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A definition of Gregorian chant as concept and phenomenon and interpretational preferences from the point of view of present-day practitioners

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The words 'Gregorian chant' as a term and phenomenon can be interpreted in several ways. In addition, there are many vastly different known interpretations of Gregorian chant, which are based on the same medieval Franco-Roman manuscripts and, frequently, even on the same semiological principles. The article uses a quantitative sociological approach to find an answer to the question: How do present-day practitioners of Gregorian chant (1) define the concept and phenomenon of Gregorian chant and (2) describe their preferences in interpretation? The study is based on an international sociological survey among the performers of Gregorian chant conducted from 2006 to 2008 with 127 respondents.

The results indicated that the respondents shared a vision of Gregorian chant as having a primarily spiritual value, considering Gregorian chant to be a form of prayer. The most important element in this shared definition is a personal and essential assessment, which is followed by various musicological and/or institutional definitions. The position of the Roman Catholics differs markedly from the aggregated view of all respondents. As could be expected, the Roman Catholics prefer a significantly more institutional concept of Gregorian chant.

The common opinion in terms of interpretational preferences clearly emphasises the same values that are important in performing any musical repertoire. Specific properties associated with religious music and with Gregorian chant are believed to be less important, or there are different opinions about their importance. The regional origin of the respondents seems to be the main factor influencing interpretational preferences.

The importance of texts for the respondents was clearly evident in both the definitions of Gregorian chant and in interpretational preferences, whereby the decisive element was not so much faith in the texts but rather understanding the texts and comprehending the meaning of the texts.

Looking at the results of all respondents together, we can conclude that Gregorian chant is defined primarily at the level of personal understanding. The repertoire, which was characterised in the first half of the 20th century by the strong institutionalism assigned to it by the Roman Catholic Church, has a tendency to edge towards the esoteric due to its limited use in the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, this 'secret' would be kept by different performance schools, all believing that they represent the 'correct' interpretation of Gregorian chant and often having irreconcilable disagreements with other schools. This situation could be prevented by a new approach, which would make a clear distinction between the original medieval repertoire and the different modern interpretations of that repertoire. This new approach would, on the one hand, afford protection to our shared musical heritage and, on the other hand, would duly recognise the various attempts at personal conceptualisation, which would expand our knowledge of this heritage.