

plainsong developed

In the early centuries of the Church, there was a struggle between 'pure' Christian music and the secular music of the time, which endangered the purity, both by chromatic melodies and the associations of instruments, or so it is stated.

Clement of Alexandria (died 215 AD) and St. John Chrysostom wrote in similar vein "*wishing to ban anything that recalls pagan cults and songs of actors.*"¹ St. Augustine says that he was more interested in the singing, than what was sung.

Egbert, Bishop of York (about 732 AD) said that St. Augustin brought Gregory's 'Book of Chants and Prayers' to England, and Putta, Bishop of Rochester (668 AD), is praised for his knowledge of Roman chant, which he had learned from pupils of St. Gregory.

Little more is known of church music in England until 10th Century, when musical development started in England and on the Continent. Plainsong began to be sung by higher and lower voices, and an interval of a 4th or a 5th, were used. Thus harmony came into being. But the plea from the Fathers of the Church was always for 'pure' plainsong taken from original sources.

In 16th century, Palestrina, the Italian, was commissioned to revise the plainsong of his Country, but he died before any work was done. The task was then given to Aneiro and Soriano, who published the Medicean Edition in 1614-1615. It contained additional plainsong, altered melodies and ideas. But in the first English Prayer Book of 1549, Archbishop Cranmer took care to have the ancient plainsong in its purest form, as it had been to the litany previously published.² The task was given to John Merbecke (1523-1585)

There were a great number of plainchants, harmonised plainsong, written in the 17th century, which became 'florid and flippant' in the 18th century, with the use of 'grace and passing notes'.³ Then plainsong fell into disuse, except in cathedrals, until it began to gain ground again towards the end of the 19th century, when it was no longer just sung by choirs. Hence a method had to be found to show congregations what portion of the verse should be sung on the reciting note, and what proportion reflected. The first method of pointing was given to us by Robert James, organist at Ely cathedral in 1837, since when many methods have been set forth.

1 Pelican History of Music vol 1 *Stevens and Robertson*

2 Plainsong *Rev. Thomas Helms*

3 Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music *Scholes*