

## Medieval sacred Latin monody and its contemporary soundscape – normal integrity or ‘Siamese twins’?

Eerik Jõks

In this article I (1) describe the musical style that we are used to associating with medieval Gregorian chant; (2) explain the emergence of this style in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and put forward the problem behind considering the medieval repertoire and its contemporary performance style as a coherent whole; (3) introduce the results of a recently conducted perception experiment ‘The relationship between notation and performance in medieval sacred Latin monody’.

### Description of ‘the style of Gregorian chant’

There is a vocal style that is almost universally recognized as ‘the style of Gregorian chant’. The characteristics of this style are (1) the saturation of musical plasticity, (2) the avoidance of metrical thinking, and (3) the aspiration of a streamlined musical flow. This style is associated with otherworldliness and has a tendency to suggest feelings of peace and eternity. ‘The style of Gregorian chant’ is achieved by applying a dynamically and agogically sensitive *legato* (or even *glissandi*) that creates a specific, uninterrupted flowing delivery (ongoing flow) of the text, which is itself often amplified and made mysteriously undulating by the acoustics of the church building. Within this style there can of course be a variety of rhythmical conceptions, vocal production, agogics and dynamics. However, in an abstract way of thinking there is this ‘iconic chant soundscape’ – which Lance Brunner refers to as ‘smooth flowing sound’ (Brunner 1982: 317) – that is at least to some extent characteristic to nearly all contemporary chant performances. Brunner is correct that ‘the fairly consistent approach to the performance of chant is finally giving way to the exploration of new possibilities that incorporate the results of recent scholarly research’ (Brunner 1982: 317). However, I do not think that it has changed or will change in the near future the generally appreciated connection between Gregorian chant and ‘smooth flowing sound’ – it has become a compulsory aesthetical baggage of contemporary performance practice.

In general understanding, this style is associated with medieval liturgical singing and it is believed that this is how medieval singers performed Gregorian chant. The abstractness of this iconic soundscape can be well understood if we listen to ensembles like ‘The Gregorian’, who makes covers of popular or rock music imitating ‘the style of Gregorian chant’.

### Emergence of ‘the style of Gregorian chant’ in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

This style, however, probably owes its origins to a deeply committed liturgical theologian, Prosper Guéranger (1805–1875), in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many decades before the medieval repertoire of Gregorian chant was more or less adequately restored. The process was initiated before the popularly recognised ‘princes’ of chant restoration Joseph Pothier (1835–1923) and André Mocquereau (1849–1930) began their activities. To teach the new style to the monks of St. Peter’s Abbey in Solesmes,<sup>1</sup> Guéranger had to use the so-called *Editio Medicea* (or its slightly corrected editions) – a mutilated version of medieval Franco-Roman repertoire that was created and published during the Counter Reformation (1545–1648).

According to Louis Soltner’s ‘Solesmes and Dom Guéranger’ (1974; see Soltner 1995), one of the most serious problems in the performance of Gregorian chant in France in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was that of beating out every single note (Soltner 1995: 107). Each note was heavily stressed and emphasized, and Guéranger did not consider this style proper for prayer and meditation.

According to Guéranger, Gregorian chant had become a heavy, dull sequence of quadratic notes that was not able to provide any cognition and said nothing to the soul. In the words of Joseph Pothier,

---

This article is prepared with the support of the Estonian Science Foundation (ERMOS 85) and co-funded by the Marie Curie Actions during 2011–2014 at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre.

<sup>1</sup> Originally established in 1010 and re-established by Guéranger in 1833.

<sup>2</sup> Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Codex 121.

<sup>3</sup> Apart from one antiphon (‘Vox in Rama’) that is not included in this publication.

Guéranger's efforts had spectacular results – by giving Gregorian melodies the likeness of speech, Guéranger achieved a rhythm that nobody had even dreamed of previously (Soltner 1995: 107–108).

Therefore 'the style of Gregorian chant' that dominates the contemporary performance practice of this medieval repertoire was not restored by musicians on the basis of the medieval manuscripts. Rather, it was invented by a liturgical theologian, and based on editions (at least in the initial process) that included mutilated melodic information from the era of the Renaissance.

### The problem

Since the restoration of Gregorian chant and the invention of the contemporary performance practice of this repertoire (in the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries) these two items have been wedded, and as a consequence there is a rather widespread tendency to identify the medieval repertoire through contemporary performance practice. Our ability to focus on medieval repertoire may indeed be clouded by the sonic preconceptions of contemporary performance practice. My interest in this research project was (1) whether it would be possible to consider medieval Gregorian repertoire without the compulsory aesthetic baggage of contemporary performance practice, and (2) whether it would be possible to consider Gregorian chant as untouched musical ground.

### The perception experiment and its purposes

To this end I devised a musicological perception experiment inspired by John Butt, who suggests in his 2002 book 'Playing with history' (Butt 2002) that material which was designed to be performed should also be analysed through performance. Even more, he claims that '... performance might be a useful parameter in understanding how a piece of music came to be created and notated' (Butt 2002: xii). The primary purpose of this experiment was to separate – as much as possible – medieval Gregorian repertoire and the compulsory aesthetic baggage of contemporary performance practice dating from the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I wanted to create a situation in which a singer can perform Gregorian chant without sonic preconceptions. At the same time I tried to retain in my perception experiment the thorough scholarly knowledge regarding medieval notation that has been gained during the past *ca* 150 years. The secondary purpose was to study whether it is possible to notate Gregorian chant adequately using classical Western notation.

The perception experiment was organised as follows. (1) I recorded Gregorian chant (**primary recording**) by experienced performers of Gregorian chant (**primary performers**), who used original medieval chant notation (**primary notation** – Example 1 on page 157). (2) By digitally measuring the recordings I created an accuracy-orientated transcription in Western classical notation (**secondary notation** – Example 2 on page 160 and Example 3 on page 170). (3) Singers who had little or no experience of Gregorian chant (**secondary performers**) recorded their performance from this transcription (**secondary recording**). (4) Experts in Gregorian chant from all over the world (**experts or test persons**) compared these two sets of recordings by answering a questionnaire. The experts did not know the details of the experiment.

The starting point of the primary notation was the 10<sup>th</sup> century manuscript Einsiedeln 121<sup>2</sup> in St. Gallen notation, which gives only information about the direction of the melody and the number of notes per syllable. More precise melodic information comes from sources from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The particular melodic information used in my experiment<sup>3</sup> is taken from the latest update of the notation restoration from the publication 'Graduale Novum' (2011), the result of international scholarly teamwork over many decades.

To compile secondary notations I measured the durations of the notes in milliseconds with the phonetics software Praat and then rounded the values to the closest 100 ms. I ended up with the following scale of durations in milliseconds:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{♪} &= 100; \text{♩} = 200; \text{♪} = 300; \text{♫} = 400; \text{♬} = 500; \text{♭} = 600; \text{♮} = 700; \text{♯} = 800; \text{♮} = 900; \\ \text{♩} + \text{♩} &= 1000; \text{♩} + \text{♪} = 1100; \text{♩} = 1200. \end{aligned}$$

*Ritenu*to extends the marked note by 100 ms, the following note by 200 ms etc. I also measured the sound pressure level in decibels and created a four step dynamic scale *p-mp-mf-f*.

I then asked singers who were unacquainted with the performance of medieval Latin monody to record their performance from the secondary notation. I compiled detailed instructions for the secondary performers, hoping to give them the impression that these were original compositions by a contemporary composer (Example 4 on page 161).

### The results of the perception experiment

Altogether there were seven pairs of primary-secondary recordings and 38 international experts involved in this experiment. In this article I used two pairs of performers with the pseudonyms (1) Abraham and Jacob and (2) Tamar and Hannah. The first pair was selected because of the uniqueness of the secondary performer Jacob, who did not associate the material to be performed with Gregorian chant. He was the ideal secondary performer – a *tabula rasa* who was able to consider the material without any sonic preconceptions. The second pair was selected because Hannah used a different study method to obtain a rather complicated rhythmical pattern of the secondary notation – she inserted the material into notation software and used MIDI track to study the rhythm.

In the first pair (assessed by 8 experts) Jacob's performance did not persuade the experts at all. Although only one out of eight experts had slight hesitations in calling Jacob's performance Gregorian chant (she answered 'so-so'), many experts realised that there was something seriously wrong with Jacob's performance. Most of them mentioned the absence of ongoing flow and the lack of the performer's ability to address them personally with a doctrinal Christian message.

In the case of the second pair (assessed by 6 experts), two very experienced experts managed to find fine semiological details in Hannah's performance. As Hannah knows nothing about semiology and was performing Gregorian chant for the first time, she must have obtained this knowledge from the secondary notation. Hannah did, however, associate the performed material with Gregorian chant, and because of this her performance had significantly more characteristics of 'the Gregorian chant style'. There were no critical remarks about any lack of ongoing flow.

### Conclusion

Jacob had no sonic preconceptions and came up with a rendering that lacked horizontal flow but gained in vertical attention to the text and in its melodic blueprint. His performance, which was not too self-confident, had a very attractive touch of humility.

Hannah's application of MIDI track provided the reassurance that Gregorian chant can be adequately notated in classical Western notation. However, this notation is not sufficiently performer-friendly and the correct rhythm was obtainable only with the help of electronic accessories.

Overall, using a rhythmically rather complicated transcription the vast majority of singers did not manage to persuade the experts of their ability to perform chant equally as well as the specialists, who used the original notation. However, most experts considered the music performed from the transcription still to be Gregorian chant. When performed from a transcription, the music differed from the accustomed soundscape. Although legato was retained, the 'smooth flowing sound' that we associate with chant was usually diminished. **A secondary performance (freed from sonic preconceptions) that did not automatically adopt a 'smooth flowing sound' raises the question of whether the accustomed soundscape is actually an integral part of the medieval repertoire.**

It cannot be stated in a definitive manner that the secondary notation adequately represents the primary recording. However, there are convincing arguments of a significant connection, otherwise it would not have been possible for the experts to deduce specific semiological aspects from some of the secondary recordings. Using the accuracy applied in my transcriptions, the transcriber has a sufficient palette of durational values; however it is problematic to perform the music faithfully from this transcription.

The title of this article asked whether medieval sacred Latin monody and its contemporary soundscape are a coherent whole or whether they are 'Siamese twins'. Having completed this research project, it seems to me that they tend rather to be 'Siamese twins' that our musical mind has conjoined, or at least has allowed to be conjoined. As we know, Siamese twins can live a full and rewarding life. However, if during their separation one of the twins will be in danger, let us give our preference to medieval sacred Latin monody.