

F.A.M.E. February 2008

Gregorian Chants

Costume: Brown robe with rope belt

Props: Time line

To begin the lesson, darken the room, begin playing one of the Gregorian Chants (track one is 3:53) and enter the room, slowly and meditatively, in your monk costume.

Gregorian Chants, which is the music you just heard, is probably the first music that was ever written down and thus saved for future generations.

Let's look at the time line to get a better picture of how far back in time we can place this type of music. (Bring out the time line). We will stop in the 400s. This is a time in history called the Dark Ages. This was a time when most people knew very little beyond their own daily lives. Most people did not know how to read and write, so it was difficult to transfer knowledge from one generation to the next. Virtually no music, to anyone's knowledge, came out of the Dark Ages. We will move into the late 500s, the beginning of the Middle Ages, which is the time that we are talking about in this lesson.

How would you teach me a song if you and I did not know how to read and write? (you would sing it to me and I'd repeat the words and tune until I could sing the song). Many of us learned how to sing songs in this manner (twinkle, twinkle little star, the alphabet song, camp songs). That is how people learned songs in Medieval times, by listening to those who already knew the songs.

The Catholic church was an important source of music at this time because music went along with all of the various parts of the church mass/service. The two important events the church celebrated were Christmas and Easter. Then the priests of the church added extensions to both of these events, and there were many special feasts/celebrations for other special occasions or for special saints. Each and every one of these special events called for its own special music, along with the "ordinary" music that went with every church mass/service.

It was monks in the church who did the singing in the church. (Monks are men who devote their life to serving God and the church). It is said that people in the towns and villages would know the time of day and the season of the year by what chants the monks were singing. (There were over 3,000 chants).

Pope Gregory I (the Pope is the head of the Catholic Church), who was Pope from 590-604, organized a singing school called the Schola Cantorum (Latin for School of Singers) in order that there would always be enough singers for the Pope's choir in Rome. The entire course took 9 years to complete and consisted of memorizing all the music of the church

Gregorian Chants were the kind of music heard in the church in the late 500's to the middle 800's. The reason we know about these chants is because Pope Gregory I, decided to organize the thousands of chants the church had been using. (Scholars believe many of the chants were of Greek/Hebrew origin). Pope Gregory had monks write down the words, which were in Latin. They only wrote the words because a system for writing music had not yet been invented. In the 600's, monks began to experiment with symbols to show in a general way how to sing the words.

The monks used a four line staff (versus modern day five line staff) and used symbols to remind the singer to either go up or down, not exactly what note to sing. The symbols were referred to as neumes (*nooms*). Eventually, as there were so many chants, the monks needed a system to suggest the course of the melody. (*The link below shows the Gregorian Chant Notations, showing the neume with the modern equivalent* <http://lphrc.org/Chant/index.html>)

.(Play another one of the chants).

Does this sound like very complicated and exciting music? Another term of these chants is plain song. There was only a single melody, usually no other instruments to accompany the singers. There is no regular beat, just the melody following the natural inflection of voices as it sang the Latin words. Gregorian Chants are popular today. The CD we are listening to has sold over 5,000,000 copies since introduced in the mid 1990's.

Gregorian chants were simple songs, no rhythm, no beat, no accompaniment, sung in church. Now let's hear about this month's F.A.M.E. artist, whose works are found in churches throughout Italy.