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The Music of the Middle Ages: How Gregorian Chant Both Shaped and Reflected Western Europe

Introduction:

Available through the University of Pittsburgh’s Archives and Special Collections Library, this study revolves around four different Gregorian chant leaves, each from a different location and time period of the Holy Roman Empire. These chant leaves include a 14th century Italian chant, a 15th century Dutch chant, a 16th century Spanish chant, and a 17th century French chant. This study involves an understanding of how the musical notation of Gregorian chant works, its emphasis on certain Latin words, and its place within the history of the medieval Holy Roman Empire. Gregorian chant was extremely popular in the Holy Roman Empire, and because of this, it quickly spread across Western Europe, carrying with it the message of its origin—the Catholic Church. Seeing these chants as not only music, but as a historical outline of the political and religious landscape of the Holy Roman Empire is the crux of this study. When looking at these chants as a timeline—a progression—I noticed a progression towards simpler notation. It is this progression that tells the story of the Catholic Church’s wavering grip on the Holy Roman Empire.

Background and Historical Context:

The progression towards simpler notation reflects the Catholic Church's wavering domination during the Reformation within the Holy Roman Empire. Though, it is first important to contextualize these chants—understand the world from which they came, understand their purpose, and understand their musical journey. Thus, this progression toward simpler notation is not only a symbol of the Holy Roman Empire as a whole, but it also reflects the more internal aspects of the medieval Catholic Church. Specifically, it reflects the movement towards the individual within the Church.

Many of the complexities of early forms of Gregorian chant were made possible through the collective voices of various monks, ranging in both vocal ability and age. In many cases, vocal range was indicative of age and vice versa (Raynor 20). The sound of their unified voices was symbolic of the unity of the Catholic Church, as well as the Church's emphasis on its collective doctrine, its collective voice. In his book *A Social Music* History, Henry Raynor explains:

The chant of the Catholic church was meant to be the voice of the church, not that of any individual worshipper; the monotone of the prayers, lessons, epistles, and gospels, with its formulae of intonation to mark points of punctuation, like chants of psalms or austere settings of the congregation's share of the Mass, were meant to give objectivity to words which could too easily be bogged down in subjective personal feelings. (16)

There was absolutely no room for individual interpretation within the Church. There was one overarching belief, and that belief was law. The Church's emphasis was on utility, not individuality.

The Catholic Church had an extremely strong grip on the Western world since its inception. It dominated both the non-secular and secular worlds. During the Middle Ages, the papacy as well as the Church as a whole used the power of Gregorian chant to act in their favor. Gregorian chant quickly spread across what was to become the Holy Roman Empire, carrying with it the essence of the Catholic Church of which it was representative. The lore surrounding Gregorian chant almost immediately popularized its unique, mystical sound. This form of music was not only new to the secular world, but it was new to the world as a whole. It changed the way music would be seen for ages to come—remnants of chant can be found all over the modern Western world through hymns, motets, parody Masses, and the list goes on. Its unique sound, notation, and performance took the Western world by storm, and its popularity only strengthened the Catholic Church.

However, Gregorian chant, as well as the Catholic Church, was at its strongest only in its earliest stages. The practice and performance of its ornate notation and sound was treated as a sacred artform by both its performers as well as its audience. There were strict guidelines enforced by the Church as to how these chants were to be performed. First and foremost, this ensured uniformity, but secondly, it ensured traditional excellence. Impossible to maintain, it was not long until this rigid uniformity fell through the cracks. With this decline of the elaborate traditional uniformity came the decline of the Catholic Church's power.

As chant began to spread across the empire, it became more difficult to control. Raynor states:

*Schola Cantorum* (originally establish by Gregory the Great) sent tutors across Europe to make sure the high standards of Gregorian chant performance was maintained, but because of the vagueness of notation, it was not accurately preserved. This means that it was modified by the tastes and traditions of individuals and cultures throughout the ages and throughout Europe” (20).

Therefore, the church as well as Gregorian chant began to shift, allowing more of an emphasis on self-expression rather than self-suppression. That being said, the purpose of chant basically remained the same: to repeatedly sing the message of the Catholic Church across medieval Europe. Yet, individual interpretation was no longer frowned upon. There was a collective realization that Gregorian chant was a fundamental aspect of not only Catholic tradition, but Western, and medieval tradition as well. The sound of Gregorian chant surpassed the walls of Catholicism's sect of Christendom. It not only became the sound of the Holy Roman Empire, but it became the sound of the Middle Ages.

Knowing the history and philosophy of Western Europe surrounding the influx of Gregorian chant provides a wealth of discovery when analyzing the physical chants in the twenty-first century. The religious and political landscape of Western Europe is reflected within these chant manuscripts.

Details of Study:

To begin this study, I chose four chant manuscripts, all from different centuries, and all from different regions of Western Europe: an Italian 14th century manuscript, a Dutch 15th century manuscript, a Spanish 16th century manuscript, and a French 17th century manuscript. The Italian manuscript is a bit of an outlier within this group. The Netherlands, France, and Spain were all closely intertwined with regard to territory and power in the Middle Ages. Italy, on the other hand, was its own entity. However, it is still crucial to look at an Italian manuscript, specifically an early Italian manuscript, for Italy is the home of the Vatican and, in turn, the home of the Catholic Church. It is from this centralized religious location that Catholicism, specifically Gregorian chant, was disseminated.

Beginning with this manuscript, it is most likely from Florence, belonging to the Cathedral of St. Peter. The chant is known as "*Tu es Petrus*," or "You are Peter." This chant, simple in its appearance, is quite ornate in its notation. In multiple places throughout the chant are collections of neumes, indicating a series of drawn-out notes that would have been sung. Some of these emphasized and elongated words include *petram*, *portae*, *pualebunt (praevalebunt*), and *celis*. This happens on multiple occasions with regard to the words *quodcumque* and *terram*. Though not fully included in this chant leaf, it seems as though the refrain of "*tu es petrus*" is also quite elaborate. These emphasized words and phrases translate as rock, give, prevail, heaven, whatever, earth, and you are Peter respectively. Most of these emphasized words serve as the crux of the chant with the exception of the word *quodcumque*. I have translated this chant as "And on this rock I will build my church. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you should unite on earth shall also be united in heaven. And whatever you should free/release on earth shall also be freed/released in heaven." I assume the inclusion of *quodcumque* in the list of emphasized words is for the purpose of transition. One occurs at the very end of one page as a transition for a page turn, and the other occurs as a transition from one verse to the next. Regardless, there is a clear connection between the words sung and the length with which those words were meant to be sung.

The ornate notation of these words acts as a reflection of the importance they once held—both within this singular chant and within the Catholic Church. This lengthy notation is indicative of the power the Catholic Church had over Western Europe in the Middle Ages, specifically in the 14th century. The many followers of the Catholic Church in the Western world around this time were very receptive to the long, ornate repetition of Catholicism's chant. The emphasis of the church's doctrine within these chants only strengthened its power as Gregorian chant spread across Western Europe, covering the Holy Roman Empire. The Roman Catholic Church's power began to waiver across Europe in years to come, however, it maintained strength within its home in the Vatican and in Italy. This is exemplified through this ornate 14th-century Italian chant.

However, a century later in the Netherlands, the Catholic Church's popularity began to decline, and so did the popularity of Gregorian chant. This is clear from this late-15th-century Dutch Gregorian chant leaf. This particular leaf contains a chant sung on the 14th Sunday after Pentecost. Similar to the 14th-century Italian "*Tu es Petrus*," this chant contains some extremely elaborate notation. It also presents many colorful, decorative elements. However, there is one striking difference: most of the elaborate notations are erased. Many of the erased notations are above words such as *domine* and *virtute—*both crucial words within the chant as well as within the Catholic Church, meaning God and power/virtue. These erased neumes indicate a simplification and shortening of what would have been a much longer and richer chant. This is also symbolic of the metaphorical "erasing" of Catholic doctrine and power within the Netherlands at the time.

Around the time this chant was written, the Netherlands was part of what is considered modern-day France. The Dutch were in a state of political and religious turmoil. During this time was the infamous Dutch Revolt against the Hapsburgs, catalyzed by a religious clash. Due to this, there was a suppression of Catholicism—reflected in the suppression of Gregorian chant. This was the beginning of the end of Catholicism's omnipresent and omnipotent hold on the Western world. Not only did the Dutch Revolt begin this decline, but it also landed on the brink of the Protestant Reformation which would quickly take Western Europe by storm, causing further complications for the Catholic Church.

Quickly moving into the 16th century with a "*Te Deum*"manuscript from Spain, we see a completely simplified chant. Without any elaborate notation or erased elaborate notation, this chant was written as simply as possible at its inception. At the time this 16th-century chant was written, the Protestant Reformation was in full force in Spain. Spain had only conquered the Moors in 1492, and, following that, they focused much of their time on converting people of the Muslim and Jewish faiths—the people of Spain were strictly Catholic due to the Spanish Inquisition. In fact, they were the leaders of the Counter Reformation. They wanted to see the Catholic Church reformed from within. Because of this strict national allegiance to Catholicism, Protestant teachings were prohibited. Nonetheless, between 1530 and 1540, Protestantism was gaining followers within Spain. This created an obvious conflict within the country and within Christendom. The preservation of Catholicism within Spain at the time explains why this is the only bifolio I am studying—there was excellent preservation of the church's manuscripts within the country. However, the wavering religious allegiances as well as the rigidity with which Catholicism had to be practiced within the country explain the over-simplification of its chant.

The final chant in this study is one from 17th-century France. This chant was sung during the first Sunday after the Epiphany. Its words and notation are much more standardized than the others while still maintaining a certain amount of simplicity. This chant, unlike the one from Spain, is not as well preserved, for there is water damage, obscuring some of the words and neumes. There is also an excess of extraneous markings. This preservation, or lack thereof, is reflective of the religious landscape of France at the time. France was very much affected by the Protestant Reformation, especially with the rise of Huguenots. At the time this chant was written, hundreds of thousands of Huguenots fled France, while a significant amount still remained within the nation, maintaining a large Protestant presence. This chant was also likely written in between the passage (1598) and revocation (1685) of the Edict of Nantes which granted religious toleration to people throughout France. This would then serve as a détente of sorts for the religious turmoil in both France and Western Europe. France was a major power within the Holy Roman Empire, and their actions, in turn, were extremely influential. This sort of middle ground that France reached through the Edict of Nantes no longer favored a specific religion. This meant that the Catholic Church no longer dominated France, and neither did Protestantism. Both were tolerated—none were supported, and none were suppressed. This toleration was reflected in their Gregorian chant. This chant is far more standardized than the other ones in this grouping. It is not particularly decorative, and it is not particularly ornate in terms of notation. In this aspect, it is reminiscent of the erased Dutch chant and the over-simplified Spanish chant. Yet, there are still a few words throughout this French leaf that are emphasized through a series of neumes—not to the extent of the 14th-century Italian chant, but a collection of neumes is present, nonetheless. This chant presents itself as a middle ground—a standardization of Gregorian chant for years to come.

Conclusion:

The story of both the religious and political landscape of the medieval Catholic Church is told through these four Gregorian chant leaves. With the initial unbridled strength of the medieval Catholic church came an emphasis on its power and doctrine throughout its music as well as throughout Western Europe. As European tensions rose and religion became a widely battled subject during the late-15th, 16th, and 17th centuries, the power of the Catholic Church wavered, causing it to simplify its rigid doctrine and weaken its grip on Western Europe. With this came the simplification and shortening of its music—all a symbol of its consolidation of power. Its previous strength was beginning to be erased. As years passed and the Protestant Reformation subsided, the idea of religious toleration was introduced through the passing of the Edict of Nantes in France. Without a clear winner in this religious battle, there came the idea of general religious acceptance. The power of the Catholic church no longer prevailed over the entirety of Western Europe. Instead, it became just another sect of Christendom. With this standardizing of the Catholic faith came a similar standardization of Gregorian chant. Gregorian chant finally met the middle of the two extremes of the ornate 14th-century Italian chant and the simple 16th-century Spanish chant. By the 17th century, chant was no longer the perpetuation of Catholicism's rigid doctrine. While Catholicism's reign was to be kept within the walls of religion, Gregorian chant remained a staple of the Middle Ages and Early Europe—prevailing throughout both the secular and non-secular worlds. Gregorian chant finally grew into what it would come to be associated with for centuries to come: the glorious and unique sound of the Middle Ages.

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