

The old is new again

Gregorian chant strikes deep chord with young people

By DANIEL BURKE / Religion News Service

It doesn't have much of a beat, the kids can't dance to it, and it's sung in a dead language. But Gregorian chant seems to be the hottest thing in sacred music right now.

Consider the following:

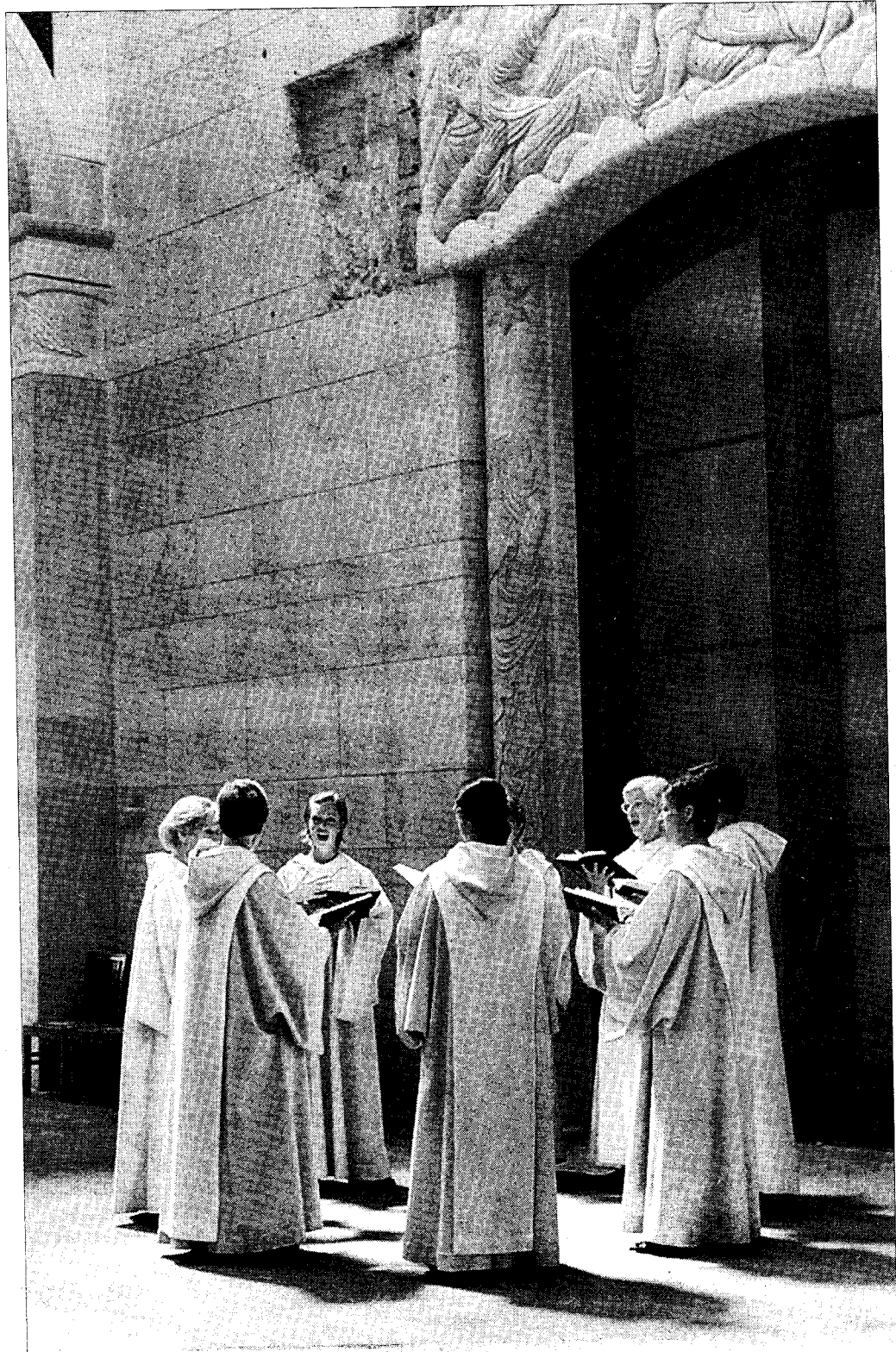
- ▶ The wildly popular "Halo" video games use Gregorian chant (sometimes called plainsong) as background music.
- ▶ Universal Music Group, the record company best known for bawdy acts such as Amy Winehouse and Snoop Dogg, recently signed a group of Viennese monks to record an album of Gregorian chant.
- ▶ The Middle Ages chants can even greatly reduce stress, British researchers reported this month.

After a public relations push by Pope Benedict XVI, who wants Gregorian chant restored to its "pride of place" in the liturgy, a plainsong renaissance is percolating among U.S. Catholics as well.

Nearly 200 scholas — choirs that sing plainsong — have popped up around the country, many in the past five years, according to the Church Music Association of America.

There are few Latin Rite masses in the Archdiocese of Atlanta. Father Mark Fischer of St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church in Mableton has been doing the Latin Rite mass — which includes the traditional Gregorian chanting as part of the liturgy — for more than a decade. The church has been at its present site since 1999.

"Most of the parishioners are young people," said Pat Chivers, Atlanta Archdiocese communications director. "It seems that the Latin mass seems to speak to their hearts."



The Latin rite mass also is offered by Father Tom Hennessey the first Sunday of every month at 8 a.m. at St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Norcross.

Sacred music seminars that once drew 40 to 50 people now lure hundreds of Catholic musical directors, organists and singers. And priests-in-training in seminaries across the country are increasingly asking to be educated in the intricacies of Gregorian chant, CMA President and sacred-song expert William Mahrt said.

Meanwhile, religious publishers are stocking — and selling — large collections of plainsong books and music. One such publisher, Paraclete Press of Brewster, Mass., has sold more copies of its "Gregorian Melodies" CD in the first five months of 2008 — 5,000 — than it did all of last year.

"There is such an exciting resurgence around Gregorian chant," said Jim Jordan, a musicologist and Paraclete consultant. "We have the great privilege of watching it be reborn."

Gregorian chant hasn't been dead that long, at least compared to its deep history.

The style of chant is named for the sainted Pope Gregory I (circa A.D. 540-604) in what was probably an early exercise in brand marketing. Musicologists say the pope most likely didn't invent plainsong, but his name was used to help it spread from monastery to monastery in medieval Europe. Written records of Gregorian chant date to the 10th century, but many Catholic experts say it was probably transmitted orally for several centuries before it was notated.

Over the years, plainsongs' unadorned melodies, sung in Latin to an uneven meter and somehow suggestive of high religiosity, became a staple of Hollywood soundtracks, if not always Catholic churches.

But although its roots are in the Catholic tradition, Gregorian chant also has

The Glorie Dei Women's Circle Schola sings Gregorian chant, which is experiencing a renaissance in the U.S. Sacred music seminars that once drew 50 people and now attract hundreds. Priests-in-training are increasingly asking to be educated in the intricacies of Gregorian chant.

Religion News Service photo courtesy of Paraclete Press

been embraced by some Protestants churches.

During college in the 1970s, Atlantan John Whitt fell in love with plainsong, and sang in Gregorian chant groups, thanks to the inspiration of a medieval music professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

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Now he sings the deep sonorous bass tones of the chants — as well as directs — at the Atlanta Schola at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church.

The 13-member schola group sings the compline liturgy, long associated with the Benedictine monks evening prayer tradition.

The twice-monthly evening service, held September through April, begins at 8 p.m. The chants are sung in Latin — but also in English, or other languages, Whitt said, depending on the composer. But it's the way it's sung that creates a certain mood, he said.

"The music just sort of wraps you in a sound, if you are in a place with the right kind of acoustics, and the right kind of singers singing this music. It has a way of transporting you to another spiritual level," Whitt said.

Jeffrey Tucker, managing editor of the magazine Sacred Music, said chant strikes many people as "spooky, ominous and meaningful in some way."

"It has an inner pulse like a heartbeat, but it doesn't have a regular rhythm," said Tucker, a plainsong proponent. "The

effect is like musical incense. It's always sort of floating and rising."

Chants' seemingly timeless melodies and Latin lyrics also connect Catholics throughout centuries and space, Tucker and others said.

But after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, which allowed Mass in local languages, Gregorian chant fell out of favor in U.S. parishes. In came guitars and tambourines, out went plainsong.

Some say the folksy music that replaced plainsong hasn't aged well and leaves many Catholics wanting. Catholics in their 20s and 30s may be looking for something else.

Although Whitt says there is usually a small group — just about 30 people — attending the evening service, he has noticed a resurgence of interest in the sacred service among young people in other parts of the country he's visited.

"I've noticed it's been popular among younger worshippers who are looking for something that is more otherworldly; sacred, holy or transcendent, than modern contemporary (Christian) music," he said.

Whitt points to St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Seattle, which has been "filling their church with mostly young people — older teens and college students," for years, whenever they do the compline service.

"It's become the thing to do for young people on a Sunday night in Seattle," he said.

Freelance writer Rebecca Rakoczy contributed to this report.