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Before Notation

Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636), encyclopedist and historian, defined music as follows:

Music is the practical knowledge of melody, consisting of sound and song; and it is called music by derivation from the Muses. Since sound is a thing of sense it passes along into past time, and it is impressed on the memory. From this it was pretended by the poets that the Muses were the daughters of Jupiter and Memory. For unless sounds are held in the memory by man they perish, because they cannot be written down.

Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri xx*, trans. E. Brehaut (New York: Columbia University, 1912), 136.

From this it can be seen that the musical notation of classical antiquity had been totally lost by the beginning of the Middle Ages, and that all music was transmitted by oral tradition. So automatically did medieval thinkers associate music and singing with the processes of memory that St. Augustine employed it in a famous passage from his *Confessions* to illustrate his theory of time. Note that time is conceived of as a kind of moving point, representing the awareness of the present, that constantly encroaches upon the future and turns it into the past. It is not a measurable or divisible quantity; lengths of time are simply collections of successive and discrete “nows.” This conception of time is integrally bound up with the “additive” quality of pre-fourteenth-century musical rhythm. The reforms of the *Ars Nova* in the fourteenth century (see p. 67 below) depended first of all on the supplanting of this theory of time by the more modern one of time as a systematically divisible entity, a view that arose in connection with the invention of clocks, just as Augustine’s theory fits the workings of an hour-glass.

The mind performs three functions, those of expectation, attention, and memory. The future, which it expects, passes through the present, to which it attends, into the past, which it remembers. No one would deny that the future does not yet exist or that the past no longer exists. Yet in the mind there is both expectation of the future and remembrance of the past. Again, no one would deny that the present has no duration, since it exists only for the instant of its passage. Yet the mind’s attention persists, and through it that which is to be passes towards the state in which it is to be no more. So it is not future time that is long, but a long future is a long expectation of the future; and past time is not long, because it does not exist, but a long past is a long remembrance of the past.

Suppose that I am going to recite a psalm that I know. Before I begin, my faculty of expectation is engaged by the whole of it. But once I have



The Carolingian propaganda that the Roman liturgy was composed by Pope Gregory the Great under divine inspiration is illustrated in a Frankish Sacramentary (a book prescribing the liturgy for Mass and Office) of *c.* 870. The picture adapts a motif already established in illuminated manuscripts containing Gregory's famous Homilies on Ezekiel. According to this tradition, the Pope, while dictating his commentary, often paused for a long time. This puzzled the scribe, who was separated from Gregory by a screen. So he peeped through and saw the dove of the Holy Ghost hovering at the head of St. Gregory, who resumed his dictation only when the dove removed its beak from his mouth. (It is from such representations of divine inspiration that we get our expression, "A

begun, as much of the psalm as I have removed from the province of expectation and relegated to the past now engages my memory, and the scope of the action which I am performing is divided between the two faculties of memory and expectation, the one looking back to what I have already recited, the other looking forward to the part which I have still to recite. But my faculty of attention is present all the while, and through it passes what was the future in the process of becoming the past. As the process continues, the province of memory is extended in proportion as that of expectation is reduced, until the whole of my expectation is absorbed. This happens when I have finished my recitation and it has all passed into the province of memory.

What is true of the whole psalm is also true of all its parts and of each syllable. It is true of any longer action in which I may be engaged and of which the recitation of the psalm may only be a small part. It is true of a man's whole life, of which all his actions are parts. It is true of the whole history of mankind, of which each man's life is a part.

St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1961), 277-78. Copyright © R. S. Pine-Coffin, 1961. Reprinted by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

The lack of a musical notation became a stumbling block when the Frankish king Charlemagne (742-814) sought alliance with the Pope as part of his strategy to bring about the political unification of Europe under his throne. One of the conditions of that unification was the standardization of the liturgy of the church and its attendant music according to the use of the Roman rite. Local liturgies of northern and central Europe (the so-called Gallican rite) had to be suppressed and supplanted by the imported chant of the Pope's church. In the absence of a way of writing music down, the only means of accomplishing this was by importing cantors from Rome who could teach their chant by rote to the Frankish cantors. The difficulty of the task was compounded by resistance. In order to persuade the northern churches that the Roman chant was in fact better than theirs, it was claimed that Pope Gregory I (reigned 590-604)—who was actually an important reformer of the liturgy but not, as far as we know, a musician—wrote the entire body of "Gregorian" chant directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. As a divine rather than a human creation, then, the Roman chant was lent the prestige it needed to triumph eventually over all local opposition. The two accounts given below of the early laborious attempts to reform an orally transmitted chant

little bird told me.") Such depictions of Gregory in musical connections all date, of course, from a period long after his death. The actual Gregory could not have dictated music under any circumstances, since in his time there was no way to write it down, as his contemporary Isidore of Seville (see p. 41) advises us quite explicitly. *Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Lat. 1141, fol. 3. All rights reserved.*

vividly reflect the situation. One of them gives the Roman side of the story, the other the Frankish. Each side attempts to blame the other for the initial failure. The real culprit, though, was the lack of musical notation.

From John the Deacon, Life of Gregory the Great (873–75)

St. Gregory compiled a book of antiphons. He founded a *schola* which to this day performs the chant in the Church of Rome according to his instructions. He also erected two dwellings for it, at St. Peter's and at the Lateran palace, where are venerated the couch from which he gave lessons in chant, the whip with which he threatened the boys, and the authentic antiphonal. Again and again Germans and Gauls were given the opportunity to learn this chant. But they were unable to preserve it uncorrupted, since they mixed elements of their own with the Gregorian melodies, and their barbaric savageness was coupled with vocal crudeness and inability to execute the technicalities.

Charlemagne too was struck, when in Rome, by the discordance between Roman and Gallican singing, while the Franks argued that their chant was corrupted by our chanters with some poor melodies; ours probably showed the authentic antiphonal. On that occasion, so the story goes, Charlemagne asked whether the stream or the source carried the clearer water. When they answered the source, he added wisely, "Then we too, who till now drank the troubled water from the stream, must go back to the clarity of the source." Hence he soon left two of his assiduous clerics with Hadrian. After good instruction they restored for him the early chant at Metz and, by way of Metz, all over Gaul.

But after a long time, when those educated in Rome had died, Charlemagne discovered that the chant of the other churches differed from that of Metz. "We must return again to the source," he said. And at his request—as present-day trustworthy information states—Hadrian sent two chanters, who convinced the king that all had corrupted the Roman chant through carelessness but that at Metz the differences were due to their natural savageness.

*From Notker Balbulus, De gestis Karoli
Imperatoris (Life of Charlemagne)*

Deploring the widespread variety in chanted liturgy, Charlemagne got some experienced chanters from the Pope. Like twelve apostles they were sent from Rome to all provinces north of the Alps. Just as all Greeks and Romans were carping spitefully at the glory of the Franks, these clerics planned to vary their teaching so that neither the unity nor the consonance of the chant would spread in a kingdom and province other than their own. Received with honor, they were sent to the most impor-

tant cities where each of them taught as badly as he could. But in the course of time Charlemagne unmasked the plot, for each year he celebrated the major feasts in a different place. Pope Leo [III, 795–816], informed of this, recalled the chanters and exiled or imprisoned them.

The pontiff then confessed to Charlemagne that, if he would lend him others, they, blinded by the same spite, would not fail to deceive him again. He suggested smuggling two of the King's most intelligent clerics into the papal *schola* "so that those who are with me do not find out that they are yours." This was done successfully. These two chanters returned to Charlemagne; one was kept at court, the other sent to Metz at the request of the bishop. Because of the latter's zeal the chant began to flourish not only there, but throughout Gaul.

Translations of both excerpts slightly adapted and abridged from S.J.P. van Dijk, "Papal Schola versus Charlemagne," in *Organicae voces: Festschrift Joseph Smits van Waesberghe* (Amsterdam: Instituut voor Middeleeuwse Muziekwetenschap, 1963), 23–24 (John the Deacon), 27 (Notker).

Another reason for the success of the Charlemagne-inspired standardization of liturgical music may have been the kind of pedagogical method described below. It will be recalled that one of Gregory's relics mentioned by his biographer was the "whip with which he threatened the boys," so the eleventh-century report given here would seem to describe a time-honored practice.

At Nocturns, and indeed at all the Hours, if the boys commit any fault in the psalmody or other singing, either by sleeping or such like transgression, let there be no sort of delay, but let them be stripped forthwith of frock and cowl, and beaten in their shirt only, with pliant and smooth osier rods provided for that special purpose. If any of them, weighed down with sleep, sing ill at Nocturns, then the master giveth into his hand a reasonably great book, to hold until he be well awake. At Matins the principal master standeth before them with a rod until all are in their seats and their faces well covered. At their uprising likewise, if they rise too slowly, the rod is straightway over them. In short, meseemeth that any King's son could scarce be more carefully brought up in his palace than any boy in a well-ordered monastery.

Costumal of St. Benigne, Dijon (c. 1050), in Edward J. Dent, "The Social Aspects of Music," *Oxford History of Music*, I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901), 190–91.