

What does the old Roman chant signify?

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In this lecture, I would like to draw attention to a dimension of music that transcends what might be considered a musicological or historical approach. I would simply like to raise the question of the significance of cultural events that arise at a given moment in history.

At the beginning of the 20th century, five manuscripts originating from large Roman basilicas were discovered. They contain music reminiscent of Gregorian chant, and its structure is recognisable, but the acoustic universe that seems to emerge from these melodies is certainly very far removed from the aesthetic of church singing as cultivated in the Catholic Church at the time.

It was not until the 1950s that these manuscripts were studied, first from a liturgical perspective and then from a musical one. At that time, Helmut Hucke proposed calling this repertoire Old Roman chant to distinguish it from Gregorian chant. From the 1960s onwards, musicological studies developed, with Bruno Stäblein and Michel Huglo, but it was not until 1984 that research into the interpretation of this chant really began, research presented in the first disc by *the Ensemble Organum* devoted to Old Roman chant in 1985.

If we take a quick look at the history of this rediscovery, we see that since 1900, it took half a century for studies on these manuscripts to begin, eighty-five years for concrete studies on the interpretation of this chant to begin, and today — one hundred and twenty years later — although *the Ensemble Organum* has devoted four discs to this repertoire and published a book on the practice of this chant in 2009, Old Roman chant remains completely marginal in the overall reflection on the role of music in the transmission and creation of liturgical traditions.

Why?

Before answering this question, we must first clarify what we learn from the discovery of this chant.

Firstly, it is a Roman usage, the oldest surviving manuscript dating from 1071. This gradual, originally from Santa Cecilia del Trastevere, is incomplete, ending at the end of June. Then we have another manuscript, ms.5319 from the Biblioteca Vaticana, probably written some thirty years later. This manuscript is the only one that transmits the Easter Vespers as well as seven Alleluias with verses in Greek. These Easter Vespers are of essential importance in the history of ecclesiastical chant, as they are at the origin of the transmission of Roman chant in the Carolingian Empire. Saint Chrodegang, who came to Rome on an embassy mission at the end of the eighth century, sent by Pepin the Short, attended the magnificent Easter Vespers and was fascinated by them. On his return, he conveyed his wonder to the Franks, asserting that this tradition must be learned. And so he founded the monastery of Gorze, near Metz, dedicated to the transmission of Roman chant.

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Roman chant manuscripts reveal a tradition that appears to be different from that conveyed by Carolingian manuscripts from the tenth century. I say "appears" because, in reality, the acoustic world of the early Roman chant manuscripts and what is known as Gregorian chant refers to the same sound world. The difference is that in the Old Roman chant manuscripts, almost all the ornaments are written out, whereas in the so-called Gregorian manuscripts, the ornaments are symbolised by special notation, but this does not indicate the details of the ornament. These symbols simply indicate that at a particular point, there is a vocal event, without it being possible to know the exact form of this vocal event. These vocal events are in fact ornaments. These ornaments are an essential aspect of the resurrection of these chants. But the problem is that since the end of the nineteenth century, those involved in the restoration of Gregorian chant have become locked into a rigid attitude that denies the existence of these ornaments in ecclesiastical chant. Unfortunately, this extreme attitude has radically distanced the process of restoring Gregorian chant from the continuous flow of tradition.

For Gregorian chant enthusiasts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ornamentation represented vestiges of the eighteenth century that were inauthentic and could not be traced back to ancient times.

In summary, this ancient Roman chant reflects the living testimony of ecclesiastical chant from the first millennium. This chant expresses liturgical and mystagogical criteria that are very different from the objectives set by the restorers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Let us briefly recall these objectives :

- to produce an edition of Gregorian chant that would enable the whole Catholic Church to sing the same chant in the same way.

- Entrusting the transmission of these chants to parish choirs rather than to cantors trained in a continuous tradition.

In fact, the reforms that followed Pius X's *motu proprio* in 1903 reflected a desire to break with living traditions. The twentieth century, with its desire to create a new man, disconnected from what had gone before, was already beginning to spread its tentacles. The reforms following the Second Vatican Council continued in this direction. It is a movement that I sometimes call *the Idolatry of Amnesia*. Old Roman chant completely contradicts this movement. This explains why it had so little impact on liturgical thinking in the twentieth century.

The Old Roman chant is memory.

Memory of the first millennium, memory of the common genetic codes found in Byzantine chant, Coptic chant and Ethiopian chant.

Memory of Antiquity. For this chant, like the chant of Benevento and Milan, is based on tetrachordal structures, a fundamental principle of Greek and Roman musical art, an organisation of musical discourse that tradition traced back to Pythagoras, who himself had received it from the ancient Egyptians.

Memory of the true nature of the act of singing in the liturgy.

To understand what the nature of liturgical chant might be, it is necessary to reflect on the meaning of the words we use. So let us begin by summarising what we know today about ancient Roman chant.

1. Old Roman chant

Today, these words refer to a repertoire linked to the great Roman basilicas and the papal chapel. It disappeared at the end of the 13th century with the departure of the popes to Avignon, then fell into oblivion. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was rediscovered, just as the various volumes of the official Vatican edition of Gregorian chant were being printed. The discovery of this chant revealed that what was then called Gregorian chant was practised almost everywhere in Western Europe, but not in Rome. This was difficult to accept, because for more than half a century there had been a strong movement within the Church to restore liturgical music, a movement that took official form with the *motu proprio* of St. Pius X in 1903.

In 2011, on the occasion of the centenary celebration of the creation of the Pontificio Istituto di Musica Sacra, I published a conference in the proceedings of the congress on the theme, "Why, more than a century after its discovery, the old Roman repertoire remains largely unknown to musicians and clergy."

This question is important because it reveals the hidden side, the unspoken aspects and the limitations of our cultural behaviour. Why is it that the chant that reveals the Roman tradition of the first millennium is of so little interest to so many people?

Firstly, because people accustomed to singing Gregorian chant are at a loss when faced with Old Roman chant manuscripts. They do not know how to read them, because when interpreted according to the criteria established in the second half of the 19th century, Old Roman chant seems absurd and unmusical. Sometimes it is referred to as being of "archaeological" interest, but completely disconnected from today's realities and issues.

At first, no one knew what to call this Roman repertoire. It was only in the 1950s that Helmut Hucce proposed, at a conference held here in Rome, to call it "Old Roman".

To sum up, we can say that Old Roman chant is simply Gregorian chant, but notated in a very different way from the square notation that Gregorian chanters are used to, as well as from earlier notations, such as those of the 10th and 11th centuries. The main difference lies in the fact that in Old Roman chant, almost all the ornaments are notated, **whereas** they are not in square notation, and in earlier neumatic notations, the ornaments are simply indicated by a symbol whose meaning has been lost.

Thus, in order to interpret ancient Roman chant, one must understand how the internal dynamics of the music are organised, dynamics that do not always appear in the notation itself, read according to the criteria of the 19th and 20th centuries. All this must seem abstract to a listener who does not know what I am talking about. That is why we must return to the words themselves and try to understand what the words music and song refer to.

2. What is music?

Are we sure that what we call "music" today has the same meaning, the same function, and is revealed through the same rituals **as** it did five hundred, a thousand, two thousand, four thousand years ago?

No, of course not...

But therein lies one of the great pitfalls of the contemporary adventure into what we now call early music.

The arts of the past are judged by today's standards, and cultural forms from bygone eras are often invoked solely to satisfy whims, a thirst for exoticism, or simply erudition. However, the study of ancient repertoires cannot be confined to a simple reconstruction of written or oral material in the context of a concert, recording, ritual, or scientific publication. It calls for a different relationship with memory, with its construction through musical behaviours that reveal other horizons. The practice of this music profoundly transforms our relationship with heritage. Originally, this movement towards the knowledge of early music was of purely archaeological or aesthetic interest. But as it has evolved, it has become apparent that this work on the music of the past leads to a profound rethinking of musical behaviour and its functions within the social fabric. For music always has a social function, whatever the repertoire.

So-called early music opens us up to other ways of being, and above all, of being with ourselves.

But how can we summarise in a few moments what the nature of music might be? Let us first look at the main trends that have brought our knowledge of music to us over the last 30 centuries.

Over the past century, music has undergone a fundamental revolution : the invention of recording. Previously, music could not exist without musicians. But now, musical moments can be multiplied infinitely, in any situation, and over the **past** twenty years or so, this phenomenon has accelerated even further with new technologies. Soon, and this is already the case in certain repertoires, we will no longer need musicians or even composers. The goddess algorithm will instantly create music tailored to the audience we want to reach.

But our era also contains many new seeds that could take humanity to new, unexplored horizons. The word that sums up these different phenomena could be 'openness'.

Yes, an opening in space, in time, in memory. Never before has there been a real interest in the music of others, especially when they were from outside Europe, apart from a few rare individuals, of course.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, so-called popular music has been carefully studied. Since the 1970s, interest in orally transmitted traditions has grown significantly.

There was Vatican II, and its injunction to pay particular attention to the treasures of sacred music, **as well as** to Eastern rituals, an aspect of Vatican II that unfortunately is not emphasised as it should be.

Interest in so-called ancient music has also grown significantly, even if in terms of volume, the number of people interested in it remains limited in relation to the population as a whole.

3. What does all this signify?

Human societies function like living organisms that produce their own antibodies to restore balance, but it should be noted that they also produce cancer cells...

It is interesting to note that interest in early music and traditional repertoires emerged in the 1970s at a time when, in scholarly discourse, it was believed that so-called contemporary music, and mainly the compositional trend originating from the Vienna School, would shape the musical world in the near future. Things did not evolve in this direction. The belief in a linear progression of musical language, moving towards increasingly complex expression, collapsed in the late 1970s and, at the same time, a movement to revive ancient repertoires emerged. Society rejected the future that a few intellectuals wanted to build for it, and from within it arose a movement to return to sounds, imaginations and perceptions that propelled sensibilities beyond the horizon of the 19th century, while opening up the field of future possibilities towards new horizons.

Similarly, in the field of liturgical music, the 1960s and 1970s saw a strong thirst for modernity **and** a veritable iconoclastic movement, obsessed with erasing the forms of music and singing that had been established since the beginning of the 20th century.

For the moment, it is mainly Baroque music that has attracted the most attention in terms of quantity. Older music remains shrouded in a cloud of ignorance, but despite its limited impact on the public, this so-called medieval music has great potential to bring about profound changes in the relationship to time, space and memory that humans of the future could develop to its fullest potential.

This music from before the 16th century challenges the established framework for the transmission of music. The concert ritual **as** it crystallised during the 20th century is not really suited to this music. Similarly, conservatory teaching is not the most appropriate setting for approaching, absorbing and reproducing the repertoires of the first millennium and the first half of the second millennium. Finally, modern liturgies do not provide the ideal setting for this music to develop and bear fruit.

For these repertoires, the relationship to writing is very different from that which developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. We should rather say relationships to writing, because the further back in time we go and the closer we get to the end of the first millennium, the more diverse and obscure the notations become.

From the^{14th} century onwards, the figure of the composer gradually became indispensable. So much so that today many musicians cannot conceive of making music without going through a composer. This evolution has profoundly transformed the musician's responsibility in the act of making music. They are no longer the source of inspiration, but attempt to imitate and reproduce the initial inspiration that the composer received, sometimes long ago. Musicians no longer spread their own *daimon* throughout space and time, but that of the composer.

However, this issue is essentially European; there are still many other cultures in which music is not learned through written notation. The musician must therefore be the intermediary, the medium, between the listeners and a tradition. The musician is like a demiurge who, through his knowledge and intimacy with music, can bring to the shores of time a living memory to which he has access through his education and which he knows how to reproduce.

Thus, the further back in time we go, the more we see what was essential to the musical act : memory. Let us always keep in mind that the nine muses are the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, goddess of memory, herself the daughter of earth and sky. Music is therefore a privileged channel for accessing memory. Memory, which for the ancients was not only a dimension of the past. There is something timeless about memory that encompasses what we call the past, present and future. It is in this sense that we must consider all practices related to the divinatory arts. The diviner is the one who can access the memory of the future. When his son asked him what singing was, Saint Augustine replied : "To sing is to remember ."

Music was part of the Greek and Roman triad of movement arts, along with poetry and dance. This triad was itself part of another triad, that of the therapeutic arts. It included knowledge of the therapeutic virtues of plants, animals and the movement arts. Almost all music competitions, to which the Greeks were very attached, took place in therapeutic centres. Epidaurus, the sanctuary of Asclepius, the demigod of medicine, is still famous for its prodigious amphitheatre, where performances were the final stage of the therapeutic process. This process began with two baths, the first to cleanse the body on arrival, the second before going to sleep, a ritual bath accompanied by the inhalation of various plant vapours. Then in the morning, the priest-therapist listened to the patient talk about their dreams. And based on their account, the therapeutic process was determined...

All these considerations naturally lead us to liturgy. We must keep them in mind in order to understand the significance of the Old Roman chant. Through this chant and the liturgy of which it is an integral part, we reconnect with the mystagogy of the first millennium, which is directly linked to the religious science of Antiquity. We thus find ourselves on the same ground as Eastern rituals.

These rituals, **although** they have retained profound liturgical dimensions that the Latin world has forgotten, are now in danger. For there is also a desire among Easterners to modernise liturgical rites and languages. Many are following the example set by Latin Catholics. Contact with everything that Old Roman chant conveys can effectively give a different historical perspective to the repertoires of the Eastern Churches. For example, Old Roman chant reveals a state of the

Greco-Latin tradition that is more archaic than what Byzantine chant presents today, which has been strongly influenced by the compositions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and by the reforms of the mid-nineteenth century.

With regard to reflection on the Latin liturgy, Old Roman chant considerably broadens the scope of reflection on *what* the Church's tradition is. Today, debate and thinking are confined to a period of time that, broadly speaking, runs from the Council of Trent to the Second Vatican Council.

But it is urgent to open the doors of this imaginary prison.

The tradition of the Church dates back to the early centuries, and the Church itself did not come out of nowhere. It is part of a much older tradition. Let us remember that all priests are consecrated according to the order of Melchizedek. We must always seek to deepen this dimension of the Church, a place of living memory. To access it, the liturgy and the sacraments are the surest means, but we must concretely explore the paths that lead us to this living memory.

The time of the Church is of a completely different nature than linear time. One could criticise the reforms that followed Vatican II for placing too much importance on linear time, considering that the Church should exclusively sacrifice itself to the false dogmas of modernity.

Roman chant reminds us that the Church is universal, both in space and in time. Thanks to what this chant conveys to us, we enter into communion with the energy of those who, since the fourth century, have achieved a synthesis between the science of pre-Christian rituals and the revelation of the special covenant that God sealed with humanity through the sacrifice of Christ.

Yes, linear time is not the only reality of the Church; there is also the time of the Transfiguration, which reveals to us the contemporaneity of all the prophets, their words and their deeds.

This chant, discovered in 1900, passed through the twentieth century in complete discretion, carried by a few scholars who had grasped the profound richness that this repertoire conveys. In the twenty-first century, this chant could be the key to a liturgical renewal that would bring the spiritual clarity of the first millennium to the threshold of linear time.

Catholics would thus find themselves on the same mystagogical ground as the Eastern rites.

In our relationship with Islam, too, a concrete knowledge of Roman chant reveals the treasures of cantillation, the art of singing sacred texts, which Muslims have preserved with all the energy of the early centuries. The science of reading the Qur'an comes from the expertise of Christians and Jews. In the Latin world, this science has almost disappeared. However, ancient Roman chant is a direct witness to this art of singing psalms and proclaiming sacred texts. In ancient Roman chant, almost all the ornamentation that constitutes the raw material of this science is written down. It is therefore possible, based on concrete knowledge of this Roman chant, to lay the foundations for a revival of cantillation, a practice that represents one of the most fertile sources for the transmission of faith through listening to sacred texts.

I will conclude by clarifying what this chant reveals about the nature of liturgical chant in the first millennium.

We were in an era when musical scores did not really exist. Similarly, composers, as we conceive them today, did not exist. It was out of the question to consider a religious chant as a succession of notes determined in advance by a composer, whose melody, tempo and nuances had to be scrupulously followed. Indeed, these parameters do not appear in the notations of the end of the first millennium.

From the^{16th} century onwards, we gradually moved from a prophetic humanity to an allegorical humanity. The prophet sees, expresses and communicates invisible realities. Allegory is merely a representation. Man is no longer the actor in a supernatural life, he is its spectator.

The hegemony of allegory spread throughout the West from the^{16th} century onwards. It reached its peak in the second half of the^{20th} century with the advent of television. It became definitively established in customs with the development of tourism.

Thus, the musician has become a tool that allows listeners to observe from the outside what a supernatural experience might be like. Listeners have become tourists.

Only the composer retained, exclusively, the function of the "daimon", that is, the one who maintains contact with the memory of the future. What we now call the creative act.

This is why we find it so difficult to understand ancient notation, because the further back in time we go, the more this creative function falls to the performer. Thus we see the true nature of early notation, which gradually weakened over the course of Western history. Notation was the medium for a symbolic act intended to connect an invisible and inaudible reality, which exists outside of time, with a space-time conjunction.

Today, attempting to rediscover the spirit, nature and function of art means reviving the memory of our civilisation in order to restore art to its true dimension, that of a divinatory act.