

## Music in the Time of Saint Anselm

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*The 11<sup>th</sup> century gave birth to a new artistic impulse as it also gave rise to original and systematic treatises about faith. St. Anselm, innovative theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury, contemplated the qualities of faith and argued the existence of God. Likewise, Guido d'Arrezzo, Benedictine monk and medieval music theorist, contemplated the properties of sound and formalized early musical notation (the visual charting and indication of pitch). The monophonic music of the plainchant that embellished the Church's liturgy gave way to polyphony. The vagaries of memory, as singers tried to memorize more and more music, gave way to the development of notation. This paper will present the development of music at the time of Anselm, the music that Anselm would have heard in his abbey church, the music that perhaps helped to inspire him in his meditation on the wonders of God.*

### I. Introduction

When acknowledging the time span of over 1,000 years referred to as the Middle Ages, musicians must admit that little is known about “the music of the important formative years of the early Middle Ages,”<sup>1</sup> i.e., 400 to 800 A.D. In Western culture, commonly it is understood that during the years leading up to the 10<sup>th</sup> century both secular and religious music existed, served an important purpose, and that both were of fundamental significance in the lives of people.

Unlike most secular music, which was not written down and is now largely forgotten, the sacred music associated with the Christian liturgies and hymns of the Divine Offices and the Mass was written down. This was due to the education received by the men and women (priests, monks and nuns) of the Church in matters of music, reading and writing. The men and women of the secular world did not seem so fortunate relating to education and musical literacy.<sup>2</sup> In comparison to sacred music, secular music obviously suffered since the efforts to notate music were led by clerics who developed ways to write down the music so they could effectively remember and reproduce the music at other times.

It is to this “written down music”—the psalm tones, the chants, and the polyphonic *organum*—music that conveyed through melody the texts of sacred scripture and religious poetry, music that was sung during the daily round of Medieval Christian worship, music that would have been familiar to St. Anselm that I propose to give a context and a sounding voice.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Wilson, *Music of the Middle Ages: Style and Structure* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990) 7.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Wright, *Listening to Music* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Group/Thompson Learning, 2004) 72-73.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of the music that will be discussed in this paper can be found in Davidson, T. Archibald and Willi Apel, *Historical Anthology of Music*.

## II. Early Christian Music

In the book *Worship in the Early Church* Ralph Martin states that the Christian Church was born in song. Christians sang hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs, as the parallel passages in *Ephesians* 5:18-20 and *Colossians* 3:16-17 indicate. Even though the terms hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs as they are used in the New Testament are admittedly imprecise, the underlying reality was that early Christian “ ‘worship was lyrical’ with no clear distinction between singing and speech, and that lessons were cantillated and prayers were intoned.” The whole of worship was musical so that it is difficult to distinguish music as a separate element of worship. There was an “aural aspect” of the church’s worship and “an intense lyrical quality in the life of the apostolic church, particularly in its liturgical assemblies.”<sup>4</sup>

The music historian Donald Jay Grout states in *A History of Western Music* that “[f]or a long time music historians believed that the ancient Christians modeled their worship services on those of the Jewish synagogue.”<sup>5</sup> Surely this makes good common sense because the first Christians were Jews. And even though they felt a conversion or allegiance to the teachings of the itinerate rabbi Jesus of Nazareth they continued to think of themselves as Jews and remained faithful in their attendance and participation in the Jewish Temple and synagogue services.

But as sensible as this seems, Grout also offers in an equally sensible and yet counter position. “Some scholars now, however, are skeptical of this theory, because there is no documentary evidence to support it. Indeed, it seems that the early Christians could have actually avoided imitating Jewish services so as to draw attention to the distinct character of their beliefs and rituals.”<sup>6</sup> Whether either opinion can be debated, proven or dismissed, there is at the heart of the matter the historical position that for Jews, music had always held an important if not a major position in worship. Surely we can assume that stemming from their spiritual and cultural legacy the early Christians, the Jews who were the first people to be so profoundly effected by the message of Jesus, would have practiced the same musical importance in their worship.

Although we cannot be sure of all the details, it is positive that the synagogue services of the early Christian era were generally organized around readings from the Scriptures, a sermon, the singing of psalms, the saying of prayers, and the performance of songs of praise. In all of these except the sermon, music played an important role as the accompaniment to the word, for music had long been a traditional way to set apart the religious act and its texts from the everyday; the extraordinary nature of the service to God required extraordinary means.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: the Church and Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) 59-60.

<sup>5</sup> Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988) 25.

<sup>6</sup> Idem.

<sup>7</sup> Albert Seay, *Music in the Medieval World* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 9.

### III. The Psalms

A usual and prominent feature of Jewish and early Christian worship was, and remains, the singing of psalms. To sing the psalms, melodic formulae were imposed upon the texts for ease of performance and consistency. Since in the psalms, unlike the readings and sermon, the congregation was expected to take part, ease and consistency were important considerations. In most cases the singing of psalms was guided by a leader, the precentor, a Levite who was musically gifted and trained to lead the worshippers.

With the skilled musical leadership of the precentor, there developed in the temple and synagogue the use of certain performance practices known as “responsorial singing” later adopted by the Christian Church. Of these, perhaps the most common was the procedure in which the precentor would sing the psalm by half verses and the congregation would repeat immediately after what the precentor had just sung. Such a manner of psalm singing would have been familiar to St. Anselm and would have been an especially beneficial method in teaching any type of unfamiliar music to a congregation. The practice remains in use even today and is referred to as “lining out”.

Sometimes a psalm “‘proper’ to the given day or festival could be long and not amenable to memorization.”<sup>8</sup> This led to a second practice of responsorial psalm singing. It appears from about the beginning of the third century such an extended psalm was more likely sung with the precentor singing complete verses of the psalm and the congregation responding to the singing of the text with a short repeated sentence or *antiphon*, “short sentences, usually from Scripture, sung before, [sometimes during] and after the Psalms and Canticles in the Divine Office. They vary with the season or feast, and are often intended to indicate the spirit in which the (invariable) Psalms and Canticles are sung.”<sup>9</sup> The increasing reliance on the presence and talent of the precentor led to the practice of direct psalmody in which the precentor alone would sing the complete psalm and the congregation would supply only an “Amen” or “Alleluia” at the conclusion.

Two other styles of psalmody were far more inclusive of and depended more on the participation of the congregation. One style was unison psalmody in which congregation sang together the entire psalm in unison. The other style was “antiphonal psalmody where the congregation was divided into two choirs who alternated [singing psalm] verses with one another.”<sup>10</sup>

The organization of the Divine Offices or Canonical Hours and the liturgy of the Mass had been completed well before the seventh century. During the Middle Ages the daily routine of the Divine Offices would begin with the monks awakening at 4:00 A.M. and assembling in the church for *Matins*, the first of eight daily services that consisted of prayer, the reading of

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<sup>8</sup> Westermeyer, 61.

<sup>9</sup> Idem.

<sup>10</sup> Idem

scriptures, and the singing of psalms and non-biblical hymns. The monks and nuns would return to the church at sunrise for the second service of the day, *Lauds*. The rhythm of the day would continue with *Prime* at 6:00 A.M., *Terce* at 9:00 A.M., *Sext* at Noon, *None* at 3:00 P.M., *Vespers* at sundown, and *Compline* before retiring for the night. For the monastic community the most significant of these religious services was the celebration of the Mass. “Central to the Offices, and prominent also in the Mass, (would be) the singing of psalms—all 150 were sung within a week’s round of Offices, intermixed with other biblical and other non-biblical texts.”<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. Liturgy and Rites

The liturgical organization and music of Medieval Christian worship drew upon rich religious traditions and musical practices ranging from Jerusalem through Asia Minor and into Africa, Italy, Spain and Gaul. From the Hebrew synagogue the Church adapted and expanded the responsorial practices and the lyrical melodic formulae that were used to intone the psalms. From the Byzantine liturgies the Western Church adopted the Greek *Trisagion*, “thrice holy”, and the more usual *Kyrie Eleison*, “Lord, have mercy upon us.” The *Kyrie Eleison* when adopted into the Roman Rite became the first of the five ordinary sections of the Mass with invariable texts. Also from Byzantium the Western church adopted the eight musical modes *oktoechos* (*octo*, eight; *echos*, modes) which could function as either scale like arrangements of tones and semi-tones or as a collection of melodic motifs (Mode). Such motifs would be used in the intoning of psalms and the scale like patterns could be employed as the sound tonalities that would express musically the growing repertoire of plainsong or Gregorian chant as it was later named because of the influence of Pope Gregory I.

In the West, as in the East, conditions existed that produced several distinct liturgies and bodies of chant. Ambrosian chant was practiced in Milan, Mozarabic chant in Spain, Old Beneventan chant in south-central Italy, and the Gallican liturgy was in use by the Franks until the eighth century when it was fully suppressed by Pepin and Charlemagne and replaced by Gregorian Chant.

With local Christian churches acting in relative independence and the diverse influences imposed by geography, language and custom, the origin of Gregorian chant is more of a question. “But in something similar to its present form it probably can be traced back to around 800 A.D. It is the fusion of Roman and Frankish elements Pepin and Charlemagne brought about when, for political reasons, they sought to strengthen their relationship with Rome by imposing Roman usage into the Frankish empire.”<sup>12</sup> Customarily, the Gregorian Chant as we know it today—that otherworldly religious music supposedly composed (very doubtful) and organized (very probable) by Pope Gregory the Great—is now understood as:

1. unaccompanied monophonic vocal music (a single line melody);
2. having Latin texts;

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<sup>11</sup> Wilson, 11

<sup>12</sup> Westermeyer, 106-107.

3. having set texts in one of three word-tone relationships: syllabic, one note for one syllable; neumatic, two to four notes per syllable; and melismatic, many notes per syllable;
4. employing chant melodies that move through “a relatively narrow range and in largely stepwise motion (Wilson 13)”;
5. devoid of meter or rhythm;
6. being an essential part of Medieval Christian religious services such as the monastic Office Hours and Mass.

## V. Notation

As I stated in the Introduction to this paper, I propose to give a context and a sounding voice to “written down music”—the psalm tones, the chants, and the polyphonic *organum*—music that conveyed through melody the texts of sacred scripture and religious poetry, music that was sung during the daily round of Medieval Christian worship, music that would have been familiar to St. Anselm. Had the music not been written down we would have few, if any, examples of medieval music to sing, play or discuss. Far too much of Medieval music was lost due to its existence only in oral tradition and not written down or notated.

The importance of writing down music so that it could be accurately remembered has been a concern that dates back to ancient times. Musicians in the Middle Ages were aware that systems of notation were in use in ancient Greece and other classical civilizations. But the early systems of notation had fallen into disuse and could no longer be deciphered. In the early 7<sup>th</sup> century Archbishop Isidore of Seville expressed his concern that “unless sounds are remembered by man, they perish, for they cannot be written down.”<sup>13</sup>

In the years before the 6<sup>th</sup> century there was neither little need nor, seemingly, little concern for musical notation. The services of the Christian Church were not complex and the music, therefore, was more congregationally centered and more easily remembered. Oral tradition was an effective manner in which to pass on the melodies and psalmic tonal formulae. But with the development of a more structured and more complex liturgy, and with the success of missionary efforts and Rome’s zeal to impress the Roman rite throughout the West, an effective form of written notation became crucial. Besides remembering or memorizing more and more chants was becoming an impossible challenge even for someone with an excellent memory.

Noticeably, during the 6<sup>th</sup> century symbols made by the point of the pen such as dots, dashes, or strokes and referred to as “neumes,” began to be placed above the liturgical texts to indicate the course of the chant melody and guide the memory of the singer who probably already knew the melody. The symbols of neumatic notation, however, were related only to the melodic contour of the chants and were inexact depicting interval relationships. Neither did

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<sup>13</sup> *Etymologiarum* iii. 15.

neumatic notation attempt to depict a pitch standard, as in modern music, but rather was more related to notating the chant melody that could be sung within a comfortable vocal range chosen by the singer. Nor did neumatic notation offer any indication of rhythmic values.

Some older sources attribute a solution to the problem of notating or recording a melody, in a manner that was pitch accurate and formally accepted by other musicians, to the Benedictine monk and music theorist Guido d'Arezzo. While Guido's life (born sometime between 990 and 999 and died after 1033) is not well documented his treatise *Micrologus* established him "as the best-known medieval writer on music since Boethius (Guido d'Arezzo)."<sup>14</sup> It is likely that he was born in France. He became a Benedictine monk and entered the Benedictine monastery of Pomposa (near Ferrara in Italy). Some time later he left the monastery at Pomposa and moved to Arezzo where he was appointed choir-master of the cathedral. Eventually he retired from public life and returned to monastic life.

Probably a systematic development of more precise notation was underway already, but no one seems to doubt that Guido improved the notational system significantly. Albert Seay explains that the ninth-century Guido based musical notation:

...on the use of two lines as reference points, the first, originally in red, to show the place of *f*, the second, in yellow or green, to indicate *c*'. The addition of other lines between and above or below, with the introduction of a clef, led directly to our modern system; chant notation, however, because of the restricted range of its melodies, has never used more than four lines in its staff.<sup>15</sup>

With a more precise and pitch-accurate notation musicians could see what they were singing or, at least, what they were supposed to be singing. They could now read music as effectively as they could read the text. Music and texts are notated on hundreds of manuscripts dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The manuscripts preserved the melodies of the chants for them and for us, and the notation made it possible for singers to read the music and sing at sight. No longer did they have to rely on their memory, but with the adoption and acceptance of a common notational system new questions arose. For example, how does one learn to sing at sight all the chants now notated and how does one teach others to sing at sight? Modern musicians term the process as sight-singing or sight-reading, i.e., "the ability to read and perform music at first sight, i.e., without preparatory study of the piece."<sup>16</sup> No longer relying heavily on memory, experienced musicians began to search for ways to develop some teaching aid that would train other less experienced singers how to learn new chants quickly from the music notation on the manuscripts.

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<sup>14</sup> "Guido d'Arezzo," *The Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Gitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Seay, 41.

<sup>16</sup> "Sight-reading, -singing," *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1972).

Once again Guido d'Arezzo rose to an enviable opportunity and contributed another important advancement in the development of music, thereby proving himself to be one of the most important musical theorists of the Middle Ages. Guido is credited with the invention of solmization syllables—*ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la*—syllables in use even today as a sight-singing teaching devise. “He used a familiar hymn to Saint John, *Ut queant laxis*, in which each phrase begins on the succeeding note of an ascending scale, as a means of tonal orientation. From the first syllables of these six lines were abstracted the syllables *ut, re, mi, fa, sol, and la . . .*”<sup>17</sup>

Ut queant laxis  
resonare fibris  
Mira gestorum  
famuli tuorum  
Solve polluti  
Labii reatum, Sancte Joannes.

“That thy servants may freely sing forth the wonders of thy deeds,  
remove all stain of guilt from their unclean lips, O Saint John.”<sup>18</sup>

## VI. Polyphony

During the life span of St. Anselm a singular musical development occurred that theorists consider to be a defining characteristic that set Western music apart from other cultures. That musical development was polyphony. “Musical texture in two or more, though usually at least three, relatively independent parts. . . . Polyphony, in the sense of vocal music in more than one part, as opposed to monophony, developed between roughly the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The earliest manifestation was *organum*.”<sup>19</sup>

Surely other cultures have produced music with individual lines sounding at the same time but in most cases the music relies on the improvisatory skills of the performers and because the performance is improvised it cannot be accurately repeated. *Organum*, the term for early polyphonic sacred music, probably grew out of the individual elaborations or the improvisations of singers as they sang a melodic line. Western polyphony, however, is under the creative guidance of the composer and because it is composed, i.e., “written down,” the performance can be duplicated as desired or needed and by other performers.

The most basic and perhaps earliest *organum* was parallel *organum*—the addition of another voice or voices (*vox organalis*) to the original chant melody (*vox principalis*). In parallel *organum* the *vox organalis* (the added voice) moves in a constant note-against-note style with the *vox principalis* (original chant melody) at the constant interval of a perfect fourth, a perfect fifth,

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<sup>17</sup> Wilson, 89-90

<sup>18</sup> Grout and Palisea, 78

<sup>19</sup> “Polyphony,” *The New Oxford Companion to Music* (1983).

an octave, or a combination of these intervals. If a combination of intervals occurs the *organum* is referred to as composite *organum*.

Troping was another development in the growth of polyphony. Tropes were textural and/or musical additions to an existing plainchant. Troping originated in the latter part of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and followed generally three basic patterns: adding supplementary phrases of words (a text) or additional music to an existing chant or melisma (several or many notes sung to one syllable), the addition of an entirely new melody or text to an existing chant or melisma, or the addition of a new melody independent of the text. Troping died out in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but for a short-lived musical expression the production of tropes was unusually large and popular among singers.

Compositional practices relating to the new phenomenon of polyphonic *organum* expanded significantly during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries resulting in a large repertoire. Quickly the early parallel *organum* and tropes expanded to include free *organum* (*organum* not limited to the parallel movement of voices and with an expanded use of intervals that would include the third as well as perfect fourths or fifths), oblique *organum* (the added voice begins in unison with the chant and repeats its opening note until the chant has moved up and away to the interval of a perfect fourth and the voices remain parallel until they merge in a unison at the ending), discant (the added voice moves in contrary motion to the original voice), and melismatic *organum* (the original voice is slowed down and held in long notes which came to be called the “tenor” while the added voice moves in melismas of different lengths above the chant).

One of the most creative and interesting achievements in the early development of polyphony is chronicled in the French polyphonic music of about 1200 A.D. and designated as the School of Notre Dame. The designation is based on a belief and probability that the creative genius of two French musicians, Leonin (who lived during the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century) along with his successor Perotin (c. 1160 – 1220) were connected musically and perhaps spiritually with Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Both Leonin and Perotin collected their polyphonic compositions in the *Magnus Liber Organi*. The works are for two voices and composed in the style of melismatic *organum* with the original plain chant melody sung by the choir in long notes while the other voice, the newly composed solo voice, moved in a far more florid and interesting manner above.

Much of the Medieval polyphonic music or *organum*, especially free *organum*, was characterized by:

1. independent voice movement (especially in the *vox organalis*);
2. voices moving in contrary motion;
3. voices crossing each other;
4. placing the new voice above the original chant;
5. reliance on and use of trained solo singers;
6. awareness of intervals as the *organum* was sounded *and* composed.



## VII. Concluding Remarks

We know that during the Middle Ages the voice was the primary instrument of choice. Medieval chant and organum conveyed texts, thereby, requiring a singer to perform. Yet the literature concerning music in the Middle Ages refers over and over again to instruments. Secular musicians possessed and used to their advantage a large and diverse number of instruments: harp, lute, rebec, recorder, shawm, bagpipe, horns of various types, drums, cymbals, and triangles. However, in the performance of sacred music, the music St. Anselm would have been more familiar with and accustomed to, it seems that only the organ and bells were welcomed or ordinary. The organ was generally used to support the tenor melody of the *organum* or take the place of the singers at appropriate times. We don't know what the bells played but we have many illustrations depicting priests and monks happily ringing them. "Music in the Middle Ages, like all the arts, had its required function, one without which it could not have existed."<sup>20</sup> While we have briefly looked at only one form of music, i.e., religious music that conveyed a sacred text, it is understood that music had another function, a secular function.

Minds and hearts, religious and secular, practical and creative, explored and developed music's potentials and technical intricacies. Modern musicians look back with both deep appreciation and humility at the thoughts about music profoundly expressed in the philosophical and practical treatises, at the accepted importance of music in the both sacred and secular institutions, at the development of an effective and efficient musical notation, and at the defining characteristic of Western music—composer created and controlled polyphonic music. Such would have been the experience of a Medieval musician and such would have been the experience of St. Anselm.

Somehow I am confident that St. Anselm paid close attention to the text of the daily psalms of the monastery and cathedral and participated fully in the intoning of melodic formulae that gave the psalms their musical voice. Somehow I believe that, during the Offices and Mass, St. Anselm sang from his memory the timeless Gregorian chants and comprehended the importance of the new musical notation that conveyed the melodies of sacred scripture and poetry. Somehow I am sure he listened and wondered at the sounds of Western polyphony and gave thanks for the God-given ability to be creative and original in producing a new voice and a new way to praise God. Somehow I think that the music around him, whether that music soared through the towering spaces of the splendid stone interiors of Medieval cathedrals or the chapels of rural monasteries, lifted his heart and stirred his mind to the contemplation of that "something than which nothing greater can be thought."

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<sup>20</sup> Seay, 176.