

ON
SINGING
CHANT
WELL

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Based on the experiences of forty-nine years of liturgical chant and the solutions adopted in the search for the best way of singing Sacred Music as a prayer and praise to God, not as a form of exhibition and/or solely as a matter of vocal technique, I hereby write, for singers who given me their faith and assistance in keeping Gregorian chant alive in the liturgy, a few bits of advice for singing Gregorian and Ambrosian chant well.

I

Gregorian chant is prayer that is sung; therefore the sound should always be light, *legato*, and humble. Also, when one expresses joyful praise, the sound should be more distinct but must never be heavy, or shouted.

II

Before singing, it will be useful to understand what one sings.

III

When one sings, it is logical to remember that we are turning ourselves toward God. We are not merely singers or musicians. Also, one who does not have the gift of faith should remember that he or she is making sacred chant for excellence and therefore should be attentive in the deportment and expression of the chant, remaining in the context of praise and prayer.

IV

The Gregorian chant does not seek applause. If such a consensus emerges, let it be expressed only at the end of a concertized representation -- not, in any case, and obviously, during the liturgy.

V

In Church, in their appointed places, singers will move themselves calmly without self-consciously parading around to be noticed, but with the humility of one who is completing an important liturgical and cultural action, with professionalism and good taste.

VI

It is necessary to pronounce the text well. The text of the sung prayer can be directed towards one's own self (*molto interiore*) but it must also be able to be understood by whoever is listening. One should find a true equilibrium between interiority and communication.

VII

When the melody rises in pitch, one never sings from the throat: it is necessary to use one's 'head voice' so that a better intonation will be possible. To sing well a melody that rises, in the high notes, the vowels must be sung slightly covered and softly (*rimpicciolite*), but clearly articulated (*partecipate*) and thoughtfully (*pensate*).

VIII

Pay attention to crucial notes of the phrase, usually those that descend, because one often tends to forget them.

IX

In psalmody, to care for the intonation of the reciting tone or tenor, do not sing casually but always with articulate clarity, not only with the voice but also, and above all, with the mind. If we think about what we are singing, the quality will automatically be much better.

X

"A's" should not be too open but should tend slightly to be held in the form of a short "o."

XI

"I's" should be sung while thinking of the vertical, graphical shape of the letter "i," or they will tend to become like "o's" and fall flat.

XII

One sings, observing the rhythm of the word; the notes, the neumes of the chant, serve to make evident the meaning of the text; therefore, the chant will have a "verbal rhythm," not a syllabic one. (The rhythm of the spoken text is the rhythm of the sung text.)

XIII

The phrases always go together in a connected way. They begin forcefully and come to rest as a single respiration. Internally, everything goes *legato*, from neume to neume. To obtain a good legato, it will help to know the melody well; then, while one sings a note, already one should think about the next one.

XIV

Between intervals of a third, fourth, and fifth, do not slide from one sound to another like a glissando in lyric opera, but with the aid of a hypothetical "h" before the vowel and a light swelling (*ringonfiamento*) of the sound (i.e. a brief and delicate *messa di voce*), one passes from one sound to another without *portamento* or sliding between intermediate notes.

XV

Final notes should not be 'swallowed' (*ripiegarsi*) at the conclusion of their sound but should be sustained in intonation; the mouth should remain open until the sound production is completely terminated.

XVI

Final "n's" should resound lightly in the nose with the tongue resting on the upper palate.

XVII

The Gregorian chant is a song arising from silence. Also in our noisy city, when we sing the Gregorian chant, it will do well to be inspired by the silence of the monastery, where in silence, God makes himself manifest.

XVIII

Before singing, it will be well to vocalize a bit, and then, above all, silence and concentration serves you well. (Remembering the importance that Gregorian chant has in the liturgical action.)

XIX

The Church, as an edifice, is a place of worship, not a salon or a theatre; at the end of a liturgy or a concert, one does not stop to talk in Church but rather exits to comment, say hello, or do anything else that is not directly germane to the sacred place.

XX

When a chant is finished, it is dutiful and graceful for there to be silence in which the spirituality of Gregorian chant can reverberate.

In the actualization of these ideas, I remind myself and my singers: humility, coherence, and silence.

With joy, conviction, and labor,
Giovanni Vianini

PS -- A very beautiful and meaningful definition by Solange Corbin, an important scholar and teacher of early music at the University of Poitiers in France: "The Gregorian chant is for sacred music what light is for the trees: life!"

Translated by Pes
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