

Dr. Eric Hung

MH 247: Music Historiography I

15 October 2012

The notation of chant is our earliest notation of a large body of music. Chant was first developed without notation, making the switch to learning by notation very difficult when the time came to do so in the churches of the Middle Ages. The purpose of chant was to pronounce faith and establish the rules of that faith, making this the perfect way for the Frankish kingdom to prove their alliance with the Papal State. Hearing a sustained-note organum or chant in a liturgical service serves a similar purpose while they produce a different effect for the listener and performer.

A sustained-note organum consists of an accompanying chant underneath a top melody, or organum. The organum is often sung by a soloist and can be either improvised or predetermined from notation. The underlying chant and organum are a basis for the soloist to improvise or write an embellishment on the organum melody. This can produce a more free and spiritual experience for the listener and soloist. The soloist has the opportunity to express their faith in a more original musical way other than the predetermined chant.

The chant by itself has a very stoic and reverent sound. In a liturgical setting, the chant gives the listener a very calming and reflective atmosphere in which to worship. The chant also clearly depicts the beliefs of the faith and helps the listener reflect on their beliefs. Chant consists of predetermined intervals and notes that have a melody fitting the text. No improvisation is included in chant.

Chant and sustained-note organum both include the original chants that were notated, keeping the original tradition of the liturgy and its teachings present. Both include rules of the faith in the text, and both texts of the organum and chant are the same. Similar intervals and consonances are used in both the organum and chant, unless the soloist decides to make some other change in their improvisation.

Sustained-note organum included the original chant, which was learned by rote during this time period. As we in our own class demonstrated, learning a chant by rote and memorizing or reading the notation is easier for some and more difficult for others. Even though the soloist might have to compete with keeping their own melody above the chant, the same intervals and consonances tend to result when singing with others. This makes reading and singing notation easier because the ear becomes accustomed to hearing certain harmonies that are characteristic of this time period. Seeing chant and organum written on paper can be easier to some people because we are accustomed to reading music.

For other groups in our class, hearing the chant and being able to improvise seemed easier as well. Again, the ear becomes accustomed to hearing the intervals associated with the time period and can adapt and fit in the melody very easily. However, for some learning the chant by rote or written notation is easier than learning to improvise on top of the chant because of the open sound of the intervals. Difficulty in tuning and jumps in the improvised melody can cause problems for the soloist because we are used to hearing thirds and fifths rather than fourths and sixths.

In the chants that we have encountered so far, the form seems to be simpler than it first appears. To put in more Western music terms, the form of *Cunctipotens genitor* seems to consist of two beginning phrases that lead into a refrain. When adding the organum on top, the form stays about the same. Harmonies are added and the general pulse stays the same. When adding an improvised or embellished organum to the top of the chant, the pulse feels different because the soloist must cue the accompanying chant. This causes the chant to feel more elongated while the entire piece seems to have increased in texture and changed in form.

Singing and learning the chant and organum for class was definitely an experience that seemed simple when first approached. As our groups tried to put our pieces together, we found that the process of listening and writing our own parts was very difficult and took time to learn. Obviously we discovered the problem with trying to teach ourselves one piece by rote and realized the difficulty of learning hundreds of chants by rote during the Middle Ages.