

EDITORIALS

How Teach the Chant?

Having just seen a circular advertising 120 “modern” melodies for the hymns of the breviary, one might also ask “why teach the chant?” But allow me to take the chant for granted as long as it is possible to do so, and write about chant education. It is a matter of regret that much in these paragraphs must be cast in the first person, for I can speak only from experience, and a sometimes desultory experimentation.

Why is it that despite our church-supported schools we teach our children almost everything but the music (and language) of our worship? What do we need—text-books, teachers, or attitudes? I should guess that we can use all three, with the order of importance just reversed. Text books should certainly contribute in a controlled situation, one where, let us say, it is possible to set up a complete primary program. But let me say at once that a music series which boasts that students using it will, over a period of several years, learn the minimum suggestions of the 1958 Instruction is pure bunk. We learned far more in the old days from Justine Ward. (No plug here, for she, alas, is no longer a subscriber to *Caecilia*, being angry about you-know-what).

The first and obvious point is that no text book is a substitute for a teacher. If he or she is not informed, the best contrived series in the world will be of no help. This writer and his colleagues do not work in a controlled situation. They have their charges in grammar school for one, two or three years at the outside. Even if we were convinced otherwise, we could not afford the luxury of a protracted series. We have, then, for some years, simply started cold with the *Kyrie* and *Graduale*. This becomes the basis for our music-reading, and of all our music for worship. They learn solfege, they learn tonal patterns, and they learn tonal production. One is not particularly concerned about the intricacies of Gregorian nomenclature (having forgot half of it himself), but the students see the neumatic picture, and they perceive the vocal line. The transition to polyphony is simple. Whether it is Josquin, Palestrina, or Lassus, they must be able to solfa the gentleman first. Because of the limited situation indicated above, we are still riding with the moveable do. We admit its fairly obvious disadvantages, and under some unforeseeable circumstances are liable to change; but we caution nonetheless that anyone who imagines that the fixed do solves all pitch problems is living in a partial dream world, even if he or she is concerned only with conservatory singers.

The usual diversion to chironomy and the placing of the ictus is, in my opinion, a costly one. It is a kind of direction by the initiate for people who never become initiate, and must surely dash its foot upon the stone of congregational singing. This writer has tried to take criticism and compliment astride—from the *New Yorker* to the *Boston Pilot* (some distance!)—but one of the few of either which has ever really meant much was the twin-edged comment of an Iowa nun after a mass which involved some thousand school children: “. . . an idiot could follow you.”

I have indicated that we use no text books because we have been so conditioned. But I suspect that it would be a good idea for many music teachers, granted they are both musical and teachers, to use no text books. For it ought by now to be clear that years of text book teaching has not resulted in the singing of the chant. Oh, I don't mean Mass VIII or XVI or the Requiem which five year old practitioners the country over can whistle, or dabs of “chant prayers” and a half dozen antiphons! I am by now quite sure that you will have to use the *Graduale Romanum* as your text if you want to get the show on the road, that you will have to throw your students in the water if you want them to swim. Let no secondary school teachers say that their high school students cannot be taught to render the propers! Of course not. If they haven't been taught to read. Of course not. If their teachers are willing to give over a semester to *Peg o' My Heart*, or *The Sound of Music*, or *Brigadoon*. Why is who teaching what? One remembers an essay of Father Benedict Ehmann, written for one of the early bulletins of the N.C.M.E.A., and he should dearly love to see it reprinted, in italics, in *Musart*.

Permit me a few further personal remarks. I should like to make it plain that I accept the Neo-Solesmes style as a possible method of singing chant. I also accept as quite possible the methods of Dom Johner (Beuron), Cogniat (Fribourg), and Vyverman (Malignes). And that of Urbanus Bomm, O.S.B. (Marialaach), Msgr. Overath and Dr. Fellerer, which three edited the Schwann *Graduale*. For that matter, one accepts as possible methods the mensuralist publications of Peter Wagner, Dom Jeannin, O.S.B., the Jesuits Bonvin and Vollaerts, and Doms Meuus and Gregory Murray. One is here concerned about the guts of chant, whether Vatican, Neo-Solesmes or Mensuralist. It has been suggested that it is now time to ditch the vertical episema. I suggest that it is past time for all non-mensuralist schools of interpretation to ditch the silly, arbitrary business of enforced binary and ternary rhythm. The Solesmes people persist in counting from the rear—just a turn less

respectable than counting from the front (Johner, Vyverman). Cogniat at least speaks of quatern rhythms. Chant—Gregorian, Roman, even Medecian—cannot be cast in all sorts of classical and romantic concepts without losing its own inner vitality. For it must not be a method. It can only be an experience. This manner of singing partook, from the earliest Christian times and back to the synagogue, of things charismatic. And who can contain the Holy Spirit with artificiality?

F.S.

REVIEW

Records

Chant Samples:

Das Kirchenjahr in Gregorianischen Choralen, St. Rombout-Chor Mechelen, Msgr. Julius Vyverman, Director. Opera 3139, European Record Club, Verlags GMBH, Stuttgart.

Gregorian Chants, sung by the Edmundite novices under the direction of Marie Pierik. Folkways Records FR 8954.

Gregorian Chants for the Feast of Corpus Christi, sung by the monks of St. John's Abbey. Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn.

Chants of the Liturgical Year, sung by the Sisters of the Precious Blood, St. Mary's Institute, O'Fallon, Missouri.

These albums probably do not essay the entire field of chant recordings during the past year, but they are the ones which have come this writer's way, and they are an interesting quartette. It is not terribly important that three of the four eschew the neo-Solesmes principles, but it is perhaps important that there are groups singing something more than the ephemera of chant who obviously think it of some moment that the rest of us know about it. And this reviewer avers that it is a point that should be literally bashed into the head of every choirmaster, novice master and mistress who has the temerity to hang on to such a post.

About the offerings of the choir of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Malignes: let it be said at once that the work is expertly defined,