

Cantus in Choro

A GLOBAL VIEW OF CHORAL SINGING



In quest for chant primeval

A new disc exploring the origins and development of chant is explained by its creators, Benjamin Bagby and Katarina Livljanić, in conversation with *Malcolm Bruno*

Two of Europe's most innovative ensembles for medieval music, *Sequentia* and *Dialogos*, have recently released a wide-ranging survey of plainsong, immediately compelling in concept and execution – in short, without equal on disc. Much more than an atmospheric album of medieval chanting, it offers the listener a veritable map-in-sound, looking back a millennium to the ecclesiastical world of Charlemagne. It seemed thus completely fitting that I might meet its musical intendants to probe the mysteries of their *Chant Wars* in one of the most ancient medieval *quartiers* of Paris.

Before I had had a chance to open the CD, I'd imagined that from its rather apocalyptic title *Chant Wars* might have portrayed the fiery encounter of monody stemming from the ancient Near East juxtaposed with the conventions of medieval Europe. But as I would learn from the Bagby-Livljanić team, whose brainchild this is, the diversity and disputation in question is an altogether European affair, taking us back to the very roots of western music as we have come to know it. For as a performing art the history of European music has, at its heart, the not always amicable relay of tradition from one generation to the next.

Having thought of chant – unlike folksong – to be in essence a branch of a scribal authority, one might carelessly have imagined it to be as 'immutable' as *The Book* itself. But the chant of the Carolingian world, looked at as the endgame of a tradition reaching back to Pope Gregory and before, would not be free in the dissemination process from what one might call the 'inextricable relationship of message and messenger'. And what a surprise if we thought that questions of 'authenticity' were a recent phenomenon! 'In fact,' adds Bagby, 'the same myths of authority and authenticity of chant have been re-cultivated by the monks of Solesmes since the 19th century.'

So I was taken off guard to be reminded by Benjamin Bagby and Katarina Livljanić just how common the desire for 'original perfection' is to us. 'It was Charlemagne in the ninth century who was said to have posed the question, in resolving a dispute between his own Frankish cantors and those of the pope in Rome, each convinced of their own superior authenticity, "choosing between a stream and its source, which has the purer water?" –

the implied answer, of course, being the Source, or Rome!’ Appropriately then, our journey in the opening track of *Chant Wars*, ‘Gregorius praesul’, depicts Pope Gregory in full splendour, an ‘Adam’ figure for chant, who, according to medieval legend, received the whole chant repertoire – now known, of course, as Gregorian – through the auspices of a dove (the Holy Spirit) perched upon his shoulder!

‘But the quest for an “original, golden age” of chant is illusory, though Rome as the centre of Christendom would often claim it as its own,’ explains Bagby. ‘Chant is as perennial throughout the world as an intoning of the word; it is part and parcel of the human voice, speaking in song; it must have developed simultaneously across Europe – and indeed in the East and beyond.’ The section headings of *Chant Wars* tell the story succinctly: (1) the myth of Gregorian Chant; (2) traces of oral chant traditions from Rome and Gaul; (3) Germanic voices; (4) a new Roman chant tradition; (5) chant in Frankish books and memories.

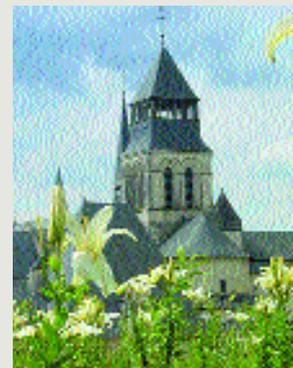
‘As with liturgy,’ Livljanić suggests, ‘chant developed with the flavours of the different languages and cultures of Europe. Croatia, where I was born, is a Catholic country on the border of the Orthodox world, beginning in Serbia and then moving further southward toward the Mediterranean. Not only can those influences be found, but the amazing presence of Glagolitic chant, that ancient local Slavic culture in which the Mass was quite exceptionally celebrated alongside Latin. Even so, the Roman authorities would time and again attempt to stamp their authority on language and style, but diversity would always push its way through. Language that gathers up cultural distinctiveness in our daily acts of communication is one very important reason.’

We think of Latin today as a dead language – existing, that is, solely as a written language from the fall of the Roman Empire one and a half millennia ago. ‘But Latin was in fact the lingua franca of Europe among the literate classes as well as the common language of written communication,’ Bagby continues, ‘and although there is nothing approaching Harold Copeman’s comprehensive *Singing in Latin* encompassing the period before 1500, we know that the variation in Latin pronunciation – from the Slavic/Germanic east, north to Celtic or Norse lands or south to the Iberian peninsula – must have been striking and driven completely by the vowel sounds and consonants of so disparate local languages, from Moorish in the Iberian peninsula to Saxon in the east, and so on.

‘Remember the sound of language isn’t something incidental to the meaning of the text;

it’s inextricably connected to the mode – the colour and shape of the melodic phrase – of music itself’. As Bagby speaks, I think of English in the world today from London to Newcastle to New York to Mississippi to the subcontinent of India and all the literature and song in the ‘same’ language in those places. How connected, but how distinct! And as he speaks, I remind myself as well that this is no casual comment from Bagby, for quite uniquely after years of research he has performed and recorded both the Icelandic *Edda* in old Norse, and most recently the first portion (some two hours!) of *Beowulf* in Anglo-Saxon.

‘I am drawn to this archaic period,’ he continues, ‘because its modal music printed its stamp on European language and culture (its languages having equally given the modes their voice); and from those modes, from that song, came the music of the medieval, renaissance and modern world.’



Chant is as perennial throughout the world as an intoning of the word

But beyond the sound of language, of a Latin which had become in effect, by pronunciation, a series of different local languages, why song with the sacred text? ‘There are a number of reasons,’ Livljanić says. ‘Of course sung or intoned text would carry better in the vast spaces of a medieval cathedral. But I think there is more. The voice in song not only carries above the ambient noise of a cathedral, but it is an elevated form of delivery – it’s not like getting information from a PA system in a big public place. You pay attention on a different level when you hear; and you also may feel as if you are in a trance – what St Augustine called chant’s seductive quality. The transmission of the message, not just its content, can transform the recipient!’

opposite Benjamin Bagby and Katarina Livljanić Photo courtesy of Benjamin Bagby and Katarina Livljanić, *this page* Chant Wars was recorded in Fontevraud Abbey Photos courtesy of Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud



Alleluia: Proschete iada Vol. lat. 5319, fol. 90

Allelu-ia

Allelu-ia

Vi Pro-schete ia-de i-ma, to no-mo i-ma; cil-na-te to us
i-ma-n is ta rimata tu sta-ma-to i-ma.

Allelu-ia

Vi Ani-mo en parz volte to sta-ma i-ma pro-theosopos
prodi-ma-tu ap' ar-chis.

Allelu-ia * ph. 11. 11. 11. 11. 11.

'And,' Bagby adds, 'it's a way of extending time, in which expression and text are united, and in which expression carries the text.' What a fascinating dichotomy, as one reflects: the sound of language is the basis of the melody of chant, but yet the text can only be perceived as carried by that same melody that it created!

And what of the singers? Chant, I point out, for the non-expert is quite often seen as an addition, as an entr'acte for the reconstructions of big polyphonic settings of Mass and Vespers sequences. But here the plainsong is centre stage. 'And it is essential,' both explain, 'that it is not performed casually by an indifferent group of singers with good sight-reading skills, which is so often the case with professionals who turn up for just another early music gig!'

To hear the very musically diverse tracks of *Chant Wars* one can understand why. Far more than a tidy, passive, calculated unanimity of delivery, their

singers, with no sacrifice to clarity, are completely immersed in the text and the contours of its melodic release, which is clearly the outcome a great deal of performance together. 'Before recording begins there is an intuitive, organic wholeness that has room for the personalities of individual voices in concert.'

The magnificence, for example, of the rich opening unison tutti – unified but variegated – in 'Gregorius praesul' breaks into an organum, so full of the delights of its resulting intervals, each with its own distinct colour, that one wonders how later music could ever have corrupted us into reducing sound rather glibly into two neat sets of intervals, consonant and dissonant. Most notably in this chant, there is a prolongation of an 'unresolved' major second that is so totally unexpected and foreign, that one's contemporary ears are mesmerised in the hearing.

But the issues in *Chant Wars* are not only musical but vocal, as two further examples show. The antiphon 'Ad Dominum dum tribularer' (Psalm 120) shows how passionate (indeed with an unashamed vibrato) chant unison can be without sacrificing its focus. The fibre of its sonic intensity reveals itself in the verse following an opening tutti in the voice of Olivier Germond. His oboe-like denunciation contrasts remarkably with Bagby's in 'In convertendo Dominus': here the voice is smooth, the clarinet following the oboe, and the idiom miles away, the little quilisma-like flicks of ornamentation sounding almost like a Palestinian folksong. Yet another 'instrumental' colour appears in the 'Domine, exaudi orationem meam', the text from Psalm 102 that appears in the opening of the Requiem Mass. Here Katarina Livljanić's own lyricism stretches the listener's sensibilities in a sound neither simply male nor female nor both, summoning forth the text.

And there is stylistic diversity. The oriental influence makes an appearance in a setting of an antiphon based on Psalm 78 in Greek, where an incredibly sumptuous reiteration of a single 'alleluia', lasting some 45 seconds in its opening statement, is followed by a solo verse, alluring not only in the exotic flavour of its Greek but with the underpinning of a drone on a perfect fourth so pure and stable in tone as to be unreal; while the opening psalm of the Frankish section 'Laudate Dominum' also boasts an Alleluia refrain with such a swing in its confirming unison, its influence feels more like French Africa than Frankish Paris! And so proof of this *Chant War* pudding, recorded in the beautiful and atmospheric Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud, is indeed in the tasting. □

www.sequentia.org
www.ensemble-dialogos.org

Dialogos and Sequentia
Photo courtesy of Jean-Marie Jobard,
the 45-second Greek Alleluia

Score courtesy of Benjamin Bagby and Katarina Livljanić

Win a free copy of
Chant Wars
– see page 67 –