

## **The cantor in liturgical celebrations<sup>1</sup>**

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At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is surprising to note that the term "sacred music", which applies to ancient Christian music as well as to that of other religions, gives substance to hundreds of festivals and enables millions of records to be sold. However, contemporary Catholic music is left out of this movement.

Non-European religious music is attracting growing interest among Western populations, while one would search in vain for concerts featuring liturgical songs selected by our liturgical pastoral committees that would arouse the enthusiasm of Iranian, Tibetan or North African audiences.

Yet this century was inaugurated by a pope, Saint Pius X, who proclaimed that the people of God should pray on beauty. This statement crowned the very important efforts of Catholic musicians, liturgists and musicologists who, since the second third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had been doing their best to provide the liturgy with dignified and exemplary music. It must be noted, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that all these efforts did not produce the desired result. This can naturally be explained by the cultural revolution that followed the last council or by sociological arguments, and by referring to the massive de-Christianisation of populations, or even the evolution of taste and a different attitude towards the sacred. All these factors must be taken into consideration, but in this short study we would like to re-examine what happened in the last century from a different angle than the one usually used, in an attempt to understand in a different way the current disappearance of the reform desired by Pius X and expressed in his *motu proprio* of 1903<sup>2</sup>. From a musical point of view, several radical transformations transformed the lyricism of the liturgy, that is to say, everything that constitutes the aesthetic substance of a liturgical ceremony. The most radical of these transformations was the gradual elimination of cantors and therefore of everything they represented.

The role of cantor has now completely disappeared from the liturgical imagination. For more than a century, everything has been done to eliminate it and replace it with parish choirs and, after

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<sup>1</sup> Acts IV. Poissy. 7 to 9 October 1998.

<sup>2</sup> PIUS X, *Motu proprio Tra le sollicitudine*, 1903.

the last council, with the ideology of the singing of the people of God. Cantors have fallen by the wayside, relegated to the dustbin of history. Very few Catholics know that they ever existed and that some continued to practise in a few rural parishes until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nowadays, the term 'animator' is used to refer to someone whose function is mainly to lead the congregation in song.

However, cantors have always been essential participants in liturgical celebrations. From the earliest centuries, these individuals, initially called psalmists or readers, assumed the role of proclaiming the words of collective prayer through song. The cantor's primary function was to keep alive the memory of the songs and sounds of the prayers of their ancestors. They were responsible for bringing to life the celebration of an immemorial act. Much more than just a repertoire, cantors were the guardians and witnesses of liturgical expertise<sup>3</sup>.

In this article, we propose to lay some groundwork for understanding how the Church detached itself from these liturgical actors, and above all what it lost by making them disappear. The current unease observed in the liturgy could perhaps begin to dissipate if contemporary reflection were to incorporate another vision of the liturgical past.

A quick review of the bibliography on plainchant in the 19<sup>th</sup> century reveals the nature of the problem. While there are hundreds of articles and books devoted to the restoration of Gregorian chant, there are very few studies devoted to the singing traditions practised by Catholics at that time. The only recent study on cantors is Jacques Cheyronnaud's unpublished thesis, defended in 1984. It is an ethnographic study of the last cantors in north-western France entitled: "*The church lectern and its cantors in the village (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries) – Approche d'un service public musical*"<sup>4</sup>. Jean-Yves Hameline has written a few articles on this subject, but it is clear that it does not interest many people<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> For information on the first cantors, see the sources given by Dom Leclercq in the article "Chantres" in the *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne*. See also: Michel ANDRIEU, "Les Ordres mineurs dans l'ancien rite romain" (Minor Orders in the Ancient Roman Rite), in *Revue des sciences religieuses* (1925). Solange CORBIN, *L'Église à la conquête de sa musique* (The Church Conquers Its Music), Paris: Gallimard, 1960.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques CHEYRONNAUD, *Le Lutrin d'église et ses chantres au village (XIX<sup>e</sup> - XX<sup>e</sup> siècles) – Approche d'un service public musical*. Postgraduate doctoral thesis in ethnology, Paris, 1984. École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales – Centre d'ethnologie française.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Yves HAMELINE, "The Sound of History. Song and Music in the Catholic Restoration," in *La Maison-Dieu* 131 (1977), pp. 5-47.

For most 19th-century commentators, references to cantors are always disparaging, as if they embodied everything the Church wanted to distance itself from at the time. Authors mock their singing style and express outrage at it. They are often compared to animals that bellow or howl. They are accused of hammering out plainchant, of singing in registers that are too low and inaccessible to the average parishioner. In short, they are criticised for having no artistic sense. This is why one of the favourite themes of the time was to show that plainchant, provided it was reformed, could be a musical art form and hold its own in the concert of the arts, as Dom Moquereau asserted in his first lecture at the Catholic Institute in 1896<sup>6</sup>.

The writings of the 19th-century reformers must be placed in their historical context. Today, we can no longer uncritically endorse their rejection of the choral traditions that were alive at the time, even if these traditions no longer reflected more than a few glimmers of their former splendour and, in many cases, showed signs of decline.

The discourse of 19th-century authors conveys ideas that go far beyond a simple historical reflection on aesthetics. Fundamental issues were at stake, as the Church had to seize the opportunities necessary for its restructuring in order to stand united in the face of societal change. It seemed necessary to erase aesthetic behaviours that were too strongly associated with the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, because in order to survive, the Church had to appeal to a different imagination that would no longer identify it with socio-cultural paradigms that had become obsolete by force of circumstance. It was necessary to define a "Catholic art" that would project people's consciousness into times other than those that had been harmful to the Church: the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the end of a society and ecclesiastical structures that had failed to adapt in order to survive; and the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which was too strongly associated, especially in France, with Gallicanism, in opposition to the ultramontane movement that was then becoming predominant. In order to build a new ecclesiastical environment, Catholics chose to take as their example two emblematic figures who could dissociate them from a recent past from which they wanted to distance themselves. These were Palestrina and St. Gregory.

Palestrina, whose career reached its peak just after the Council of Trent, could be considered the model Roman musician of the Counter-Reformation. His polyphony, made accessible by transcriptions in modern notation, had three advantages:

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<sup>6</sup> See the section entitled "L'art grégorien" in *Transversalité* 63, Revue de l'Institut catholique de Paris (July-September 1997), pp. 183-226.

- first, his style was completely different from the traditions of fauxbourdon and chanting from the book still alive among cantors;
- secondly, this music, assimilated to the Renaissance, made it possible to erase the last vestiges of the learned polyphonies of the Baroque era;
- finally, it was radically different from contemporary opera music, which many Catholics were reluctant to embrace because it was too reminiscent of the secular world.

Saint Gregory was put forward because his chant – which it was proposed to restore to its original ancient flavour – allowed new approaches to be explored, but in a break with living traditions. This so-called "Gregorian" chant projected consciousness into a kind of timeless period, described as the golden age of plainchant, and thus diverted attention from true medieval plainchant, which was documented by sources and theorists from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, a period that was peremptorily described as "decadent".

The consequences of these choices mean that, unfortunately, today, more than 150 years after the first studies devoted to the archaeology of Latin church singing, we still do not have a true history of plainchant that takes into account the reality of all centuries.

Yet what treasures are contained in the monodic and polyphonic repertoires and singing styles of all these centuries! They form a continuous chain in which we can see the true Catholic tradition at work. By tradition, we do not mean the mechanical repetition of musical and liturgical forms, but a continuous flow in which each new element inspired by the genius of an era never appears as a break with the heritage of the ancients, but as an enhancement or, to paraphrase the Greeks, an explanation of tradition.

These repertoires were not perceived solely as a collection of melodies, but first and foremost as a sound, a way of using the voice specific to the sacred function. It is from this tradition that Catholics were cut off following the reforms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is why we believe that any contemporary reflection on liturgy and its music should, first and foremost, be based on a new approach to the history of liturgical chant, in order to better rediscover the riches of the past and the link with the whole tradition.

Today, many parameters have changed in our appreciation of historical facts. Contemporary reflection on liturgical aesthetics should take into account the new advances that have been made in recent decades in the history of art in general, and more particularly in the history of music.

The growing interest in early and non-European music has profoundly changed perceptions of the aesthetics of the past. Even if the majority have not yet benefited from the opportunities created by this movement, a fundamental change has taken place. For the first time, people are attempting to approach cultural forms that differ from those that dominate their own group with a desire for objectivity. Works from the past are no longer considered expressions of a bygone era, but rather objects that can open the minds of modern people to other perceptions that have now disappeared or lost much of their sharpness. This new approach is based on a meticulous study of all the details that constitute a style: the choice of materials, the way they are prepared, and the methods of acquiring knowledge. Gradually, the work is no longer understood as an object in itself, but as a tool that allows those who use it to have an experience accessible to people today. The arts and sciences gain an extra dimension of humanity, because ancient styles teach us another way of seeing, hearing, and experiencing time and space. Other realities are superimposed, counterpointed, or grafted onto the realities emanating from our modern societies.

As far as liturgy is concerned, the intense and profound practice of past centuries should not be considered a dead letter. Today's Catholics have much to learn from ancient practices. To do so, they must be known; and to know them, they must be practised.

In order to better understand the context of my remarks, allow me to briefly describe how I gradually came to make the observations I am about to share with you.

Since 1982, the *Organum* ensemble has had the opportunity to explore a wide range of liturgical repertoires. Concerts allow us to bring this music back to life by recreating the sequence that was part of the liturgy. Whenever possible, it is also valuable to recreate the conditions in which the music was performed, i.e. the position of the cantors in the church and their orientation, the type of reading material used, and the number of singers. Sometimes, paying attention to certain liturgical traditions that are still alive can be deeply beneficial. The study of Corsican religious chant, preserved by oral tradition, is valuable because it represents one of the best-preserved vestiges of the cantorial traditions of post-Tridentine Catholicism. Byzantine chant can also provide valuable insight into the vocal styles referred to in the earliest notations of Roman chant and by certain medieval theorists. This makes it possible to glimpse the behaviours induced by these types of music and to discern their characteristics, five of which we consider essential and will discuss below:

- Singing and vocal behaviour
- The proclamation of the liturgical text
- The material supports for musical reading: books and lecterns
- The places where singing took place
- The role of the organ

These five points, which for a very long time were essential to the celebration, are mostly ignored by those who reflect on liturgy today. However, these technical details and s were indispensable means of transmission for the perpetuation of the traditions and knowledge they conveyed. Ignorance of this liturgical know-how means that our current celebrations are at odds with the Church's past, whereas they would gain in depth and intensity if they embraced the heritage that each generation of Catholics had patiently passed on to the next.

### **Singing and vocal conduct**

Religious singing cannot be considered solely as the combination of a text and a melody. The act of liturgical singing is first and foremost a vocal technique, that is, a particular way of using the voice, of entering into the sound and inhabiting the space and time of the celebration. The melodic contours are only the result of this attitude. Forgetting this fundamental distinction can lead to major misunderstandings, such as those experienced by Catholics since the last century.

The reform of Pius X, by its scope, enshrined the singing technique recommended by the Benedictines of Solesmes but thus rejected other Catholic singing traditions, which became less and less understood during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The cantors sang in a deep voice – remember that the pitch of ecclesiastical singing in France was one tone lower than the current pitch – loud and resonant, making abundant use of all the resources of the art of ornamentation. The Solesmes ideal is very different. In the Solesmes school of thought, the perfect voice is characterised by its high pitch – implying angelic – its softness, its lack of timbre and its rejection of any ornamentation considered futile and superfluous.

### **The proclamation of the liturgical text**

The meaning of the text is not the most decisive factor in its vocalisation. It should be remembered that the primary meaning of the Latin word *oratio* refers to the art of well-constructed

speech. The skill of *the orator* lies precisely in knowing how to highlight the architecture of speech in the right way, so that the main points of the discourse, through their harmonious arrangement in the time of the proclamation, lead the listener to perceive its meaning. But this structure is based primarily on the word, the Latin word, whose scansion is characterised by the alternation of long, short and semi-short syllables.

On this specific point, Catholics also experienced a cultural revolution at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, national pronunciations were discarded, which had the effect of destroying, especially in Romance-speaking countries, the phonetic and therefore genetic link between Latin and modern languages. But even more seriously, the way Latin was chanted was completely changed. Since late antiquity, the stress had corresponded, with rare exceptions, to a long syllable, as in modern Italian. In liturgical chant, the syllables were naturally arranged according to three types of duration corresponding to long, short and semi-short syllables. Under the pretext of returning to a supposed antiquity, the existence of which is difficult to determine, the solesmian reformers substituted a scansion of Latin in which practically all syllables have the same length. This bias allowed them to justify, in the interpretation of plainchant, the theory of indivisible prime time, the standard of which was to be a syllabic time. Thus, a centuries-old tradition of scanning sacred texts was sacrificed to justify a hypothesis for interpreting Gregorian chant.

### **The physical supports for musical reading: books and lecterns**

Another reform at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had an unfortunate consequence on ecclesiastical chant, namely the transformation of the reading aids for chant, books, and the removal of what they were placed on, lecterns.

From the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Catholics, who had previously sung from memory, began to sing from books, which had to be large so that several people could read the content at the same time. These books were placed on a lectern, which quickly became an essential liturgical object and location for more than seven centuries. We will not analyse here the underlying reasons for the emergence of the lectern: they are linked to a global evolution in the status of books and reading in our societies during the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

These large books were replaced at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by smaller, eminently practical books, but these led to a completely different way of standing while singing. The large books placed on a lectern forced the singers to raise their heads, thus standing up straight and opening their chest cavities, and thus projecting their voices upwards with a vigorous breath. The

wearing of chasubles during the most solemn liturgies reinforced this posture.

Conversely, the small book causes choristers to lower their heads in order to read the tiny notation; the curved back completely closes the chest and the voice, supported by compressed breath, is directed downwards. This attitude could only lead to the widespread use, towards the second third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of vocal prostheses that disfigure our contemporary liturgies: I am referring to the microphone, without which very few priests and liturgical leaders are now able to perform their duties<sup>7</sup>.

Let us add that a new square notation was created, which resembles medieval square notation but is very different from it. It served as a support for Dom Moquereau's theories but has no real rhythmic significance. It was used for the Vatican edition of Gregorian melodies and imposed on the whole Catholic Church at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This square notation, still in use today, even in the *Graduale Triplex*, does not allow performers to truly access the different rhythmic interpretations used in past centuries.

### **The places of singing**

The place of the cantors was never random, whether in the stalls, around the lectern, or in specific places: it was always determined by the requirements of the liturgical action. We will only outline this essential point here; indeed, to understand the relevance of these liturgical places linked to a living conception of ecclesial space, we would need to discuss the meaning of space and movement in the liturgy, the importance of light, both that coming from the sun and that emanating from the candelabra, graded according to the importance and spirit of the celebration. Finally, we would need to mention the importance of acoustic spaces, which vary according to the period and architecture, and to which our ancestors attached fundamental value. Let us simply note for the record that most often the chants of the proper were performed facing the altar. All of this could be the subject of a specific paper.

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<sup>7</sup> The quality of vocal delivery was of great importance. Let us recall the three modes of vocal delivery reserved for the officiant, which the ceremonial texts refer to as tones, or inflections of the voice.

- 1) *La voce intelligibili*, where the priest pronounces what must be said aloud so that it can be heard by those present.
- 2) *La voce mediocri*, where the priest pronounces what he must say in a moderate voice, so that he can be heard by those closest to him, but always in a less intense tone than what is said aloud.
- 3) *The voce secreto*, where the priest pronounces what must be said in a low voice in such a way that he can hear himself, but the congregation cannot hear him. See Léon-Michel LE VAVASSEUR, *Cérémonial selon le Rit romain*, Paris: J. Lecoffre, 1882, Vol. I, p. 264.

## **The role of the organ**

Many organists reflect on what the use of the organ could be in our contemporary liturgies, but very few try to understand the traditional way of using the organ that Catholics practised for nearly nine centuries.

It is commonly said today that the organ should be at the service of the liturgy. However, the people must sing. Therefore, it is said, the organ must accompany them to support the singing. This reasoning, which currently prevails in the , is unfortunate. When the organ accompanies, it does not support anything at all: on the contrary, it prevents people from truly engaging in the singing. It is thought that the organ sets the tone: this is false, as most organs today are poorly tuned and are a tone higher than the pitch traditionally used in the liturgy – around 390 instead of 440. The clergy very often require equal temperament in order to be able to accompany in all keys. However, in this temperament, all intervals are out of tune except for octaves. It has never been used by Catholics, except at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The temperament traditionally used by Catholics from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century to alternate with plainchant is the meantone temperament with eight just major thirds.

In the Catholic tradition, the organ was never intended to accompany singing. It was only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that plainchant began to be accompanied. Since the organ was introduced into the liturgy around the year 1000, its function has always been to alternate with the choir at specific moments: only on major feast days, i.e. about twenty times a year, and on only two occasions during the liturgical day, at Mass and Vespers, and rarely at Lauds. At Mass, the organ alternates for the ordinary chants – *Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus, Ite missa est* –; at Vespers, it also alternates every other verse for the hymn and the Magnificat. The organ plays the first verse, the choir sings the second, and so on. This gives the organ time to deploy all its resources, and allows the voice to truly express itself without being overwhelmed by the sound of the organ. Each thus maintains its own dignity. The *Kyrie* or *Gloria*, performed in this manner, could last twenty minutes, even half an hour. Our civilisation has lost this sense of the time that should be given to things. Liturgy should play an essential role in this area.

## **What are the prospects for the future?**

The presentation we have just given may seem very negative, given how far the current situation and what has been implemented over the last century are from the ancient cantorial traditions. However, there may be some reason to hope that all is not lost. We believe it is important not to seek to create mass movements. The direction we need to take can only be set by a small number of people at first. Only when this appropriation of ancient traditions becomes natural and fully integrated by a small group will it be possible to spread the word to wider circles.

The phenomenon of the rebirth of lay brotherhoods in Corsica, in which we have been actively involved for several years, could serve as a model for initiating a revival of traditional liturgical chant. These brotherhoods are trying to revive their liturgical traditions, which remained untouched by the reforms initiated by Pius X. Relations with the ecclesiastical authorities are not easy, but we are helping these brotherhoods to implement a liturgical charter that harmoniously regulates the duties of the members – preserving their liturgical heritage – and the concerns of the bishops, namely to bring it into line with post-conciliar pastoral practice.

As for other places, interesting experiments can be carried out in certain parishes, but since the Church is an eminently hierarchical organisation, renewal must come from the liturgical centre, that is, from the cathedral. To move things forward, episcopal will is necessary in order to structure this renaissance. Around the bishop, in the cathedral, a group of lay people and religious could work under the artistic direction of a liturgical professional to practise a traditional liturgical form. From this centre, religious and cantors could spread out and transpose this model to the parishes. Confraternities, where they exist or where it seems necessary to create them, could be the vehicle for this dissemination.

But practices will only really evolve when children, from the beginning of their religious initiation, are educated in what could be called liturgical catechesis. Catechesis and liturgical initiation should be one and the same thing. Transmitting the great principles of the faith is only possible if the centre of religious life and aesthetic experience remains the liturgy.

Since this article was first published some twenty years ago, we have developed the various elements mentioned in it in several books and articles. Here are the main ones:

M. Pérès, "Pour une rééducation du sens liturgique" (Towards a re-education of liturgical meaning), *Catholica* 46 (Winter 1994).

M. Pérès, "Reprendre à frais nouveaux la réflexion sur les traditions liturgiques" in AA. VV., *Reconstruire la liturgie*, Paris: François-Xavier de Guibert, 1997.

- M. Pérès, "A different sense of time; on plainchant" in *Inside early music*, B. D. Sherman (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- M. Pérès and J. Cheyronnaud, *Les voix du Plain-chant*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001.
- M. Pérès and X. Lacavalerie, *Le chant de la mémoire, ensemble Organum 1982-2002*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2002.
- M. Pérès, "L'Église et la mémoire de ses traditions cantorales," *Revista de Musicología XXVII* (2004), no. 1 – Proceedings of the International Symposium "El motu proprio de San Pío X y la música (1903-2003)," Barcelona, 2003.
- M. Pérès and Bernhard Groebler, "Is Gregorian chant ecumenical?," *Catholica* 82 (Winter 2003).
- M. Pérès, "Reconstruire une mémoire liturgique" (Rebuilding a liturgical memory), *La Nef* 183 (June 2007).
- M. Pérès, "Jerome of Moravia (13<sup>th</sup> century) and the origins of figured plainchant" in *La Misa Solemne Popular en latín en la tradición salmantina*, Miguel Manzano Alonso (ed.), Centro de Cultura Tradicional "Angel Carril", Diputación de Salamanca, 2008.
- M. Pérès, "Gregorian Utopia," *Arts sacrés* 2 (November-December 2009).
- M. Pérès, "The Transfigured Twilight: Another Approach to the Pilgrimage to Compostela," in *Sacred Arts* 23 (May-June 2013).
- M. Pérès, "La parole, le chant, et l'espace rituel" (Speech, song, and ritual space), *Arts sacrés* 27 (January-February 2014).
- M. Pérès, 'Old Roman chant: New Horizons for Understanding Gregorian Chant and the Repertoires of the Eastern Churches,' in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Musica Sacra svoltosi in occasione del centenario di fondazione del PIMS, in Roma, tra il 26 maggio ed il 1 giugno 2011*, Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Musica Sacra, 2014.
- M. Pérès, "What could be a hermeneutics of ecclesiastical chant?," in *Liturgical chant today and the Gregorian tradition*, Proceedings of the GREAM colloquium, edited by Beat Föllmi and Jacques Viret, Paris: Hermann, 2016.