

Chant: Older than Church, New as Tomorrow

The practice of chanting ritual texts was around long before Christianity emerged from Judaism in the first and second centuries of Christian history. We don't know what role it may have played in the early Church, but we do know that, when it became legal to be a Christian, the public rituals of the Church included the practice of chanting the ritual texts. We don't know for sure what those early chants sounded like because there was no standard form of musical notation until about the ninth century. We do know that the practice of chanting became part of every form of early Christianity as a way to proclaim the rituals in various languages and cultures. Today, we know of several variants of western chant (Old Roman, Gregorian, Ambrosian, Beneventan, Mozarabic, and Gallican) and there are vast repertoires of chant in the Eastern Churches: Byzantine, Armenian, and Syrian, for example.



Chanting the liturgical texts originally had two purposes. The religious purpose is the older of these: to convey the ritual text convincingly—with confidence, musicality, lack of inhibition, and spiritual dynamism. The second purpose was very practical, but it did not come into play until Christianity became widespread in the Roman Empire: to communicate the text to a large community in a large building.

Using the collection of music called “Gregorian chant” today adds a third purpose: to bridge the millennium-wide span that separates our hearts and voices from those of worshipers for whom this music was new but still, somehow, sounded familiar. The basic and simple chants (“plainchant”) were not all that different from the music they were hearing in other places—at home, at work, and even in the developing universities, where chant was sometimes used to reach a large crowd or drive home a lesson. The more complex compositions (such as the Mass “propers”) also sounded familiar but were more complex and technically challenging, limited then as now to performances by a trained choir.

As western music developed out of its foundation in the Latin Church's chant repertoire, and as polyphony began to expand choral sounds and even, sometimes, disguise the presence of the old chants from which it developed; as composers in various styles (baroque, rococo, classical, and modern) composed new Mass settings and added new styles of music to various rites; the Church continued to affirm the repertoire of Gregorian chant as “specially suited to the Roman liturgy,” as a musical repertoire that “should be given pride of place in liturgical services” (Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum*

Concilium, 116).

In fact, that repertoire's influence has reached far beyond the liturgical practice of the Latin (Roman) Church. It was absorbed into and modified by the vernacular liturgies of the Reformation Churches, especially Anglican and Lutheran rituals. In fact, certain Lutheran chorales preserve both the texts (in German translation) and the melodies of Latin hymns.

During the Renaissance, when the pipe organ came into liturgical prominence in the liturgy of the western Church, the choir's chant repertoire served as its first inspiration—most pipe organs in the Catholic tradition during this period were played in support of the vocal schola. Soon, however, as with the choral repertoire, composers for the organ took the Church's chants as inspiration for new compositions, not just accompanying what was already there but expanding on it in ways that echoed the music in other parts of the culture.

Today, after a century of goading by popes and councils, there is a new interest in the Church's ancient chants. People are finding new sources of ritual depth in chanting the liturgy, using both the ancient repertoire (with Latin texts or adapted to vernacular translations) or doing what other generations have done: beginning with that repertoire but building on it in ways that sound familiar to our generations, in ways that sound like us.