

The Wanderer

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Chant in Liturgy Today

An Interview with Gisbert Brandt

By Arlene Oost-Zinner¹

There is a movement afoot that is succeeding in dispelling a myth long propagated by liturgists and many parish musicians. The myth suggests that people respond most positively to music that mimics what they are accustomed to in their everyday lives, and that the music we hear at Mass can do this, so long as we do it all in good taste. Thus do these musicians seek out what sounds familiar in the hopes of eliciting singing or encouraging participation at Mass. This usually means music that has a modern sound, is sentimental or upbeat and superficially pleasing, but has no basis in the intellectual, ritual, and aesthetic traditions of the Roman rite.

The error in this thinking lies in the fact that the Mass, properly understood, is intended to be furthest thing from daily life. It is Christ's gift from Heaven to us, and as such has been guarded by the church from profane imposition since the apostolic age. It has its own musical language, Gregorian chant, whose melodies and rhythms grew up in connection with the texts of the psalms that were sung by the earliest Christians. An understanding of this intimate relationship between the text of the Mass and the chant, which is its native complement, is a necessity if the Mass is to encourage reverence, supplication, and a sense of greater meaning on the part of those who attend.

The aims of Vatican II reforms were clear: the Mass belongs to those for whom Christ's sacrifice was made. It is for the people to take an active role in the celebration, and in a manner reflective of all generations and true to the tradition and heritage of the Roman rite. Without excluding new composition based on authentic texts and traditional musical motifs, and which meet the criteria of being truly sacred and truly art, Gregorian chant is the only form of musical expression named as specifically appropriate to the rite.²

With the purpose of returning this music to the people, and universally so, Pope Paul VI, in 1974, issued a minimal publication of basic chants that Rome wanted to see on the tips of the tongues and embedded into the memories of all Catholics around the world. The booklet, *Jubilate Deo*,³ was sent to all Bishops, accompanied by a letter, *Voluntatis Obsequens*, by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship. This letter was more than a friendly invitation: it was call for the implementation of the copyright-free Vatican publication. Musicians and liturgists "cannot refuse to the Gregorian chant the place which is due to it," said the letter.

¹ President of the St. Cecilia Schola Cantorum in Auburn, AL. Contact: Arlene@ceciliaschola.org

² Though polyphony is also cited as permissible, as well as other sacred music.

³ Download free of charge at www.ceciliaschola.org

Yet Gregorian chant is seldom heard in parishes today. What went wrong? Without embarking on a discussion including both fact and speculation, let it suffice to say that liturgists of today, largely through no fault of their own, have neglected to adhere to the directives handed down by the council. What remains are misconceptions ranging from the theological to the aesthetic to the practical. Unarmed with proper formation, and having never been exposed to chant in its proper context, many liturgists and parish musicians consider the chant old fashioned on first hearing, and see it has having no potential for impact on our modern lives.

But now, a return to the authentic music of the Roman rite is being led by a new generation, many of whom were children in the 1960's and 70's. Individuals of this generation, discouraged by the widespread lack of solemnity found in many parish liturgies today, have sought to acquire an informed understanding of the proper function of music in Mass, and the kinds of emotion and deeper meaning, embodied by Gregorian chant, that can only be understood in terms of the Sacrifice.

One such man is Gisbert Brandt, who teaches music at the Cathedral School in Cologne, Germany. To have studied with Gisbert Brandt is to understand that the chant depends and thrives on an ear for true, salvific joy. A veteran teacher of children and adults, Mr. Brandt, without straying from techniques handed down to us from the monks of Solesmes, encourages singers of all ages to make chant a dance: a vibrant and living part of the celebration once again.

Mr. Brandt was invited to serve as schola conductor for the *Church Music Association of America's*⁴ 14th annual Colloquium on Liturgical Music and the Restoration of the Sacred, held at Catholic University the during the fourth week of June, 2004. The aim of this annual meeting is to assist church musicians in maintaining the highest artistic standards in composition and execution, and to preserve the Church's treasury of sacred music, especially Gregorian chant. He was interviewed during this meeting in Washington, DC.



Were you exposed to chant growing up?

Not in any depth. I was born in Cologne, and my parents and grandparents are from Cologne. People in Cologne have a particular kind of relationship to the Catholic Church – it is very casual. They don't take things by the letter. They don't think it is necessary to go to Mass every week, and my family certainly didn't.

At my parish they chanted the ordinary – the Kyrie, and the Gloria, and so on. I sung it by ear, of course, but knew no more of it than that. After making my first communion, my attendance became less and less frequent, until I wasn't going to Mass at all.

What marked your return to the chant?

When I was at the University of Cologne, a fellow student asked me to come and listen to the schola he was directing. I was involved in music, but as I said, hadn't been at Mass in a long time. I thought, well, why not. I went to the rehearsal, and was fascinated from the beginning.

⁴ www.sacredmusic.blogspot.com

What were you studying at the time?

Musicology and Art History. Cologne is a big University. There was a famous professor in the department of Musicology during this time: Dr. Karl Gustaf Fellerer. He had founded the Schola Cantorum Coloniensis. I began singing with the group almost immediately.

Has your group grown over the years?

Gabriel Steinschulter, is still directing, and I, and others, are still singing. Of course all of us have gotten older. He has six children, and I have three. It can be difficult for new people to jump in and join us. We no longer sing in liturgy every week, and rehearse with less frequency as a result.

You are primarily a teacher.

I taught piano and guitar while I was at the University, just to make ends meet. And I have always loved teaching. In fact I switched my major from musicology, which was too theoretical, to music pedagogy. Now I teach music and mathematics.

But most music teachers these days don't teach Gregorian chant.

Right. At one point Gabriel told me about the Ward method, [which encourages the use of a system called *Solfeg* in learning to sing and read the chant]. No one in Germany had heard of it at the time. This was in 1980. He said go to Holland, and he gave me the address of the school. I went for a visit, and was enthusiastic about what I had found. I knew I had to learn this.

I went and studied in Holland for a few years, and then brought it to Germany. I organized the first Ward Course in Germany in 1985, and brought in a teacher from Holland to teach it. We had about twenty students.

How did you get from there to the Cathedral?

When I finished my studies with the Ward method, I went to the Cathedral in Cologne where they had a boys' choir and offered my services. Here is where I met Fr. March, an American with close ties to Catholic University. He was a monk, and the choirmaster there. When he heard that I had studied the Ward method, he hired me on the spot to work with the cathedral choir.

The boys would come in the afternoon, and I taught chant. Then Fr. March would work with them on polyphony. After one year of working with the cathedral choir, the Cathedral school was founded. I've taught there ever since.

Is this a music school?

It is a regular school where the children learn reading, and writing, and arithmetic, and all of the other standard subjects. But it is special in that it places an emphasis on music. In most schools in Germany, if there are too few teachers, the first courses that are eliminated are music, then art, then sports, and of course, religion.

We started with 25 children, but now have 200 kids. I do the Ward method with all of them. They are all my pupils. I work four times a week with the younger ones, and twice a week with the older ones. Then in the fourth grade they go into the Cathedral choir – the boys' choir or the girls'

choir. Since there are girls in the school, we now have the two choirs. Of course before that no girls sang in the Cathedral.

You emit great joy when you teach, encouraging students to let the lines of music dance around the room. How do you account for this?

I think I am just a joyful man. I am very fortunate. I love teaching. I am teacher, body and soul. I am especially fond of teaching children. Nothing is more fun.

Where should one begin in teaching chant to children?

One should begin with the Ordinary. It has the advantage of having an unchanging text, and one can concentrate on the different, characteristic melodies. Children also respond well to melodies that are filled with joy: *Introitus Gaudeamus*, *Introitus Jubilate Deo*, *Communio Cantate Domino*, *Communio Factus est Repente*.

Naturally it is difficult to select the right thing without knowing the particular children: how old they are, what kind of musical background do they have, etc. It is also important to sing chant with children where it is most at home: in the church, in the Mass.



Why does chant sound so different to our ears?

People are accustomed to a different kind of music today: music with a strong emphasis on rhythm, or music that is composed for many voices. One always hears chords or harmonies. One rarely hears a single voice, unaccompanied. Imagine a pop song, or a favorite operatic aria without instrumental accompaniment. But the chant is totally unaccompanied.

And chant uses different scales than those we are accustomed to today. Today we have only major and minor scales. But the chant uses eight different modes. Some of them sound more major, some more minor, but others sound unfamiliar to our modern ears.

You mentioned rhythm, as well.

Much of today's music is closely tied to dance. Regular, repetitive rhythms invite us to start moving. This doesn't apply to pop music alone. Even classical music is in many cases inspired by dance. Think of waltzes, minuets, and mazurkas. In baroque music we have suites, which consist of short dances. Chant doesn't have any of this.

Should chant be sung in liturgy today?

Chant makes the Divine accessible. Chant is liturgical music; it belongs in the liturgy. It is first and foremost meditative music. It is never self-serving, but serves to draw the listener into the liturgy. It does not exist for our entertainment. The answer is a resounding "yes."

But to discover its beauty, one must make the effort to approach it without prejudice. One must listen and allow it to have its effect.

Ridding oneself of prejudice is an enormous challenge.

Begin with children. They approach things innocently. They are not burdened with theories. For them, chant is not a question of worldview. They do not ask: does chant please me, or can I think of reasons to reject it? Children are more receptive to the beauty of chant than we are as adults. They readily acknowledge what sounds sacred. In this way, we can all learn from them.

