



Music Report

A regular column from St Faith's Director of Music, Robert Woods

What is Gregorian Chant?

In the 8th century, the Pope asked Peppin the Short of the Franks for protection. Reward for this meant that Charlemagne recognised Peppin as King of the Franks. At the time the Franks used a Gallican style of music, but it was at this time that the Franks agreed to learn the Roman style of plainchant. What happened was not a replacement of the Gallican style of chant, but rather a blending of both Roman and Gallican styles. As this was quite controversial at the time, to give it some legitimacy the church started to associate Pope Gregory I with this, hence the name "Gregorian Chant".

It is in Gregorian Chant that Western music really began to take off. If it had never emerged in the 8th Century, European music might never have evolved beyond simple chants, songs and dance music. No Bach, Beethoven or Mozart! This is because it brought about the first widely used system of music notation and the ramifications of that were huge.

Without written notation there had to be an oral tradition of passing music from one generation to the next. Every piece and note had to be memorised, which limits how music you can sing. With the emergence of written music, musical ideas were recorded for others to study and learn, and more importantly without the composer having to be present. Without this notation system musicians wouldn't be able to share and expand on musical ideas of the past, which greatly hampers their ability to grow and evolve.

So what are the basic principles of Gregorian Chant? All chant was written in Latin, although today we can use the music in any language. Chant does not have a meter, there is no obvious beat in chant which means the listener may hear a more ethereal sound. The purpose of the chant was for use of worship and religious reflection.

Chant moves principally by stepwise motion, small intervals are sometimes heard, and intervals of more than a 5th are rare, the range for the singers is narrow. This meant that for those who did not read the music that they would be able to intuitively join the music. Singing in intervals would be difficult to guess and so were only used for special reasons. There is no harmony or accompaniment, which makes it a monophonic piece of music. This was only important as it represented the one voice of the church. Chants were composed in 8 "scales" or church modes, this would become important with the development of major and minor scales by the baroque period.

Although we appreciate the beauty of this form of music, it is the beginning of all other music we hear and sing in church today. Without it we would sing the same four hymns every service, use the same chant for psalms, and have little contrast within our liturgical calendar in music. It means that today we can freely enjoy music and music learning. I'm sure Pope Gregory I would not mind this legacy being named after him!

Robert Woods

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