

# Gregorian chant



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## **The Development and Evolution of Gregorian Chant**

For centuries, Gregorian chant was considered the official music of the Catholic Church. Naturally, this degree of importance placed on the genre gives it considerable significance, both religious and cultural. Its exact beginnings, however, are not absolutely known. Also, chant has changed over time due to it being based on practices of the Church, which have also changed over time due to decrees by various popes, agendas of monastic orders, and the influences of and intermingling of cultures, such as the Franks, Romans, and Byzantines.

Although the name of Gregorian chant is derived from Pope Gregory I “The Great”, it has its roots much earlier in history, predating Christianity. In fact, Christian chant is believed to have been originally derived from Judaism, as there was a considerable amount of common ground between Jewish and early Christian liturgies (Werner 20). This is seen through writings of the early church which show that the early Christian church was heavily influenced by Hebrew worship (Barton). However, there is little information available from chants of early centuries compared to Gregorian chant and other chants of later centuries (Hiley 478). One reason for this is that musical notation for chants of this time did not exist, for at this time chants were an entirely oral rather than written tradition. Also contributing to this lack of information is that early Christians were persecuted, forcing private worship until the Edict of Milan of 313, which gave Christians the right of freedom of worship in Rome (484). Due to this freedom, Christianity could afford to become more formalized and organized, its music included.

There is further ambiguity surrounding the specific origins of Gregorian chant in considering Pope Gregory himself. What Gregory's influence was on Gregorian chant is debatable, as there is limited evidence supporting that he either had a great deal of influence on the genre, such as directly composing chants, or virtually none (513). However, two pieces of evidence support a common theory of his involvement in the creation of Gregorian chant that was known throughout the Middle Ages, which are two books written by Pope Gregory. These two books, entitled *Antiphonarium* and *Graduale Romanum*, are compilations of already existing chants that Pope Gregory designated for specific parts of Catholic mass which supports the theory that his involvement was limited to such compilations (D' Silva). An example of Gregory's ordering to use specific music in liturgy is him mandating that the Allelulia be used during mass for an entire year (Apel 41).

Despite the lack of specific information concerning the beginnings of chant that would later evolve to become Gregorian chant, the origins of Gregorian chant as it was known throughout the Middle Ages are more clear, as music books, although they still were not musically notated, of the genre were created by the Franks at around the 9th century, making the genre easier to trace through history to that point (Hiley 514). Note that it was not until the 10th century that sources were created containing musical notation, namely being musically annotated Graduals and Antiphonals from the Codex 359 (Apel 52). Also, it was not until the 11th century that music was annotated in a way so that tunes could be read (53). In addition to these musical books, various manuscripts were written that outlined liturgical proceedings, allowing for further clarification of the specifics of Gregorian chant (53).

The peoples who ruled the area that is roughly present-day France played a large role in forming Gregorian chant to what it is, from the Franks to the Carolingians (Hiley 512). This started under the rule of the Frank king Pepin, who led the Franks to control much of Europe through military conquest, spreading the culture of chant to the Franks, and also causing reforms to Gregorian chant by the Franks and their successors (513). In addition to causing chant to be more widespread, the intervention of the Franks also caused Gregorian chant to evolve from further influences (513).

Not only did the influence of the Franks allow the beginnings of Gregorian chant to be seen more easily, as was described previously, but their musical texts also show the original motives behind its development, the main motive being to help control how the liturgy was run by assigning specific chants to certain parts of the liturgy, as was done by Pope Gregory (515). In the case of the Franks (namely Pepin and also Charlemagne), the reasoning behind trying to control the specifics of the liturgy was so that it would become standardized since many members of the church were influenced by their own local traditions in structuring the liturgy, which Frank leadership was trying to suppress (Barbon).

Of course, due to the amount of time between Pope Gregory's writings and the adoption of chant by the Frankish church (300 years), it can be safely assumed that the liturgical assignments of the Franks were different than those of Pope Gregory. More changes were made as well in Gregorian chant, including the style of singing, such as the combining of both Roman and Frankish singers, although eventually a return to a more Roman styled liturgy and type of singing occurred among the Franks (Hiley 517). Since

writing texts for the chants was still not common practice and musical notation for them did not yet exist, it follows that the Franks had to learn Roman liturgy and chants by memory when this shift back to strictly Roman liturgy occurred. This also denotes that the number of chants that were used and popular were not too numerous at this point in time, as they could still be all memorized.

Despite the shift back to a Roman style liturgy, over the years and into the 9th century to the start of the rule of the Carolingians, who succeeded the Franks, Gregorian chant continued to evolve as new musical elements were added to the genre by the Franks and more compositions were created (Hiley 517). Some of these changes were brought on by outside influences on Gregorian chant, such as by the Byzantines, who developed the eight mode system (529). The fact that the amount of compositions of Gregorian chant were increasing can be tied in with the development of written musical texts around this time period, causing Gregorian chant to shift away from a strictly oral tradition, for it would no longer be possible to memorize all of the chants necessary as their numbers grew.

As the popularity of Gregorian chant grew, it underwent several more reforms and evolutions, mostly during the 12th and 13th centuries (Hiley 608). An example of such a reform was more specific notation being used in writing chant, which included specifying pitch, among other specific musical elements (608). Another reform was the tendency to drift away from previous melodies of the Middle Ages, creating a type of chant called “ Neo-Gallican” chant (609). Many of these changes made to Gregorian chant were initiated by various orders, two major ones being the Cistercians, who

believed in performing the liturgy as it was done originally, and the Dominicans, whose reforms, like the efforts of many before it, were aimed at standardizing the liturgy (612).

Gregorian chant did not enjoy constant growth and popularity, however. After the 12th century, the popularity and growth of Gregorian chant started to wane, presumably due to a period of reduced popularity of the Catholic Church (D'Silva). Also, around the 16th century the Catholic Church was threatened by Protestantism, which also played a part in decreasing the popularity of the church, thus affecting the popularity of traditional monastic liturgies and music (Hiley 615). Another such period of decadence for the church and for Gregorian chant was during the age of Enlightenment, as less emphasis was placed on the church and God and instead more on the individual and reason.

As a result of this new ideology, the power and influence of the church began to decline. In addition to the general ideology of the time, another reason for the decline of the Church was the political struggle caused by the French Revolution, which caused a reform in the French church so that it no longer observed previous monastic traditions (Bergeron xii). Due to Gregorian chant's close association with the church, its popularity began to decline as well (Barton). This causes yet another obstacle in acquiring information about Gregorian chant and thus makes it more difficult to interpret today as the knowledge of how to interpret various medieval musical notations was lost (Barton).

A large factor of why Gregorian chant did not die out completely is the involvement of monks at the French monastery at Solesmes, and other such monasteries, who during the 19th century were commissioned by Pope St. Pius X to modernize Gregorian chant (D’Silva). They achieved this by removing the strict association that Gregorian chant had with the church, secularizing it and adding a meditative, “trancelike appeal” (D’Silva). In the end, Gregorian chant was changed to be more akin to classical Roman chant than the Gregorian chant of the Middle Ages. As a result, the chant that is known today as Gregorian chant is more similar to early plainchant rather than what was originally dubbed as “Gregorian chant” (D’Silva).

As a result of this change of the style of Gregorian chant, along with the declining power of the Catholic Church and thus the popularity of Gregorian chant, it is difficult to know what Gregorian chant of the Middle Ages exactly sounded like (Barton). Another factor that contributes to this is the lack of musical notation with text in the Middle Ages, and that some of the notation that does exist from the time period cannot be interpreted due to these periods of decrease in popularity.

Overall, the fact that chant was originally a purely oral tradition that consisted of few enough chants that could be memorized, along with Gregorian chant’s affiliation with a religion that was originally persecuted and later declining in popularity, contributes to the murkiness of the origins of Gregorian chant. Also, the fact that Christianity underwent significant changes from the time of its conception to modern times results in equally significant changes occurring in the style of music that was so closely

affiliated with its prominent church, even causing Gregorian chant to nearly die out on several occasions in history.

However, despite the several bouts of decrease in popularity that Gregorian chant experienced, it is currently one of the oldest forms of music that is actively listened to today (D'Silva). Also, the many changes that Gregorian chant underwent throughout history makes it very unique, as it cannot be entirely attributed to any specific event, person, or even nation or empire. Instead, as David Hiley states, "... 'Gregorian' chant is neither of one specific time, nor wholly Roman, nor wholly anything else" (Hiley 513).

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