III. The Chant of the Psalms

The Psalm was recited with such minimal inflections of the voice that this recitation resembled speech more than song.

Saint Augustine[1]

The traditional and ancestral manner of transmitting a sacred teaching, such as we see in the religions that venerate the Bible as well as in other religious cultures, has received the technical name of "cantillation." This neologism, created in the beginning of the twentieth century,[2] designates a style in which speech is predominant over the music, but in which the latter plays the role of a regulator and of a kind of solemn vesture. It is a sort of declamation that is midway between speaking and singing, and that has for its goal not to decorate the text, but to amplify the speech.[3] Cantillation gives to words a burst of volume and a range that they would not have in a simple declaration; it gives them a very specific presence, adapted to the stylized solemnity of a sacred space. From the instant it resounds, it evokes another world and generates an ethos propitious to religious rites. However, its musical material remains so rudimentary that it hardly deserves the name of song.

1 Concerning the manner of singing instituted by Saint Athanasius; from *Confessions* X, 33.

2 Solange Corbin, "La cantillation dans les rituels chrétiens," *Revue de Musicologie* 67 (July 1961), 5.

3 Solange Corbin, *L'Église à la conquête de sa musique* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1960), 43.

It is in this context of such "stylized speech"[4] that we must situate the birth of Western sacred chant. It was a style that was well suited to the solemn oral teaching of an assembly at a time when the faithful did not have the ability to read.

The Musical Process of Cantillation

The musical material of cantillation is extremely limited, generally confined to only a few degrees [of the scale] and rarely exceeding the ambitus of a fourth. One of these degrees assumes the function of the principal note, and the others function of the principal note, and the others function as its ornaments. However, the word *ornament* must not be taken here to have the meaning that it donned in later musical tradition. Ornaments, *"agréments,"* of classical music have a superfluous aspect. The ornamentation of cantillation is, on the other hand, absolutely essential. It consists of neighboring, contrasting degrees which, when heard, give prominence to the principal note and also clarify the modal structure.

All the musicality is ordained by the text: the ornamentation is at the service of the words or the phrase; the rhythm is one of solemn declamation.

4 Jacques Viret, *Le chant grégorien* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme, 1986), 65.

The musical enhancement of the text is assured by three processes:

- accentuation
- punctuation[5]
- the jubilus.

In reality, it is analysis that distinguishes these processes. They are not completely independent of each other. The two last are particularly closely overlapped.

Accentuation

The languages of the Mediterranean basin generally have a singing quality, and they are endowed with accents that are somewhat melodic. Such was the case with Old Latin, according to the testimony of Cicero himself, which recognized in words a *cantus obscurior*, that is, a latent or hidden song.[6]

In Gregorian cantillation this singing quality results in a tendency toward a melodic elevation of the accented syllable; in elaborated musical compositions the accented words end up even taking the shape of the melodic curve of a perfect arc.

5 Marie-Noël Colette, "L'invention musicale dans le Haut Moyen Âge: ponctuation et transposition," *Analyse musicale* 18, 1er trimestre 1990, 7–17.

6 "There is in speaking a kind of hidden song… for nature has placed in each word an acute sound" (*Orator ad M. Brutum*, XVII, XVIII).

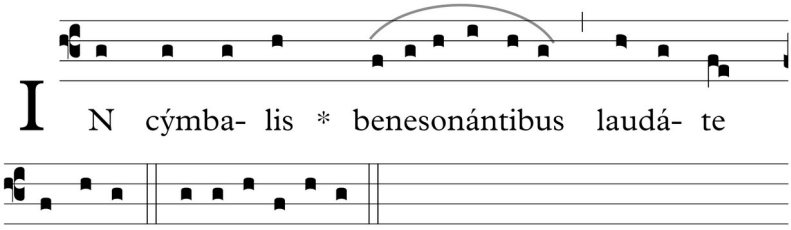

Figure 7: The melodic shape of the Latin word

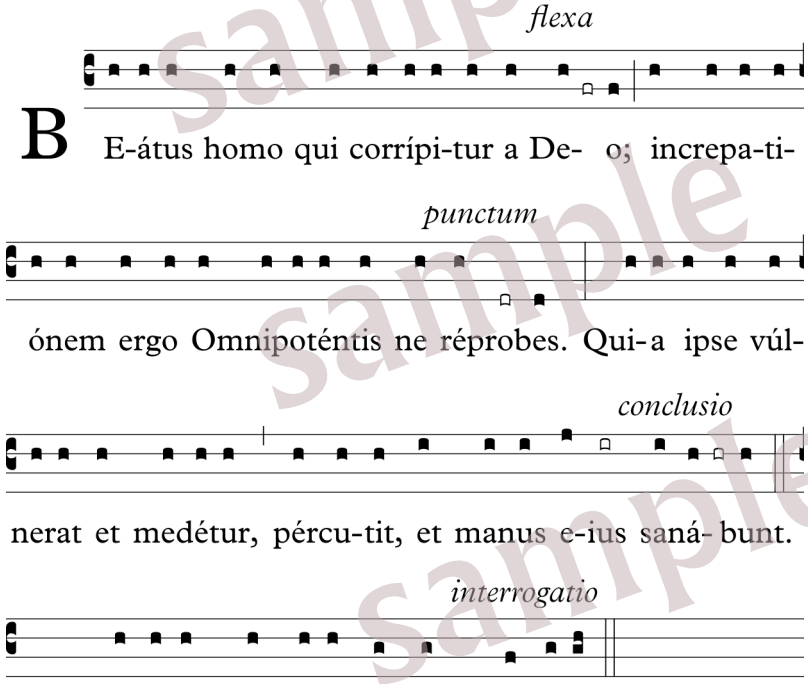

Figure 8: Tone for the readings of the Office

This is the phenomenon of the *accentus* (from *ad cantum*: "for the chant"); the accent, "the soul of the word and the germ of musicality,"[7] that orders all musical invention. Because there is a genuine dynamic in the Latin word, the word itself is a melodic movement. The accented (or tonic) syllable lifts itself upward, while correlatively the final syllable rests on an architectural note.[8] The other syllables are carried along in this movement: pre-tonic syllables in preparation of the high point and post-tonic syllables in transition toward the final, all in the unity of only one rhythm, that of the word.

Punctuation

Punctuation is an integral part of discourse. It is, first of all, a vital requirement for the reader, who can fulfill his role only on the condition of being able to take breaths and, in the process of so doing, of momentarily interrupting the sung delivery. It is also required just as much by the listener, who is guided toward a full understanding of the sung discourse by the prioritized ensemble of pauses, divisions, and caesuras treated tactfully by the singer.

Moreover, isn't silence also part of the music? Is not the silence its breathing and its life?

7 *"Anima vocis et seminarium musices*," according to the beautiful expression of Martianus Capella (fifth-sixth centuries); cf. Dom Paolo Ferretti, *Esthêtique grégorienne*, Paris: Desclée, 1938 (repub. Solesmes, 2005), 9.

8 Jean Jeanneteau, "Style verbal et modalité," *RG* 36:4 (1957), 117.

In fact, several centuries before the invention of musical notation, the first signs that appeared in manuscripts are related to those of punctuation. They indicate to the reader the less important, normal and more important punctuations. Questions are often specified by means of a special sign. These first musical indications, called *ecphonetics*, testify to an oral tradition that has the tendency of placing caesuras in the discourse on lower pitches, and more precisely on the degree immediately below that of the recitation note. As we will see while studying the pentatonic scale, this degree of the caesura is situated a whole-step or a minor third below the note of cantillation.

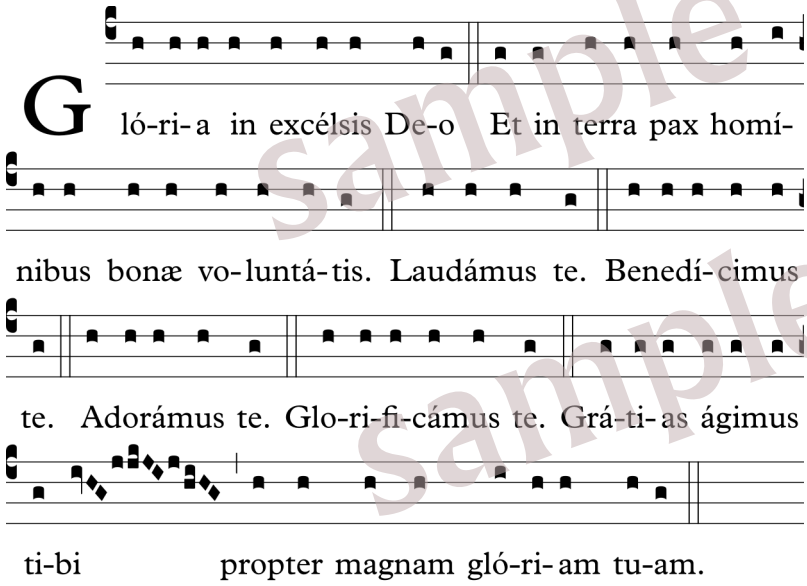

Figure 9: First strophe of the Ambrosian Gloria

This process of descending to lower notes for the finals — and correlatively ascending to higher notes for the accented syllables — will develop and grow in the tones for the readings, and will contribute to the development of Gregorian composition.

The jubilus

The third musical process utilized by primitive cantillation seems to be quite archaic. It is the jubilus, or melisma. This is a moment of pure music that interrupts the syllabic recitation and contrasts with it, while employing a "vocalise" on a single syllable. According to the unforgettable expression of Saint Augustine,[9] the chant "then liberates itself from syllabic limits." The jubilus is not any less an authentic form of musical composition bound to the cantillation: the jubilus is not music from which someone has deleted the words, or from which something is missing. It is a song beyond words, beyond the somewhat narrow concepts that the words evoke.

The tie between the jubilus and cantillation is of a functional order: the jubilus is traditionally situated at the penultimate logical division of the discourse, on the final syllable.[10] Over the centuries, this traditional placement

9 *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 32, 1.8, and 99.4. It is important to note that in these texts Saint Augustine has in mind the chant of the responsorial psalm and not that of the Alleluia.

10 Msgr. Ernesto Teodoro Moneta-Caglio, *Lo jubilus e le origini della salmodia responsoriale* (San Giorgio Maggiore [Venezia]: Jucunda Laudatio, 1977); Dom Jean Claire, "La place traditionnelle du mélisme dans la cantillation," *Yuval* V, Jerusalem, 1986.

of the jubilus, which goes back to the ancient cantillation of the Jewish Bible, was little by little forgotten. The jubilus was moved progressively toward the ends of phrases and especially toward the word accents, which were perceived as a lyric and expressive pole of the composition.

Psalmody: its Musical "Material" and its Forms

The basic liturgical unit studied in the previous chapter has taught us to recognize the *lectio cum cantico* as the ancestor of Western sacred chant. Literarily, it was first a scriptural Canticle, then later a Psalm. But what shape, what musical style did this chant take, over the course of the centuries?

Psalmody without refrain (in directum)

The liturgy of the first two centuries is not directly accessible to us. It is known only by means of a set of deductions. During this early time, the chanting of the Psalm is not yet very distinct from the reading of the Scripture lesson. It is the same minister who gives the reading and the Psalm successively. The cantillation of the Psalm is hardly more ornamented than the reading, and it joins harmoniously with the reading.[11] The chant is assigned to the soloist, while the assembly exercises its involvement in the liturgy simply by praying through

11 In certain manuscripts, the reader is warned of the passing from the reading to the Canticle by the rubric: *Hic mutas sonum* [here you change the melody]. Cf. *PM* vol. XX, tables p. 37*.