

GREGORIAN CHANT  
A GUIDE TO INTERPRETATION AND CONDUCTING



# Gregorian Chant

A Guide to  
Interpretation  
and Conducting

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ISBN: 9789403617886  
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Published by Attwater Books

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To my fellow singers, pupils, colleagues and teachers:  
*coram fratribus intellexi*



*'Psallite sapienter'*

— Psalm 47.7b

'What makes the desert beautiful,' said the little prince, 'is that  
somewhere it hides a well...'

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*



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# Preface

Gregorian chant is a fascinating subject. In the exploration of its intricate detail chant inspires the meeting of apparently unrelated disciplines, but it is about more than just theory. The emphasis on centuries-old manuscripts may suggest that Gregorian chant is a dead repertoire, a mere museum piece, but nothing is further from the truth; it is a repertoire intrinsically linked to performance practice. The chants notated in those old manuscripts are reflections of a living liturgy, and thus reflections of their particular surroundings. In these surroundings worked singers and writers, who all contributed to the development of ideas of what chant should be and of habits of composition and notation, before passing them on to their successors – a process which still continues today. It is this aspect of chant that gives it its vitality: if this repertoire is to be fully appreciated and understood, it needs to be performed – especially since its purpose was nothing less than expressing the Word Incarnate.

Performance and its necessity form the starting point for this handbook. Those interested in chant rejoice in a vast literature covering all possible aspects of chant: semiology, palaeography, the study of modality, etc. – although just as much remains to be discovered. When it comes to performance practice however, most methods do no more than introduce the topic. Those interested in chant interpretation and conducting have fewer books to choose from.

This handbook is intended for those who seek to know more about the interpretative and performance aspects of chant – beginners or professionals, performers or listeners, lay people or the ordained. For chant conducting in particular, it aims to assess those aspects which distinguish this type of conducting from other kinds, and to provide a means for

practice. As befits the breadth of the subject, it has been written from a wide range of experience: in-depth studies of chant, performing with different types of chant groups, the conducting of all genres outside chant, acquaintance with other chant practices, inspiring discussions with teachers, colleagues, singers, and students of all ages, and most of all: sheer love of the subject.

# Introduction

## OVERVIEW

This handbook consists of three parts. The first part introduces different approaches to Gregorian chant and the questions of chant interpretation and conducting through the requirements of practice. Then follows an overview of the types of books in which particular chants can be found and a list of sources, including references to their respective digitisations.

The second part consists of explorations of all the elements that make up a single chant, moving from text to mode, melody and rhythm. The aim of these chapters is to clarify these subjects and offer the means of interpretation.

The chapters of part III cover issues of performance practice, such as questions of pitch, accompaniment and conducting technique. Chapter 10 is aimed at providing practical guidance for those leading a chant group.

## REQUIREMENTS

This handbook is intended for readers with a basic knowledge of Gregorian chant: acquaintance with contemporary chant notation, some idea of earlier notations, and some familiarity with the liturgical context.

It is written from the assumption that readers have some experience with singing Gregorian chant (most probably Mass chants) and that they are able to read contemporary chant notation (such as that found in the *Liber Usualis* and *Graduale Romanum*), although neither is needed for reading this

handbook. Likewise, knowledge of neumatic notations is not required, but basic knowledge of the notational system of Sankt-Gallen is helpful.

Frequent reference is made to the *Graduale Triplex*; this book can be found online, but a physical copy will prove more efficient to work with.

Suggestions for further reading are provided for each chapter. It has been the aim to include many freely accessible digital sources, to ensure as low a threshold as possible. **D** denotes that a source or manuscript has been digitised and can be viewed online. Since weblinks are often subject to change, only the main links of the archives have been given; all sources can be easily traced with the information given. If experience has proven this to be difficult, the full URL is provided.

The critical apparatus has been intentionally kept to a minimum, to focus instead on the practical application of the material. The literature relevant to each chapter is listed at the back of the handbook.

# Part I

## Getting started



# 1. Approaches

## THE QUESTION OF CHANT

Any book exploring a plainchant-related topic must start with a definition of chant itself. This may seem an odd requirement in comparison with other genres, in which the repertoire and performance styles are usually taken as read, but plainchant is a repertoire that demands interpretation on every level: in research and, especially, in performance. This also holds for its most famous branch, *Gregorian* chant.

The question of definition is posed at the outset of this handbook because of the diversity and long history of the subject, as well as its wide range of associated disciplines; a definition of chant follows from the approach proper to each respective discipline. And as is apparent in chant research and performance, different approaches can lead to very different results...

### *Approaches to Gregorian chant*

In general, there are two types of approach to Gregorian chant: musicological and theological. It is important to note that these are not exclusive or contradictory.

A **musicological** approach seeks to define Gregorian chant based on its musical characteristics. Following this approach, chant is defined as a vocal, monodic, unaccompanied and diatonic repertoire consisting of settings of Latin texts, intrinsically connected to the Roman-Catholic faith and the geographic region of the Carolingian empire. 'Gregorian' chant is the term used for the repertoire that emerged from the collaboration between the church of Rome and the Carolingian rulers (with different theories

regarding the actual creation of the repertoire). The label ‘Gregorian’ has been in use since the ninth century, together with the legend of the sainted pope Gregory I (ca. 540-604) writing down the repertoire, whispered in his ear by the Holy Ghost. From historical fact however, it is clear that Gregory had no part in the creation of the repertoire that bears his name.

Well-known disciplines associated with the musicological approach are palaeography, semiology and the study of modality.

A **theological** approach seeks to define chant through its liturgical function. From its earliest manifestation until today, plainchant has always been part of the liturgy.

The theological approach to chant focuses on chant’s liturgical function, assessing the nature of chant composition through which the (intended) translation and rumination of the Word takes place. The connection to the Word is an integral part of Christendom, Christ being the Word incarnate. The theological approach defines Gregorian chant as Holy Scripture *sounding*.

One of the oldest known Mass antiphoners (in which the sung parts of the Mass liturgy were documented) is the Monza Cantatorium (ca. 850). It is a stunning example of a *codex aureus*: the text is written on purple-soaked parchment with gold-dust ink. This most precious style of Carolingian book art was reserved solely for the Gospels, as a symbol of their divine provenance. As *codex aureus*, the Monza manuscript shows that the chants of the liturgy were viewed and assessed as nothing less than the Word of God, brought to life by the art of the singer.

Even though many centuries and liturgical reforms stand between the oldest sources and contemporary liturgy, chant is still considered a part of the latter. In chapter VI of the liturgical constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), one of the main documents of the Second Vatican Council, the following is written on Gregorian chant:

‘112. The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy. Holy Scripture, indeed, has bestowed praise upon sacred song [Cf. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16], and the same may be said of the fathers of the Church and of the Roman pontiffs who in

recent times, led by St. Pius X, have explained more precisely the ministerial function supplied by sacred music in the service of the Lord.

Therefore sacred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action, whether it adds delight to prayer, fosters unity of minds, or confers greater solemnity upon the sacred rites. But the Church approves of all forms of true art having the needed qualities, and admits them into divine worship. (...)

'116. The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as especially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.'<sup>1</sup>

These words, echoing to a certain extent those of Pius X's influential *Tra le sollecitudini*<sup>2</sup> (1903), spell out the current position of Gregorian chant in the Roman Catholic church: it is sacred through its connection to the words of Scripture, and as part of the liturgy, the sung word is itself proclamation.

### *The combination of approaches*

Musicological and theological approaches need not be exclusive – in fact, anyone dealing with Gregorian chant will soon discover that it is always at the intersection of disciplines. Yet the distinction indicates why publications and performances of chant can be so diverse in their objectives and outcomes.

An example of this is the widely used *Graduale Romanum*, in which different approaches to Gregorian chant became the source of an ongoing debate. In the shortest possible summary, the musicological studies of the

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* solemnly promulgated by his Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963. An English translation can be found on the Vatican website:

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> A *motu proprio* issued 22 November 1903 by Pope Pius X that detailed regulations for the performance of music in the Roman Catholic Church. The regulations favoured more traditional music and was critical of the turn toward modern, orchestral productions at Mass. The original text and translations in all languages can be found online.