

Sound in the Service of the Sacred: Mystagogical Aspect of Gregorian Chant

I. Mystagogical function of the sacred music

Sacred music has several functions:

It serves the demands of the congregation in the celebration of liturgy¹.

It presents the medium for the expression of worship – both public and private.

In the course of history it turns into the transmitter of religious experience containing particular religious content with all variety of its historically human manifestations and thus explicating a true repository of spiritual heritage.

Being in its nature not only the completed product of some artistic activity which exists in certain independent forms but also the live process of ever living performance it also serves as an instrument for the acquiring of the religious experience and for a certain path leading into the sacred mysteries of religious faith². In all traditional religions music plays an important role achieving and practicing skills of different kinds of prayer, and is used for the meditative practices as the substantial school of spiritual praxis³. With its power to invoke and impart on the listeners and co-performers both the content and the process of religious experience it is a true mystagogue into the realm of faith.

The term *mystagogy* denotes catechetical instruction on the sacraments, with special attention to the sacraments of Christian initiation and to the deeper spiritual meaning of the liturgical rites. A *mystagogue* is a person who initiates others into mystic beliefs, an educator or person who has knowledge, experience and practice of the sacred mysteries. According to Enrico Mazza, “in addition to the general sense of ‘initiation into the mysteries’, two main meanings can be distinguished: first, ‘performance of a sacred action’ and in particular the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, that is, baptism and the Eucharist; second, ‘oral or written explanation’ of the mystery hidden in the scriptures and celebrated in the liturgy”⁴. It leads those who have been initiated into a mystery into its deeper meaning and significance for their lives. So in its broadest sense the term of mystagogy describes the believer’s journey into the spiritual maturity through some mediator and assistant.

By the name of a “mystagogue” a certain person used to be called. Can music in its pure auditory nature serve as a factor which assists believer in his spiritual growth and mediates the acquirement of spiritual experience in such a significant way as the performative art of a sound would be cherished as an especial spiritual practice? This is exactly the question that this research is intended to approach.

Efforts of investigation are directed at one specific example of the sacred music – Gregorian chant, – which presents a very interesting and valuable example of “the prayer in sounds” and makes the relationship between the sound and the experience that this sound is meant to transfer clearly visible and specifically explicit which makes it a very convenient object of analysis and good illustration of the claim.

II. Verbal and auditory layers of Gregorian chant

Gregorian chant as any other example of vocal music is a complex musical phenomenon containing text beside the other traditional means of musical expression. For the purpose of our analysis we will separate the two constituent layers of Gregorian chant: its verbal content – a *word*, from its auditory expression – a musical *sound*.

¹ Pope Paul VI. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Sacrosanctum Concilium*. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

² See the beautiful description of an “interiorization” in Hourlier, Dom Jacques. *Reflections on the Spirituality of Gregorian Chant*. Paraclete Press: Orleans, Massachusetts, 1995. P. 8.

³ Grigaravičiūtė, Aušra. *Musica Tota. Keletas žvilgsnių į muzikos, filosofijos ir teologijos sąsajas ankstyvaisiais Viduramžiais. // Naujasis Židinys – Aidai*. 2003 m. Nr. 5. P. 252.

⁴ Mazza, Enrico. *Mystagogy*. Pueblo Publishing Company: New York, 1989. P. 1.

II.1. Gregorian chant is a musical pronouncement of the word

First and foremost Gregorian chant is a musical utterance of the word. Verbal origin and priority is a fundamental principle determining the very nature of Gregorian: “it brings out the proper meaning of the sacred texts that are sung in liturgy”⁵. Music of Gregorian chant emanates from the word that this chant sings, and this word is the Word of God. Gregorian chant is most respectful and solemn pronouncement of the dialogue between God and his people⁶. The texts of the songs are taken exclusively from the Holy Scripture, they are direct quotations with a very few and insignificant exceptions. This text contains the words of God with which God reveals His nature and His will, teaches of His commandments, explains the historical course of events, values, reproves and even allures man into the closer relationship. On the other hand Holy Scripture is the most comprehensive anthology of a human prayer. We can find various complaints, requests, apprehensions, petitions, thanksgivings, meditations and insights into the God and life, and all kinds of worship.

So the word is the main transmitter of the content which is manifold and abundant religious experience recorded in the medieval melodies of the Gregorian.

II.2. Gregorian is a chant overpassing and transcending the word with musical expression

On the other hand Gregorian is a *chant* that overpasses and transcends the word with much ampler purely musical expression⁷. The very nature of the music is to transcend a meaning of our ordinary communication. Musical sounds start where all other means of expression fail. And when the words fail the true jubilus of a purely auditory effusion emanates. Music has its own language and it does not need any translation because the things it enunciates cannot be said in any verbal language⁸. That’s what music is for.

On their own word and musical sound are independent media of communicating the meaning. They do not need one another’s supplement or endorsement. In the case of the vocal music they meet in their sovereignty for the equal cooperation. Sometimes they operate so separately that we can not find any coherent relationship between specific word and its auditory expression: they co-exist in contingent proximity. But Gregorian chant is a very special case of vocal music.

We approach the very core of this especial musical tradition which distinguishes it among all other musical styles and traditions of the Western world and constitutes its singularity.

III. All means of musical expression of Gregorian chant are subjected to the purpose of conveying the particular experience recorded in its word

Both layers of Gregorian chant – verbal and auditory – have been grown into inseparable synthesis. As a matter of fact the integrity is so great and relevant that it is more accurate to speak not of the unity of these two media but the one phenomenon with two dimensions of one manifestation. Dom Daniel Saulnier describes the rhetorical dimension of the chanted text in the following way: “The *ars bene dicendi* or *recte loquendi* [...] profoundly impacts the aesthetic of Frankish-Roman [Gregorian] repertoire. The association between melody and text becomes a veritable symbiosis: it accords a previously unknown reverence in the Roman repertoire to pronunciation and articulation (of syllables), to accentuation (of words and of incises) and to the general economy of the phrase”⁹. Content and especially the rhetoric of utterance of the word determine all musical characteristics of this musical tradition. We can see it in all instruments of its musical expression.

III.1. Modality

Mode presents the objective matter for a musical composition: a scale of the sounds of a different pitch which is unique in its catalogue of the degrees and a specific pattern in which the intervals are organized. But different modes also embrace a specific and quite mysterious characteristic of *ethos* which might be roughly

⁵ Hourlier, Dom Jacques. *Reflections on the Spirituality of Gregorian Chant*. Paraclete Press: Orleans, Massachusetts, 1995. P. 8.

⁶ “People of God’ represents its identity in song”. Pope Benedict XVI. *Liturgy and Sacred Music. / Online Edition: April 2008* Vol. XIV, No. 2. // <http://www.adoremus.org/0408SacredMusic.html>.

⁷ See the beautiful explanation: “You can look up the meaning of the words *lux* and *fulgere* in the dictionary, but the Introit from Christmas Mass of the Dawn, *Lux fulgebit*, transports you a thousand leagues beyond the dictionary”. Hourlier, Dom Jacques. *Reflections on the Spirituality of Gregorian Chant*. Paraclete Press: Orleans, Massachusetts, 1995. P. 7.

⁸ “Meaning of music resides in it itself”. Sodeika, Tomas. *Martinus Buberis ir žydiškojo ‘graikiško mąstymo’ alternatyva. / Martin Buber. Dialogo pricipas I. Katalikų pasaulis: 1998. P. 22.*

⁹ Saulnier, Dom Daniel. *The Gregorian Modes*. Solesmes, 2002. P. 14.

defined as a specific modal sentiment¹⁰. The notion of modal ethos is quite known and discussed in Western musicology starting with the philosophers of Ancient Greece; it also widely prevails in oriental music. However complicated and controversial the issue was, the very fact of a theoretical discussion implicates that the subjective sentiment of the listener does have a certain objective foundation in the musical construction which in turn manifests a particular connection between the states of the soul and the diverse categories of musical discourse.

III.2. Rhythm

Rhythm describes the variety and organization of the accentuated and non-accentuated syllables or other rudimentary musical elements and the pattern of their change. For those who are used to the transparent mathematical structures of a classical Western musical theory rhythm of Gregorian presents an exclusive challenge. There is no any mathematical unit or scheme which could quantify the sequences of the sounds and render the key for the exact recreation of the rhythm. Rhythm of Gregorian is ordained by the text. The musical expression of the verbality of Gregorian depends on its linguistic auditoriness: Gregorian chants a Latin word. Therefore the particular rhythm of this language becomes the pivot for its musical rhythm. Since Latin bears the characteristic of melodic accentuation so does Gregorian: “the accented (or tonic) syllable lifts itself upward, while, correlatively, the final syllable rests on an architectural note. The other syllables are carried along in this movement: pre-tonic syllables interpretation of the high point and post-tonic syllables in transition toward the final, all in the unity of only one rhythm, that of the word”¹¹. All this structure circuits the accent which is “the soul of the word and the germ of musicality”¹². Meanwhile the concrete length of the sound is determined by the logic of rhetorical intonation.

III.3. Agogic

Agogic, which in classical musicology is given a role of a secondary set of the interpretational suggestions, in Gregorian presents the most sapid characteristic. According to the admonition of the rigid rule of interpretation, – “There are no equal sounds in Gregorian”. Every sound has its specific characteristic of a strength, volume, accentuation, tempo – speed of a flow, manifold diversity of the nature of the flow, the tendency and direction of a further development etc. etc. One lacks the words to describe all this abundance of the nuances in the auditorial nature of a sound. That’s what a special notation – very specific musical script, neumatic in its nature – was invented for: to draw the sound in the patterns that exceed the one-dimensional signs of the scriptorial systems of our time. The variety and complexity of the neums is so huge as the separate science had to be initiated in order to be able to address the issue – semiology. Semiology examines the reasons for the diversity of the signs in order to deduce the fundamental principles for an authentic and objective interpretation¹³. And the source of this abundance is not only the auditorial variety of a specific linguistic musicality but the rhetoric of the message which is rendered by the text.

Auditory expression of the text in Gregorian “has for its goal not to decorate the text, but to amplify the speech. [...It] gives to words a burst of volume and a range that they would not have in a simple declaration; it gives them a very specific presence, one adapted to the holy nature of sacred space and rite.”¹⁴ All musical characteristics of Gregorian chant serve the purpose of manifestation of a particular rhetoric address which is being mediated through the words and musical sounds of the concrete song. That rhetoric can also be understood as the structural texture of intonation which always is significantly subjective, because of its personal nature¹⁵.

The specific nature of all these main musical characteristics of Gregorian chant explicates the unanimous relationship between its auditorial and verbal layers. They are so close one to another that in fact they can be hardly distinguished as two separate media even for the analytical purposes: in order to determine the features of a sound one has to listen to a word. Virtually we deal here with a merely theoretically discernible two aspects

¹⁰ Saulnier, Dom Daniel. *The Gregorian Modes*. Solesmes, 2002. P. 20.

¹¹ Saulnier, Dom Daniel. *Gregorian Chant. A Guide*. Solesmes, 2003. P. 33.

¹² Ferretti, Dom Paolo. *Esthétique Grégorienne*. Solesmes, 1938. P. 9.

¹³ Cardine, Dom Eugene. *Gregorian Semiology*. Solesmes, 1982. P. 8.

¹⁴ Saulnier, Dom Daniel. *Gregorian Chant. A Guide*. Solesmes, 2003., P. 29.

¹⁵ Mocquereau, Dom André. *A Study of Gregorian Musical Rhythm*. Solesmes, 1989. P. 144.

of the one. This proximity of the auditory and verbal in Gregorian chant manifests its rare beauty and makes this musical tradition to be the true jewel in the heritage of the world music.

One might argue that this is the case of any vocal music. And that is partially true. Many vocal pieces start with the words and then evolve in the musical development in the auditory medium adding something significant to the verbal meaning and leading the content of the artistic message much further than the mere words.

Gregorian chant also starts with the word and since this word is sung in a very particular musical manner it also transcends the pure verbal sense of the message. But differently than in many other musical traditions it does not go anywhere further and clings to the word itself constituting exceptional symbiosis of the word and its musical manifestation.

IV. Challenge of interpretation

Yet this particularly close relationship between the auditorial and verbal expression of the Gregorian song makes it to be the true trap for the performer of the Gregorian chant. Performance of the Gregorian presents to musician the tasks that are quite unique in musical literature¹⁶.

With some history of restorational investigation of Gregorian chant we have a certain library of Gregorian melodies that can be read in the books with a slightly exotic notation of a *nota quadrata*. Unfortunately this is exactly where our Western musical literacy ends. The first problem that performer encounters with resides in determination of a rhythmic value of the notes. We find quite many instructions and references for determining the length of the note or the strength and the nature of accentuation in the neums with the help of interpretational rules of semiology. But the final decision is to be made only after assessing the meaning and significance of the word, syllable and even the neumatic element inside a syllable in the context of the entirety of the message in which separate words are only transcendent elements of the conveyance. Integral unity of experience that particular piece imparts is the true and ultimate source for the clue of interpretation.¹⁷

This is how we get into the situation that the experience itself becomes the most relevant and informative source for the interpretation. The words of the song pronouncing the experience are not helpful here, because these words themselves and their understanding are exactly the very object of our concern: it is their interpretation that is sought here. Therefore they can not give it themselves. That's why we are looking for the references for their interpretation outside them in something which is beyond the word. And that is experience.

Understanding always requires some common base. It does address the layers of experience which are inter-subjective for a speaker and a listener¹⁸. This is how communication is enabled: in order to understand the one who speaks or sings to us, we need to have some common base for that understanding, some experience which would be familiar and akin to the things that the speaker is trying to convey. The closer we are in our experience – the better we understand. However message always contains something new. Otherwise, it is not a message but just a repetition of something that has already been said, understood, experienced. In that common basis of the mutual experience the action of transcendence is to be executed which brings to us a true “increase of understanding” speaking in hermeneutical terms of H.G. Gadamer¹⁹. The process of interpretation turns into the investigation of the message and attempt to penetrate into the understanding of the authentic experience. Performer is always the first listener of the message. He also is a potential mediator of it. But can he mediate it without understanding?

The mysterious performative nature of the music has attracted many different possible approaches. Intention of a composer and the performative result of a performer has always been very intriguing problem of the very fundamentals of musical aesthetics. However treated relationship between the composer's intention and the performer's interpretation has always been a knot of a great tension. Is performer able to reach and manifest the true idea of a creator? Or maybe the music once created contains its own content independent from the intentions of composer – an independently developing life beyond any control, understanding and

¹⁶ See on the *matter of rhythm* in Mocquereau, Dom André. *A Study of Gregorian Musical Rhythm*. Solesmes, 1989. P. 29.

¹⁷ “Any choir director worthy of the name should begin by entering deeply into the proper character of the piece to be performed, into its reality at once concrete and traditional”. Cardine, Dom Eugene. *Direction of Gregorian Chant*. Solesmes, 2003. P. 29.

¹⁸ This feature of understanding is described as “vor” structure in hermeneutics. See more about it in Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993. P. 152. Also in Gadamer, Hans-Georg. “Apie supratimo ratą”. *Istorija. Menas. Kalba*, sudarė Sverdiolas, Arūnas. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1999. P. 27.

¹⁹ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. “Estetika ir hermeneutika”. *Istorija. Menas. Kalba*, sudarė Sverdiolas, Arūnas. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1999. P. 60.

eventually even the knowledge of a creator? And how great is the role of performer? Can he add something to message that he is mediating from himself? Leading it through his own personal experience to what extent does he alter it?²⁰

Classical Western aesthetic theory acknowledges even the possibility of not-knowing: even the case when performer preserves a distance from the content that he is mediating is the case of an aesthetic act. When the interpretational signs are followed and the rules obeyed with a satisfying precision listener can make up an interpretation of his own from the musical elements presented to him by performer, even if the performer has no claim to convey the content of the message in the case, for example, of not-understanding it.

Is this possible with Gregorian chant?

Historical circumstances under which it has been born and matured determined for the Gregorian a very different situation. It is the problem of the performative directions and the problem of the different nature of neumatic musical notation. Performative signs that Gregorian is written in were intended for a different purpose and function than the contemporary Western musical script. Today's script is designed for an accurate reconstruction of the sound. The perfection of the script consists in its ability to translate the sound into the visual sign and enable the reverse process in the closest possible proximity. The musical script of the Xth century has never had such a purpose. The signs were scarce hints for the memory of those who all shared the auditory experience of the singing together, which was singing "by ear" and not "from list"²¹. Therefore there is such a huge amount of performative information that has never been recorded in the neums although is virtually implicit: the most obvious accents, prolongations or some other particularities of the pronouncement that have not been written down because of its evidence – there was no practical need for it²². That's how experience turns into the primary source of interpretation.

Only after one is from ear to ear submerged in the continuous experience of the tradition which exercises the performance of the experience of the sacred, the knowledge is attained that is ultimately competent for the developing a musical interpretation. But by then he already is an active participant of the Mysterium.

V. Musical performance of Gregorian chant is a Mystagogical provocation

Thus I arrive at the conclusion that musical performance of Gregorian chant is a mystagogical provocation. Pronunciation of the Word of God is a very liturgical act in its essence. It requires the reenactment of the religious experience that this word expresses and thus provokes the performer of Gregorian chant into the immediate religious action which is the ultimate goal of a mystagogy of any kind.

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²⁰ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Wahrheit und Methode*. Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1960. P. 127.

²¹ Mocquereau, Dom André. *A Study of Gregorian Musical Rhythm*. Solesmes, 1989. P. 24.

²² See one of many issues in Mocquereau, Dom André. *A Study of Gregorian Musical Rhythm*. Solesmes, 1989. P. 278.

Santrauka

Garsas sakralumo tarnystėje: mistagoginis grigališkojo choralo aspektas

Sakralinė muzika egzistuoja ne tik tam tikroje nepriklausomoje išbaigto meninės veiklos produkto formoje. Pagal savo prigimtį pirmiausia būdama gyvu atlikimo procesu ji pasitarnauja kaip religinės patirties įgijimo įrankis ir savitas kelias, vedantis į sakraliuosius religinio tikėjimo slėpinius. Visose tradicinėse religijose muzika vaidina svarbų vaidmenį įgyjant ir tobulinant skirtingų maldos būdų įgūdžius, ji naudojama meditatyvinėse praktikoje kaip reikšminga dvasinės patirties mokykla.

Senosiose religijose asmuo, kuris buvo atsakingas už inicijuojamojo įvedimą į slaptuosius mokymus ir ritualus, buvo vadinamas mistagogu. Mistagogijos terminu nusakoma tikinčiojo kelionė dvasinės brandos link, kurioje jis yra lydymas tam tikro tarpininko ir padėjėjo. Straipsnyje svarstomas klausimas, ar muzika savo grynai garsine prigimtimi gali tapti faktoriumi, kuris padeda tikinčiajam dvasiškai augti ir leidžia įgyti dvasinės patirties tokiu reikšmingu būdu, kad atlikėjiškas garso menas būtų branginamas ir puoselėjamas kaip ypatinga dvasinė praktika. Tyrimo objektu pasirenkamas grigališkasis choralas, kuris atstovauja vieną iš „meldimosi garsais“ būdų ir pateikia eksplityvų išskirtinio garso ir juo išreiškiamos patirties tarpusavio santykio pavyzdį.

Grigališkasis choralas yra muzikinis žodžio ištarimas. Gyvas žodžio tarimas yra tiesioginė šios muzikinės tradicijos kilmė, apibrėžianti pačią jos esmę ir savitą prigimtį. Kita vertus, choralas yra giedojimas, kuriame verbalumas yra pranokstamas ir peržengiamas itin turtingomis muzikinės išraiškos priemonėmis. Abu grigališkojo choralo sluoksniai – tiek žodinis, tiek garsinis – yra suaugę į neišskiriamą vienvę. Žodžio tarimo turinys ir ypač jo retorika nulemia visus muzikinius šio giedojimo bruožus.

Tai matyti grigališkosios dermės sampratoje, kurioje ypač svarbi tampa ganėtina slėpinga *ethos* charakteristika. Subjektyvią klausytojo jauseną atitinka objektyvi muzikinė konstrukcija, kuri savo ruožtu liudija tam tikrą ryšį tarp sielos būsenų ir skirtingų muzikinio diskurso kategorijų. Grigališkojo choralo ritmą lemia retorinės intonacijos logika. Nėra matematinio vieneto ar schemas, kuria būtų galima kvantifikuoti garsų sekas ir kurių būtų galima paversti raktu tiksliai ritmo atkūrimui. Agogika, kuriai klasikinėje muzikologijoje skiriamas antraeilis interpretacinių pasiūlymų vaidmuo, grigališkajame chorale atstovauja pačią turiningiausią garso charakteristiką. Kiekvienas garsas yra apibrėžtas konkrečiu stiprumu, garsumu, akcentavimu, tekėjimo greičiu ir pobūdžiu, tolesnės garsinės plėtotės kryptimi etc. Ši gausa, užrašoma neumine notacija, išreiškia ne tik konkretaus lingvistinio reiškinio muzikinę įvairovę, bet ir pranešimo, perteikiamo šiuo muzikiniu diskursu, retoriką. Visos grigališkojo choralo muzikinės charakteristikos tarnauja konkretaus retorinio kreipinio, kuris giesmėje yra įtarpinamas žodžiais ir muzikiniais garsais, ištarimui.

Šis išskirtinai glaudus ryšys tarp žodinės ir garsinės giesmės išraiškos grigališkojo choralo atlikimui kelia uždavinius, kurie yra unikalūs Vakarų Europos muzikinėje literatūroje. Neuminė notacija sukurta kitu tikslu nei modernūs muzikinis raštas. Modernieji muzikiniai rašmenys yra skirti tiksliai garso rekonstrukcijai. Neuminiai ženklai yra štrichinės nuorodos atminčiai tų, kurie giedodami remiasi bendra giedojimo „iš klausos“, ne „iš lapo“, patirtimi. Todėl yra gausybė su atlikimu susijusios informacijos, kuri niekuomet nebuvo pažymėta neumomis, nors jose implicitiškai akivaizdi. Galutinis sprendimas dėl atlikimo interpretacijos priimamas tik įvertinus žodžio, skiemens ir netgi atskirų neuminių ženklų, sudarančių skiemenį, reikšmę ir svarbą viso muzikinio pranešimo prasmės kontekste. Šitaip giesmė išreiškiama ir įgyvendinama religinė patirtis tampa pirminiu muzikinės interpretacijos šaltiniu. Tik iki ausų panirus į nenutrūkstamai besitęsiantį gyvą tradicijos, kuri praktikuoja sakralumo patyrimo „atlikimą“, procesą, įgyjama žinių, suteikiančių galutinę kompetenciją, reikalingą muzikinės interpretacijos sukūrimui. Tačiau tada atlikėjas jau būna tapęs aktyviu slėpinio dalyviu.

Muzikinis grigališkojo choralo atlikimas yra mistagoginė provokacija. Dievo Žodžio tarimas savo prigimtimi yra liturginis veiksmas ir kaip toks reikalauja juo išreiškiamos patirties sudabartinimo, šitokiu būdu grigališkojo choralo atlikėją provokuodamas religiniam veiksmui, kuris yra mistagogijos galutinis tikslas.