

Essays in Medieval Studies 5

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Franciscan Chant as a Late Medieval Expression in the Liturgy**Lavern John Wagner**

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When St. Francis turned his back on earthly vanities and established the Franciscan order in the first part of the 13th century, his biographers tell us he did not cease his interest in music. *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* recount that he went about singing, and we have the text, though not the music of several of his songs.¹ In sending his friars out to preach he admonished them to sing God's praises as if they were "joculatores Domini," i.e. "minstrels of the Lord."² The friars were closely associated with the composition and spread of *laude spirituali* simple religious songs in the vernacular that became enormously popular.³ While this popular aspect of the Franciscan musical contribution has been duly noted,⁴ the liturgical chants which the Franciscans developed, especially those commemorating saints of their order, have not been as thoroughly considered. It is interesting to explore some characteristics of Franciscan chant, and relate its musical style to the mainstream of medieval liturgical chant, the better known Gregorian chant.

As a background to this study, it can be recalled that in the latter part of the 19th century the monks of the Benedictine monastery at Solesmes, France conducted their epochal examinations of Gregorian chant manuscripts.⁵ The manuscripts which they researched, and which have since come to be regarded as representative of the "Golden Age" of Gregorian chant, come from the 9th through 12th centuries, a period before the Franciscan order existed. The monks of Solesmes published their research in

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the Volumes of their *Paléographie musicale*.⁶ Only recently has there been an attempt to study chant which was developed within other religious orders, and which is unique to them. Dom David Nicholson, a Benedictine at Mount Angel Abbey, Oregon, gathered together articles on the chants of many religious orders in the *Dictionary of Plainsong* which he compiled in the 1960's. His intention was to have this Volume printed; however, changes in the Roman Catholic liturgy mitigated against this, and he was only able to have fifteen sets copied and bound as a private edition.⁷ My contribution to this *Dictionary of Plainsong* is on chants unique to the Franciscan order, and it has given the impetus to this study.

As a starting point for this consideration of Franciscan chant it is interesting to observe that the musical notation of Gregorian chant today, using square notes as it does, is the result of Franciscan usage. While square notes were first developed in northern Europe by the Notre Dame School on the Ile de France in Paris, they were introduced into Italy through the Franciscans.⁸ A little later, with the adoption of the Franciscan liturgy into the mainstream of the Roman Catholic church, the square-note notation for chant became the norm. The difference between the older Beneventan style of musical notation and the new style introduced by the Franciscans is graphically illustrated by these two schematic lay-outs which explain the improvements.⁹ (Example 1)

A further comparison of manuscripts written in the older Beneventan style and the newer square-note style illustrates the improvement in readability. The manuscript from Rome, Cod. Vatic. lat. 8737 (before 1266), fol. 251v, contains the office of St. Francis in Beneventan notation, and it may be compared to the manuscript with the same office from Freiburg, Switzerland, Minoritenkloster cod. 2 (also 13th century), fol. 213v. The clarity of the square notes over the earlier notation is striking.¹⁰

Before presenting some interesting musical details of Franciscan chant, it is well to be reminded of the kind of musical expression which chant exhibits. A succinct, yet comprehensive, definition of Gregorian chant is to be found in Donald Grout's *A History of Western Music*: "Gregorian Chant consists of a single-line melody sung to Latin words by unaccompanied men's voices, in a flexible rhythm articulated by means other than regular accentuation, in a scale system different from our major or minor."¹¹ Grout further characterizes chant as impersonal, objective, other-

worldly,

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Example 1

Paradigms explaining paleographic improvements from the earlier Beneventan notation (first illustration) to the square-note notation introduced by the Franciscans (second illustration).



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concerned with a religious expression of its text, and not associated with sensuous beauty and emotional appeal. It is not possible to discuss the many aspects of chant in a short study such as this; rather, this article is concerned with characteristics of the single line melody as it is used in Franciscan chant. The tendency of the Franciscan melodies to fall into the major-minor scale system and not adhere to the modal system of Gregorian chant will especially be considered.

This modal system for Gregorian chant was based on eight scales which were defined by the location of half-steps within the scale.¹² The major-minor system simplified these scales into the major scale with its half-steps between the 3rd and 4th degrees, and 7th and 8th degrees, and the natural minor scale with its half steps between 2 and 3, and 5 and 6.

As was mentioned before, chants of the Franciscan order necessarily arose after the historical period during which Gregorian chant is regarded as having flowered in its most characteristic expression, i.e. the 9th and 10th centuries. When St. Francis died in 1226, music was entering the stage of its first important developments in polyphony. Leonin and Perotin associated with Notre Dame of Paris just before 1200, and the first composers whose names are known to us were interested in the simultaneous performance of up to four musical lines, and not interested in refining a single musical line as chant composers did.

A basic principle of the early Franciscans was the simplicity of the life in their order. This characteristic was carried over into their liturgy. Reputedly, existing liturgies were not expanded, but rather were shortened.¹³ This trend is reflected in a chant phrase which the Franciscans used at the very beginning of Introits opening the mass, especially the Introits of masses for the more important Franciscan saints. This musical opening, a setting of the word "Gaudeamus," involves the characteristic leap of a fifth, followed by an expressive half-step upper-neighbor. It is a chant figure which was originally composed for the feast of St. Agatha, and is to be found in Gregorian chant for the Introit opening the mass of the feast of All Saints, November 1. It is to be noted that the interval of a fifth is important in defining major and minor tonality, and this figure includes the important pitches of D, A, and B flat which characterize the minor scale configuration. The

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Introit opening the mass for the Feast of St. Francis on October 4 gives an excellent example of this chant figure).¹⁴

Example 2.

"Gaudeamus" motive, Feast of St. Francis, Introit.



In line with the order's ideal of simplicity, this same musical opening was used for the feasts of other saints, and especially for important Franciscans. This melodic figure was used to open five of the possible nine occasions when it fit the modal structure of the Introit.¹⁵

Such a striking opening melody for a chant would also relate to the practice of using large illuminated initials for the first letter of the first word in manuscripts of the time. These became more and more elaborate in the 13th and 14th centuries.¹⁶

The Franciscan scholar, Eusébe Clop, says that the heart of Franciscan chant is to be found in the Alleluias.¹⁷ An Alleluia for the Feast of St. Rose of Viterbo uses the "Gaudeamus" motif five times in the course of the chant, yet does not open with this melody. This chant is notable for its strong D minor tonal tendency. Only at the word "anima" does it briefly rise to a higher register, perhaps to illustrate the quickening of life. At this point it also gives a brief impression of another modal background, A minor, which is the dominant of D minor.¹⁸ (Example 3)

As was mentioned, some Franciscan chants also show a strong tendency toward a major key. The Alleluia for the Feast of St. Bernard of Sienna is distinguished for its F major tonality. The notation of this chant has a key signature of one flat. Gregorian chants do not normally exist with any type of key signature. However, there are a number of Franciscan chants which show this feature, another mark of their late medieval character and their tendency toward the major and minor tonality which was developing at the time.¹⁹ (Example 4)

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Example 3.

Feast of St. Rose of Viterbo, Alleluia. "Gaudeamus" motive used five times.



Example 4.

Feast of St. Bernard of Sienna, Alleluia. Key signature of one flat, key of F, major tonality.



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While plainchant is monophonic music, i.e. it has only one melody line and no accompaniment, the 13th century was developing a feeling for polyphony, and the hearing of more than one pitch at the same time. This interest in chords can be demonstrated to have carried over to the musical lines of Franciscan chant. The Introit for the mass "Common of Several Virgins who are not Martyrs" opens with three pitches which form a major triad. When this would be sung in a large church where the sound has a reverberation time of as long as seven seconds, it would produce a major chord echoing and re-echoing. Below is the opening of the Introit mentioned. One can imagine the reverberation effect, that quality which made it more pleasing and up-to-date to 13th century ears, when a chant opened in this manner.²⁰

Example 5.

Common of Several Virgins who are not Martyrs; Introit. Opening three pitches form major triad.



Richard Hoppin's text book, *Medieval Music*, contains an excellent introduction to Gregorian chant. In it he summarizes the general characteristics of chant style. Regarding the intervals between pitches in chant melodies he says:

In all types of chant, melodic progressions are primarily conjunct that is moving by step up or down the notes of the mode. Skips of a third in either direction are the most common form of disjunct motion, and some chants consist of nothing but seconds, thirds, and repeated notes. Throughout the repertory, the predominance of stepwise motion with occasional skips of a third produces a smoothness and uniformity that greatly increase the effectiveness of larger melodic intervals.²¹

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To illustrate the contrast between the melodic styles of Gregorian chant and Franciscan chant, Sequences from feasts important to each tradition have been chosen. The Sequence *Victimae paschali* has been noted as representative of medieval Gregorian chant. It only takes a few phrases to illustrate the conjunct movement which is typical of its

melodic style.[22](#)

Example 6.

Easter Sunday, Sequence, opening phrases. Gregorian chant, illustrating primarily conjunct melodic movement.



In contrast to the smoothly flowing melody of *Victimae paschali*, a short excerpt from the Sequence of the Franciscan mass for the Feast of St. Francis, October 4 is presented. Note the many skips in the melodic line in fact, it is practically all skips. At one point, on the words "hostem superasti," a dominant seventh chord (G7) is even outlined. These notes, combined as a chordal harmony, were not common in music until about 300 years later![23](#)

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Example 7.

Feast of St. Francis, Sequence, excerpt. Franciscan chant, illustrating primarily disjunct melodic movement.



The Feast of St. Francis on October 4 is the most important feast of the year for members of the Franciscan order. It is also celebrated by the entire Catholic church of the Roman rite. However, the importance of this feast to Franciscans, contrasted with the importance given it in the church as a whole, is striking, and is graphically illustrated by a comparison of the Gregorian chant Alleluia for the mass of October 4, with the Alleluia in the mass used by the Franciscan order for its very important feast. In the Roman rite, St. Francis does not have an Alleluia specifically for his feast day. Rather, he shares his Alleluia with that from the mass for St. Joseph of Cupertino, Confessor, of September 18. While this chant is solemn and beautiful, it is somewhat restrained.[24](#)

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Example 8.

Roman rite, Mass for Feast of St. Francis, Alleluia. Gregorian chant, beautiful but restrained.



In striking contrast, the Alleluia from the Franciscan mass for St. Francis reaches great heights of joy. Its melodic compass cannot even be contained within the range of a single mode, so it is indicated for modes 5 and 6. The notes reach so high, they burst beyond the bounds of the Gregorian 4-line staff. There is a key signature of one flat, showing its genesis as a late medieval chant. There are many skips, and chords are spelled out melodically. These include those chords commonly found in the key of F major, the I chord (F chord), the IV chord (B flat chord), and the V chord (C chord). This Alleluia is an excellent illustration of Franciscan chant in its most joyful expression. Certainly it is worth quoting when one recalls that Eusébe Clop, the Franciscan scholar, says that the heart of Franciscan chant is to be found in the Alleluias.[25](#)

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Example 9

Franciscan order, Mass for Feast of St. Francis, Alleluia. Franciscan chant, reaching great heights of joy. Note: 1) large melodic compass covering modes 5 and 6, 2) notes on ledger lines above staff, 3) key signature of one flat, suggests key of F major, 4) chords spelled out melodically under brackets: I, F chord (FAC); IV, B flat chord (B flat D F); V, C chord (CEG).



The characteristics which distinguish Franciscan chant from Gregorian chant may now be summarized. There is a definite tendency toward major and minor tonality in Franciscan chant. The melody sometimes outlines chords. The

chants cover an expanded melodic range. B flat is used so frequently, it appears as a key signature in some chants. Despite these features, which were modern in the 13th century, the basic Franciscan principle of simplifying the liturgy is carried out with the same motive being used in several chants.

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Franciscan chant is a musical product of its time, and its time is late medieval. It is no less beautiful than Gregorian chant, but its beauties come forth in a different light, a light illumined by the simple richness of St. Francis, shining through the musical developments in the order which he founded.

Notes

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1. *The little Flowers of St. Francis*, tr. by Raphael Brown (Garden City, New York: Hanover House, 1958). Pp. 18, 317-318.
2. Article "Franciscan Friars," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (6th ed.), Stanley Sadie, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1980), VI, 776-777.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Extensive article titled "Lauda spirituali," *New Grove Dictionary* (1980), X, 538-543. Article "Lauda," *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, Don Michael Randel, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 441-442.
5. Article "Solesmes," *New Grove Dictionary* (1980), XVII, 452-454.

6. *Paléographie musicale*, 19 vols. Ed by. Benedictines of Solesmes, Dom A. Mocquereau to 1930, Dom J. Gajard since 1931. Pub. began in 1889. Contains facsimiles and studies of Gregorian chant manuscripts.
7. *Dictionary of Plainsong*, 2 vols., Dom David Nicholson, ed. (Private edition, 1971). Information from Dom David Nicholson cites the following institutions as having been sent copies: Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. (2 sets); Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; Northwestern University, Evanston, IL; Columbia University, New York, NY; Yale University, New Haven, CT; University of California, Berkeley, CA; Mt. Angel Abbey, St. Benedict, Oregon; Abbey of Solesmes, France; Pluscarden Priory, Elgin, Moray, Scotland; University of Edinburgh, Scotland; British Museum, London, England; Oxford University, England.
8. Article "Notation," *New Grove Dictionary* (1980), XIII, 348.
9. S.J.P. Van Dijk, *Sources of the Modern Roman Liturgy*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963), 112-113.
10. These two manuscripts are placed side by side for easy comparison in the article "Franziskaner," *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Friedrich Blume, ed. (Kassel u. Basel: Barenreiter, 1949-1968), IV, plate facing cols. 833-834.
11. Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), 36.

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12. Extensive information on "Medieval modal theory," *New Grove Dictionary* 1980), XII, 378-396. Article on "Church modes," *New Harvard Dictionary* (1986), 499-501.
13. Van Dijk, op. cit., 68-71.
14. *Graduale Romano-Seraphicum*, ed. P. Bernardini Klumper (Tournai: Desclée, (1924), (119).
15. Intros which begin with the "Gaudeamus" motive, and their source in the *Graduale Romano-Seraphicum* are: *Charitas Dei* (40), *Erat haec* (140), *Gaudeamus*, feast of St. Francis (119), *Gaudeamus* feast of all Franciscan Saints (150), *Scitis quod locuerim* (32). This motive also opens the first Antiphon of the First Vespers, *Franciscus, vir catholicus*, for the Office of St. Francis, cf. *Antiphonale Romano-Seraphicum pro horis diurnis* (Tournai: Déclée, 1928), 967.
16. Examples of such initials may be seen in: Richard Hoppin, *Medieval Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 111, 117.
17. P. Fr. Eusébe Clop, O.F.M., *Le Chant dans l'Ordre Seraphique* (Solesmes, 1900), 83.
18. *Graduale Romano-Seraphicum*, (106).
19. *Graduale Romano-Seraphicum*, (51).
20. *Graduale Romano-Seraphicum*, (162).
21. Hoppin, *Medieval Music*, 15.
22. *Liber Usualis* (Tournai: Desclée, 1956), 780.
23. *Graduale Romano-Seraphicum*, (126).
24. *Liber Usualis*, 1646.
25. *Graduale Romano-Seraphicum*, (121).

