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LEARNING TO PRAY BY SINGING
GREGORIAN CHANTS WITH TEXTS BASED ON THE PSALMS

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Bases

Gregorian chant – named after Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) – began in its presently known form between 760 and 790 in Franconia; this also says that its contents have nothing to do with its name giver. By naming it after the great pope, this liturgical chant was connected with him simply for the purpose of legitimising it.

Without the work of the Benedictine Order (OSB – *Ordo Sancti Benedicti*), neither the creation nor the rapid and wide-spread distribution of this repertoire in all of present-day Europe would have been possible: In his rule, Benedict stipulates the chanting of certain Psalms in his monasteries' Office; when these texts are so very present in the liturgy, it is not surprising that chants were also put into the Eucharistic celebration and that the texts of these chants were to a large extent based on the Psalms. In another way, the Benedictine Order was also helpful for the distribution of Gregorian chant: In the monasteries, there was reflection on the theory of music – the creation of various modes in which the chants were put together according to tone aspects – and these were written down; the first examples of their written form can be seen about 100 years after their creation.

The following table shows the sources of Gregorian chant as regards the choice of texts:

Sources of Gregorian chant texts (according to Rumphorst 1992, 181):

	Number in GT	with neumes	OT	of these, Psalms	NT	Others
Introit	163	148	134	101	12	2
Gradual	125	114	108	100 (+2vs)	5	1
Alleluia	158	86	66	61	14	6
Tract	25	19	19	16	–	–
Offertory	111	102	95	82	5	2
Communion	161	143	77	63	66	–
Total	**743**	**612**	**499**	**423**	**102**	**11**

Explanation: Right in front is the liturgical name of the genre; then comes the number of representative chants in the *Graduale Triplex* (the Catholic Church's official book of chants – a *Graduale Romanum* with medieval signs over the chants, published in 1979), and the indication of the number of these that have signs from the earliest notations (neumes) (these can thus already be found in the first sources of Gregorian chant in the 10th century). The following four columns break down from which part of the Bible (OT / NT) the texts originate and how many Psalm texts are amongst them.

The evaluation is extremely perplexing: More than half of all Gregorian chants for *propria* (56.9%) are based on Psalms, whereby there are significant differences within the individual genres. The percentage of Psalms in the *Alleluia* (38.6%) and the *Communio* chants (39.1%) is clearly lower than for example in the *Gradual* chants (81.6%). The liturgical place is also decisive, since *Alleluia* (as a call before the Gospel) and *Communio* (as an acoustic "communion of the Word" which, parallel to the sacramental Communion, reinforces the Gospel's central idea) are of course closer to the given New Testament message than the *Gradual*, which is sung after the Old Testament reading and deepens its message. But in the entry song / *Introitus* (61.9%) and even more in the Offertory song / *Offertorium* (73.7%), the use of Psalm texts in the Christian liturgy is clearly preferred.

Christians understand the Psalter as also belonging to their theology and liturgy; however, over long periods of Church history, there was no awareness or respect for the fact that these texts are genuinely the hymnbook of another religion. In the meantime, this has changed fundamentally – esteem for the genuinely Jewish Psalter stands on an equal footing with the reception of the Psalter as part of the Christian history of spirituality.

Three factors in particular are decisive for the understanding of the Psalm texts during the Pippinian or Carolingian period (8th/9th centuries, so the period in which Gregorian chant was created):

1. There are the interpretations of the Church fathers, in particular of Augustine, who with his *Enarrationes in psalmos* consistently interprets the Old Testament songs as "Christ songs". This Church father's writings were present in many Carolingian libraries – as early inventories of the books show, for example in the court academy in Aachen. Augustine, for instance, reads the Psalter as *vox Christi* (Christ himself is speaking), *vox de Christo et de ecclesia sua* (the Psalm speaks about Christ and his Church), or as *vox ad Christum* (prayer to Christ).

2. At the same time, the homilies of Gregory the Great, which were well known during the Carolingian period (because they were read during the Church service), gave an interpretation of the Psalm texts that was very close to life and existential.

3. The "Teaching of the fourfold meaning of Scripture", developed by Amalar of Metz (823), is a further means of interpretation. According to this, biblical concepts are never to be understood in an isolated way or with only one connotation regarding their significance; rather, they carry in themselves an abundance of partly associative and partly reflected contents: thus for example, Jerusalem as a biblical city, as the human soul, as Church, and as the eternal home after death.

A Look into the "Gregorian Composition Workshop"

If we were to visit a fictional "composition workshop" for Gregorian chant (with its musical setting of Psalm texts), the three framing conditions mentioned above would be like tools that are used in creating the chants.

The workshop has three chambers: In this composition workshop's first "chamber" the text is prepared. For this, Psalm texts are chosen which first of all shed light on the liturgical context into which they are fitted. It is often amazing how this is done. Many times the text is compiled, which is to say that, based on the original text, it is put together freely (and sometimes in an associative way); sometimes several text sources are used for this. Many words are left out, the order of the rest is changed according to what is supposed to be said. An example from Advent to explain this:

During the last days of Advent an entry song (*Introitus*) is sung, the text of which is taken from Psalm 80, verses 2-4 (according to the Greco-Latin counting, Psalm 79); the words that are to be taken into the *Introitus* are marked:

> [2] *Qui regis Israel intende qui deducis tamquam oves Ioseph* **qui sedes super cherubin** *manifestare* [3] *coram Effraim et Beniamin et Manasse excita potentiam tuam et* **veni** *ut salvos facias nos* [4] *Deus converte nos et* **ostende faciem tuam et salvi erimus**.

The chant's text says:

> *Veni et ostende nobis faciem tuam, Domine, qui sedes super Cherubim: et salvi erimus.*

We can see: the most important word in the context of Advent ("*Veni*" – come!) is now first and is followed by the hopeful request: Show us your Face – and we shall be saved! "*Domine*" ("Lord") is the reformulation of "*Deus*" ("God") – and in this connection, the "*nobis*" ("show *us*") is new.

Let's go on to the next chamber in our Gregorian composition workshop; here a fitting mode for the text is chosen. Gregorian chant has eight modes that can be clearly distinguished from one another. They receive their respective characteristic by means of different basic tones and through a very specific structure of steps in whole and half tones. In this, it is important which text comes to bear in which season of the Church's year and in which mode; already medieval music theoreticians developed the moods of the individual modes. From this came a memory verse from which helpful information on the respective mode can be gathered:

Omnibus est primus,	If the first is for everyone,
sed est alter tristibus aptus,	the second is appropriate for those who are sad.
tertius iratus,	The third is angry;
quartus dicitur fieri blandus,	of the fourth is said that it flatters.
quintum da laetis,	Give the fifth to those who are joyful,
sextum pietate probatis,	the sixth to those who are proven in piety.
septimus est iuvenum,	If the seventh is for youth,
sed postremus sapientium.	the last is for the wise.

Of course this verse is not to be understood in the sense of a recipe book: "For this mood, take this mode!" Also, some characterisations remain relatively indeterminate. But the verse can be taken as a kind of guideline.

In the third and last chamber of the "composition workshop for Gregorian chant", the melody now comes about, which will let the text resound within the space contained in the chosen mode. Melodic arches and phrases structure the statement; rhythmic details (such as accelerations, slow downs, a rhetorical jam) see to it that we encounter the emphasis in a text by means of its musical setting: Gregorian chant is not first of all a musical phenomenon, but a rhetorical one (or better: an orational one).

A brief look at a Gregorian composition based on a prominent text of a Psalm can again make clear the individual steps:

The *Introitus* (entry song) of the first Christmas Mass ("during the Holy Night")

Christmas is one of the feasts marked by several independent Mass formulae (each with its allocated Gregorian chants). Midnight Mass begins with the chant *"Dominus dixit ad me"*:

From the *Graduale Triplex*, Solesmes 1979, page 41

The translation of the text taken from Psalm 2 says:

> The Lord said to me: You are my Son. Today I have begotten you.

In the Augustinian sense, this is about a *"vox de Christo"*, a statement about Christ that is placed into the mouth of God the Father.

First of all, we note the choice of mode: The verse quoted above gives the second mode the characteristic of sorrow (*"alter est tristibus aptus"*). Now that might not at all be fitting for Christmas – is the birth of the Son of God into human flesh not a feast of great joy? Does this not deserve a different song, one of rejoicing as if with timbrels and trumpets?

A look at one of the early Carolingian manuscripts of the Psalter leads onto a different track as to how Psalm 2 might have been understood and situated in the 8th and 9th centuries. This is the *"Stuttgarter Psalter"* (today in the *Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart*, Bibl. Fol. 23), which was written between 820 and 830 in the Saint-Germain-des Prés Abbey (near Paris). It is a complete version of the Psalter in the biblical translation by Alkuin. In this book we find not only glossaries regarding the Christological interpretation of the Psalms, which were added later; already with the editing of the Psalter, more than 300 images were added, which refer to individual texts and in part go back to imaging programs in late Antiquity.

At the beginning of Psalm 2, there is a marginal note that personifies the *"gentes"* (the pagan nations) and the *"populi"* (the believing nations):

Hic Reges terrae Herodem Pilatum Annas et Caipha intelligendi sunt, qui in unum consilium adversus Christum venerunt.

Here Herod and Pilate can be seen as kings of the earth, as well as Hannas and Caiphas; they have come together to take counsel against Christ.

The following image shows Christ, whom Pilate is handing over to Herod; both leaders, of the "pagans" and of the "believers", do not recognise Christ as the true Messiah, they mock him and hand him over (Lk 23). So through the interpretation by the Church fathers, Psalm 2 stands in the context of the Passion! Perhaps this fact led to mode 2 (that of sorrow) being chosen for its chanting, since for the Church fathers it was an obvious theological fact that the wood of the crib and that of the cross come from the same tree.

The verse on which the *Introit* is based is provided with the marginal note:

Vox paterna ad filium, hodie pro sempiterna ponitur

The Father's voice to the Son – today it is established forever.

and this brings us to visible rhythmic details: The manuscripts that for the first time definitively fixed this chant (around 930 or 960) were transferred to the present edition of chants and placed under a square notation (cf. the example of notes above). These notations show even to the smallest detail the rhymic-agogic process of the Gregorian chant, which proceded with incredibly fine nuances. It is noticeable that the *Introit* for Christmas is to be chanted with a very flowing tempo – except for two places: "... Filius **meus** es tu" and „**hodie** genui te". The paternal voice (*vox paterna*) reveals the child as *his* Son, and the event (historically unique in Bethlehem) is transferred to the liturgical "Today", which Christians celebrate every year – "*hodie pro sempiterna*".

Short Studies of Chants

The following three antiphons (short verses from the Weekday Office) that directly follow one another in the manuscript show very clearly what is meant by the composition principle according to which the musical setting gives the text its emphasis.
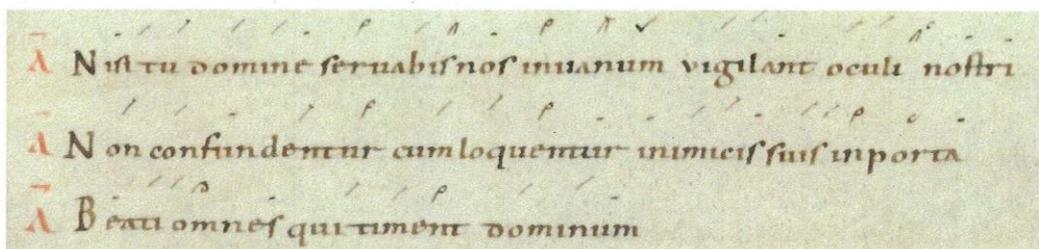
From the Codex 390 / 'Hartker', in the *St. Gallen Stiftsbibliothek* (monastic library), page 95

The first antiphon contains a text that is connected with the two first verses of Psalm 127.

Nisi Dominus aedificaverit domum, in vanum laboraverunt qui aedificant eam.
Nisi Dominus custodierit civitatem, frustra vigilat qui custodit eam

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.

becomes a personal address (*"Nisi tu, Domine ..."* – "Unless you, Lord ..."); the metaphors *"domus"* and *"civitas"* are resolved as *"nobis"* – *"us"*, and the statement *"vigilant oculi nostri"* concretises the *"aedificare"* and the *"custodire"* in the Psalm text. So we are dealing with a text compilation containing significant grammatical changes that however concretise the content of both Psalm verses:

If you, Lord, don't keep us, our eyes watch in vain (with delusion).

The signs above the text (which are called neumes) again stand for the melody, of which it is presupposed that it is known by heart. In great detail, the neumes emphasise certain things in order to reach the desired emphasis in the text; this can be read from the signs without having to know the melody: There is a sign above *"tu"* with a small horizontal line at the top end. This is a signal for slowing down the respective syllable; the signs above *"vanum"* are meant to insinuate a comparable effect. The small loop above *"in"* serves to carefully prepare the *"vanum"*. So for the person who knows and can decipher the signs, it is immediately clear how the text should be emphasised: "If *you*, Lord, don't keep us, our eyes watch *in vain*!" The indications given by the neumes are small; but they have a big effect for the interpretation, which the singer must first of all interiorise before he or she sings the antiphon. Seen spiritually, this is the point of Gregorian chant in general: to let the holy Word entrusted to the person praying become flesh in him- and herself, before it becomes a sound that can be heard by others.

The text of the following antiphon comes from Psalm 128 (verse 5):

Non confundentur cum loquentur inimicis suis in porta.

They shall not fail when they speak / negotiate with their enemies at the gate.

Again, the neumes with the small slash above are noticeable (*"**Non** confun**dén**tur cum **lo**quéntur ini**mí**cis suis in porta."*); three times they show the word emphasis, and once they prepare it. The neume with the loop can also be found again: twice it prepares an emphasis (*"confunden**tur**"*, *"**in** porta"*), once the word accent is singled out (*"lo**quen**tur"*).

The third antiphon as well – the shortest – contains a text from Psalm 128 (verse 1):

Beati omnes, qui timent Dominum.

Blessed are all who fear the Lord.

The loops above *"**om**nes"* and *"ti**ment**"* draw our attention, as does the neume with the small slash on top over *"**qui**"*. If these signs are used adequately, the result is a strong emphasis on *"timent"*, translated as "to honor-fear", which does not exist in English as one verb (though perhaps as "to revere"). *All* human beings who *revere* (*fear* and *honor*) the Lord are called blessed.

The neumes are a rhetorical (orational) school in which we praying people learn over and over again not to say holy texts without thinking, but rather to interiorise them first – to bring them into the center of our body and our soul, so to "meditate" them. If this is done with texts that come from the Psalms, the various dimensions contained in the Psalm become dense through this meditating: the Psalm's origin, its Christological significance, and its anchoring in the praying person's existence in today's spiritual life.

If there is still enough time, these insights during the talk will be shown in detail by means of further chants. For this, the *Introit "Etenim sederunt principes"* and the *Communio "Memento verbi tui"* are good examples, as well as the *Gradual "Laetatus sum"* and the *Communio "Ierusalem, quae aedificata est"*; their texts come from Psalms 119 and 122.

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