

What Is Gregorian Chant?

How is it different from music? Why is it sacred? How does it promote listening?

Gregorian chant is a body of chant collected from many cultures by St. Gregory (Pope from 590-604) in an effort to standardize the Catholic Mass.

Gregorian chant differs from music in a number of essential ways. Most importantly, this chant has no meter. Timing is based not on a rhythm noted on music sheets, but rather on the human breath.

In fact, the chant master who trains novices (four years before they join the choir) and leads the chant, controls the group's respiration rate by drawing forth increasingly long phrases from the chanters.

The extension of the controlled exhalation necessary to maintain a good tone has the physiological consequence of slowing down the rate of breathing and thereby slowing down the heart. It follows that a reduction of blood pressure occurs during the chanting. In addition, without their conscious knowledge, those listening to the monks begin to alter their breathing too. What occurs then, eight times daily for traditional Gregorian chanting monks, is a form of respiratory yoga. The result is that physical and then emotional stress evaporates permitting a profound feeling of peace to fill one's being.

Also, of therapeutic interest is the practice of maintaining a certain "listening" posture during the chant. Lower back pain, stiff necks, and tension headaches are practically non-existent among these monks despite the long hours of manual labor which is required of them. What we found to be most intriguing, however, is the fact that the traditional Gregorian chants, in combination with traditional church architecture (a paper in itself) create a sound which is rich in timbre overtones of frequencies ranging from 2000 to 4000 Hz. In other words, the monks produce and listen to high-frequency sounds for eight hours every day of their lives.

These monks sustain, day in and day out, a legendary work schedule. Arising at 5 am, and retiring at 1 am, the monks' day is one of work interrupted only by three hours of mealtime and eight hours of chant. On call for life. No vacations. Far from a retreat to placid contemplative existence, the monastic lifestyle is quite strenuous; many novices quit, unable to sustain the perpetual demands of balancing this grueling regimen.

Eight Hours of Chant Demands Closer Scrutiny

Since the mid 20th century, many Catholic monasteries have closed down unable to sustain their operations. Tomatis claims that of these closures, none involved monasteries which practiced the traditional Gregorian chant. It is a reasonable hypothesis that cortical charge and its consequent boon to energy levels, concentration, alertness and general well-being of the monks is an important factor in the health of the Catholic church. In fact, in works citing Dr. Tomatis and his "house-calls" to failing monasteries, the Church has called for a return to the traditional, Latin form of the chant. When Tomatis originally read "... open wide the ears of your heart" in the first rule of St. Benoît, founder of the Gregorian-chanting Benedictine Order, he thought of the heart's auricles, flaps above each atria whose function is unknown. It delighted him that indeed, the heart does have an ear, of sorts. For the moment, therefore, unsatisfied that it was so named solely due to resemblance, as the story goes, I wondered what has the heart to do with listening? In order to answer that question, we must define listening. In Latin, "to listen" is translated "ab audire" which literally means "to go towards that which is heard". This, in turn, is translated in French as "obeir" which means "to obey".

What then is the connection between to listen and to obey? And where does the heart fit in? It should come as no surprise to learn that each chant master interviewed explained that chanting is an exercise in listening. It follows from the etymological sequence of the preceding paragraph that listening, in turn, is an exercise in obedience. At best, true listening is an approximation of selflessness whereby one person opens not only his ears, but his heart to the words, both spoken and non-spoken, of another. Listening. The monks spend eight hours a day actively listening as they chant to God who speaks to them through the words of the chant (Psalms) as well as through their hearts – through the ears of their hearts. Gregorian chanting, therefore, to the degree that it is sacred music, is an exercise in true listening – an exercise in obedience.

After all, it does no good to listen to the words of the Lord if one has not the heart to obey.

Paul Madaule and Tim Gilmor. *About the Tomatis Method*, pp. 177-180.