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"Authentic" Gregorian Chant

What makes the singing of Gregorian chant in the liturgy authentic? How should it be sung, so as to be authentic?

I suppose the question is a bit esoteric, considering how little we actually sing this chant which, according to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 116, "should be given pride of place in liturgical services." This is not to make accusations of disobedience: Vatican II said other things about active participation and vernacular and inculturation that are weightier than its statements about Gregorian chant. It is precisely obedience to those other things that has led to the marginalization of Gregorian chant, about which some of us have mixed feelings.

And yet, enough Gregorian chant is still sung in enough places, and is even increasing in some places, to make it worthwhile to think about how to sing it authentically. And before we're done, I hope that these reflections on authenticity will help us think about not only Gregorian chant but the other music we sing in the liturgy as well.

RHYTHM

Let's start with rhythm. We won't end there, I must assure readers who find the following a bit technical. But it makes sense to start with rhythm, since the question of authentic rhythmic interpretation has loomed so large among chant practitioners for over a century.

In their 2007 document *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, the U.S. Catholic Bishops say this at no. 78:

> Gregorian chant draws its life from the sacred text it expresses, and recent official chant editions employ revised notation suggesting natural speech rhythm rather than independent melodic principles. Singers are encouraged to adopt a manner of singing sensitive to the Latin text. [The footnote that accompanies it reads,

> "The Praenotanda to the 1983 *Liber Hymnarius* explains the flexible rhythms intended by the revised notation."]

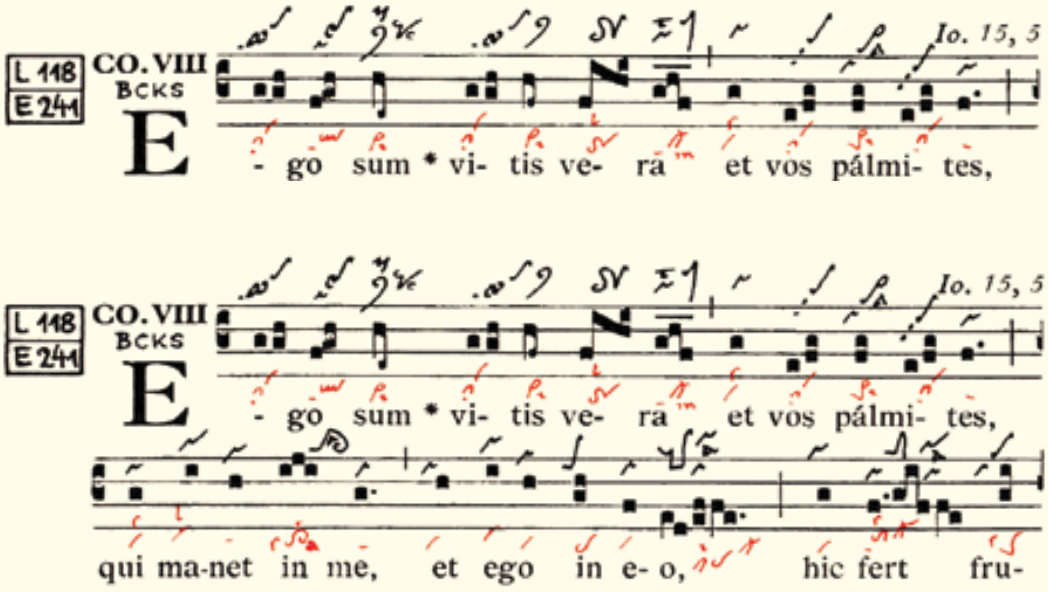
This brief statement displays appropriate episcopal reserve about the specifics of performance practice. It makes recommendations about speech rhythm and Latin text, but gives wide latitude to musicians in their application of these recommendations and their resulting musical interpretations.

For those familiar with the intense chant rhythm controversies of the entire twentieth century, however, the bishops' statement has packed into it much by way of summary, commentary, and evaluation. In effect, the above passage disfavors (without prohibiting) equalist and favors (without mandating) semiological rhythmic interpretation of Gregorian chant.

To unpack that claim, one should know about two monks from the center of the chant revival, Solesmes Abbey in France: André Mocquereau and Eugène Cardine. The first monk, Mocquereau, developed at the turn of the twentieth century the equalist interpretation known as the "Solesmes Method," or better, the "Old Solesmes Method." This approach dominated by far throughout the twentieth century, favored as it was by Benedictines worldwide and by the Gregorian Institute of America (yes, that's the origin of G.I.A Publications) in the U.S. The second monk, Cardine, is considered to be the founder of the semiological school of chant interpretation. Mocquereau's approach gave primacy to the melody; Cardine's approach gave primacy to the text.

Mocquereau taught that every note of the melody has an indivisible beat, an eighth note. To be sure, at his behest the Solesmes chant editions included added rhythmic signs indicating doubling and slight lengthening of some notes, so strictly speaking his method is "semi-equalist" or "modified equalist," but its signal characteristic is the equalism that predominates. The Latin text underneath the melody is to be pronounced correctly of course, and it is all to the good if the singers and listeners comprehend the Latin text for spiritual gain, but nothing in the Latin text *per se* informs or affects the rhythmic interpretation. The melody operates by its own rules—"independent melodic principles" in the bishops' statement—apart from the text. When the melody is

well executed, the effect is beautiful "sound," a "prayerful" atmosphere within which one may reflect on the text.



Graduale Triplex (1979) 228, "I am the true vine,"
Communio of Fifth Sunday of Easter, Years B and C.

Around the middle of the twentieth century, our second monk from Solesmes questioned the scholarly foundations of the equalist approach. Cardine's study of the earliest lineless notation of the ninth to eleventh centuries (and a bit after) convinced him that chant was sung in the era of its greatest flourishing with great rhythmic nuance so as to express and interpret the Latin text. Semiology (based on the Greek for "sign," *semeion*) is essentially applied paleography. It derives its rhythmic interpretation from a comparative study of the highly nuanced *signs* of the lineless neumes from various early manuscripts. The 1979 *Graduale Triplex* is "triple" in that there are three notations in it—lineless neumes from Metz and the St. Gall school are written above and below the four-line notation respectively. The "revised notation" in *Sing to the Lord* no. 78 refers to the development of a wider variety of note head shapes in the four-line notation of recent official chant editions to indicate that they are not all sung at the same length. (The revised *Graduale Romanum* called for by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 117 has not yet appeared;

the very helpful *Graduale Novum* of 2011, which corrects the melodies of the official *Graduale*, is a private edition, the work of German-language scholars.)

So then, have we arrived at authentic interpretation of Gregorian chant? Does semiology give us the Rosetta stone for singing chant with the authentic, original rhythms?

You will have guessed that it is more complicated than that. It all depends on what is meant by "authentic." Not for nothing does the title of this column put that word in quotation marks, signaling ambiguity, or perhaps irony.

Consider the context. When a piece of Gregorian chant was sung in a Carolingian monastery—let us assume for now that it was sung with a rhythmic interpretation more or less like our semiological renderings today—the singers as well as the listening monks were fluent in Latin and very familiar with the Latin Bible. They had all committed the Latin psalter to memory—a prerequisite for singing the psalms of the Office eight times a day at a time when manuscripts were expensive. Some of the monks would have committed the entire New Testament in Latin to memory. One Carolingian abbot even reported that a few of his monks had memorized the Old Testament. In such a milieu, the most refined rhythmic nuances would readily have been picked up for their theological and spiritual significance as a sung exegesis of the well-known Latin text.

Needless to say, our contexts today are quite different. The language barrier alone, to say nothing of other significant factors, puts us in an entirely different world. One philosopher of music has a colorful image for the notion that we realize a composer's wishes by following implicit and explicit instructions "for a performance at a time long past under conditions vastly different in relevant respects from those that exist today." Though he is speaking of so-called classical art music, his cutting comment might also be applied to our attempt to sing chant with original rhythms. It is "like thinking you can bring to pass today Napoleon's grand design for the unification of Europe by restaging the battle of Waterloo in original costumes."[1]

[1] Peter Kivy, *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 45.

AUTHENTICITIES

That philosopher is Peter Kivy and his book *Authenticities* is most helpful to the question at hand. Note the plural in the title—there are several possible meanings of "authenticity." Kivy discusses at length four kinds of authenticity: faithfulness to composer's intention, exact reproduction of original sound, faithfulness to original context, and what he calls "the other authenticity"—personal authenticity. Though as far as I am aware Kivy has not discussed Gregorian chant, Kivy's discussion is helpful in thinking about authentic—or "authentic"—chant interpretation.

1. *Authenticity as intention.* This would be a manner of singing that is faithful to what the chant composer(s) intended. Of course, it is notoriously difficult to pin down the source for the chant repertoire that has come down to us, for the most part, anonymously. In the case of the Mass propers, one widely held theory is that the melodies were developed at the papal court in the mid-seventh century (i.e., after Gregory the Great), exported northward, and reworked into their present-day form by one or more individuals somewhere between the Rhine and the Seine in the second half of the eighth century.

How would one sing the Mass propers, then, faithful to the composers' intention? What did the Carolingian composer(s)/arranger(s) intend, to the extent that we can know that from manuscripts postdating them by five or so generations? Did they intend that future generations remain faithful to the rhythmic interpretation they had in mind, as seems likely from the amazingly accurate oral transmission of that interpretation to widespread locales before it was committed to manuscripts from various regions witnessing overwhelming agreement about the most minute rhythmic nuances? Or, given the freedom they took in reworking the repertoire they inherited, did they intend and expect that future generations would rework and reinterpret their melodies?

2. *Authenticity as sound.* This would be a manner of singing that sounds as close as possible to what chant originally sounded like. (Note that this is not necessarily the same thing as what the composers intended, for they may have had in mind something better or different from what the performers of the time were able to deliver.) This second type of authenticity seems to have

been implicitly in mind throughout the twentieth-century chant rhythm controversies for all schools of interpretation, including the semiological school. The claim is that semiology best interprets the manuscript evidence and therefore allows us to come the closest to what Gregorian chant originally sounded like.

But does this make it authentic? As Kivy points out, even if our interpretation is very close to the original sound (and that is a big "if"), that does not mean that we can hear it as did the original listeners. None of us has the familiarity with Latin that monks who used it exclusively at eight or nine daily liturgies had. And even if we understand the Latin text well and pick up the nuances of the rhythmic interpretation, our ears have heard Palestrina and Bruckner and the Beatles and Broadway. We cannot help but hear Gregorian chant as a contrast to our most common musical diet, which it would not have been for Carolingian monks.

3. *Authenticity as practice.* Here Kivy refers to the original context in which something was performed, which of course is distinct from a current context. For Gregorian chant, the original context was an entirely Latin liturgy. Our context could be that, but it is more likely a predominantly vernacular liturgy, which causes the Latin chant to stand out for us in a way it originally would not have. Even an entirely Latin liturgy today would be according to the missal of 1962 or 1970, both of which are some distance from the Roman rite of the eighth century, in Rome or farther north. The Carolingians were busily inserting tropes (added texts and melodies) to the liturgical chants, which shows that they did not consider them fixed sung texts in a missal as we do. For that matter, the full missal with all the texts including the Mass propers did not yet exist. And, of course, the laity did not have a leaflet or pocket missal giving them a translation of the sung Latin text—and most of them would have been unable to read it anyway.

Some of the differences between then and now are subtle, to be sure. But they still indicate that the Carolingians would have experienced Latin chant more as something contemporary, vital, and evolving than something from the long past fixed on the page of an officially approved book.

4. *Personal authenticity*. By this "other authenticity," Kivy refers to the sincerity of the performer(s). He means that quality of a musical rendition which makes it convincing because it comes across as the sincere expression of the performer(s) rather than simply the correct reproduction of the writing on the page. It reminds me of the comment of one of my organ teachers that I should figuratively cross out the name of the composer and put my name in its place because I had so made the piece my own that I was playing it as if I wrote it myself.

LITURGICAL AUTHENTICITY

And here we have arrived at the crux of the matter. Semiology is certainly the best means for appropriating the original intention, sound, and practice, as is suitable and possible in each case, of Gregorian chant. But for chant to become authentic, something more, this "other authenticity" is called for. It is that singers make chant truly their own, with the hope that this musical and spiritual sincerity will be conveyed to the liturgical assembly. This presumes, of course, that there is a place for participating by listening to chants sung by a vocal ensemble alongside the more basic mode of participation by assembly singing.

With a bit of translation of Kivy's terms for our liturgical purposes, I would say that this "other authenticity" is *communal* rather than *personal.* Gregorian chant is sung most authentically when the singers claim their role as liturgical ministers deeply conscious of their relationship to the liturgical assembly, the liturgical action, and the God who acts in Christ sacramentally. This is to say that authentic Gregorian chant shares in all the purposes of communal worship.

There is a *hodie*, a "now-ness," in all this. As much as the past inspires and informs us, it is *today* that chant is sung liturgically—in *our* liturgy, in *our* cultural context, within *our* liturgical and spiritual understanding, for *our* purposes. However much Kivy's (and my) probing and sometimes iconoclastic observations make us aware of our inevitable distance from original intentions, sounds, and practices, the conclusion need not be that our singing of Gregorian chant is hopelessly inauthentic. We can affirm both, the past and

the present, for what they are, in all their difference as well as in the continuities that are received as a gift.

Make no mistake about it: this "other authenticity" requires a good deal of musical competence. For something of the original spiritual vitality of Gregorian chant to be brought into the present, the singers must be highly confident in their rendition. Better to sing less Gregorian chant and do it well than to sing it inadequately. As much as possible, the singers should understand the Latin text so that their singing conveys its meaning. Even if most listeners in the assembly don't understand Latin, or understand it at the remove of reading a translation in the leaflet, they will sense that the singers understand the text, and even more importantly, that the singers *mean* the text.

There is something unique and irreplaceable about Gregorian chant, a level of spiritual reflection upon a sacred text issuing forth in a highly nuanced musical setting that has never been surpassed, and most likely never will be. This is why it is worth reflecting deeply on the use of Gregorian chant in our worship today, across all the expanse of the centuries between us and our forebears. For this reason it is worth reflecting on the "other authenticity," the liturgical authenticity, of Gregorian chant. It is about so much more than getting the rhythms right. It is about singers making the liturgical chant their own, so that the assembly can receive it as authentic. That is true of all music sung in the liturgy; it is certainly true of Gregorian chant.