

GREGORIAN CHANT

Gregorian chant is the central tradition of Western plainchant, a form of monophonic liturgical music within Western Christianity that accompanied the celebration of Mass and other ritual services. It is named after Pope Gregory I, Bishop of Rome from 590 to 604, who is traditionally credited for having ordered the simplification and cataloging of music assigned to specific celebrations in the church calendar. The resulting body of music is the first to be notated in a system ancestral to modern musical notation. In general, the chants were learned by the viva voce method, that is, by following the given example orally, which took many years of experience in the Schola Cantorum. Gregorian chant originated in monastic life, in which celebrating the 'Divine Office' eight times a day at the proper hours was upheld according to the Rule of St. Benedict.

CHANT MELODIES

Gregorian Chant is vocal music which can be sung in various ways.

1. **Syllabic:** chant which is sung one tone per note; this type of singing is the most common for chant
2. **Neumatic:** chant which is sung one tone over several notes
3. **Melismatic:** Elaborate melodies are sung on long sustained vowels, which range from five to sixty notes per syllable

Gregorian chants fall into two broad categories of melody: recitatives and free melodies. The simplest kind of melody is the liturgical recitative. Recitative melodies are dominated by a single pitch, called the "reciting tone". Free melodies fall into one of three categories:

1. **Psalmodic Chants:** These are chants which intone psalms and include both recitatives and free melodies
2. **Antiphonal Chants:** These are chants where two choirs sang in alternation; one choir sings verses of a psalm and the other sings a refrain called an antiphon
3. **Responsorial Chants:** These chants consist of a refrain (a respond) sung by a choir, which are alternated by psalm verses sung by a soloist

Centonization is a process by which musical motifs are woven together to create families of related chants.

For those who wish to learn more about the different movements of the Mass check out the page Renaissance Part 2 Church Mass.

THE ROLE OF GREGORIAN CHANT IN THE LITURGY

Gregorian chant had several functions:

1. Liturgical recitatives are used for texts intoned by deacons or priests
2. Antiphonal chants accompany liturgical actions
3. Responsorial chants expand on readings and lessons
4. The non-psalmodic chants, including the Ordinary of the Mass, sequences and hymns, were originally intended for congregational singing. The structure of their texts largely defines their musical style

CHURCH MODES

Early plainchant is believed to have been distinguished by the use of the diatonic scale (a seven note, octave-repeating musical scale comprising five whole steps and two half steps for each octave, in which the two half steps are separated from each other by either two or three whole steps).

Gregorian chant was categorized into eight modes, influenced by the eightfold division of Byzantine chants called the “Oktoechos.” Each mode is distinguished by 3 important characteristics:

1. **Final:** The ending note, which serves an important role in the overall structure of the melody
2. **Dominant:** A secondary pitch that usually serves as the reciting tone in the melody. The reciting tone is a repeated musical pitch for which all other pitches lean on, or by which the entire melody is centered around
3. **Ambitus:** The range of pitches used in the melody. Referred to in modern times as the melodic span of a piece of music

For more information on Medieval theory and notation, check out the page of the same name.

SINGING AND PERFORMANCE

Gregorian chant was traditionally sung by choirs of men and boys in churches, or by women or men of religious orders in their chapels, and is commonly heard in celebrations of the Tridentine Mass by those Catholics who follow the 1962 Missal. It is the music of the Roman Rite, performed in the Mass and the monastic Office. Although Gregorian chant supplanted or marginalized the other indigenous plainchant traditions of the Christian West, Ambrosian chant still continues in use in Milan, and there are musicologists exploring both that and the Mozarabic chant of Christian Spain. The Roman Catholic Church still officially considers Gregorian chant the music most suitable for worship in the Roman Rite. During the late 20th century, Gregorian chant underwent a musicological and popular resurgence both within and outside the Roman Catholic Church.

Gregorian chant was originally used for singing the Office (by male and female religious) and for singing the parts of the Mass pertaining to the lay faithful, both male and female, the celebrant (priest, always male) and the choir (composed of male ordained clergy, except in convents). Women were only allowed to sing in the church choir in convents as a function of their consecrated life. Chant was normally sung in unison.

There is debate as to how chant should be sung in terms of rhythm as many different views exist. This topic is further complicated by the difficulties of certain neumes on the rhythmic plane: which notes to repeat as well as the duration of the notes. Several different theories and ideas were proposed to correct these problems. The modern Solesmes edition of Gregorian chant supports the interpretation of free rhythm of equal note values, lengthening some notes for textual emphasis or musical effect. Mocquereau, a musical scholar, divided melodies into two- and three-note phrases, each beginning with an “ictus”, akin to a beat, notated in chantbooks as a small vertical mark. These basic melodic units combined into larger phrases.

Common modern practice favors performing Gregorian chant with no beat or regular metric accent, largely for aesthetic reasons. The text determines the accent while the melodic contour determines the phrasing. The note lengthening recommended by the Solesmes School remains influential, though not prescriptive.