

Why Chant is Timeless for the Church

For Dr. Kevin Navarro, PME 514, Fall 2012

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If you have a Protestant background, chances are good that you have never encountered chant in a corporate worship setting. Perhaps you have listened to some Gregorian chant for a music history class or bought an album (such as *Chant* by the monks of Santo Domingo de Silos, released in 1994 and number three on the *Billboard* 200 chart¹) so as to appreciate the diversity of Christian worship. However, Gregorian chant is not just a colorful element on the fringes of Christian worship. Chant or plainsong has existed at the core of the liturgy of the historical Christian church virtually since its inception, with ties to Judaism before the time of Christ. Further, it carries on strong today in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic branches of Christianity, although to a lesser extent in Roman Catholicism since Vatican II. It is arguably “the foundation of all our Western music.”²

The purpose of this paper is to show in brief how Gregorian chant came to occupy such an important place in the liturgy of our worshiping community. Thus, we will look not only at the history of chant but also at its purpose and significance. Our documentation of chant goes back reliably only to the ninth century, so there is some speculation about its early history; however, we are fortunate to have recovered a good deal of knowledge of the art due to a resurging interest in chant over the last two centuries. Part of the beauty of chant is its elegant simplicity. One can begin to learn chant fairly quickly, as we will see, and yet mastering its subtle depths requires a lifetime of learning and dedication.

History

Chant was used in the psalmody of Jewish worship in the synagogue long before the New Covenant and the birth of the Christian Church. We cannot go back confidently all the way to the Temple in trying to establish a link, since the historical ground and critical-research findings are

¹ The Community of Jesus, *The Song of Prayer: A Practical Guide to Learning Gregorian Chant* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2009), 9.

² The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 1.

shaky. We do know that the *Hallel* psalms (Psalms 113-118) were sung in Temple worship, which included the use of refrains and frequent interjections of “*Hallelujah!*” However, we cannot say what kinds of melodies were used. What scholars have found useful is the study of groups of Jews from the synagogue era, which have lived (more or less) detached from their fellow Jews since the fall of Jerusalem. Since their sacred worship has not been influenced by outside influences like Christians or Muslims, early (yet late) documentation can be taken as indicative of New Testament times. These Jewish groups are the Georgian, Persian, and Yemenite Jews, as well as the Babylonian Jews in Iraq; particular emphasis is placed on the Yemenite group since they have been the most isolated. Rabbinical writings show that Biblical chant was taught and encouraged, and synagogue worship passed down by these groups has been strikingly similar to the Early Church, so that “we can only conclude that we possess a true contact with Hebrew sacred music of the early Christian music.”³

The similarities between Hebrew and early Christian worship music may be stated more explicitly as follows:

- 1) The basic principle of monotonic recitation with cadences, or chanting.
- 2) The principle of inflected monotone, corresponding accurately to the various rhetorical pauses of prose.
- 3) Congregational refrains in the singing of the Psalms, the precursors of the antiphon and of the respond.
- 4) Elaborate festal jubiliations of many notes at the end of some phrases, or passages, like the brilliant melodic exfoliations on the vowel “a” in the Alleluia responds of the Mass.

³ Winfred Douglas, *Church Music in History and Practice* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 17.

- 5) The principle of the indivisible note unit which indeed may be ornamented by a shake or a grace note, but which is the equivalent in time of a syllable.
- 6) A certain number of definite melodies.
- 7) A musical style of noble and grave dignity, sharply distinguished from secular or domestic song; a fit vehicle for the utterance of inspired liturgical worship.⁴

In discussion of the list above, it is noteworthy that Christians have from the beginning adopted certain Hebrew words of praise, such as *Hallelujah*, without translation. Consequently, these words transfer universally across all peoples and languages when used in Christian worship. Second, the all-familiar refrain of Protestant hymns also seems to have its precursor in Hebrew tradition. Third, the clear differentiation of Jewish secular song from sacred lends credence to the use of chant today in a culture that is heavily media-driven, in-your face, and demanding attention in the name of “relevance” from churches.

Another argument for the strong connection between chant in Jewish worship and the liturgy of the Early Church is the lack of much reference to worship music in the New Testament, since “Christians saw their faith as a completion of Judaism, [and] were able to continue to use many parts of Jewish liturgy, but to see them in a new light.” Christians fortunately did not have to “reinvent the wheel,” because “Cantors, trained to lead the singing in the synagogue and then converted to the Christian faith, continued to put their skills to use in their new church.”⁵ The most detailed description we have of worship song in the New Testament church is Paul’s exhortation to engage in “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” in both Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16 (ESV). Now that we have established the Hebrew background of

⁴ Douglas, *Church Music*, 17.

⁵ Andrew Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music: From Gregorian Chant to Black Gospel: An Authoritative Illustrated Guide to All the Major Traditions of Music for Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 24-25.

cantillation of Scripture, particularly the psalms, it is quite plausible that Paul the Jew has in mind chant when he singles out the category of “psalms” in his description of worship songs for the Church.

Besides the Jewish element, Gregorian chant obviously has a Latin element as well; here we must be precise in specifying “the Latin tongue as it developed from the close of the third century to that of the sixth.”⁶ In the West, it was natural for Christians to use Latin in prayer. The tonic (or primary) accent of each word in the Latin language gave it a melodic rhythm. The *cursus* provided a system for regulating word rhythms at the end of sentences, which contributed cadence. These characteristics were transferred and became ingrained in Gregorian chant, for one reason because of the emphasis on the *music* of the prayer complementing the *words*. As one scholar puts it, “the verbal text of Gregorian Chant *guides* the rhythm of the melody without, however, *dominating* it.”⁷ Because of this highly interwoven nature, the Archbishop of Bruges wrote in 1912 to push for the preservation of Latin in the recovery of ancient chant: “*The accent and pronunciation of Latin had great influence on the melodic and rhythmic formation of the Gregorian phrase, and consequently it is necessary that these melodies be rendered in the same manner in which they were artistically conceived.*”⁸

The description for how to pronounce the Latin words and phrases is surprisingly scientific and highly precise, yet it emanates a deep sense of art as well. For example, technical terms like the *arsis* (accent or rise) and *thesis* (drop) are used to explain exactly how weight should be deposited on each syllable of a word. However, pictures are also used to give an aesthetic sense of the pronunciation. Taking a more specific example of a three-syllable word with the accent on the first syllable (called a dactyl), we may envision:

⁶ Douglas, *Church Music*, 21.

⁷ Marie Pierik, *The Psalter in the Temple and the Church* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1957), 80.

⁸ Pierik, *The Psalter*, 81.

One speaks of throwing a light rubber ball upward with the right arm, starting on the left side of the body. The ball arrives at its maximum height when the impulse which generated its upward flight is exhausted. It then falls to the ground by the natural laws of gravity...but instead of its movement ceasing here, it bounces slightly or merely vibrates, then falls to its permanent place of rest.⁹

The melodic rhythm present in Greek-Latin oratory discourse, and hence in chant, is called *free rhythm*, as opposed to *measured* or *metrical rhythm*; it is “governed by the laws of nature, not by conventional rules,” and its parts are “guided by instinct of the ear.”¹⁰

Finally, Gregorian chant is indebted to Greek influence as well, as already hinted by the mention of Greek-Latin discourse. However, the Greeks were also the first to focus on the intentional, systematic development of music. They are directly responsible for giving us the diatonic scale, from whence eventually sprang the various modes used in chant. Indirectly, their musical development and melodies had a significant impact on chant, such that “it is unquestionable that Greece first made music an art resting on a secure basis of accurate thought; and the debt of Christian music to Greek, often minimized, is therefore very great.”¹¹ The dependence of chant on the Greeks is viewed more negatively by some, who see the sacredness of chant as overrated:

Frankly, no one knows just how the melodies we call Gregorian came into existence. The prevailing opinion, in the light of more recent research, seems to be that they are derived from the current secular music of the Greeks, and adapted to Church use. At any rate, it is quite demonstrable that they are not essentially sacred in origin. The odor of sanctity attributed to them is due, not to their inherent character, but to the fact that secular music has long moved away from these humble origins, and association with the temple has added a quality that they do not by nature possess.¹²

Gregorian chant is essentially a form of prayer, and this is something that Christians practiced from the beginning of the Church – first in secret and then openly when Christianity

⁹ Pierik, *The Psalter*, 69.

¹⁰ Pierik, *The Psalter*, 64.

¹¹ Douglas, *Church Music*, 19-20.

¹² Holland L. Church, “Contemporary Tendencies in Anglican Church Music,” *Anglican Theological Review* 12, no. 6 (October 1, 1930): 511, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 21, 2012).

was legalized in 313. The significance of chant for the Jews was that it unfolded the meaning of the words, made Scripture more audible in corporate settings, and added beauty and mystery, so that the hearts of participants and hearers were drawn to reverence. For these reasons, Christians continued to embrace chant in their own worship. In fact, “before the Reformation, scripture was never read in worship in a normal speaking voice. All the words were chanted or intoned, both for reasons of audibility and to set apart the sacred text from mundane speech.”¹³ They also began quite early on to organize regular times of prayer throughout the day. These prayer times became known as “the Liturgy of the Hours,” or “the Divine Office.”¹⁴

Chant was adopted as liturgy early on in the monastic tradition. Benedict of Nursia (circa 480-530) wrote a well-known Rule for his order, which incorporated chanting of the psalms as a core element in worship, or “God’s work,” as he called it. The Divine Office in Benedict’s Rule consisted of:

- 1) Matins (‘morning’) before daybreak
- 2) Lauds (‘praises’) at dawn
- 3) Prime (at the first hour) 6 am
- 4) Terce (third hour) 9 am
- 5) Sext (sixth hour) mid-day
- 6) None (ninth hour) 3 pm
- 7) Vespers (‘evening’) about 6 pm
- 8) Compline (‘completion’) end of the day¹⁵

¹³ Richard A. Smith, DSM, “Roots into the Future: Recovering Gregorian Chant to Renew the Church's Voice,” *Theology Today* 63, no. 1 (April 1, 2006): 49, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 21, 2012).

¹⁴ The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 2.

¹⁵ Wilson-Dickson, *Christian Music*, 33.

Monks during this early period used their time profitably to contribute the eight modes still used for Gregorian chant today. These modes are Greek in origin, showing further influence of Greece on chant. Second, the monks also developed an elaborate system of markings for writing down the chants, called *neumes*.¹⁶ Third, the monasteries were key instruments in preserving the rich heritage of this sacred liturgy during the “Dark Ages,” when medieval Europe was busy tearing itself apart in war.

As this form of worship flowered and developed, Pope Gregory the Great (pope from 589-604) saw a need to unify its liturgical variations, e.g., its different tones and cadences. Thus, “the differing Latin liturgies (Mozarabic, Gallican, Ambrosian, Celtic) were gradually absorbed into the Roman, with an inevitable effect on the melodies that characterized them.”¹⁷ Gregory established and endowed two “song-schools” for orphans and other singers, which proved hugely successful. The quality of religious musicianship became high and unified across Rome, and it diffused throughout all of Europe over the next two centuries.¹⁸ Contemporary scholars point out that Gregory has been credited with systematizing chant largely by medieval scholars with spurious motives. This theory is supported by the fact that chant was still transmitted primarily through oral tradition at the time of Gregory. However, the fact that chant *was* unified at the time of its first reliable documentation does provide evidence for Gregory’s legitimate influence.¹⁹

The earliest reliable documentation we have of notated chant is from the ninth century, namely the Montpelier Antiphony and the St. Gall Codex 390 (see Figure 1 below). Note that the original markings in these documents are the elaborate *neumes* at the top of each line. The

¹⁶ The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 6.

¹⁷ Wilson-Dickson, *Christian Music*, 31-32.

¹⁸ Douglas, *Church Music*, 45-48.

¹⁹ Wilson-Dickson, *Christian Music*, 31-32.

standard or modern notation came as a later development in the eleventh century by an Italian monk named Guido d'Arezzo.²⁰

Intr. 1.
S tá-tu-it e-i. Dó-mi-nus te-stamén-tum pa-cis & prin-ci-pem fe-cit
 e-um : ut sit il-li sa-cerdó-ci-i di-gni-tas in e- tér-num.
 The Montpellier Antiphonary showing bilingual notation and transcription.

Ex.
H o-di-e no-bis de cæ-lo páx ve-ra de-scen-dit :
 Ho-di-e per-to-tum mun-dum mel-li-flu-i fa-cti sunt cæ-
 St. Gall Codex 390 showing rhythmic indications, e—equaliter, note repeated; c—celeriter, quicker; m—modiocriter, moderately; t—tenere, to hold.

Figure 1: Two of the earliest documents showing notated chant.²¹

The Montpellier document has been dubbed the “Rosetta Stone” in the history of chant because with the neumes are included corresponding series of letters that assign definite pitches to them. The St. Gall document is likewise valuable because it shows letters marking rhythmic indications for the chant.²² Unfortunately, Guido d'Arezzo's system of lines and square notes for writing down chant “could not show the fluid nuances of rhythm portrayed by the ancient

²⁰ The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 6-7.

²¹ J. Vincent Higginson, “Revival of Gregorian Chant: Its Influence on English Hymnody,” *The Papers of the Hymn Society*, ed. Carl F. Price, XV (May 13, 1985), 9.

²² Higginson, “Revival of Gregorian Chant,” 6.

neumes” that they replaced; hence “oral tradition that had been handed down for generations began to die out and a heavier style of chant developed...known as ‘plainchant.’”²³

Finally, in the early nineteenth century, French monk Dom Prosper Guéranger reopened the Solesmes monastery and commissioned his monks there to study the ancient manuscripts and recover the original style of chant with its lightness and beauty. After 50 years, they had determined much of how chant was sung in its original form and were printing chant books based on the old sources with neumes from all over Europe. Hot debate ensued in the late 19th century between plainchant and the “Solesmes Method” of chant. Then, in 1903, Pope Pius X authorized Solesmes editions of chant for the Mass of the entire Roman Catholic Church, and it began to spread on a more popular level throughout Europe and North America. In the later 20th century, another Solesmes monk, Dom Eugène Cardine published chant books with additional markings to help singers understand the nuances of the ancient neumes.

In the last few decades, Christians – especially many Protestants – have begun to search for something genuine that runs deeper in their history than the last five hundred years. Further, society as a whole has come to sense this lack of roots because of the technological advances we have made and the rapidity we have made them with. Thus, the revival of chant, as predicted by scholars some time ago, is gaining momentum. “In a world filled with noise, stress, and anxiety, the sounds of monks or nuns singing in a quiet church, filling it with ancient strains of praise to God can bring an otherworldly comfort.”²⁴ Chant as practiced through the Divine Office also provides a regular rhythm of life for the soul amidst the seemingly constant change and tyranny of the urgent. This daily practice does not need to be overwhelming; even Benedict allowed flexibility in how his Rule was carried out by lay folk. For example, the contemporary

²³ The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 7.

²⁴ The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 10.

Community of Jesus (located on Cape Code, Massachusetts) practices only four of Benedict's daily prayers: Lauds, Midday, Vespers, and Compline; and they chant in both Latin and English.²⁵

There are good arguments to be made for chanting in both Latin and the vernacular, as was demonstrated by Vatican II. The reasons for chanting in the vernacular are fairly obvious. Those for preserving Latin are the highly influential nature of the science and art of the language on the music, as discussed earlier. Also, using Latin means that when one travels to a different country or worships with another people group or culture, language is not an issue. In this case, everyone should ideally know ahead of time what the Latin text means, but once this is done believers are freed to worship together without the language barrier. In an age where the church is slowly becoming more global, a common tongue would be a huge benefit and catalyst for unity. This is especially true in America where the church must minister to rapidly increasing multicultural demographics. In support of this outlook, Kathy Black predicts that by 2050 Native Americans in the U.S. will increase by 80%, Latin Americans by 199%, and Asian Americans by 195%, while the European American (white) population will increase by only 3%.²⁶

Practice and Learning

To incorporate chant into their worship, Protestants have some catching up to do. However, we do not have to start over to the extent that we can appreciate and join with our Orthodox and Roman Catholic streams of the Church. A good practice for leaders would be to focus on chant in their devotional life, both listening and singing. For corporate settings, both the rhythm of the liturgical year and introduction of a single chant in Latin and English seem good and complementary places to start. Other suggestions have been made by scholars for ways to

²⁵ The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 5-16.

²⁶ Kathy Black, *Culturally-Conscious Worship* (Danvers: Chalice Press, 2000), 14-15.

incorporate chant more effectively in Protestant worship. For example, “The Russian cathedral choir in Chicago occasionally sings the Lord’s Prayer in English to a simple chant which could be used effectively in Anglican services.”²⁷ However, to really benefit from chant, we must begin the journey of learning how to take an active role in it.

First, to learn how to sing chant, we need to understand some basic notation, i.e. modern neumes or notes (see Figure 2 below).

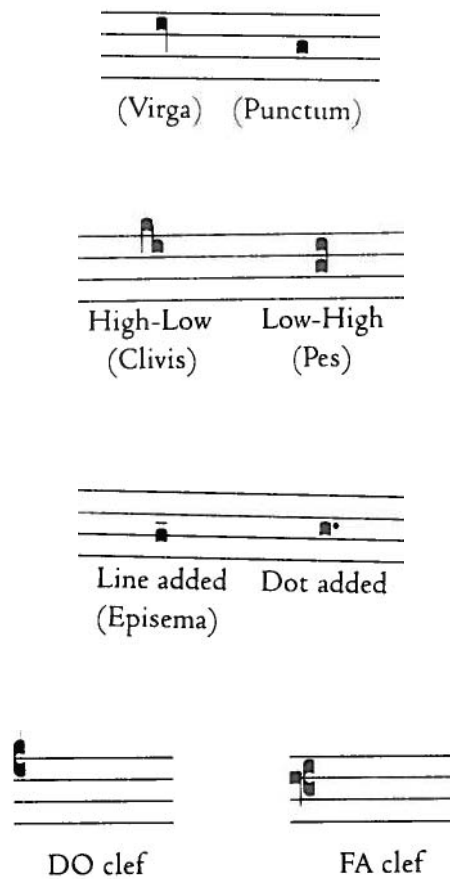


Figure 2: (Top) shows the basic neume; (top-middle) shows movement; (bottom-middle) shows duration marking; and (bottom) shows clef designation.²⁸

From Figure 2, we can see the basic notes or neumes used in notation at the top. Next down, we see how to represent the singing of two notes together, either from high to low or low

²⁷ Church, “Contemporary Tendencies,” 515.

²⁸ The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 23-26.

to high. Third, we see how notes can be lengthened – slightly by a bar and slightly more by a dot. Finally, at the bottom, we see how the two clefs of chants are designated: the DO clef and the FA clef; this brings us to the scale and modes used in Gregorian chant.

Gregorian chant is based on the diatonic scale, and more specifically eight variations or modes of this scale. The French solfège system assigns names to the notes of:

DO – RE – MI – FA – SOL – LA – TI – DO

This allows for relative pitch, where the singer or choir leader can choose the starting pitch most comfortable for those singing (recall there are no instruments involved other than voices). The eight modes are created first by choosing a different “home tone” or root. Thus, Modes 1 and 2 start and end their scale on RE; Modes 3 and 4 on MI; Modes 5 and 6 on FA; and Modes 7 and 8 on SOL. Second, the modes are further differentiated by their “reciting tone,” the note on which the majority of the text is chanted. In summary, we have the following.²⁹

Table 1

	Home Tone	Reciting Tone
Mode 1	RE	LA
Mode 2	RE	FA
Mode 3	MI	TI
Mode 4	MI	LA
Mode 5	FA	DO
Mode 6	FA	LA
Mode 7	SOL	RE
Mode 8	SOL	DO

²⁹ The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 38-41.

Knowing the two clef designations together with the modes listed in Table 1 allows us to get the “feel” for the mode or scale we’re singing in, and to interpret the neumes on the (staff) lines correctly in terms of whole steps and half steps. Typically, a choir leader will hum several notes of the mode before commencing a chant with the choir. Most chants are from the psalms and hence have a two part nature based on Hebrew parallelism; this leads naturally to set formulas for how to chant a psalm in a given mode. Thus, associated with each of the eight modes is a pattern for how to end the first and second halves of the verse. In addition, there are variations on the ending for the second half of the verse, which are designated for example as “Mode 8g” or “Mode 3a.”³⁰

Finally, one must be aware of the antiphonal nature of many chants. Antiphony in general simply means “responsory,” and likely goes all the way back to Old Testament times when two separate choirs would sing alternately, back and forth. This practice has been well preserved in catholic liturgy, with responses sometimes between two choirs and sometimes between the choir and the congregation. However, an antiphon also refers specifically to a short Gregorian chant that both precedes and follows after the psalm or canticle (chant from another book of Scripture). Its purpose is to introduce and then sum up or reflect on the main chant in the middle.³¹

One thing to beware of in incorporating chant is to not take it out of the hands of the laity, the congregation, as has been done to variable extents in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Protestantism has contributed positively in this manner by insisting from Scripture on the “priesthood of all believers.” For example, it is better for the majority of the liturgy to have the choir and congregation sing antiphonally than for two choirs to echo back and forth, with no essential or necessary part for the congregation to play.

³⁰ The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 53-70.

³¹ The Community of Jesus, *Song of Prayer*, 46-47.

In conclusion, Gregorian chant has strong roots that run deep throughout the history of the Christian Church, including Israel as God's chosen people, who we have been grafted into. Notwithstanding its free-spirited or "timeless" rhythm, chant is hence timeless in a historic sense, a lingual sense (since Latin is not spoken commonly today), and a unifying sense (based on God's design for the Body of Christ). It has been used successfully in liturgical renewal of current Protestant churches and will, I predict, continue this trend in the near future. I close with a quote on the essence and use of Gregorian chant looking forward:

Formed then literally by the word of scripture and given to us as the music of an undivided church – the Gregorian repertory developed even before the separation of the Eastern Church from Rome – Gregorian chant becomes an authoritative and effective means of renewing the church, Protestant no less than Roman Catholic. This renewal must be primarily spiritual, and for this task the chant is uniquely suited, having been recognized again and again by the church as the only music that has no other association than its role in Christian worship.³²

³² Smith, "Roots into the Future," 51.

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Why Chant - Free download as PDF File (.pdf), Text File (.txt) or read online for free. About Gregorian Chant. Obviously allowing for the use of the mother tongue at Mass, it also quotes Vatican II: "According to the Constitution on the Liturgy, 'the use of the Latin language, with due respect to particular law, is to be preserved in the Latin rites.'" and orders that: "Pastors of souls should take care that besides the vernacular 'the faithful may also be able to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.'" (n.47). About the chant, it repeats Vatican II: "Gregorian chant, as proper to the Roman liturgy, sho