A.xiv 195

4.11 *Hodie in Iordane*, reproduced by permission from *Liber responsorialis* (Solesmes, 1895), p. 71 202

4.12 *Hodie in Iordane*, reproduced by permission from *Liber antiphonarius* (Solesmes, 2005), p. 112 203

Map of places from which important chant manuscripts are preserved. Copyright © Catherine Anne Hiley. 219
Musical examples

1.1 Antiphons *Deprecamur te Domine* and *Crux fidelis inter omnes* page 20
1.2 Antiphon *Hodie celesti sponso* 40
1.3 The eight modes 44
1.4 Psalm 138 *Domine probasti me*, seventh psalm tone, with antiphon *Confortatus est* 46
1.5 The eight psalm tones 48
1.6 Eighth-mode responsory verses *Dum lucem habetis* and *Nonne ecce omnes isti* 49
1.7 Antiphons *Omnis spiritus*, *Cito euntes*, *Descendit angelus*, *Non enim misit filium* and *Apparuit caro suo* 52
1.8 Antiphons *Veni Domine et noli tardare* and *Ecce veniet propheta magna* 54
1.9 Responsories *Ecce ego mitto vos* and *Facta autem hac voce* 55
1.10 Gradual *Benedicite Dominum* 59
1.11 Introits *Gaudete in Domino semper* and *Ego autem in Domino speravi* 62
1.12 Communions *Servite Domino*, *Quis dabit ex Sion* and *Adversum me exercebantur* 64
1.13 Offertory *Iusticie Domini recte* 68
1.14 Alleluia *Oportebat pati Christum* 70
1.15 Hymns *Christe, qui lux es*, *A solis ortus cardine* and *Sanctorum meritis* 72
1.16 *Kyrie Clemens rector* 75
1.17 Gloria in excelsis Deo 78
1.18 Sanctus 80
1.19 Trope *Quem Iohannes in deserto. Agnus Dei* 81
2.1 Short responsory *Veni ad liberandum nos* 89
2.2 Responsories *Magi veniunt* and *Omnes de Saba venient* in Gregorian and Old Roman versions 105
2.3 Transitorium *Corpus Christi acceipimus* 113
List of musical examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Responsory <em>Celestium minister donorum</em> (St Cuthbert)</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Responsory <em>Mundi florem</em> (St Thomas of Canterbury)</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Antiphons <em>Granum cadit</em> and <em>Opem nobis</em> (St Thomas of Canterbury)</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Sequence <em>Celica resonent</em> (Christmas)</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Sequence <em>Ecce dies triumphalis</em> (St Victor)</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Trope <em>Dicite nunc pueri</em>, introit <em>Ex ore infantium</em> (Holy Innocents)</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Conductus <em>Lux optata claruit</em></td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Mary Magdalene and Christ in the garden</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>From the <em>Ludus Danielis</em></td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>Hildegard of Bingen, responsory <em>Spiritui sancto</em></td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Tetrachords and <em>dasia</em> signs from <em>Musica enchiriadis</em></td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td><em>Ut queant laxis</em>, Guido's hexachord hymn melody</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Tetrachords in mainstream chant theory</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Hermannus Contractus, antiphon <em>Invicta Christi testis Afra</em> (St Afra)</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Examples of liquescence</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Gradual <em>Ex Sion species</em> in three notations</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Notational signs in Guidetti's <em>Directorium chori</em> (1588)</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Offertory <em>Laetentur caeli</em> from the <em>Graduale Romanum</em> 1908</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note on the musical examples

Notes are named according to a modification of the Guidonian system, with capital letters for the lower octave, small ones for the upper octave:

Guidonian:

\[\text{Notes are given in the main text in italic.}\]
\[\text{Liquescent notes are printed small and joined to the main note with a slur:}\]

\[\text{The note-groupings of the original manuscripts are reflected in the transcriptions, without the use of slurs.}\]

Sign for oriscus: \(\text{œ}\)
Sign for quilisma: \(\text{w}\)
Tables

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>The order of Mass</td>
<td>page 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>The daily cycle</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>The hours of the Divine Office</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>The Easter cycle</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>The Advent–Christmas–Epiphany cycle</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Texts for Mass of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Responsory texts for Epiphany</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Modes in the early Middle Ages</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Eight medieval types of signs for notating chant</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>St Amand or paleofrankish neumes</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>The interval notation of Hermannus Contractus</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Text boxes

1.1 Gregory the Great on the Eucharist  
1.2 The Benedictine Rule  
2.1 *Ordo Romanus I*  
2.2 Singing from memory and singing from books  
3.1 Amalar of Metz on the Mass  
3.2 The *Visitatio sepulchri* in late tenth-century Winchester  
4.1 The harmony of the universe  
4.2 Guido of Arezzo  
4.3 Neume  
4.4 Chanting in rhythm  
5.1 The *Motu proprio* of Pius X  
5.2 Singing chant in the early twentieth century
This book tries to answer some of the questions which are often raised about Gregorian chant: what is it about and why is it the way it is? where does it come from, who composed it, and for whom? These are questions about its history, and the book is orientated towards historical matters. Thinking about the nature of Gregorian chant may nevertheless help explain why so many are interested in it and like to listen to it. For it may very well be that more people listen to Gregorian chant today, or have heard it at some time or other, in some form or other, than at any time in history. In sheer numbers, that is, not as a percentage of the population in lands with a Christian heritage. Every so often a recording of Gregorian chant climbs towards the top of the sales charts (as I write these words, the singing of the monks of the Cistercian Abbey of Heiligenkreuz in Austria is making the running). No beat, no harmony, such simple note patterns! Sung quietly, free from tension, it is far removed indeed from modern music of almost every kind, and a welcome respite from the haste and clamour of everyday life. Its ‘other-worldly’ character appeals to esoteric movements, and it has been thoroughly exploited in branches of the entertainment industry.

By contrast with this popularity of Gregorian chant outside the church, things are less happy in the original home of chant, the worship of the Christian church. Church attendance and the numbers of those entering holy orders fall. The changes brought about after the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) led to a drastic decline in the use of Latin, the language of Gregorian chant, in the services of the Roman Catholic Church. Those in the church who regard chant as a relic of the past, inappropriate for the modern church and best forgotten, are by no means few in number. Nevertheless, there are strong movements in many countries today to cultivate chant in church worship, and singing courses are popular. There seems little danger that chant will sink into oblivion.

As well as occupying these spaces in modern life, plainchant is of great interest to anyone with a feel for history. It is, after all, the earliest substantial (very substantial!) body of music preserved in written form. So it has a regular place in the syllabus of institutions of higher education, not least in inter-disciplinary courses in medieval studies.
Preface

The reasons why so many are interested in, or listen to chant, outside its original context are certainly important, but they should be the subject of a different book. This one concentrates on the time when chant was created. For it is a fact that nowadays we do not compose chant, just as we do not build medieval cathedrals. In the Middle Ages singing chant dominated the lives of very many men and women, including many of the leaders of medieval society. To understand chant we need not only to look at it note by note but also to think about the circumstances in which it was made and performed. We need to get a sense of the purpose and shape of the religious services, of the places of worship, and of how medieval men and women might have thought about chant.

There are plenty of musical examples in this book, and it is my earnest hope that readers will take the time to sing them through, at least in their minds, or even pick them out on a musical instrument. Then they can test their reactions against my descriptions. Some, however, may well wish to keep to the more general information and pass over the discussion of particular pieces of chant, which are accordingly set off in appearance.

I have written about the music fully aware of the well-known problem that music is something which happens in time. Looking at a string of marks on a page in musical examples is very far removed from experiencing chant in a medieval church service. But that is what I would wish readers to try and imagine, in their mind’s ear and eye. Hence the decision to relate some of what is explained to a specific church, Worcester Cathedral, and to transcribe most of the musical examples from Worcester manuscripts.

My view of chant is naturally shaped by my own experience of it, the way I have come to know it, what I have read and learned, what I should like to believe about it. The experience of others is inevitably different. But that is the chance any writer on things of the past has to take. Faced with the miraculous beauty of the music and the sheer size of the achievement – nothing less than creating Latin chant to be sung most of the day (and part of the night) throughout one’s whole life – it seems well worth taking that chance. For the ultimate point is not to describe the patterns made by those marks on the page but to understand and appreciate the creative achievement of which men and women are capable. I am also convinced that music is such a complex phenomenon, and our powers of appreciating it so infinitely various, that the distance in time between then and now is relatively insignificant, and no more of a hindrance for chant than it is for any great music of the past.

As its place in the series of Cambridge Introductions suggests, this book is not intended to be as comprehensive as some previous reference books on chant. In keeping with this, the ‘Further Reading’ paragraphs and Bibliography are mostly restricted to publications basic to the study of chant, although some citations will take readers into more specialized research.
The book is also different in character from another one with a similar title, Richard Crocker’s *An Introduction to Gregorian Chant* of 2000. This is the right place to acknowledge a debt to Richard Crocker. Helping his volume in the New Oxford History of Music towards publication in 1989 was one of the most valuable formative experiences of my early career. That we write quite differently about chant would have become clear when my own *Western Plainchant: A Handbook* appeared in 1993. Now history has repeated itself, once again in the shape of two very different books.

I am grateful to Vicki Cooper of Cambridge University Press for commissioning this book, and both to her and to Rebecca Jones, Rosina Di Marzo and Ann Lewis for their expert help in guiding it into print. Special thanks go to Nicolas Bell of the British Library, Christopher Guy of Worcester Cathedral, Ute Engel and Jill Atherton for their help and generosity over the illustrations. My wife Ann saved me from many egregious errors and persuaded me to smarten up many points of presentation.

As a music historian I have learned most of all from what has been written by the glorious company of chant scholars, past and present, not least those of the Research Group ‘Cantus Planus’ of the International Musicological Society, whose meetings over more than two decades have been such pleasant and profitable occasions. If their words and ideas appear to have fallen on stony ground here, I beg their forgiveness. Teaching for ten years at Royal Holloway College, University of London, and for over twenty at Regensburg University, has certainly benefitted me as much as my students. I hope future students will find something in these pages to spur their imagination. In a similar way, I am sure I have learned more from my daughters than they have from me (though not about Gregorian chant) and so this book is dedicated affectionately to them.
Note on front cover illustration

London, British Library, Cotton MS Caligula A.xiv, from fol. 26r: The Annunciation to Joachim

The first part of the manuscript Caligula A.xiv is an eleventh-century troper probably made in Winchester for Worcester. In this illustration an angel announces to Joachim that his wife Ann will bear a child. This will be a daughter, Mary, mother of Christ. The illustration appears amid the trope verses to chants for Mass on the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 8 September. Joachim is depicted as a herdsman with a flock of animals. The story of Joachim and Ann is not biblical but is related in the Greek Protevangelium of James, then in the Latin apocryphal gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. Like all the pictures in MS Caligula A.xiv, this one is framed by Latin verses in Leonine hexameters (that is, with internal rhyme, so named after Leoninus, optimus organista of Notre-Dame in Paris c.1200):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Credidit angelico} & \quad \text{Ioiachim per nuntia verbo} \\
\text{credens foecundam} & \quad \text{conceptu germinis Annam} \\
\text{Christum glorificat} & \quad \text{inopi qui semper habundat}
\end{align*}
\]

[Joachim believed the angelic word through the (divine) message, believing Ann to be fertile by the conception of a child. He glorifies Christ, who is always generous to one in need.]