

Plainsong beginnings

Take heed, that what you sing with your lips, you believe in your hearts, and what you believe in your hearts, you show forth in your works.

This was a blessing given to liturgical singers, by a decree of the Fourth Council of Carthage, under Boniface – Bishop of Carthage 525-534 AD – a timeless saying, as relevant today as it was then.

Plainsong comes from the Latin *cantus planus*, and is the name given to the large body of traditional ritual melody of the Western Church. It is the free unmetrical rhythm of speech used in prose, psalms and prayers.¹ Since its beginnings, plainsong has developed along two distinct lines: *a.* Responsorial or Plainchant developed from recitation of psalms round a dominant or single note, and *b.* Antiphonal, developed as pure melody, as in the hymn, *O come, O come, Immanuel* of the 19th century.

Plainsong would have started in the earliest centuries of Christianity, being influenced by the musical formulae of the Jewish synagogue, and used in the three early canticles, Benedictus – *the song of Zacharias* (Luke 1, 68-79), Magnificat – *the song of Mary* (Luke 1, 46-55) and Nunc Dimittis – *the song of Simeon* (Luke 2, 29-32)

At the end of the Last Supper, Christ sang a song or hymn, which tradition says was psalms 113-118 (Mark 14, 26). St Paul implored the faithful followers, to offer to the Lord, *Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* Colossians 3, 16 & Ephesians 5, 19)

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan 340-397AD, found the music of the early church in great disorder. He took the scientific musical scale of the Greek Pythagoras, and used it in four different ways, or *modes*. Later in the 6th century, Pope Gregory elaborated this system and added four more *modes*. Pope Gregory is credited with a *Book of Chants and Prayers* and much more musical writings. However, it is in fact, questionable whether St. Ambrose and St. Gregory did all that they are reputed to have done!

A book discovered not long ago, written by a Spanish Abbess between 385 and 388, refers to *the regular singing of hymns and songs and psalms and antiphons*.² Antiphonal singing, alternative verses by men and women, was first used by professional liturgical singers in Antioch about 350 AD, and was later introduced into the West by St. Ambrose.

¹ Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music Scholes

2 Early Christian Music *Egon Wellesz*

Howard Brayton
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