Chant in the Middle Ages
Part I: 500 – 1000 A.D.
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Chant is considered one of the greatest musical achievements of human history. It spread throughout the entire continent of Europe and inspired thousands of composers throughout the centuries. It survived the Dark Ages, a period of history spanning over a thousand years and characterized by invasions, starvation, and mass death. Chant continues to be a source of enlightenment for our modern age as a means for serenity, enlightenment, and a look into the past that is as powerful now as it was 1500 years ago.

The Fall of the Roman Empire

At the height of its power, the Roman Empire controlled provinces in Europe, Asia, and Africa. In the 1st and 2nd centuries, over a quarter of the world’s population lived under the control of the Roman government. Because of its massive influence and overwhelming power, Rome eventually succumbed to decadence and corruption. Its people were soon besieged by invaders, including the Huns, the Vandals, and the Visigoths. In 395, the Roman Empire split its power into two capitals, the Western empire (Rome), and the Eastern Empire (Byzantium, now Istanbul). The separation of power further weakened the empire, opening the door to internal political strife. This eventually led to the abdication of Rome’s last emperor, Romulus Augustus, in 476 and the final blow to Rome’s sovereignty.

Music in the Time of the Caesars

Since Rome absorbed the musical system of Greece when it became a Roman province in 146 B.C., there are no particular examples of any alterations or contributions during the Roman era. Although a few instruments such as the trumpet, and a horn called the cornu, among others, were used, Rome received most of its cultural heritage from Greece. Before the advent of chant, music in the ancient world consisted primarily of pure melodic lines that were linked with dance and the meter of words. Performances were mostly improvised, using the traditional musical formulas of the time. Scales were being built up from tetrachords, and the musical terminology and theory were well developed by Greek philosophers. This musical style was about to undergo a dramatic change as the Christian Church gained in influence over the Western world.
**Who is This Jesus Guy, and Why is He so Popular?**

With the fall of the Roman Empire, the Christian Church began slowly unifying Europe under its sway. Before that time, Christians were persecuted and had to practice their religion in underground circles. When Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 313 A.D., the church’s power grew until its ascent into the main religious force of Europe. Chant developed as the body of song during church services, also known as the **liturgy**. Chant had developed separately in different areas of Europe, but they all stemmed from the central source which was still located in Rome. Even now, Rome houses the center of power in the Christian faith, known as the Vatican. Chant went under different names depending on the geographical area in Europe. For example, chant in Spain was known as Mozarabic, in England the Salisbury Use, Milan the Ambrosian, Gaul (modern day France) the Gallican, and in Rome chant was known as Old Roman.

*Right: St. Peter’s Square in Vatican City*

Though we have limited examples of these geographical-specific chants, the chant type known as **Gregorian** became the dominant chant form in approximately the 9th century. The figure responsible for this is the great king **Charlemagne** (742-814). King of the Franks (modern France) from 768 until his death, Charlemagne was unlike other kings of his era by his desire to learn and become educated. He instituted economic reform, created universities throughout Europe, and encouraged advances in art, architecture, and music. In 800 A.D., Pope Leo III gave Charlemagne the coronation of Holy Roman Emperor. By this act, Charlemagne began a campaign to unify Europe through religion and progress, which included the unification of chant performed in church services.

The term “Gregorian” chant is generally attributed to Pope Gregory I or II, who was said to have dictated the chants under divine influence. He is frequently represented in illustrations with having a dove, the symbol of divinity, on his shoulder, supposedly communicating with it. Throughout Charlemagne’s rule, Gregorian chant quickly became the dominant form of chant in Europe. The current library of chant preserved from the Middle Ages in libraries and scriptoriums provide an insight into our religious and cultural history during an age trying to rebuild itself from the ashes.
**So is Chant just a bunch of guys in robes humming “Oommm”?**

Well, it’s a little more complicated than that. Chant was used in the liturgy of the Christian Church for the worship of God. The church rejected any use of music for pure enjoyment, unlike the Greeks, specifically because the church wished to distance their musical practice from the Greek pagan society. Music was still acknowledged as pleasurable, but it was not separated from its religious context. Instrumental music in particular was banned, and only music that expounded the views of the church was accepted.

*Right: Charlemagne, King of the Franks*

Chant is musical prayer based on heightened speech through melody and rhythm. Early chant did not contain any widespread harmony until around the 13th century, although harmony was gradually added before then. Since chant is completely based on text, it can be classified according to the text used and the way it is performed. Chants could be based on biblical or non-biblical texts, which can be further classified into those with poetic (Te Deum, antiphons) or prose (canticles, psalms) texts. Furthermore, chants are classified according to how they were sung, including antiphonal, responsorial, or direct.

- **Antiphonal chants** are chants that are sung by alternating choirs.
- **Responsorial chants** are chants that alternate between a soloist and a full choir.
- **Direct chants** are sung without any alternation.

Chants are also classified to how melody was composed:

- Notes that are attached to every syllable is called **syllabic chant**.
- Multiple notes attached to one syllable is called **melismatic chant**.
- Chants that alternate between syllabic and melismatic are called **neumatic**.

Many chants followed specific formulas, while others are combinations of these aspects. Now let’s take a look into how these aspects were used in practice.

*Left: Pope Gregory I dictating chant to a scribe*
Music of the Middle Ages – Early Chant

**Chant Characteristics**

Remembering that chant melodies and rhythms are completely based on religious text, certain syllables of that text would be emphasized by rising or falling melodic lines. Long melismas would also occur on fixed syllables, such as the “a” of “Alleluia”, or the “us” of “Dominus”. The chants were sung in two of the church functions, the **Office** and the **Mass**. The Office was held every day, in which chants were at specific times of the Canonical Hours. Matins were sung before daybreak, Lauds at sunrise, Prime at 6 am, Terce at 9 am, Sext at noon, and Nones at 3 pm. Vespers were sung at sunset, and Compline shortly afterward. The chants of the Office are kept in a liturgical book called the **Antiphonale**.

The chants sung during the Mass, held at specific times during the church calendar, were split into two compartments, the **Proper** and the **Ordinary**. The Ordinary consists of the fixed parts of the Mass, while the Proper varied depending on the season or particular date of the church calendar, such as Easter or Christmas. The major musical portions of the Proper are the Introit (Introduction), Gradual, Alleluia, Tract, Offertory, and Communion. The Ordinary consisted of the **Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei**. The music for the Mass is published in a book called the **Graduale**.

Later developments of chant were developed after the middle of the ninth century, after Gregorian chant became dominant in all Europe. Additions called **tropes** were made to existing chants by composers, which eventually led to the creation of an additional line, creating harmony. **Sequences** began as long melodies usually attached to the Alleluia, with or without text, and **liturgical dramas** developed as morality plays, which were performed both inside and outside the church service. The most accomplished composer of these, among other chant forms, was **Hildegard of Bingen**, who is discussed in the Composer Profiles section.
**Theory and Notation of Chant**

The most influential and revered musical theorist of the Middle Ages was Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (480–524). His work, *The Fundamentals of Music*, is a combination of multiple subjects, including mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics. The most notable section of his work is Boethius’ division of music into three kinds, *musica mundane* (music of the heavens and the earth), *musica humana* (music of the soul and the body), and *musica instrumentalis* (instrumental music). The writings of Boethius influenced countless musicians and theorists of the Middle Ages, and he is frequently referenced by important Middle Age writings, including the anonymous work *Musica enchiriadis* and the *Micrologus* by Guido of Arezzo.

*Left: Boethius with monochord*

The system of medieval modes did not develop with Boethius’ work, however. Numerous anonymous treatises, such as the *Musica enchiriadis* and the *Musica Scolia* misread the ancient Greek modes and proceeded to incorrectly label what would eventually become known as the modern day *church modes*. In its complete form, the system encompassed eight modes, each indentified by a reciting tone, or *final*. Another note of importance was the *tenor*, located a fifth above the final (except in the case of B-natural, in which the tenor was raised to C to avoid the tritone). The modes are grouped in pairs; the even number modes are known as *authentic*, while the odd number modes were called *plagal*. Because chants were written before the development of the modal system, many examples of chant do not completely conform to this system, located below. The comparison to the ancient Greek modes is as follows, and are in no way alike in terms of nomenclature:

Greek modal system:

- Dorian
- Phrygian
- Lydian
- Mixolydian
- Hypodorian
- Hypophrygian
- Hypolydian

Church system equivalent:

- Phyrgian
- Dorian
- Hypolydian
- Hypophrygian
- Hypodorian
- Mixolydian
- Lydian
As seen in Figure 1, the Church modes were built on the final, or first and last note in the scale, and its tenor, located a fifth above the final (except in the Phrygian mode). In the Plagal modes, the tenor is located a third below the tenor of its corresponding authentic mode (except when it falls on B-natural, to which it is moved upwards to C). Subsequent chants written using the church modal system normally stayed within the range of the mode used, usually Mode 1 (Dorian) or Mode 7 (Mixolydian). The only accidental, or altered note, was sometimes B-flat, particularly in Mode 5 (Lydian).

In the eleventh century, the Italian monk Guido of Arezzo (picture on right) wrote a treatise entitled the Micrologus (c. 1025) where he developed a set a syllables to help chant singers remember the pattern of steps (tones) and half-steps (semitones) in each mode. The syllables he proposed (ut, re, mi, sol, la) became the forerunners of our modern day solfege system. Guido is also credited for the invention of the four-lined staff; an advancement in music which is considered one of the most important developments in music history. Now singers would not have to memorize each chant and learn them by rote, but instead, each chant could be preserved and copied so the same version would be sung by all church choirs.
Guido also developed what was known as the “Guidonian Hand”, which traced the solfege symbols on each finger, allowing the singers to better remember them. There was no musical text in the Middle Ages thereafter that did not contain a drawing of the Guidonian Hand.

Contemporary Uses of Chant

While chant fell into disuse by the beginning of the Baroque Period, a resurgence of interest in chant began in the mid-90’s with the release of recordings by the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos. Their albums, entitled Chant and Chant II were listed on the Billboard Top 100 albums of the 90’s. Chant is also used by several contemporary bands, including Enigma, Iced Earth, and Gregorian. Gregorian in particular uses chant while covering existing songs of many styles, although it cannot be termed as authentic chant. Video games also make use of chant, including the series The Legend of Zelda and Halo. Chant has proven to create relaxation, higher awareness, and serenity to its listeners. After over two thousand years of its existence, chant is still as powerful to listen to as when it was sung in medieval churches and cathedrals all over Europe.
Music of the Middle Ages – Early Chant

For Review:

- At the end of the Roman Empire, music consisted of pure melodic lines designed to accompany dance and speech. Performances were mostly improvised, and a thorough musical system was being developed by theorists and philosophers.
- **Chant** became the dominant form of musical expression when the Christian Church stepped forward as the major center of religious influence in Europe.
- The Frankish king Charlemagne consolidated all chant into what was titled “Gregorian”, named after Pope Gregory I or II, after becoming Holy Roman Emperor in 800 A.D.
- Music such as chant was only used in the service of God. No instrumental music was accepted by the church, and music used for pure enjoyment was banned.
- Chant is musical prayer and can be classified according to the text that was being sung, the way it was written, and the way it was to be performed.
- Chants were performed in the church services known as the **Office** and the **Mass**. Each chant served a specific purpose and was performed at a set time in the church calendar.
- **Boethius** and **Guido of Arezzo** were the greatest musical theorists of the Middle Ages and contributed to the musical theory and notation that we use today.
- Chant eventually used the system of the **Church modes**, a collection of eight scales that were incorrectly taken from the ancient Greek modal system.
- Chant is still used in modern times, ranging from New Age and Pop bands to video games and therapeutic environments.

Suggested Listening:

*Gregorian Chant: Mass for Christmas Day, Mass for Easter*

*Hildegard of Bingen: Ordo virtutum*

*Theme from “Halo” Suite*

*Benedictine Monks of Santa Domingo de Silos: Chant and Chant II*

*Enigma: Sadeness, Part I*

*Temple of Time Theme from The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*

Sources:


