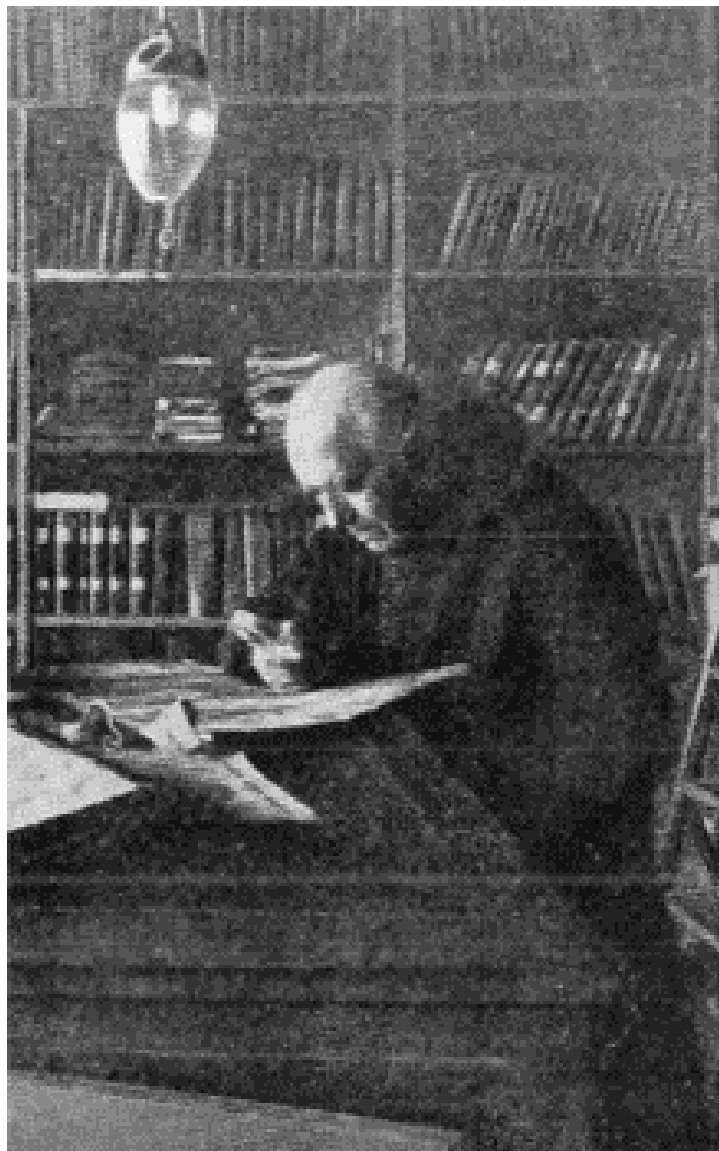


The Art of Gregorian Music

by

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I. Its Aims, Methods, and Characteristics

Plato has given us an excellent definition of music. "It is," he says, "art so ordering sound as to reach the soul, inspiring a love of virtue." He would have the best music to be that which most perfectly expresses the soul's good qualities. "It is to serve no idle pleasures," he says in another place, "that the Muses have given us harmony, whose movements accord with those of the soul, but rather to enable us thereby to order the ill-regulated motions of the soul, even as rhythm is given us to reform our manners, which in most men are so wanting in balance and in grace." This was the high ideal which the Greeks had of music. It was, in their conception, the expression of order in all things: far from regarding it as a mere pastime, they made it the indispensable foundation of civilization and morality, a source of peace and of order for the soul, and of health and beauty for the body. Their masters were insistent that "rhythm and harmony should be so identified with the minds of the young that as they became more balanced and composed, they might be better able to speak and act aright. For, as a matter of fact, man's whole being has need of rhythm and of harmony."^[2]

The very nature of that music, its dignity and simplicity, its gentle, tranquil movement seconded the master's endeavors, and led, as it were, naturally to the desired end. "The ancients," says Westphal, "never attempted to express the actual and passionate life of the soul. The noise and bustle whither modern music carries our fancy, the representation of strife and strain, the portrayal of those opposing forces which contend for the mastery of the soul, were all alike unknown to the Greek mind. Rather was the soul to be lifted into a sphere of idealistic contemplation, there to find peace with herself and with the outer world, and so to rise to greater power of action."³ Greek music may not always have remained faithful to this ideal, but it is enough to know that in its primitive purity it rose to such heights.

The Catholic Church, that society of souls established by our Lord Jesus Christ, is the depository of all that is good and beautiful in the world. She inherited the traditions of antiquity, and gave a foremost place to the art of music, using it in her liturgy as well as for the instruction and sanctification of her children, no light task indeed when one recalls the state of society when that peaceful conquest was begun. But Holy Church set her strength and her hope in her divine Head, that true Orpheus, whose voice has power to charm the beasts, and melt the very rocks. She had, moreover, treasured those words of St. Paul: "Teach and admonish one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles." In the mouth of the great Apostle this precept had all the force of law: rightly, therefore, may music be considered a constituent element of the Church's worship. St. Dennis was of this opinion, and none have treated of the divine psalmody with greater insight than he. It was, in his conception, the preparation for the deepest mysteries of the faith. "The hallowed chant of the Scriptures," he writes, "which is essentially a part of all our mysteries, cannot be separated from the most sacred of them all (he is speaking of the mystery of the Eucharist or Synaxis). For in the whole sacred and inspired Book is shown forth God, the Creator and Disposer of all things." St. Dennis then describes that great drama at once human and divine which is enacted in our sacred books, and in the liturgy, and continues: "Wherefore the sacred chants form, as it were, a universal hymn telling forth the things of God, and work in those who recite them devoutly an aptitude for either receiving or conferring the various sacraments of the Church. The sweet melody of these Canticles prepares the powers of the soul for the immediate celebration of the holy mysteries, and by the unison of those divine songs, brings the soul into

subjection to God, making it to be at one with itself and with its fellows, as in some single and concordant choir of things divine.⁴ Peace, strength, purity, love: in very truth, the music of the Christian Church soars to greater heights than that of the ancients.

Is it possible, however, for any music of man's making to realize this ideal? Can modern music do so? If the question were put, no doubt the answer would be, "*Quo non ascendam?*" What shall hinder it? Were you to enquire of M. Combarieu, who has plunged more deeply than any other critic into the potentialities and ideals of music,⁵ he would doubtless reply that this high ideal does not transcend its powers. But although I both admire and respect the views of this distinguished musician, I cannot share them. I know modern music well: it cannot, in its present form, rise to the heights of the Christian ideal. And if you name those great creators of the classic symphony, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Berlioz, I must again answer in the negative. Those eagles of their art never attained to the tranquil spheres of Christian music. They had indeed force of conception, inspiration, the flight of genius: some had, moreover, the light of faith, the flame of love; one thing only was lacking, and that was a language so pure, so free from all earthly alloy, as to be able to echo faithfully that divine calm, that ordered peace, that ever attuned melody which rings in the heart of Holy Church, and reminds the exiles of earth of the tranquil, endless harmonies of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Far be it from me that, in thus criticising these great composers, I should seem to disparage them. To disown them would be to disown my dearest memories. Often, as a child, I was lulled to sleep to the sound of the sonatas, the trios and the quartets of Beethoven, Mozart, or Haydn. And when I grew to man's estate, I took my place as 'cellist in an orchestra conducted by that revered master, M. Charles Dancla, a professor at the Conservatoire. I know the power of orchestral music. At Padeloup, and at the Societe du Conservatoire more especially, I was alternately swayed, overwhelmed, soothed and entranced; it is the conviction born of this experience that enables me to assert today that the ideals of Christian art are not, and cannot be, found therein.

Is, then, this ideal realized by Palestrina? A few days hence, in this very place, M. Bordes, one of the greatest authorities on this subject, will, no doubt, answer this question. Moreover, M. Camille Bellaigue has already treated of the characteristics and the beauties of Palestrina's compositions in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. One remark, however, I will allow myself: The Church could not have allowed sixteen centuries to elapse before she found a chant befitting her worship.

Shall we, then, find what we seek in the Gregorian chant? I venture to think so: nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that this hallowed chant has in our days so fallen into disrepute, and is so condemned and discredited that to present this patrician outcast as the most artistic and finished realization of the Church's prayer would seem folly. That music which, in the days of its glory, was so full of beauty, is today unrecognizable. Like the Master whom it hymns, the chant is come to the hour of its passion. "*Non est species ei, neque decor, et vidimus eum et non erat aspectus et desideravimus eum.*" There is neither beauty nor comeliness: the music which we hear in our churches does not attract us: it is an object of contempt: "*Unde nec reputavimus eum.*"⁶

And yet, notwithstanding its sorry plight, something of the ancient power and majesty remains. You have but to read the impressions recorded by Durtal in Huysman's book, "En Route," to see that the chant is still able to turn souls to God. Along the way, bestrewn with relics and with blood, are yet some faithful ones who pray and hope beside the grave where the chant awaits the

day of resurrection. That day, gentlemen, has already dawned: A day real enough, even if not all glorious and resplendent as that of the Master. In many places the chant, even now is heard. Rome has summoned it to the venerable feasts of St. Gregory; it is installed in the Vatican; Venice has restored it to its former place beneath the dome of St. Mark's. Everywhere the chant is found: in Belgium, in Germany, in England, in Spain, in America. It is used by all the great religious orders; in France it has invaded all our churches. It has existed in a quiet way in Paris for some years, and today you meet it at the Institut Catholique, so that it may be said to have fairly established itself in the very stronghold of intellectual culture. You are soon to hear the chant for yourselves, and I trust that its artless, unaffected beauty will go straight to your heart. But before you do so, you will allow me, I hope, a few words by way of introduction.

The chant is invariably set to words. Among the ancients music was regarded as the auxiliary of poetry: "It was speech raised to the highest term of power, acting simultaneously upon the sensitive and intellectual faculties.⁷ Unconscious of its own power, music did not at once throw off the yoke of centuries in the first ages of Christianity. Indeed, had it existed as a separate art, the Church would not have made use of it. Music without words would not have served her end, which is to give her children not sacred melodies only, and vague musical impressions, but also theological and philosophical truths, and definite acts of faith, of love and of praise, which music alone could never formulate.

The primitive conception of music was therefore perfectly adapted to the Church's purpose. Set, as it were, at the confluence of those two streams of civilization, the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman, the Church, with her rare insight, borrowed from the music of both whatever was most suited to her purpose. The words, and also the whole scheme of her psalmody, were taken from the books of Holy Scripture, that treasure the Church had received from the Lord's hands. The psalmody of the Roman office, indeed, with its verses and strophes characterized by antiphons, which serve as refrains, has a most unmistakable Jewish flavor. The Psalter stood forth above all others as the book of divine praise: the Church added thereto songs of her own making. This is not the place to remind you of the surpassing beauty of the Liturgy: it ought, nevertheless, to be done, for, in order fully to fathom the meaning of the chant, it is imperative that we should understand, love, and live those hallowed canticles. For it must ever be borne in mind that they are the essential part of plainsong.

But however great their beauty, the mere recitation of the words does not suffice. The Church does not merely know her dogmas: she loves them, and therefore she must sing them. "Reason," wrote Joseph de Maistre, "can only speak; but love sings." But the Church sings for yet another reason. Although the word of God has such power that it would seem that the mere hearing would enthrall both mind and heart, it is, alas, addressed to mortal men, to souls dull and heedless, buried, as it were, beneath the covering of flesh and sense, which must be pierced before it can touch them. And therefore the Church summons to her aid that most subtle and penetrating of all arts, music. Albeit inferior to speech in the world of the intelligence, it reigns supreme in the world of sense, possessing, as it does, accents of matchless strength and sweetness to touch the heart, to stir the will, and to give utterance to prayer.

It was from the Graeco-Roman stream that the Church borrowed the elements of her music. She chose diatonic melody because of its dignity and virility, for chromatic and inharmonic melodies

accorded but ill with the pure worship of God. It is, moreover, probable that the Church adapted her songs to the Greek modes and scales; to what extent, however, it is impossible to say. It has been recently asserted, though without any sort of proof, that the pagan airs or nomes, were adopted by the Church, and used by the early Christians. But this assertion is in manifest contradiction with all that we know of the Fathers, and of the Councils, as well as with the mind of the Church. Until further information comes to hand, I incline to think that the airs to which our antiphons are set, whether simple, florid, or neumatic, are in very deed of the Church's own composition.

Whether this be so or not, of this marriage of Jewish poetry done into Latin, with the chant, was born a new art, perfect in its kind, which, though imbued with the principles of antiquity, was nevertheless well fitted to serve the Church's purpose. One of our modern poets⁸ most aptly describes it: *Beau vase athénien, plein de fleurs du Calvaire*. And so it is: Like the music of the ancients, its offspring is simple and discreet, sober in its effects; it is the humble servant, the vehicle of the sacred text, or, if you will, a reverent, faithful, and docile commentary thereon. Even as a healthy body is an instrument perfectly fitted to serve the soul, and to interpret its workings, so the chant interprets the truth, and gives it a certain completeness which words alone could not achieve. The two are bound up together: the word sheds the rays of intellectual light upon the mysterious shadow world of sound, while the melody pervades the words with deep inward meaning, which it alone can impart. Thus mingled, one with the other, music and poetry ravish man's whole being, and uplift the soul to the blissful contemplation of truth.

Before we pursue our subject further, you ought to hear some examples of plainsong. The real value of a statue cannot be estimated from a description, however graphic. And so I propose setting before you a fair statue of ancient church music, not mutilated, but restored, living, and complete. It will be easier for me afterwards to make you admire the dignified simplicity, the harmony and proportion, of its lines and the pervading sweetness of its expression.

To aid me in this attempt, the execution of the chant should be perfect. The voices should be pure, flexible, and trained as in the great academies of the capital. Nevertheless, I have thought it better not to choose trained singers for my purpose. Not that I consider art to be a negligible quantity in the execution of plainsong. On the contrary, it is a point on which many, unhappily, have fallen into regrettable exaggerations which are only calculated to discredit the chant. But on this occasion, in order to prove that a lengthy training is not an indispensable condition, and, at the same time, to show what results may be attained by such ordinary means as may everywhere be found, and in the conviction, moreover, that culture and intelligence will always give a better rendering than mere art, however perfect, I have chosen some young men who would be much astonished were I to introduce them to you as great artists. I therefore refrain from doing so; this, however, I may say of them, they have the type of soul which can appreciate and render these holy melodies.

[At this point the Schola sang the following simple chants: An Ambrosian *Gloria in excelsis*, the Ambrosian antiphon *In Israhel*, followed by the psalm *Laudate Pueri*, and the Gregorian antiphon *Cantate Domino* with the *Magnificat*.] II

Gentlemen, you have been listening to plainsong in this simplest form. We shall now be able to study its features, its aspect, and expression. If it be beautiful, wherein does its beauty lie—is it of

earth or of heaven? And if this beauty be something heavenly, if it act upon our souls like a gentle and refreshing dew, how does it go to work? What are its means of action, the elements of which it makes use? This we must first ascertain by a rapid analysis of details. I do not propose to do more today than to sketch these in brief.

When I was speaking a little while ago of the marriage of words and music in the chant, I omitted to say that some modern critics have drawn a somewhat surprising conclusion from this fact. They allege that this intimate connection between text and melody is precisely the principle underlying modern musical drama, which has reached its zenith in the works of Richard Wagner. The famous composer, alluding to his opera, "Tristan and Isolde," says: "In 'Tristan' the fabric of the words has the full compass planned for the music: in fine, the melody is already constructed in poetic form."² But may not Wagner's rule be applied most exactly to plainsong? Whereupon the critics forthwith leap to the conclusion that Gregorian music is Wagnerian music and vice versa.

To maintain such a conclusion, however, it is evident that one or other of the terms of the comparison must be omitted. The snare into which the critics have fallen is obvious. They should have foreseen that although the principles which govern Gregorian and Wagnerian music are identical, the same principles in application may attain widely differing results. And, as a matter of fact, have you not noticed that as we listen to these melodies, our habits, taste, and judgment are utterly nonplused? The truth is that, there, a wide gulf separates the chant from Beethoven's overpowering symphonies and Wagner's fantastical dramas. Though the expression of beauty be the end of both, the two arts lie at opposite poles: literary and musical terms, tonality, scales, time, rhythm, movement, the very ideals differ, as analysis will show.

Take the first element: unison. Plainsong is unisonous; it is simple, clear, luminous, stripped of all disguise: all can understand it, the most fastidious artist as well as the man in the street. It does not lurk beneath the obscure and whimsical maze of the myriad sounds of an orchestra, hardly to be followed, even by cultivated ears. Harmony, in the modern meaning of the word, is unknown: it relies upon its own intrinsic charm to move and enthrall us. Plainsong is like a great, still-flowing river: the sacred text is broadly reflected on the surface: the clear, limpid stream, so to speak, is unison; the sonorous waves of an accompaniment, harmonious though they be, sadly trouble the surface and sully those limpid depths. This alone were enough to differentiate it from all modern music. But what follows is still more characteristic.

It will be well at this point to bring to mind some principles which have been most ably exposed by M. Mathis Lussy, in his treatise on "*Expression in Music*." I quote them in an epitomised form:

"Modern music is composed of three principal elements—

"1. The Scale, or tonality, in the two modes, major and minor.

"2. Time, that is, the periodic recurrence at short intervals of a strong beat, breaking up a piece of music into small fragments, called measures, of equal value or duration.

"3. Rhythm, that is, the periodic recurrence of two, three, or four measures of the same value so as to form groups or symmetrical schemes, each of which contains a section of a musical phrase and corresponds to a verse of poetry.

"These three elements impress upon our consciousness a threefold need of attraction, of regularity, and of symmetry.

"No sooner has the ear heard a series of sounds subject to the laws of tonality, of time, and of rhythm, than it anticipates and expects a succession of sounds and analogous groups in the same scale, time, and rhythm. But, as a rule, the ear is disappointed of its expectation. Very often the group anticipated contains notes extraneous to the scale-mode of the preceding group, which displace the tonic and change the mode. Or, again, it may contain notes which interrupt the regularity of the time, and destroy the symmetry of the original rhythmic plan. Now, it is precisely these unforeseen and irregular notes, upsetting tone, mode, time, and the original rhythm, which have a particular knack of impressing themselves upon our consciousness. They are elements of excitement, of movement, of force, of energy, of contrast: by such notes is expression engendered."

It must be admitted that this theory contains a certain measure of truth, but can it be said to be complete? Are not order, calm, and regularity most potent factors of expression, even in modern music? Moreover, if expression must be denied to all music which does not employ such elements of excitement, then it must be denied to Gregorian music, which rejects, on principle, all such expedients, being thereby distinguished from all compositions of modern times. The comparison and the scrutiny of the three elements of which we have been speaking will be a convincing proof of this assertion.

We will deal first with tonality. It is well known that Gregorian tonality is very different from that of modern music. In the latter are found diatonic and chromatic intervals, major and minor modes, discords, the leading note, modulations, and constant irregularities of tone. What is the result? Agitation, excitement, frenzy, passionate emotional and dramatic expression; in short, the violent and excessive disturbance of the hapless human frame.

Gregorian tonality, on the contrary, seems ordained to banish all agitation from the mind, and to enfold it in rest and peace. And since the chant is all in unison, discord, that most effective element of expression, is unknown. It follows that the leading note is also debarred; and as a matter of fact, long before there could be any question of its use, anything resembling such a note was excluded by the rules laid down for the composition of the chant. In plainsong, the cadence is never made by approaching the final from the semitone below: a whole tone must invariably be used in such a case. This rule gave the cadence a certain dignity and fullness of expression to which modern music cannot attain by means of the ordinary rules of composition.

Gregorian tonality likewise proscribes the effeminate progressions of the chromatic scale, admitting only the more frank diatonic intervals. These intervals are arranged in scales, eight in number, called modes, the distinct characteristics of which evoke varying impressions and emotions. Bold or abrupt changes from one mode to another are also proscribed, though the chant is by no means lacking in modulations, for these are essential in any music. In plainsong, the modulation is effected by passing from one mode to another. Some compositions borrow the sentiments they seek to interpret from several modes in succession: the mere change of the dominant or reciting-note is enough to give the impression of a true modulation. These changes of mode are effected very gently: they move and mildly stimulate the soul, without either shock or disturbance.

You must not be surprised that the means employed should be so simple and elementary: it is to the higher faculties of the soul that the chant makes appeal. It owes its beauty and dignity to the fact that it borrows little or nothing from the world of sense. It passes through the senses, but it does appeal to them: it panders neither to the emotions nor to the imagination. Plainsong is capable of expressing the most tremendous truths, the strongest feelings, without departing from its sobriety, purity, and simplicity. Modern music may perhaps arouse and voice coarse and violent passions, although I grant that this is not always the case. The chant, however, cannot be so abused: it is always wholesome and serene: it does not react upon the nervous system.

Its frank diatonic tonality, and the absence of chromatic intervals, whose semitones give an impression of incompleteness, seem to render plainsong incapable of expressing anything but the perfection of beauty, the naked truth, "yea, yea, and nay, nay." For the unyielding diatonic scale has a certain angelic quality which never varies: an ear accustomed to its matchless candor cannot tolerate melodies, sensuous even when the love of God is their theme.

If from the study of sounds and their progression, we proceed to analyze their duration and intensity, we shall find that the contrast between plainsong and modern music is as great as before.

In modern music the simple beat, that is, the unit of time which, when once adopted, becomes the form of all the others, may be divided indefinitely. An example will serve to make my meaning clear. A bar, or measure, in simple duple time is composed of two crochets: each crochet constitutes a beat, and may be divided into two quavers; these again into semiquavers, demisemiquavers, and so on, until the subdivisions become infinitesimal. It is easy to see how such facility of division may introduce much mobility or instability into modern music.

In plainsong, on the contrary, the beat, or pulse, is indivisible: it corresponds to the normal syllable of one pulse, and cannot be divided any more than a syllable can be. Thus, in writing a piece of plainsong in modern notation, the crochet becomes the normal note and unit of time; it must never be broken up into quavers. I have no hesitation in declaring that plainsong is syllabic music, in the sense that the syllable is the unit of measure, and that not only in antiphons, where each note corresponds to a syllable, but also in vocalizations (melodic passages or neums), where the notes, momentarily freed from words, remain subject, nevertheless, to the time of the simple beat, previously determined in the syllabic passages.

This approximate equality of duration is the inevitable consequence of the intimate connection which existed among the Greeks between the words and the melody. It is explained by a fact familiar to all philologists and grammarians, namely the transformation which the Latin language underwent during the first years of the Christian era. Quantity, once paramount in poetry, and to a certain extent, in Ciceronian prose, eventually gave place to accent. Little by little the short and long syllables came to have the same value: in prose as in poetry, syllables were no longer measured, but counted. Quantity was no more. In actual practice, the syllables were neither short nor long, but of equal duration, strong or weak, according as they were accented or unaccented.

An evolution of such import was bound to react upon the music of the Church, which was in its infancy at the time that these changes were being effected. Plainsong was modeled on the prose of the period: it therefore adopted its rhythm, from its simplest elements, the primary fundamental

pulse, for example, to its most varied movements. And just as there were two forms of prosody, the one metric, the other tonic; two forms of prose, and two "cursus," so there were two forms of music, the metric and the tonic; the latter, like the tonic prose and cursus, was based upon the equality of notes and syllables.

It must be understood that this equality is not a metronomical equality, but a relative equality—the mean duration resulting from all the syllables taken as a whole, and pronounced in accordance with their material weight: this, to the ear, produces a distinct sense of equality. Nevertheless this equality becomes more rigorous as the melody frees itself from the text, for then the shades of inequality caused by the varying weight of the syllables, entirely disappear and make way for more equal musical durations.

It is not to be inferred from this fact that the notes are all equal in length. As a matter of fact, though a beat may never be divided, it may be doubled and even trebled. Just as in embroidering upon canvas, the same color in wool or silk may cover several stitches, so upon the canvas of the simple beat, the same note may include two, three or four stitches and thus form a charming melodic scheme.

Adequate attention has not been paid to this fundamental distinction between plainsong and modern music, notwithstanding the fact that it influences in no small degree the whole movement of the phrase and the expression as well. It is to the indivisibility of the beat that the Roman chant owes, in great measure, its sweetness, calm, and suavity.

Since Latin is the language of the Roman liturgy and the Latin syllables are the prima materies of Gregorian rhythm, it will be well to examine the nature of the Latin accent at the period when the Gregorian melodies were written, drawing attention to important differences between the character of the tonic accents at that date and in more recent times.

Now the Latin accent has not the same force as is usually attributed by modern musicians to the first beat of the measures, not as the accent in the Romance languages. In Latin, the accent is indicated by a short, sharp, delicate sound which—inasmuch as it is the soul of the word—might almost be called spiritual. It is best represented by an upward movement of the hand which is raised only to be lowered immediately. In modern music this swift flash is placed on a ponderous material beat, crushing and exhausting the movement. This surely is a misconception. For the Latin accent is an impulse or beginning which requires a complement: this, as a matter of fact, is found in the succeeding beat. It is therefore most aptly compared to the upward movement of the hand in beating time, no sooner raised than lowered. In modern music, however, this impulse or beginning is placed on the second and downward beat, on which the movement comes to rest. And this again is surely a misconception.

Nor is this all: for the Latin accent is essentially an elevation of the voice: which plainsong—that faithful interpreter— translates constantly by a rise of pitch; and, once more, the upward movement of the hand corresponds and gives plastic expression to the lifted accent. But modern figured music, misled by the ponderous weight of the stroke by which the Latin accent is so often emphasized as well as by the downward movement of the hand, represents this accent by lowering the pitch of the note. Have we not here a complete reversal of the text—both melodically and rhythmically, which is unjustifiable even from a purely musical standpoint?

In fine, Gentlemen, in modern music the character of the accent is utterly transformed: melody, rhythm, delicacy and joyous impulse, all are lost, and converted into the Romance accent. Hence there arises between words and music a continual conflict, an initiating apposition, which, albeit imperceptible to the inattentive and uncultured public, is none the less painful to those who appreciate the characteristics of the Latin accent, and the rhythm of the Latin phrase. It is, in fact, an outrage to the ideal which one has a right to expect in every artistic or religious composition. A very few months of familiarity with plainsong would suffice to make you grasp fully these statements. As one listens day after day to the chant, the mind opens to the appreciation of that music, the rhythm and style of which are so essentially Latin: very soon the judgment appraises it at its true value, and ultimately the exquisite feeling, the consummate skill behind that fusion of words and melody become apparent, and scholars and musicians alike applaud its artistic perfection. On the other hand, a closer knowledge of plainsong makes us discover in modern religious music—beneath the real beauty of some of the compositions—the awkwardness, the unconscious clumsiness, of this mixed romance—Latin rhythm which disfigures even the noblest musical inspirations.

We are now come to the succession of groups, of sections of the phrase, and to the phrase itself; that is to say, to rhythm properly so-called. You may already have noticed that in the Gregorian phrase the groups of two pulsations or of three do not succeed each other so uniformly, nor so regularly as in figured music. In plainsong, a mixture of times is the rule, whereas in figured music it is the exception. The ancients, who were familiar with this mixed rhythm, gave it the name of *numerus*, number, or rhythm. Impatient of restriction and constraint, plainsong shook off the trammels of symmetry: thus in the course of the melody, the groups of two notes or of three or of four, etc., succeed each other as freely as in oratorical rhythm. Any combination is admitted provided it be in harmony and in proportion. "This proportion," says Dom Pothier, "is based upon the relation in which the component parts of the song or speech stand to each other or to the whole composition."¹⁰ Nevertheless, the chant does not altogether disdain measure and successions of regular rhythms: but these are never cultivated to the extent of accustoming the ear to them and making it expect the recurrence of regular groups. Never is the ear shocked or surprised. The measures and rhythm succeed one another with amazing variety, but never at the cost of smoothness. There are no syncopations, no broken rhythms, nor yet any of those unexpected, irregular, unnatural effects, which break the ordinary movement of the phrase¹¹ by introducing elements of agitation, of strife, and of passion. All this is unknown in plainsong. All the accented pulses, whether of the measure or of the rhythm, all the notes which give expression such as the *pressus* and the *strophicus*, although scattered irregularly over the texture of the melody, are invariably found in their regular place at the beginning of the measure. This solid foundation of regular rhythm gives the Roman chant that calm, dignity and evenness of movement which become the sacred liturgy.

Was I not right in saying that the art of Gregorian music had little in common with the art of modern music? Henceforward no one will confuse Wagner's methods with those which animate the Gregorian chant. And if we would define the results which issue from this analysis, we shall form the following conclusions:

Gregorian music disclaims, or rather rejects on principle all elements of confusion, agitation, or excitement: it courts, on the other hand, all that tends to peace and calm.

It will be well, after having thus analyzed the details of the chant, to view it as a whole, and to study its main distinctive features. To refresh us, however, after these somewhat dry researches, the Schola is kindly going to render the melismatic pieces mentioned in the programme, namely, the communion *Videus Dominus*, and the Introits *Reminiscere* and *Laetare*.

III

The most striking characteristic of plainsong is its simplicity, and herein it is truly artistic. Among the Greeks, simplicity was the essential condition all art; truth, beauty, goodness cannot be otherwise than simple.

The true artist is he who best—that is, in the simplest way— translates to the world without the ideal conceived in the simplicity of his intellect. The higher, the purer the intellect, the greater the unity and simplicity of its conception of the truth; now, the closest interpretation of an idea which is single and simple is plainly that which in the visible world most nearly approaches singleness and simplicity. Art is not meant to encumber the human mind with a multiplicity which does not belong to it: it should on the contrary tend to so elevate the sensible world that it may reflect in some degree the singleness and simplicity of the invisible. Art should tend not to the degradation, but to the perfection of the individual. If it appeals to the senses by evoking impressions and emotions which are proper to them, it only does so in order to arouse the mind in some way, and to enable it to free itself from and rise above the visible world as by a ladder, cunningly devised in accordance with the laws laid down by God Himself. Whence it follows that plainsong is not simple in the sense that its methods are those of an art in its infancy: it is simple consistently and on principle.

It should not be supposed that this theory binds us to systems long since out of date: the Church in this matter professes the principles held by the Greeks, the most artistic race the world has ever known. In their conception, art could not be otherwise than simple. Whenever I read Taine's admirable pages on the simplicity of Greek art, I am constantly reminded of the music of the Church. Take for instance, the following passage: "The temple is proportionate to man's understanding—among the Greeks it was of moderate, even small, dimensions: there was nothing resembling the huge piles of India, of Babylon, or of Egypt, nor those massive super-imposed palaces, those labyrinthine avenues, courts, and halls, those gigantic statues, of which the very profusion confused and dazzled the mind. All this was unknown. The order and harmony of the Greek temple can be grasped a hundred yards from the sacred precincts. The lines of its structure are so simple that they may be comprehended at one glance. There is nothing complicated, fantastic, or strained in its construction; it is based upon three or four elementary geometrical designs.¹²

Do you not recognize in this description, Gentlemen, the unpretentious melodies of the Gregorian chant? They fill but a few lines on paper: a few short minutes suffice for their execution: an antiphon several times repeated and some verses from a psalm, nothing more. They are moreover so simple that the ear can easily grasp them. There is nothing complicated, weird or strained, nothing which resembles those great five-act operas, those interminable oratorios, those Wagnerian tetralogies which take several days to perform, bewildering and confusing the mind.

The same simplicity is found in Greek literature and sculpture. To quote Taine again :—"Study the Greek play: the characters are not deep and complex as in Shakespeare; there are no intrigues, no surprises—the piece turns on some heroic legend, with which the spectators have been familiar from early childhood; the events and their issue are known beforehand. As for the action, it may be described in a few words—nothing is done for effect, everything is simple—and of exquisite feeling."

These principles, Gentlemen, may all be applied to plainsong. "No loud tones, no touch of bitterness or passion; scarce a smile, and yet one is charmed as by the sight of some wild flower or limpid stream. With our blunted and unnatural taste, accustomed to stronger wine (I am still quoting Taine) we are at first tempted to pronounce the beverage insipid: but after having moistened our lips therewith for some months, we would no longer have any other drink but that pure fresh water; all other music and literature seem like spice, or poison."¹³

You will no doubt ask how so simple an art, from which the modern means of giving expression are systematically excluded, can faithfully interpret the manifold and deep meaning of the liturgical text. Seemingly this is impossible. But here you are mistaken, Gentlemen. In music, as in all art, the simpler the means, the greater the effect and impression produced. Victor Cousin has a telling saying :—"The less noise the music makes, the more affecting it is!" And so simplicity excludes neither expression nor its subtleties from the chant.

What then is this expression, whence does it spring, and what is its nature? Let me make yet another quotation, for I like to adduce the theories of modern authorities in support of the aesthetics of the chant: behind their shelter, I shall not be exposed to any charge of having invented them to suit my case. M. Charles Blanc, in his "Grammar of the Graphic Arts," says that "Between the beautiful and its expression there is a wide interval, and moreover, an apparent contradiction. The interval is that which separates Christianity from the old world: the contradiction consists in the fact that pure beauty (the writer is speaking of plastic beauty) can hardly be reconciled with facial changes, reflecting the countless impressions of life. Physical beauty must give place to moral beauty in proportion as the expression is more pronounced. This is the reason why pagan sculpture is so limited in expression."¹⁴ I am well aware, Gentlemen, that in sculpture, more than in any other art, the greatest care must be taken not to pass certain appointed bounds, if the stateliness which is its chief characteristic is to be preserved. I am also aware that in other arts, such as painting or music, it is legitimate to indulge more freely in the representation of the soul's manifold emotions. All this I grant, Gentlemen: nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that these distinctions are very fine indeed, and that in every art, the higher laws of aesthetics are the same. The laws of musical expression are analogous to those of plastic expression: there too it may be asserted that pure musical beauty accords ill with the tonal, metrical or rhythmic changes of a melody reflecting the manifold old impressions of the soul in the grip of its passions. There too we may say that the more intense is the expression, the more the beauty of the music as music gives way to moral beauty. How then are we to reconcile beauty, by its very nature serene and immutable, with the restlessness and versatility which are the essential characteristics of expression? The problem is by no means easy of solution.

Ancient art, with deeper insight, loved beauty so much that it shunned expression: our more sensual modern art endeavors to obtain expression at the expense of beauty. But the Church in

her song has found, it would seem, the secret of wedding the highest beauty without any change to a style of expression which is both serene and touching. This result is attained without conscious effort. For as a sound body is the instrument of a sound mind, so the chant, informed by the inspired word of God, interprets its expression. This expression is enhanced both by the smoothness of the modulations, and by the suppleness of the rhythm. And as the melody is simple and spiritual, so likewise is the expression: it belongs, like the melody, to another age. It is not, as in modern music, the result of surprise, of discord, of irregularity or disorder; it does not linger over details, nor endeavor to chisel every word, to cut into the marble of the melody every shade of emotion. It springs rather from the general order, the perfect balance and enduring harmony of every part, and from the irresistible charm born of such perfection. Measured and discreet, ample liberty of interpretation is left to the mind by such expression. Always true, it bears the signal stamp of the beauty of fitness: it becomes the sanctuary, it becomes those who resort thither that they may rise to the spiritual plane. "No defilement shall touch it," no dimness, nor stain but a limpid virginal purity: like the ancient Doric mode, it breathes modesty and chastity.

It is, moreover, infinite in its variety. "Attingit ubique propter munditiam suam." What, for example, could be more artless and expressive than the Ambrosian Gloria which was sung to you? It turns upon two or three notes, and a short jubilus. A modern composer would consider it monotonous and insipid, but to me its simplicity is charming, and its frank and wholesome tonality refreshing. That joyous neum has a rustic ring about it that reminds one of the hillsides of Bethlehem and fills me with the joy and peace of Christmastide. It is indeed a song worthy of the angels, those pure spirits, and of the poor shepherd folk.

The same characteristics are found in the little carol "*In Israhel orietur princeps, firmanentum pacis.*" It contains but six short words, yet these suffice to make a melodic composition of exquisite delicacy and expression. In the Introit *Reminiscere*, you heard the plaintive accents of sorrowful entreaty, and in the *Laetare*, those of a joy so sweet and calm as to be almost jubilant. As for the communion *Videns Dominus*, it has no equal. No melody could express more vividly the Saviour's tears and His compassion for Lazarus' grief-stricken sisters, and the divine power of His bidding to death.

In presence of the masterpieces of Greek art, the most discerning modern artists frankly confess their inability to appreciate them at their true value. To use Taine's words:— "Our modern perceptions cannot soar so high." And we may in like manner say of the musical compositions of the early Church that they are beyond the reach of our perceptions: we can only partially and gradually comprehend the perfection of their plan; we no longer have their subtlety of feeling and intuition. "In comparison with them we are like amateurs listening to a musician born and bred: his playing has a delicacy of execution, a purity of tone, a fullness of accord, and a certain finish of expression, of which the amateur, with his mediocre talents and lack of training can only now and again grasp the general effect."¹⁵

The finishing touch has yet to be added to this brief outline of plainsong; this suavity, or more correctly, unction, the supreme quantity in which all the elements we have been discussing converge. The product of consummate art, it crowns the chant with a glory unknown in all other music, and it is on account of this very unction that the Church has singled it out for her use: It is this quality which makes plainsong the true expression of prayer, and a faithful interpretation of

those unspeakable groanings of the Spirit who, in the words of St. Paul, "prays in us and for us." We sometimes wonder at the secret power the chant has over our soul: it is entirely due to unction, which finds its way into men's souls, converts and soothes them, and inclines them to prayer. It is akin to grace, and is one of its most effectual means of action, for no one can escape its influence. The pure in heart are best able to understand and taste the suavity of this unction. Yet, for all its delectable charm, it never tends to enervate the soul, but like oil, it makes the wrestler supple and strengthens him against the combat; it rests and relaxes, and bathes him in that peace which follows the conquest of his passions.

A last word as to the style of execution best suited to plainsong. There can of course be no doubt that an able and artistic interpretation is eminently suited to music so subtle and so delicate, but I hasten to add that mere technique is not enough: it must be coupled with faith, with devotion and with love. There must be no misunderstanding in this matter. Notwithstanding its beauty, plainsong is both simple and easy: it is within the capacity of poor and simple folk. Like the liturgy and the scriptures, and, if such a comparison be admissible, like the Blessed Sacrament itself, this musical bread which the Church distributes to her children, may be food for the loftiest intellects as for the most illiterate minds. In the country it is not out of place on the lips of the ploughman, the shepherd, or laborer, who on Sundays leave plough and trowel or anvil, and come together to sing God's praises. Nor is it out of place in the Cathedral, where the venerable canons supported by the fresh young voices of a well-trained choir sing their office, if not always artistically, at least with the full appreciation of the words of the Psalmist "Psallite sapienter." Very possibly the chant is neither rendered, understood, nor appreciated in precisely the same manner in a country church as in a cathedral. But it would be unfair and unreasonable to except of village folk an artistic interpretation of which their uncultured minds have no inkling, since, after all, their devotion and taste is satisfied with less. But on the other hand, a suitable interpretation may in justice be expected and required of them: the voices should be restrained, the tone true and sustained, the accents should be observed, so too the pauses, the rhythm, and the feeling of the melody. All that is needed beyond this is that touch of devotion, of feeling, which is by no means rare among the masses. With this slender store of musical knowledge, the village cantor will not, I confess, become an artist. He will not render the full beauty, the finer shades of the melody: nevertheless, he will express his own devotion and withal he will carry his audience with him. For the simple folk who listen to him are no better versed than he in the subtle niceties of art: neither he nor they can fully appreciate the chant, but they are satisfied with that which they find in it: it contents their musical instincts and appeals to their ingenuous piety.

Is this then all, Gentlemen? Does such an easy victory fulfill the Church's intentions: is her aim merely to win the approval of our good peasants? Indeed, such is not the Church's meaning: she does not rest content with well-meaning mediocrity: she has her colleges, her greater and lesser seminaries, her choirs, her monasteries, and her cathedrals. Of these she demands an intelligent rendering of the chant so dear to her heart, that it may compel the admiration of the most exacting critics, and be at the same time the most perfect expression of her official prayer. Here indeed is art most necessary: here we may despoil the Egyptians of their most precious vessels, and fairly borrow, without any scruple, from profane artists, the methods whereby to restore to the voice its true sweetness and purity. Art teaches us how to use the voice, to sing the neums softly or loudly as the case may be, to pronounce the words, to give delicacy to the accents, to

phrase correctly, to bring out the expression and the true meaning of the ideas contained in the words. Art conceals natural or acquired defects, and restores to nature its primitive beauty and integrity. In plainsong, the aim of art is to provide the soul with a docile, pliant instrument, capable of interpreting its sentiments without deforming them. To attempt to sing without training or art; "naturally," as the saying goes, would be as foolish an undertaking as to pretend to attain to sanctity without setting any check upon our impulses. Art is to the right interpretation of the chant what the science of ascetics is to the spiritual life. Its proper function is not to give vent to factitious emotions, as in modern music, but rather to allow genuine feeling complete freedom of expression. It is with intent that I use the word freedom, for freedom is simply the being able to yield without effort to the rules of the beautiful, which become as it were natural.

Art then is necessary, but as I have already said it is not sufficient in itself. To sing the chant, as it should be sung, the soul must be suitably disposed. The chant should vibrate with soul, ordered, calm, disciplined, passionless: a soul that is mistress of itself, intelligent and in possession of the light; upright in the sight of God, and overflowing with charity. To such a soul, Gentlemen, add a beautiful voice, well-trained, and the singing of those hallowed melodies, will be a finished work of beauty, the music of which Plato dreamed, a music which inspires a love of virtue: nay, more, you will have the ideal of Christian prayer as St. Dennis understood it, the realization of the great Benedictine motto :—"Mens nostra concordet voci nostrae." "Let our mind concord with our voice" in the praise of God.

LAUS DEO ET AGNO

[1] This translation of Reverend Dom Andre Mocquereau, O.S.B., of Solesmes was originally published by the Catholic Education Press with a view to making available in the English language scholarly and scientific works on Gregorian Chant which have hitherto been available to French readers only. The Art of Gregorian Music has been selected because it deals on broad lines with the principles underlying the restoration of the liturgical chant of the Catholic Church. The paper was originally read before the Catholic University of Paris in 1896 and thus antedated by nearly a decade the official action of the Holy See. In spite of this fact the translators have thought best to reproduce the paper without any attempt to bring it up to date in detail, partly because of its historical interest, but chiefly because, dealing as it does with the subject on broad and general lines, it forms an ideal introduction to the more detailed study of the liturgical chant which will follow in the monumental work of Dom Mocquereau: *Le Nombre Musical Gregorien*.

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[2] His Eminence Cardinal Penaud commented upon those last few lines in his impressive and charming pages upon the role of music in education. I feel bound to call attention here to this book, the title of which is: *Eurythmic et Harmonie. Commentaire d'une Page de Platon*. Paris, Téqui, 1896.

3 Westphal, *Metrik*, I, p. 261.—Cf. Gervaeert, *Histoire et théorie de la musique de l'antiquité*, I, p. 36.

4S. Dionysius Areop. De Eccl. Heirarchia. Ch. III.

5Jules Combarieu, *des Rapports de la Musique et de la Poésie considerdes au point de vue de l'espression*. (Paris, Alcan.) Ch. IV.

6This was written in 1896, before the time when Pope Pius X restored the Gregorian melodies officially, in a version which has been made binding upon the universal Church.

7 *Lamennais. Esquisse d'une philosophie*. III, p. 293.

8Victor do Laprade.

9 Richard Wagner, *Letter sur la musique à M. Frédéric Villot*.

10 Dom Pothier, *Melodies Gregoriennes*, p. 175.

11 Mathis Lussy, *Traité de l'expression musicale*.

12 Taine, *Philosophie de l'art en Grèce*, p. 66 et seq.

13 Taine, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

14 Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin*, p. 519.

15 Taine, *op. cit.* p. 70.