

GREGORIAN CHANT

Art is man's free creation, an element of the culture that man has added to God's creation. But most elements of culture are progressive helps to material well-being and material pleasure; art alone seems to escape this slavery. Art lifts the mind above the material; it transports man to the ideal world. It makes him human and free; it makes him a creator. For he projects his idea into nature and makes this material world reflect it in the various images that help to constitute the arts.

Among the arts music surely holds one of the chief places, if not the chief one, in any classification; for it is the only purely formal art, and is more completely the creation of the artist and more free from matter than any other, even architecture. Hence all the arts seem to keep something of music, and among them all music alone has kept the name of the Muses.

While the world hurtles onward, no one knows whither, and the youth of today scrambles over the wreckage of efficiency, the Church, serene and unafraid, finds time to explore by-paths of Catholic art. Driven upward and onward by infallible guidance, she is reaching our bewildered generation the cradle songs of Christianity. Catholics and even the world at large are rediscovering the beauty of Gregorian melodies. It is no longer true to say that love of the chant is an acquired taste. The musical public is waking up to the truth that Gregorian music is a great art, an art Greek in mind, Catholic in heart.

Eight centuries ago, Chaucer tells us, the school boy sang Gregorian tunes as he sped from school, and little maids crooned them over their tapestry. Old monks perched on wooden stools bent over crumbling manuscripts, while younger monks poured out the freshness of their love of God in song. Those were the days when men and women spent some hours of every night in prayer, rose, and by torch-light chanted the psalms.

It was the golden age of Gregorian music. Then as now Latin was the language of the Church, but then it was also the language of poetry, and so it came to pass

that Gregorian music developed its rhythm from the rhythm of the Latin word. Free, Gregorian rhythm alternates from twos to threes according to the need of the word. The musical tradition of those days, that is, the musical tradition of Greece lent itself to mediaeval prayer. To modern ears the Chant is strange and lifeless until it is understood. We wait for the breaking up of tonalities and for the rush and confusion of beautiful sounds to which we are accustomed, for as Jacques Maritain says in *Art and Scholasticism*, music is the symbol of the emotions of the soul with power to rouse what it symbolizes, and it is therefore true to say that the music of a people and of an era is the reflection of its inner life.

When evil days came upon the Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Chant hid itself in Cistercian and Trappist, in Carthusian and Benedictine monasteries; the people forgot the art of Gregorian song, and to them it was all but lost. The New Learning of those centuries, their love of adventure, the development of a purely personal and individualistic outlook became the inspiration of Bach and Handel, of Mozart and Liszt, and finally, as our modern civilization grew in complexity, of the moderns. The twentieth century has turned a corner. Many are looking back at far hills of history wondering what may not lie there for them just over the top. Up and down the country, here and in Europe, there are today musical centers where the musical traditions of Solesmes are re-creating Gregorian music in all the artistic perfection and beauty of its golden age.

Plain Chant, at its best, is not plain at all but exceptionally ornamental. It abounds in decorative curves and in musical rhythms. It is plain only in the sense of its unison. Plain Chant is a finished product of art, not a tentative beginning of some musical development. It is a classical music; it borrowed from antiquity beauty and form; into this form the early Christians breathed the vigour of spirituality. It is, as Father Ballaman says, "Prayer in music. Written in God's own scale, leaving out the chromatics of human passions, it moves in free rhythm, not in playful verse. When a man is face to face with his God, it behooves him to be very simple."

Gregorian Chant is wholly the servant of prayer;

it was conceived as prayer, it has no other object than prayer, the intimate communion of the soul with God. It is from this angle that it must be regarded; otherwise it will not be understood.

It has nothing to do with "snobbishness," any more than with the cult of the archaic or the fanciful. This is perhaps why those who approach it from a profane point of view, merely as musicians, amateurs, or esthetic sensation-seekers, do not understand it, and misrepresent it. In trying to make it say what by its very nature it cannot say, they end unconsciously by making a grotesque caricature of it, preventing it from appearing as it is.

The Church is a mother. She has the pure instincts of a mother. She knows what suits the temperament of her children best. It has often been observed that the heretical sects have, so to speak, divided, mutilated man, not understanding his nature, seeing either only his body or only his soul. The Church, on the other hand, knows that we are composed of two elements, intimately united one to the other, necessary one to the other. She knows that there is nothing in the intellect that has not passed first by way of the senses, but she knows also that nothing must stay in the senses, that the senses must be subordinated to the mind. It is only on condition that man respects this necessary hierarchy that he is truly man and fit for the Kingdom of God.

This is the explanation of all the sacraments, all the sacramentals, all the Liturgy, and of the Gregorian Chant. It is a side of the Gregorian art not usually understood, and none the less essential, which throws an immense light on it. Indeed it cannot be comprehended except as seen in this supernatural light. It belongs wholly to the Church, marked with the stamp of her supernatural and material genius. Dom Mocquereau says: "It appeals to the higher regions of the soul; its beauty, its nobility, come from the fact that it borrows nothing, or the least possible, from the world of the senses; it passes through them, it is not to them it appeals. . . . The Gregorian cantilena is always sane, pure, serene, without any action on the nerves; it uses nothing of the lower world that it does not uplift."

That is why it brings peace—true, profound peace—

the joyous expansion of the soul in the harmonious adjustment of all the faculties. And therein lies, as has been truly said, "the supreme sign, proof of its vocation, and of its divine essence" (Camille Bellaigue, "Le chant grégorien, à l'Abbaye de Solesmes)."

Peace, gentleness, suavity, these are the words which always recur when one speaks of Gregorian music; above all, love. If there is one thing that stands out in studying the Gregorian melodies, it is that they are simply bathed in tenderness. Whatever may be the feeling they are expressing, the atmosphere is always that of love. If one wishes to describe Gregorian Chant in one word, it would be, I think, charity. It is truly the whole spirit of the Church which is in our melodies. One might say of them as is said of the frescoes of Fra Angelico, that they were composed on bended knees. M. Camille Bellaigue, from whom I borrow the quotation, adds: "That was the spirit, the purest spirit of the antique music. Its mission and ideal was far less to excite than to give order and rhythm to souls."

It could not be better expressed. If I add that this perfect and tranquil harmony of the whole being is a marvelous principle of action, an indispensable condition of the highest activity of the soul, and if Gregorian music, thanks to the laws of its composition and its supernatural inspiration, expresses to a degree previously unknown the ideal conceived and portrayed by the Hellenic genius, you will perhaps agree with me that the Catholic Church, in prescribing for all its children this way of prayer, is not only the authentic means of sanctification, but also an incomparable school of art, of moral education, and of civilization.

—Charles MacIvor, '47.

FOR THE FOLKS BACK HOME

Corporal Snell raised his head cautiously from the grass and shrubs of an Italian pasture and stole a glance around the hill-side. Then he lowered his head and inched forward again. By his calculations he should be well in the rear of the machine-gun nest. Nearly time to