

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

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Abstract

There is a vocal style that is almost universally recognised as ‘the style of Gregorian chant’, characterised by the saturation of musical plasticity, the avoidance of metrical thinking, and the aspiration of a streamlined musical flow. This style, however, emerged in the 19th century (thanks to liturgical theologian Prosper Guéranger), so considering the medieval repertoire and its contemporary performance style as a coherent whole is problematic. I devised a musicological perception experiment to separate medieval Gregorian repertoire and the compulsory aesthetic baggage of contemporary performance practice. Gregorian chant by experienced performers using original medieval chant notation was recorded. Then measuring the recordings a transcription in Western classical notation was created. Singers with no experience of Gregorian chant recorded their performance from this transcription. Finally, experts in Gregorian chant compared these two sets of recordings. In this paper, ‘the style of Gregorian chant’ is described, the emergence of this style in the 19th century is explained and the results of the above-mentioned experiment are introduced.