

19 What angels? Gregorian chant and spiritual meaning in a secular world: Reflections on an artistic collaboration between Gregorian chant ensemble *Schola Nova Silvana* and British poet Hilary Stobbs

In conspectu angelorum psallam tibi.

— Ps. 137.1 (138.1)

[In the countenance of the angels shall I sing praises unto you.]

Introduction

Gregorian chant is a vast and extraordinary repertoire of devotional song, mostly in Latin, used for centuries in the formal liturgical worship of Christian faith communities all over medieval Western Europe.¹

1 There are few introductory-level publications on Gregorian chant for the musical practitioner and the ones available have some notable limitations. In the UK, *The RSCM Guide to Plainchant* (RSCM 2015) provides a starting point. Its American counterpart, *Beginners Guide to Singing Gregorian Chant Notation, Rhythm and Solfeggio* (Jones 2010) is of rather less value. The *RSCM Guide* offers a chant primer by Dr Mary Berry (reprinted unchanged from a 1979 RSCM publication), supplemented by an *Anthology of Plainchant* by John Rowlands-Pritchard which includes welcome transcriptions of chants from English sources but omits any reference to early chant notations (neums) and their rhythmic interpretation, pioneered by Dom Eugène Cardine (1970/1981). Rembert Herbert (1999), on pp. 63–93 contains a very accessible general introduction to chant and its history and much

Gregorian chant remains officially the ‘special music’ of the Catholic Church.² However, the liturgical practice of Latin chant, as a full annual cycle of daily worship, is now limited to very few, mostly monastic, communities.³

Meanwhile, millions of ordinary people are drawn to listening to chant recordings in the privacy of their homes for reasons not necessarily

else of value, to be discussed later in this chapter. There are reservations about the use of the vernacular and of psalmody in *The RSCM Guide* (2015) and in Herbert (1999). In the scholarly field, a number of important syntheses have been forthcoming over the last twenty-five years. David Hiley (2009) offers an outstanding historic and stylistic overview aimed at the serious student and the highly educated amateur. Richard Crocker (2000), addresses a non-specialist public while being thoroughly informed by a life of scholarship and musicianship. Concise and strong on the Benedictine perspective is Dom Daniel Saulnier OSB (2009). Huston Smith (1996) is a beautifully illustrated volume based on a PBS television special with a foreword by Thomas Moore and contributions by chant scholars Richard Crocker, Peter Jeffery, Margot Fassler and others (with accompanying CD but, alas, no examples of music notation). General readers interested in the religious and historic context of chant will enjoy Katharine Le Mée (2003) which follows on from her popular *Chant: The Origins, Form, Practice, and Healing Power of Gregorian Chant* (1994), conceived as a companion volume to the best-selling 1994 recording. A magnificently illustrated study by Christopher Page (2010) presents a historical synthesis of considerable depth that will reward the advanced student and the adventurous beginner.

- 2 As expressed in the documents relating to church music from the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), for example *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 41: ‘All things being equal, Gregorian chant should hold a privileged place, as being more proper to the Roman liturgy’ and 116: ‘The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, all other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.’ For a concise and balanced account of the controversies surrounding the role of chant within the Catholic Church, ‘honourably retired’ in the course of the major liturgical reform which saw traditional Latin replaced by the vernacular in most parishes (Crocker 2000: 15–18 and 222). For a (conservative) Catholic perspective on the current theology of chant, as developed by pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), see Alberto Donini (2012).
- 3 A shortlist of places and communities in the UK where Gregorian chant can be heard is provided on the *Royal School of Church Music* website under ‘plainchant resources’ (<<http://www.rscm.com>>).

determined by religious faith or liturgical practice as witnessed by the successive waves of best-selling recordings of chanting monks.⁴

This complex phenomenon raises a number of questions:

1. What inherent qualities make Gregorian chant so surprisingly attractive to modern sensibilities despite its near total lack of 'entertainment' value (unaccompanied unison singing, devoid of beat and metre, moving within a seemingly narrow range of expression, in a dead foreign language)?
2. What is the spiritual/cultural appeal of medieval devotional chant in a secular world where many people may have no meaningful personal connection to the faith and the liturgy that created it?
3. What new and inclusive opportunities can be created, live and outside the world of pop charts, to capture and communicate the power of this ancient religious art form for diverse modern audiences in a meaningful way, even in a spiritual way?

This chapter will explore such questions, mainly from a practitioner's perspective while also touching on wider issues of religion, spirituality, music and the imagination in a secular context.

4 The most famous example is the 1994 release of *Chant: Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos* (Angel Label, distributed by EMI), featuring a now iconic cover image in the style of Magritte, with hooded monks floating in a cloud-dotted blue sky. An article by Nicolas Soames in *Billboard* (2 April 1994, 8) reported that '[a] group of Spanish monks, living in an enclosed Benedictine order have followed Luciano Pavarotti and Henryk Gorecki into the European pop charts, selling more than 500,000 units in classical music's latest stunner.' Their success was followed in 2008 by the release of *Chant: Music for Paradise* by the Cistercian monks of Stift Heiligenkreuz in Austria (label: Digital Distribution Serbia). As Anite Singh reported in *The Telegraph* (1 August 2008), this record remained for two months on the UK top 20 chart 'along the likes of Amy Winehouse ... They have sold 400,000 copies and are on track to reach platinum status.' These two blockbusters have easily outsold long-established brands such as the many fine recordings by the Benedictine monks of Solesmes in France (full discography at <<http://www.solesmes.com>>) or of Clervaux in Luxembourg. Richard Crocker reflects on the *Chant* phenomenon in his essay 'Chant for the Masses' (Crocker 1996: 100–119).

The first section ('An Artistic Partnership') describes a current performance project exploring new ways of making chant accessible for diverse audiences: a collaboration between the author's choir, *Schola Nova Silvana*, a secular Gregorian chant ensemble in the New Forest area and prize-winning contemporary British poet, Hilary Stobbs. The second section ('A Meeting of Minds') widens the scope of reflection to explore the meaning of devotional chant in a secular world more generally. The last section ('Coming Full Circle') will return to the music, asking what makes Gregorian chant so uniquely rewarding, for singers and listeners alike, regardless of their religion.

An artistic partnership

In the autumn of 2016, I invited a number of non-professional singers from the New Forest area in Hampshire (UK) to join me in forming a Gregorian chant ensemble, subsequently established as *Schola Nova Silvana*.⁵ After twenty years of building choirs of all abilities in different community contexts, mostly through world music repertoire,⁶ it was a return to the music I have felt most passionate about since my late teens and all through my twenties.⁷

5 See the choir's website at <<http://www.scholanovasilvana.org.uk>>.

6 Mostly in Camphill and Steiner education settings, in New York, Pennsylvania and in the UK. For more details of my fifty-members world music choir, *Voices of the Forest*, see <<http://www.voicesoftheforest.co.uk>>.

7 Seminal influences on the way were Carlo Hommel (1953–2006), former organist of Luxembourg cathedral, who first opened the world of chant for me and pointed me to the work of Dom Cardine; my beloved teacher Michel Huglo (1921–2012) who awakened the medieval scholar in me and remained a fatherly friend for life; Calvin Bower who directed my doctoral work at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, and has shown me plenty of kindness ever since our first meeting; and perhaps above all Dom Georges Chopiney OSB (1921–1999), poet, cantor and organist of the abbey of St Maurice & St Maur in Clervaux, Luxembourg, whose strong,

I wanted *Schola Nova Silvana* to reach performance level quickly, while also allowing my singers to grow into the heart and authentic sound of what, at least in my understanding, is the West's most ancient known form of community singing. I therefore did not make music reading or knowledge of chant and Latin a prerequisite for joining the group. I only asked for enthusiasm about singing chant, commitment to learning new skills and some previous experience of singing with me in other choral settings or through voice studies.⁸

Being able to sing in tune was obviously a 'must' but I purposely made no selection of particular voice timbres. At this point, in 2019, we have an ensemble of 11 female voices plus myself as a cantor/conductor. Beside singing solo parts, I also join the choir discreetly in contralto range. While we would very much like to add a section of male singers, the current balance works well for us.

From the outset, I envisioned *Schola Nova Silvana* as a strictly secular choir – a vision embraced whole-heartedly by all of our members, whether they describe themselves as religious, non-religious or otherwise. Being a secular chant choir means we are united by a desire to sing and perform Gregorian chant in an authentic yet open and inclusive way where we do not express or promote religious devotion of any particular kind. Our

passionate and selfless singing, defiant of the inner darknesses he was fighting, still resounds within me. At Clervaux, I was also fortunate to meet Dom Jean Leclercq OSB, the eminent scholar of monastic spirituality, shortly before his death in 1993. The memory of the great man's warm encouragement, as well his remarkable witness to what he called his 'happy life' as a monk, will always be precious to me. During my graduate studies at Notre Dame, I was privileged to lead a group of fellow students in a production of Hildegard of Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum*. Our soloist, Nóirín Ní Riain, the renowned Irish singer, transfigured the solo part of Anima with her signature Celtic ornamentation and has remained a friend and a profound influence ever since. More recently, I have to thank Ann Buckley of Trinity College, Dublin, for the inspiration and friendship that encouraged me, among much else, to launch *Schola Nova Silvana*.

8 Most members of *Schola Nova Silvana* also sing in my world music choir, *Voices of the Forest*. Most are taking voice lessons with me in my private studio, established in 2013.

mission therefore does not include singing for religious services. We do make it our special mission, however, to sing in medieval churches and to help raise funds for the upkeep and restoration of those very buildings that were designed to have Gregorian chant resounding in them.

Our initial goal proved magnetic and our shared journey was transformational. Within a year of sustained practising the group was ready to perform. Our first outing at Salisbury Cathedral with a Michaelmas programme on 8 November 2017 gave us the confidence to reach out to the wider community.

Early on we had to face the practical difficulty of programming what is essentially liturgical music for performance outside the liturgy. During medieval celebrations of the Office or Mass, chants would always alternate with readings and ritual actions. Listening to live Latin chants after the manner of a modern concert or recital would run the risk of becoming monotonous and wearisome to audiences after a short time, not least because of the language gap.⁹ Moreover, some sort of historic/conceptual framework needed to be provided that would give audiences a clue as to what they were listening to, while a suitable mood needed to be set – all without tiresome introductory explanations.

We were clear about not wanting to recreate history or reducing the experience of chant to mere aesthetic enjoyment. Instead, we wanted to

9 Summing up his thoughts about the 1994 smash hit of *Chant*, Richard Crocker expressed the hope that ‘musicians may use this opportunity to make Gregorian chant a more integral part of our experience of performing and listening,’ speculating that ‘different renditions of the chant, each speaking more strongly, will speak only to smaller segments of the mass audience; by intent and necessity, they will not repeat the one-time phenomenon of the disc’ (Crocker 1996: 119). But surely, listening to recorded chants is very different to listening to a live performance. Record and CD tracks are arranged sequentially, as are traditional concert programmes, but the CD listener has the choice at every moment to stop, skip, or focus on something else: not so the concert goer. The success of the 1994 *Chant* recordings can indeed be replicated but only by other recordings, as has been shown by the Cistercians of Heiligenkreuz in 2008. Thus, it may not be the differentiation of *interpretation* that makes chant performances problematic in their reach of the masses: it is the different *conditions and expectations* that prevail in live performance situations.

invite experiences of a spiritual, liminal kind. In keeping with our secular identity this had to be done without assuming any particular framework of belief. History needed to be acknowledged without falling into detached reconstruction. Inner experience was to be allowed in without imposing a normative religious viewpoint.

I was looking for some kind of poetic, imaginative approach that would help introduce and interpret the chants while also acting as an aesthetic and linguistic ‘bridgehead’ for the audience: an authentic, bespoke and contemporary response to our specific repertoire, woven into the performance itself.

I contacted British poet Hilary Stobbs, who had just received a national award for her first published collection of poems (2016), and explored with her the idea of writing a body of poetry for us. I wanted something that would engage directly with the rich layers of meaning and experience contained in the texts that underlie Gregorian chant; something broadly connected with the cycle of the liturgical year but secular in character. Hilary’s response was strong and immediate:

I cannot remember our initial conversation, but very soon it became clear that the *Schola* initiative would develop into a partnership between music and the spoken word. I originally saw myself as accompanying the chant throughout the changing seasons of the year, yet this has grown into two disciplines meeting on equal footing. (Stobbs, in Lochner 2018)

This ‘partnership between music and the spoken word’ became an intimate creative collaboration between *Schola Nova Silvana*, Hilary Stobbs and recitalist Christopher Kidman which, so far, has resulted in three exciting performance programmes with more underway.¹⁰

10 ‘Michaelmas’, in the autumn of 2017 at Salisbury Cathedral; ‘Holy Week’ was presented in the Spring of 2018 at the church of St Michael the Archangel, Southampton, at *The Sheiling Special School and College* in Ringwood, Hampshire, and in Salisbury Cathedral in March 2019. *Stone over Water* was performed at Salisbury Cathedral in October 2018, with a pre-run at Minstead parish church, in the New Forest. More background information about our recitalist, Christopher Kidman, can be found on the *Schola* website.

Here is the poem that opens each of our performances (Stobbs 2017):

Stone

Stones are a store-place
 waiting for song.
 Notes touch them like fingerprints
 and seep into quiet hollows,
 knocked and rubbed down corners
 or fault-lines –
 a song can live in a fault-line
 and ring to warm the tread and stillness of hours.

Hilary Stobbs relates this piece to an experience she had as a young child:

I had walked (with my parents) out of a wood and heard singing but saw no-one. We soon came to an abbey where the door was open, and the singing seemed to ring around the stone pillars and walls, filling the space. I could almost touch it. This memory has stayed with me since the age of 5. *Stone* is written from this memory. Stone can resonate, vibrate and store up the music of hundreds of years. It says, 'come in and listen'. (Stobbs in Lochner 2018)

By placing the adult memory of a childhood experience at the very beginning of our musical and poetic journey we invite audiences to enter a realm of deep magic that belongs to all of us: the child's capacity for wonder, for being open to the many meanings of what the senses mysteriously disclose with such abundance. 'Come in and listen'. The silent beckoning gesture of the stones is emblematic of the ethos of our presentations.¹¹

From the entrance point of childlike, wondrous listening our programme ventures forth into the elaborate imagery of chant. The five antiphons that frame the psalms for Lauds and Vespers in the chanted Office for Michaelmas, for example, present a powerful sequence of images about angels and angelic hosts, culled from various scriptural

11 A similar gesture pervades the anthology by de la Mare (1960). De la Mare's introduction, in particular, offers a beguiling account of a young boy's journey into the mystery of the imagination, beckoned by an alluring old house that holds magical memories and important gifts for the boy's future (De la Mare 1960 ix-xxxix).

sources and placed next to each other like the golden icons of an Eastern iconostasis:

1. *Stetit Angelus iuxta aram templi, habens thuribulum aureum in manu sua.*
2. *Dum praeliaretur Michael Archangelus cum dracone audita est vox dicentium: Salus Deo nostro, alleluia.*
3. *Archangele Michael, constitui te principem super omnes animas suscipiendas.*
4. *Angeli Domini, Dominum benedicite in aeternum.*
5. *Angeli, Archangeli, Throni et Dominationes, Principatus et Potestates, Virtutes caelorum, laudate Dominum de caelis, alleluia.*¹²

[1. The angel stood next to the altar of the temple, holding a golden censer in his hand. 2. When Michael the archangel did battle with the dragon a voice was heard of those saying: 'All hail to our God, alleluia.' 3. Archangel Michael, I have appointed you the prince of all souls that are to be received. 4. Angels of the Lord, bless ye the Lord for ever and ever. 5. Angels, Archangels, Thrones and Dominations, Principalities and Powers, Mighty ones of the heavens, praise the Lord from the heavens, alleluia.]

The text and translation of these antiphons (each performed with doxology and repeat, leaving out the psalms) is made available to our audience in a printed programme. During our performance, however, the images experienced by audience members will be those heard in Hilary Stobbs' contemporary evocation of angelic presences (Stobbs 2017):

- 12 *Antiphonale monasticum pro diurnis horis* (Tournai: Declée, 1934), 1058–1059. The scriptural references are as follows: *Stetit angelus* (Apc 8: 2–5); *Dum praeliaretur* (Rev 12: 7–10); *Archangele Michael* (Dan 10: 13b, 21, Dan 12: 1); *Angeli Domini* (Ps. 102: 20–22); *Angeli Archangeli* (Col 1: 16). There appears to be no scriptural basis for calling Michael *principem super omnes animas suscipiendas* [the prince of all the souls to be received]. It is tempting to speculate that 'receiving of souls' is the function of the *psychopompos* of ancient religion who guides the departed souls from the earth to the afterlife (Anubis, Hermes, or Mercury). In the well-known American spiritual, *Michael row the boat ashore*, the figure of Michael is similarly given the role of the ferryman Charon from Greek mythology who carries the souls across the Styx and Acheron (or the river Jordan) – and 'Jesus waits at the other side'. These are remarkable instances of a creative blend between pagan and scriptural lore. I am very much indebted to Calvin Bower for tracing the biblical references for me.

The appearance of Saint Michael and All Angels

Strangers came
 with a quiet rustling of wings,
 an ever-shifting flock
 but not birds.
 Starlings were confused
 by the drumming of wings
 and arrows of wild geese
 crossed and re-crossed the sky.
 The air grew thick
 with the weight of bird song
 and each falling leaf
 had a hammer's ring.
 Now leaves just catch in the wind
 but the birds remember,
 they sing till their throats ache
 and their feathers shine.

The heavenly visitations in these lines are stepping resolutely out of the frame of religious icons. They conjure up experiences of the seasons of nature at the time of the autumn equinox: airiness and fluidity, the ephemeral, sensory and ambiguous, slowly gathering power until the images 'catch' and 'ring'. A bridge has been cast from the Middle Ages to the present. The poet comments:

I have always been intrigued by the changes throughout nature during the year, right down to the details of the sap in the veins of a leaf or the sounds of an acorn dropping. It has been a seamless progression to walk inwardly alongside the chant. [The translations of the chant texts] would be a touchstone maybe or perhaps a diving board! The Green Man finds a welcome home just as much as a cross that will be used for the Crucifixion. (Stobbs in Lochner 2017)

The inclusion of the *Song of the Green Man* in our programme is more than a 'nod to paganism'.¹³ This poem engages with an image found in many

13 Green man carvings are found in many medieval churches on corbel stones, misericords and choir stalls (for example on the spectacular carved choir stalls at Winchester Cathedral, from the fourteenth century). William Anderson has shown that medieval

medieval churches, showing the continuing relevance of the natural cycle of life, death and renewal across all ages and for all humanity, regardless of religious persuasion (Stobbs 2017).

Song of the Green Man

I have yellowed the green
and tended the flame
till orange and red
sizzle down vein
and the root in the dark
catches a spark.

I singe the high leaves
fire burns without sound
casts ash on the ground
bends sparks on the wind
and the sap cries behind

in a frenzy of death
and a greenness of birth

With its strong evocation of colours and sounds the poem subtly connects the experience of nature (the colours of autumn) with the sensory aspects of medieval liturgy itself: the coloured fabrics and reredoses, the carved figures and wall paintings of the saints.¹⁴ As an evocation of death and rebirth in nature, *Song of the Green Man* finds its place as easily at Michaelmas as in a Spring/Easter programme.

Green Man images derive from ancient, pre-Christian iconography, particularly of the nature God *Okeanos* (Anderson 1990: 34–49). Curiously, the pagan origin of the Green Man – and its connectedness to eternal life – are denied by some authors who would rather interpret it as a symbol of ‘sin and mortality’. (Hayman 2009: 34).

14 All of which were targeted during the Reformation when drastic preference was given to the textual and intellectual (i.e. biblical and doctrinal) over the ritual and devotional (i.e. sensory and gestural) in church services (Duffy 1992: 11–52, 91–116, 155–160).

Holy Week and Easter presented particular challenges. We were keenly aware that the Crucifixion would be by far the most difficult theme to introduce to diverse audiences. Hilary decided to take into her poem the opening lines of the hymn *Crux fidelis* from the Good Friday liturgy, written by Venantius Fortunatus in the sixth century (Raby 1953: 86–95). The Latin lines are exquisite and the medieval melody for *Crux fidelis* is one of the most poignant in the repertoire.¹⁵ So, in *Good Friday Tree* we decided to sing the Latin lines in alternation with Christopher's recitation of the English verse (Stobbs 2017).

Good Friday Tree

*Crux fidelis inter omnes
arbor una nobilis.*

As the cross takes shape
a fragrance of cypress, pine and cedar
fills the outhouse;
the boy who watches is a seer
he can also hear, other things –
every day since the cross was cut
the wind has been a humming wire
with an edge that vibrates in his skull,
it disturbs the well water
in the yard.

*Nulla silva talem profert
fronde, flore, germine.*

Today the humming has become a wail
that spirals higher and higher,
the boy covers his ears –
a man comes and strokes the cross
breathes in the sharp smell
and carries the wood away,
the boy is afraid
there are no footprints.

15 As transcribed in *Graduale Triplex* (Solesmes 1979), 182. The origin of the melody can, of course, only be traced to its oldest notated source, dated to the early tenth century (the famous *Cantatorium* of St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek 359).

*Dulce lignum, dulce clavo,
dulce pondus sustinens.*

Dust clouds rise
the boy struggles to breathe,
he is cold and the birds are silent,
the ground is shifting.
He pulls his blanket tight and cries
to any god who is listening,
strange eerie noises circle his mind.
It is so dark that the stars have come –
wait say the voices of the newly dead.

*Crux fidelis inter omnes
arbor una nobilis.*

The wind is still
a bird sings.
The boy watches
a man on the cross
and the air is filled
with the fragrance
of pine, cypress and cedar.

The refrain-like alternations between the Latin chant and Hilary Stobbs' visionary scenes created an unexpected and powerful effect in performance. While the exalted beauty of the chant allows a serene distance from the horrors of the Crucifixion, the figure of the young boy, through whose eyes we witness all, helps the listener to approach the events up-close, in stillness, tenderly.

We are surprisingly close here to the intensity of late medieval Passion poetry such as the *Stabat Mater*,¹⁶ or to the sensory intimacy of Rilke's *Songs of Mary* (Rilke 1913, 1951). Is this proper religious poetry after all?

16 See the magisterial introduction to the poetics of the Passion among thirteenth-century Franciscan writers in Raby, *Latin-Christian Poetry*, 415–443, esp. 426 f. on the *Philomena* by John Pecham and 437 f. on the *Stabat Mater*, attributed to Jacopone da Todi.

There is a religious source, but it is not my intention to mirror this in religious poetry. There is more of a spiritual encounter, a bordering on the incredible: the language can be inspired by Christianity, Paganism, anything where humanity has tried to walk the borders between the visible and the invisible. (Stobbs in Lochner 2018)

Taken together, Hilary Stobbs' poetry, Christopher Kidman's recitation and *Schola Nova Silvana's* singing attempt to create a new, mutually enhancing whole, resonant with manifold echoes between the 'visible and the invisible'.

All along, our purpose has been to create an inclusive way for bringing the magic of chant to people of any persuasion. However, we are aware that this approach may not work for everyone. The invitation to engage emotionally with the content of Christian religious imagery may not appeal to those who expect only to see their own certainties confirmed, be it the militant free thinker or the fervent Christian believer. Those, however, who are prepared to come with open minds and hearts may find what we offer rewarding:

This project offers a uniquely modern experience for those who dare to listen. There is no bias, merely the chance to become different for a while. This is not a walk in the past but a courageous walk on current borders, tide-lines and edges where our innermost thoughts and wishes can become lost and found again. (Stobbs in Lochner 2018)

In conspectu angelorum psallam tibi.

[I will sing to you in the presence of angels.]

A meeting of minds

The original purpose of Gregorian chant is sung prayer. Medieval authors describe the experience of singing chant as enacted 'in the countenance of angels'.¹⁷ Accounts from medieval vision literature describe the round

17 The beginning of Ps. 137 (138) is much quoted in normative monastic texts such as the early sixth-century rule of Benedict (Chapter 19) or the canons of the 816 Council

of liturgical worship as a rhythmical participation in the eternal liturgy celebrated in the heavens.¹⁸

Today, people in Western secular societies may no longer relate unquestioningly to medieval ideas of time and eternity. Even practising Christians will not easily feel at home with the medieval forms of prayer which the chant supports. Yet even now, Gregorian chant can perhaps fulfil certain fundamental *needs of the soul* not addressed elsewhere in our increasingly manic and soulless culture. This may be the key to understanding the uniqueness and potential of Gregorian chant in the contemporary world.

In pursuit of such understanding we will now widen the scope of our enquiry by making appeal to two contemporary writers of very different persuasions: Rembert Herbert, the American choral leader, Gregorian chant expert and Christian spiritual teacher; and Alain De Botton, the British philosopher, outspoken atheist and critic of culture. Both authors propose to adapt, for the benefit of their contemporaries, certain elements of medieval religion including religious art and Gregorian chant. We will review and compare their contributions in some detail before returning, in the last section of this chapter, to the questions posed at the beginning.¹⁹

The Christian

In the introduction to his book (1999), *Entrances. Gregorian Chant in Daily Life*, Rembert Herbert recalls the impact of his first encounter with the writings of the early church Fathers, which happened after he had already led chant liturgies at St James Episcopal Church in Washington, DC, for many years:

of Aachen (Chapter 19) which form the basis for many later customaries (Lochner 1991: 73). For further reading on the way of angels in the Middle Ages, see especially Jean Daniélou (1953, 2009), David Keck (1998) and Steven Chase (2002).

18 See for example the dramatic depiction of earthly and celestial liturgies in Rumsey (2017).

19 It not possible to give adequate treatment here to Gordon Lynch (2012) whose thought has been a great inspiration to me during the process of writing this chapter. Traces of his influence will be visible here and there in footnotes.

[A]s I became more familiar with the history and technical aspects of chant ... questions began to form in my mind about its special quality. Nowhere in my musical or literary training had I been given language to describe what it seemed this music was fundamentally about. Even though, historically, chant was the source from which all Western classical music derived, it was, I felt, different in its purpose even from other sacred music which came after. (Herbert 1999: xiii)

The experience described here may be shared by many students of chant. Even those who have experienced the chanting of monks at prayer can still struggle to understand that experience or incorporate it in their own practice. Short of entering a monastery, how do lay singers, amateur or professional, stand a chance of expressing the special quality of chant in all its depth, without falling into enthusiastic booming or into over-polished early music vocals?²⁰

[Such] questions stayed with me until ... I pulled from the shelf a volume of St. Bernard's sermons on *The Song of Songs* and, as I read, began to hear a familiar sound. Even though Bernard had nothing whatever to say about music, I thought I heard in his prose an echo akin to the underlying voice of the chant. (Herbert 1999: xiv)

This led Herbert to the main thrust of his book and its principal achievement:²¹

- 20 I remember as a youngster participating in a chanted liturgy in the crypt of St Willibrord at Echternach basilica, directed by Carlo Hommel (see note 7), then in his late twenties. The singers were all lay folk, some of them students like myself. Dom Chopiney, the cantor of Clervaux, happened to be listening in on the occasion and declared afterwards that our singing was 'fort et enthousiaste' but somewhat lacking in 'onction'. The question of what this 'onction' ('unction') consists in – and how to achieve it – has haunted me ever since. Where I have travelled with this is documented in a short recording of the hymn *Christe sanctorum decus angelorum*, available on <<http://www.scholanovasilvana.org.uk>>.
- 21 *Entrances* is the most comprehensive and insightful account available on the relation between spirituality and musical practice in medieval chant. Two separate bibliographies (xviii–xix, and 174–177) show the breadth of the sources consulted. Spiritual matters are closely engaged with in Chapters 1, 4 and 5, while Chapters 2 and 6 address practical issues such as methods of psalm-singing and ways to build a chant choir in a parish context. In selecting his texts, Herbert largely follows the classic study by Dom Jean Leclecq (1957/1961).

This book ... is also an attempt to present a method of teaching and singing which will support the aims and character of that tradition [of monastic thought] ... [T]here should be in this approach to the chant no dichotomy between the technical and the spiritual. Every technical exercise must have both a musical and a contemplative purpose. (Herbert 1999: xiv)

The following excerpt from Athanasius sums up the pathway Herbert proposes to follow:

The harmonious reading of the psalms is a figure and type of such undisturbed and calm equanimity of our thoughts ... For thus beautifully singing praises, [the singer] brings rhythm to his soul and leads it, so to speak, from disproportion to proportion ... and gaining its composure by the singing of the phrases, it becomes forgetful of the passions and while rejoicing, sees in accordance with the mind of Christ. (Athanasius, *The Letter to Marcellinus*, fourth century, quoted in Herbert 1999: 180)

For Athanasius, singing the psalms is both an image ('figure and type') and a very practical method for the ascent of the soul. The aim of this ascent is nothing less than 'seeing with the mind of Christ'.²² This lofty goal is anything but abstract: 'Forgetting' the many distractions and entanglements of its own self-centred 'passions', the singing soul, 'led from disproportion to proportion', is 'harmonized' by the singing itself and gains 'calm equanimity' by the 'beautifully singing' of the psalm phrases.

Starting from the premise that 'Gregorian chant is for those who sing it' (Herbert 1999: xiv), Herbert proceeds to transpose Athanasius' teachings, and the teaching of many other Fathers, into practical indications for the musical interpretation of chant with both musical and contemplative purpose. Here are three examples to illustrate Herbert's approach.²³

22 Origen calls it, seeing with the 'dove's eye', Gregory, Bernard and others the 'ear of the mind' or the 'ear of the heart' (Herbert 1999: 22).

23 A word of caution applies: Herbert relies heavily on chanting in English translation, especially for the singing of psalms – a path I cannot follow or recommend, as it inevitably distorts the indispensable rhythmic compound between Latin words and chanted melodies, especially in the syllabic chants, like psalms and hymns. I also am wary about Herbert's method of teaching psalm singing in-depth before even approaching simple chant melodies. Psalmody is a wonderful but very exacting discipline and daunting to the newcomer. Herbert's motivation is historic and spiritual,

*Listening*²⁴

The crowd of earthly thoughts, when it clamors around, closes the ear of the mind. (Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, sixth century, quoted in Herbert 1999: 180)

Rarely in our ordinary lives do we have occasion to ‘turn our attention in upward’ ... simply to listen and be watchful, as psalmody requires us to do. Not to think, not to brood or worry, but simply to be, in complete stillness – open, alert, and quiet – for an extended period of time. (Herbert 1999: 33)

The monks ... chant alternatively with one another, thus ... producing for themselves attentiveness and an undistracted heart. (Basil the Great, fourth century, quoted in Herbert, 1999: 180)

The most powerful antidote to both the rushing and the clipping of longer syllables is active listening, which is always the most important aspect of the discipline of psalmody ... Without a conductor’s guiding hand, we must listen attentively and speak simply, in perfect unison. (Herbert 1999: 39, 44)

*Silence*²⁵

Silence of the Heart, practised with wisdom, will see a lofty depth; and the ear of the silent mind will hear untold wonders. (Hesychius of Jerusalem, fifth century, quoted in Herbert 1999: 33)

since the psalms are at the heart of the chant repertoire and knowledge of the psalter is one of the tools of the trade in monastic contemplation. In a secular setting where the singing of psalms is not introduced as devotional practice or spiritual study (as it is in Herbert’s faith-based choirs), mastering the psalm tones needs to be built up slowly and only after the group has already some experience of a variety of melodic repertoire; otherwise weariness will soon set in and loss of courage will follow.

- 24 The art of listening has been too rarely explored by modern-day theologians, as Nóirín Ní Riain argues in her ground-breaking work (Ní Riain 2011). Listening has been at the centre of this acclaimed Celtic singer’s life work, as narrated poignantly and delightfully in her autobiography (Ní Riain, 2009).
- 25 Sarah (2016) restates traditional wisdom on silence of the medieval contemplative orders, especially Cistercians and Carthusians. The introduction by Nicolas Diat includes a rare and precious eye-witness account of a chanted matins liturgy at La

[L]earning to sing Gregorian chant is a matter of learning to make silence a part of the music ... [O]ne must learn to handle the silence just as one must handle melodies and rhythms ... [L]istening to the silence between the phrases of the psalms ... until we begin to sense a kind of gentle refreshment in that moment. (Herbert 1999: 40, 13, 45)

*Action and Contemplation*²⁶

And however good the active work may be, the contemplative nonetheless is better, because the first dies with this mortal life, but the second truly grows more complete in the life of immortality. (Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam Prophetam*, quoted in Herbert 1999: 182)

The musical material of the chant contains both elements of speech (activity) and elements of quiet (contemplation). The elements of quiet are found both within the music itself and in the pauses which the music requires regularly, especially in the recitation of psalms. (Herbert 1999: 13)

Becoming familiar with the contemplative approach of the Church Fathers also helps in understanding the patchwork approach of biblical quotations found in the Latin liturgical texts that underlie Gregorian chant. Small bits of scripture, often from the psalms, are chosen and prepared especially by various and often unexpected repetitions or juxtapositions, creating a beautiful pattern for contemplation during the yearly round of the liturgy.

[A] short text of scripture [is] of great sweetness, like a grape that is put in the mouth filled with many senses to feed the soul ... [W]ishing to have a fuller understanding of this, the soul begins to bite and chew upon this grape, as though putting it in a wine press. (Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks*, twelfth century, quoted in Herbert 1999: 125)

Our earlier example of the Michaelmas antiphons gives a good illustration of the mantra-like effect of liturgical selections from scripture. This manner,

Grande Chartreuse ('Carthusian plain chant imparts a slowness, a depth and a piety that is sweet and at the same time rough' (Sarah 2016: 11)). Chapter 5 features a fascinating dialogue between Cardinal Sarah and Dom Dysmas de Lassus, abbot of La Grande Chartreuse, highlighting the striking differences in sensibility between the secular prelate and the hermit monk (Sarah 2016: 189–235).

26 See also note 34.

as Herbert shows, is nothing but an extension to the liturgy of the Church Father's general approach to scriptural exegesis which the melodies of the chant are designed to support:

The chant is a musical commentary on its scriptural text just as Gregory's is a verbal one, and the aim of the two commentaries is the same. Both arts, verbal and musical, are concerned with bringing about a meeting between text and person, a meeting based on prayer.²⁷ (Herbert 1999: 2)

One aspect of the Church Fathers' exegetical approach deserves special attention here: their predilection for *symbolic reading* of the Bible, what Athanasius described as 'figure' or 'type'. This kind of interpretation of scripture, well-known to students of patristics, is utterly foreign to most modern approaches to biblical exegesis, especially the historical critical and the evangelical literalist.²⁸

Rooted in meditative practice and in the mind's capacity for imagination, the symbolic method assumes a fundamental, mystical unity of meaning throughout all the canonical Scriptures. At the same time, it allows multiple levels of interpretation to be held valid simultaneously, even when they appear to contradict each other. (Herbert 1999: 2)²⁹

The value of each layer of meaning, in turn, is seen as related to the inner development of the individual who may or may not connect with particular interpretations according to the state of advancement of their own inner life (Herbert 1999: 32). The highest capacity of vision is only achieved once

27 On the meditative aspect of the liturgical text selections see also Crocker 2000: 135–144.

28 For example, the Latin Douai/Vulgate translation of the Bible offers this line in Psalm 23:5: 'My chalice, which inebriateth me, how goodly is it!' Modern pastoral sensibilities, aware of the evils of alcoholism, might resist any positive valuation of biblical 'drunkenness.' For the monastic commentators, however, the image of drunkenness is important as another image of the opened, higher intelligence, a departure from the 'sobriety' of the natural mind and its limitations' (Herbert 1999: 120). This is a good example of the cultural distance between our own age and that of the early Church Fathers.

29 Examples of such symbolic interpretation of specific chant melodies do occur in medieval spiritual literature. One such example, the early twelfth-century *Amtenhausen* vision, is discussed in Lochner 1995: 107–117.

our ‘dove’s eyes’ (Origen) or the ‘ear of the heart’ (Gregory, St Bernard) are opened. These are super-sensible capacities that are latent within each person and are awakened through grace and through individual inner work (Herbert 1999: 95). As Herbert puts it, the Fathers’ *Way of Wisdom* is a ‘disciplined, long-term exploration of the sacred, within oneself and in the scriptures’ (Herbert 1999: 30).

There are limits to Herbert’s approach of finding ‘sympathetic resonance’ between medieval monastic spirituality and modern sensibilities. For example, allowing for multiple meanings in the symbolic approach of the Church Fathers in no way implies individual freedom of interpretation. On the contrary: Within the historic tradition, interpretation is very much regulated by patristic authority. Adherence to strict doctrinal orthodoxy is paramount.³⁰ On occasion Herbert displays such doctrinal intransigence himself, as when he dismisses out of hand contemporary interpretations of the Resurrection as a symbol for Rebirth.³¹

A major stumbling block for modern sensibilities is the ‘traditional, uncompromising rejection of the body and everything material, the idea that we must come to “despise, in heart and mind, all that is done in this world” (John Cassian, quoted in Herbert 1999: 172).’ (Herbert 1999: 172).

30 The deep need for doctrinal conformity in medieval Christianity is the reason, for example, why Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) held back publication of her own wild and wonderful visions until she obtained approval for them from Bernard of Clairvaux, the greatest spiritual authority of the age. In *Scivias*, her first book of visions, Hildegard supplies each vision not only with a visual image but also with a line-by-line symbolic exegeses of unimpeachable orthodoxy (Hart and Bishop 1990). Other seers did not take the same precautions, often at their own peril, as witnessed in the execution of Marguerite Porète (+1310) and the long controversy surrounding the visionary writings of St Birgitta (or Bridget) of Sweden (+1373). On the vagaries of Bridget’s contested 1391 canonisation, the various attacks on her writings, the examination of her visions for heresy and her eventual re-canonisation in 1415 and 1419, see Kemp (1948: 128–130) on her life, doctrine and writings see the introduction and translations in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series (Harris 1990).

31 ‘Rebirth is a familiar and comfortable idea. However such a statement may rate as theology, we should understand from John [Herbert is discussing John 1:1, 17:14, 16:25 and 21:23] that the attitude behind it is not acceptable, given what it says about the use of symbolic language’ (Herbert 1999: 95).

Strongly ascetic and penitential images are ubiquitous in the lyrics of Latin hymnody, an important non-scriptural genre of chant repertoire not discussed by Herbert.³² Interestingly, ascetic attitudes are forcefully denounced and rejected by Herbert himself:

This short-sighted teaching has led to almost total silence in monastic writing on the many ways by which the spirit lives in and through the body, supported and not weighed down by it. It has led to a similarly crippling silence within the tradition on the spiritual importance of both the natural world and the world of secular culture and work. (Herbert 1999: 172)

The prejudice of the Church Fathers in matters of the body has precluded their discussing in any way, symbolic or otherwise, the workings of breathing, the physical singing space or the profound connection between voice and body.³³ Unfortunately, Herbert's own method offers little to fill that void, thus leaving incomplete his great project of blending the 'technical with the spiritual'.³⁴

32 See for example these lines in the second verse of the hymn *Te lucis ante terminum*, for Compline, with their stern warning about the demonic nature of 'wet dreams': *Procul recedant somnia et noctium phantasmata: Hostemque nostrum comprime, ne polluantur corpora* [Let dreams and nocturnal phantasies flee far away. Crush our Enemy, lest our bodies be soiled]. Of course, such passages can also be interpreted symbolically, similar to the biblical exegesis practised by the Church Fathers and thus a more universal spiritual meaning can emerge. Nonetheless, passages of such explicit 'anti-body' ideology will require special efforts when presented in a secular context. If they are not introduced with the greatest care, modern audiences may balk and singers rebel.

33 Every singer knows from personal experience that the voice – the very vehicle of expression for the human spirit (however we may conceive of it) – lives precisely 'in and through' the body, is inseparable from it. Likewise, the physical space surrounding singers and listeners can add, through its atmosphere and its musical resonance, a profoundly spiritual dimension to the utterance of chant, as can be commonly experienced even by the casual listener.

34 A starting point for extending this project could be to relate the spiritual polarity of *action and contemplation* to the physical polarities of *in-breath and outbreath* and develop the movement polarities of *arsis* and *thesis*, of rising and falling melodies, harmonic relationships etc. Such an exploration could help develop a contemplative language for musical practice that would express the variously interconnected levels of 'breathing' throughout the whole human being, in body, soul and spirit. Such language, in turn, could help in putting experience-based approaches to musical research on a rigorous,

We must be grateful to the early Church Fathers for showing a way into the sacred through the inner human being and through symbols of the imagination – for making us discover our ‘dove’s eyes’ and the ‘ears of the heart’. Likewise, we deeply appreciate Herbert’s contribution in connecting the practice of Gregorian chant with the teaching of the Church Fathers in ways that are spiritual and musical in equal measure, helping us discover the ‘inner focus’ of unison singing or the ‘sweetness’ of the silence between psalm phrases. Nonetheless, there is more work to be done in translating, adapting and expanding the traditional understanding of Gregorian chant if we wish to encompass the fullness of its human experience with the sensibilities of our own age.

The atheist

Alain De Botton describes his book, *Religion for Atheists*, as a ‘non-believers guide to the uses of religion.’ In his introductory chapter, ‘Wisdom without Doctrine’, the author sets out his key ideas:

In a world beset by fundamentalists of both believing and secular varieties, it must be possible to balance a rejection of religious faith with a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts. (De Botton 2012: 12)

Our soul-related needs are ready to be freed of the particular tint given to them by religions – even if it is, paradoxically, the study of religions which often holds the key to their rediscovery and rearticulation (De Botton 2012: 15).

[This book] attempts to burn off religions’ more dogmatic aspects in order to distil a few aspects of them that could prove timely and consoling to sceptical contemporary minds facing the crises and griefs of finite existence on a troubled planet. It hopes to rescue some of what is beautiful, touching and wise from all that no longer seems true. (De Botton 2012: 19)

objective basis. Some steps in that direction have been taken by authors such as Ruland (1992). Much more foundational work remains to be done, however.

We take note of the author's refreshingly carefree and positive use of the word 'soul' in an openly non-religious context where the inner needs of the human being are being addressed. Needs of the soul on our 'troubled planet' are explored further under chapter headings such as *Community, Kindness, Education* and *Tenderness*.

The chapter entitled *Perspectives* opens with a commentary on the *Book of Job* from the Old Testament (De Botton 2012: 196–203). De Botton experiences in the trials of the man from Uz a 'redeeming sense of awe' (De Botton 2012: 198). He admires Job in his ability 'to bow to the incomprehensible and morally obscure tragedies that every life entails' and laments that life in a 'godless society ... lacks reminders of the transcendent and therefore leaves us unprepared for disappointment and eventual annihilation' (De Botton 2012: 200).

Again, we may be surprised by the seeming ease with which the author uses the word 'transcendence', taking its root meaning here as 'stepping beyond' (from Latin *trans-scendere*) or 'stepping out' from our narrow concerns into a larger frame of experience or reference. What kind of 'reminders of the transcendent' is De Botton thinking of?

Just like Plato in the *Timaeus* dialogue, the author recommends gazing at the majesty and infinitude of the stars 'to answer our need to be repeatedly connected through our senses to ideas of transcendence' (De Botton 2012: 202).³⁵ Just as the ancients viewed reflecting on the steadily circling sphere of the fixed stars as the beginning of all philosophy, so De Botton recognises the cosmic cycle of the solar year and its attendant annual festivals as the perfect stepping stone for experiencing the transcendent in our lives:

Religion is, above all a symbol of what exceeds us and an education in the advantages of recognizing our paltriness ... Among the cannier initiatives of religion ... has been the provision of regular souvenirs of the transcendent, at morning prayer and the weekly service, at the harvest festival and the baptism, on Yom Kippur and on Palm Sunday. The secular world is lacking an equivalent cycle of moments during

35 Jeffrey Alexander, from a cultural sociological perspective, puts it this way: 'We need myths if we are to transcend the banal reality of material life. We need narratives if we are to make progress and experience tragedy' (Jeffrey Alexander, quoted in Lynch 2012: 30).

which we too might be prodded to imaginatively step out of the earthly city and recalibrate our lives according to a larger and more cosmic set of measurements. (De Botton 2012: 200, 201)

Later in his book, De Botton discusses the uses of religious visual art in ways that may equally apply to the singing of devotional chant. After first acknowledging the emotional impact of religious art,³⁶ De Botton offers a fundamental critique of the modern museum and art gallery culture:

Museums may in theory be well equipped to satisfy needs formerly catered to by religion, but, rather like universities, in practice they abdicate much of their potential through the way they handle the precious material entrusted to them. While exposing us to objects of genuine importance, they nevertheless seem incapable of adequately linking these to the needs of our souls. We are too often looking at the right pictures through the wrong frames. (De Botton 2012: 209)

The reason for this abdication is made clear: Knowledge-based frames of reference are focused on historic, stylistic and technical information, at the expense of spiritual and emotional experience: 'When it is presented to us principally as a storehouse of concrete information, art soon starts to lose its interest for all but the determined few' (De Botton 2012: 209).

By contrast, religious art engages the whole human being and can thereby achieve 'true transformative power' (De Botton 2012: 244). whether we are looking at a devotional image of the Virgin and Child or at medieval *tavolette* with images of the Crucified, presented to prisoners on the way to the gallows. Through 'artistic enhancement of our receptivity', such

36 'For some atheists, one of the most difficult aspects of renouncing religion is having to give up on ecclesiastical art and all the beauty and emotion therein' (De Botton 2012: 208). Diane Athill, the British writer and outspoken atheist, acknowledges the special authenticity of *expression* in early religious works: '[I]t is precisely their creator's belief in the truth of the message that gives them force' (Athill 2008: 47), without however engaging with their content the way De Botton does. Athill explains her surprisingly positive relation to the Bible thus: 'How then, does the written word work? ... I understand that underneath, or alongside, a reader's conscious response to the text, whatever is needy in him is taking in whatever the text offers to assuage that need' (Athill 2008: 49).

images put ‘examples of the most important ideas in front of us at difficult moments, to help us to live and to die’ (De Botton 2012: 219).

Exploring important ideas such as love, compassion, mutuality, and courage, De Botton recognises that religious figurative images can ‘put us back in touch with themes we need to keep close to us but are in danger of losing sight of’ (De Botton 2012: 240). In order to move us back in sight of such themes, he suggests a complete restructuring of the way art is currently presented in museums. Abandoning sterile academic chronologies, De Botton proposes galleries that address the great themes of the soul’s journey. Starting with a *Gallery of Suffering* on the bottom floor, we are led on a quasi-initiatory ascent through the themes of *Compassion, Fear* and *Love* to the *Gallery of Self-Knowledge* on the top floor (see his imaginary model for a ‘new Modern Tate London’ De Botton 2012: 245).

What kind of art would be on display in such newly conceived ‘galleries of the soul’? De Botton illustrates this in a series of Christian images, often medieval ones, such as the *Seven Sorrows of the Virgin, Station 9: Jesus Falls a Third Time* and the *Pietà*, each matched up with specially selected contemporary art photographs bearing titles such as *The Twelve Sorrows of Adolescence, The Station of Disability* and *A Cancer Patient after Chemotherapy* (images in De Botton 2012: 223, 225, 226 and 228).

One juxtaposition of images is particularly poignant: Francisco de Zurbaran’s restrained and exquisitely tender mystical painting *The Bound Lamb* (sixteenth century), coupled with Helen Levitt’s photograph, *New York 1940*, which poignantly captures the desperate look on the face of a small boy cornered by street bullies (De Botton 2012: 230). Brought together at 300 years’ distance, these images can stir us deeply by showing up the same human complex of innocence, brutality and compassion in a religious as well as a secular context. Such judicious pairing of images from disparate ages and ideologies achieves new ‘coherence at an emotional level’ in satisfying ways (De Botton 2012: 244). Magically and mysteriously our souls are nourished by viewing such images and, potentially at least, transformed.³⁷

37 The transformation of the soul, achieved through artistic means, has a parallel in the ‘therapeutic value’ Gordon Lynch sees as central to the project of cultural sociology:

Thus, De Botton proves that engaging creatively with religious images can help address contemporary humanity's needs of the soul in a thoroughly secular context that remains deeply respectful toward the history and identity of those images. Substitute 'images' for 'chant' and 'poetry' and we have an ethos and a programme not unlike that of the collaboration between *Schola Nova Silvana* and Hilary Stobbs, described in the first part of this chapter.

The meeting

Our exploration has made it obvious just how alien the world of medieval religion and of Gregorian chant can appear to modern sensibilities, Christian and secular alike. Yet, entering the world of the medieval mind is well worth the effort, as Rembert Herbert and Alain De Botton have argued with great passion. Despite their very different backgrounds, their 'entrances' turn out to be remarkably compatible, even complementary.

Consider Herbert's definition of the Sacred:

The sacred character of the chant ... is based on a threefold relationship – not just words and music, but words, music, and the inner condition of the singer ... The chant begins to live when this triad begins to live, when its parts become absorbed in a larger unity. To learn to sing chant is to learn to allow that process to take place. (Herbert 1999: 11)

Here chant is not considered sacred because of the divine revelation of Holy Scripture but because it involves a special triad of living relationships where the inner condition of the human singer (or listener) is an essential ingredient. The idea of Herbert's triadic relationship may well be inspired by Christian theology, but it does not require belief in a triune God to be seen as valid. Rather than projecting faith-related doctrine, Herbert

'[C]ultural explanation can also have *therapeutic value* ... [it] holds the potential to "defuse" the often deeply felt bond between cultural meaning and social practices, creating a space in which cultural explanation ... can help people to think about the shadow side of their sacred commitments' (Lynch 2012: 53).

observes and articulates a meaningful structure in a living process experienced by human beings. There is nothing here that De Botton, the atheist, could not agree to.³⁸

Their journey appears to have led our two authors to a common meeting point, a shared middle space. In seeking to address the loss of meaning in contemporary Western society both turn to the inner life of the human soul. Both reclaim wisdom from a remote past by engaging, and thereby validating, the power of imagination, the soul's capacity to create meaning through empathetic images.³⁹

38 Such triadic structures can also be found in non-religious contexts, for example in Gordon Lynch's frequent use of 'thought (discourse) – emotion (feeling, sentiment) – action (practices)' in discussing human processes (Lynch 2012: 24, 115 and *passim*). Lynch does not mention any particular source for this terminology but the triad he describes is identical with the concept of the three 'soul forces', thinking, feeling and willing, often referred to in Western esoteric literature. Frank L. Baum, theosophist and creator of the iconic American fairy tale *The Wizard of Oz*, for example, portrays the triad of the soul forces allegorically in the familiar characters of the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Lion who help the protagonist Dorothy (the soul) to reach her goal (Algeo 1993). This is not to suggest a direct intellectual lineage between Frank L. Baum and Gordon Lynch, or that Lynch is a crypto-theosophist – merely that there seems to exist a rather curious 'resonance' within certain fields of intellectual or spiritual endeavour, open to disparate people at distant times. The appeal of both the religious *and* the non-religious versions of inner triadic structures is a possible pointer to a common source of meaning *beyond* religion and science alike.

39 The importance of empathetic imagination has been pointed out by notable twentieth-century figures with direct experience of societal 'loss of meaning'. Jane Addams (1860–1935), the Nobel-prize winning American social reformer known for her work in the Chicago slums of the 1920s, identifies 'lack of imagination' as a root cause for the lack of social compassion leading to the toleration and perpetuation of underclass misery: 'Much of the insensibility and hardness of the world is due to the lack of imagination which prevents a realization of the experience of other people' (quoted in Shetterley 2005: 8). Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), the philosopher, political theorist and annalist of the 1961 Eichmann trial, cites lack of imagination as a root cause of the 'banality of evil' which she famously detected in the mind-set of Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann: 'It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period' (quoted in Lynch 2012: 124). The noetic significance of the imagination is explored in a recent study (Lachman, 2017). Lachman, building on

This ‘shared middle space’ is opened and warmed by a genuine care for the needs of humanity. It is a gentle, alert and thoughtful place, refreshingly far from ‘fundamentalisms of both believing and secular varieties’ (De Botton 2012) or, in the words of Hilary Stobbs, a place for those who ‘dare to listen’. It is the space of a quietly spiritual humanism which, at times, can be observed in unlikely places: a traditional Muslim teacher in Indonesia defending a local transgender community against religious condemnation and persecution by arguing for the centrality of our shared humanity;⁴⁰ or a liberal prime-minister of Canada attributing his election victory to his campaign’s appeal to the ‘better angels of our human nature’.⁴¹

In conspectu angelorum psallam tibi. (Ps. 137.1 (138.1))

[When I sing unto You I begin to behold the angels within me.]

a brilliant but largely ignored tradition in Western thought and science, makes an urgent plea for reclaiming the ‘lost capacity’ of imagination in order to redress the over-development of the critical and analytical functions in our modern thinking which, he argues, threatens the very future of humanity.

- 40 ‘When we talk about religion, we talk about humanity. If we talk about religion but don’t respect humanity, it’s no use.’ These are the words of one Arif Nuh Safri, religious teacher at the Institute of Qur’anic Studies outside Yogyakarta, who also volunteers at Pondok Pesantren Waria al-Fatah, an Islamic boarding school and safe place for transgender people which has come under pressure from mainstream religious leaders (Strangio 2017).
- 41 Justin Trudeau, speaking to journalists on the night of his election as prime minister, on 19 October 2015: ‘We have shown that you can appeal to people’s better angels and still win.’ An obituary by Thomas S. Axworthy for Pierre Trudeau, Justin Trudeau’s father, likewise states that ‘[l]eaders should appeal to the better angels of our nature’ (*The Guardian*, 4 October 2000). The expression derives from Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address given in Washington on 4 March 1861, at a time when Lincoln still held out hope of averting armed conflict between the North and the seceding Southern states: ‘We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.’ Lincoln’s words are iconic in American history but may well apply to humanity at large – especially to the gulf between opposing ideologies, such as atheism and religious faith. Note how the musical imagery of the ‘mystic chords of memory’ creates a solemn, sacred mood of stillness in which the ‘touch’ of the ‘better angels of our nature’ may be experienced.

Coming full circle

Our exploration of Herbert's and De Botton's contributions has brought us new insights and language that can help us as we return to the three questions from the beginning of our chapter. Our reflections will be interspersed with selected quotes from a written survey among the singers of *Schola Nova Silvana*.⁴²

1. *What inherent qualities make Gregorian chant so surprisingly attractive to modern sensibilities?*

In explaining the special appeal of Gregorian chant, musicians and musicologists have pointed to certain technical musical properties of the repertoire (tonal structure, form, style and so on).⁴³ However, non-specialist singers tend to emphasise the *inner* aspects of the experience of chant.

I am new to plainchant but find it a very moving and uplifting experience.

There is something about the 'free flow' of chant that speaks of a connection that reaches beyond the physical world and touches our deeper spiritual selves, regardless of faith.

It makes me feel joyful.

- 42 Fabian Lochner, *Survey among members of Schola Nova Silvana* (unpublished 2018). Responses were received from ten singers. Questions included: 'What do you like/appreciate about *Schola Nova Silvana*? How would you, as a person living in the 21st century, describe your experience of singing and performing medieval Latin plainchant? How do you relate to the religious/devotional/spiritual aspects of the chant repertoire we sing? How does singing chant affect your sense of well-being?'
- 43 According to Mary Berry, much of the attractiveness of Gregorian chant is 'due to its ancient modality' which differs from the 'familiar pattern of major and minor melodic structure' (RSCM 2015: 5). By contrast, Richard Crocker (2000) attributes the popularity of the 1998 *Chant* recording precisely to the 'familiarity of the diatonic system' underlying the chant (Huston 1996: 116–118). The 'one impression' with which David Hiley (2009: 218) wishes to leave his reader concerns the 'multitude of forms and styles' in Gregorian chant.

Singers become quickly aware of the high degree of internal focus required in performing chant, despite its apparent 'simplicity'.

There is no hiding at the back ... total commitment is required the whole way through.

I have been surprised by how 'different' singing chant is. There is something beautifully simple, but also not very easy about it. Perhaps modern people don't often engage in such simplicity and directness.

Unison group singing necessitates active listening, working with silence, adjustment between active and receptive modes of being ('breathing' between action and contemplation), constant seeking for the 'other' and re-adjusting 'self' in order to create the wholeness. As Herbert Rembert has shown, such inner activity forms the central core of the medieval spiritual discipline that is monastic chant. Ultimately, the various surface qualities of any given chant piece are all designed to support and reveal this inner activity.⁴⁴

I think singing chant really challenges us to real presence and being in the moment. Real gifts in the world today. So ... for me it's more like meditation, with the occasional moment of ecstatic joy, when we embody [the music] with perfection. Sometimes it's only a phrase but it's wonderful when we do.

When singers 'embody' the music the chant becomes spiritually transparent, or *translucent*.⁴⁵ The inner tuning that 'harmonizes the souls' of the

44 To demonstrate this in detail, following the principles suggested in note 34 would be a rewarding task, though clearly beyond the scope of the present essay.

45 The concept of *translucence* (seeing one meaning through another, as opposed to the opaqueness of surface literalism) is beautifully developed by Gary Lachman (2017: 32–53, esp. 50) from the writings of Coleridge, Owen Barfield and Ernst Jünger. The spiritual roots for this concept can be found in medieval mystical theology, especially in the concept of *theophanies*, developed by early Greek Fathers, such as Maximus the Confessor, and by John Scot Eriugena in the West: '[J]ust as air illuminated by the sun appears nothing else but light ... so human nature when it is united with God is said to be God through and through ... because it receives a share in Divinity so that only God appears to be in it' (Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, Book 1:10, 450B) and: '[I]n every body we see, wherever we turn the eyes of our body, we shall contemplate with translucent clarity God Himself' (*Periphyseon* Book 1:10, 450C).

singers (Athanasius) becomes audible through the surface of musical detail. Its effects resonate in the environment and are transmitted to those who listen, creating an immediately accessible sense of internal peace, calm and centredness, resulting in well-being and inner nourishment.

I find [singing chant] very healing and calming.

[A] great sense of lightness and warmth seems to envelop me when I sing this beautiful music ... I generally leave choir practice in a much more relaxed mood than when I arrived and when [a particular life challenge] gets too much to bear, it is not unusual to find myself picking up our music and calm down singing chant for myself.

The public's intuitive perception of such harmonising and nourishing resonance with the singers' inner activity could well be a determining factor in the success of the chant albums of 1994 and 2008 and potentially of any chant performance.⁴⁶

2. *What is the spiritual/cultural appeal of medieval devotional chant in a secular world where many people may have no meaningful connection to the faith and the liturgy that created it?*

The experience of stillness in movement, so characteristic of medieval chant, can still today provoke in the singer or listener, regardless of their relation to Christian faith or liturgy, a deep sense of timeless presence as well as history and locale, of communion with ourselves and with others, including those who went before us.

46 Clearly then, the live inner activity of the performer can be captured on a recording, just like a person's facial expression can be captured in an image. On the other hand, the absence of inner activity of the kind described here runs the danger of leaving chant performances, live or recorded, sounding hollow and monotonous, unable to inspire or nourish, regardless of how technically accomplished and historically informed they may be. Readers may decide for themselves which recordings or performances fall into this category.

I love the spare simplicity and direct voice and mood of chant. I like the Latin, it feels like connecting to roots – of language, of memory, of Western traditions. It feels ‘right’ to me to be exploring this repertoire and I’m not feeling like I’m stuck in the past.

Like the spiritual practice of gazing at the stars, encouraged by philosophers from Plato onward, chant can also become a potent ‘reminder of transcendence’ (De Botton 2012), hinting at a powerful, ‘awe-inspiring’ reality that far exceeds our everyday frames of reference.

Singing medieval plainchant is moving and mystical. Knowing that we are singing what was written hundreds of years ago and learned by heart and sung regularly is quite awe-inspiring.

Most of all, the experience of Gregorian chant can, by its inward nature, remind us of our capacity for self-transcendence – our capacity to leave our ordinary selves behind, to enter, if just for a moment, the often drowned-out world of our own inner stillness.⁴⁷

Singing plainchant ... allows me ... to immerse myself in deeper, more private thoughts and reflections.

The world and its worries are left behind, and I am transported.

In such inner stillness we can collect ourselves, discover the deeper sources of our being and uncover important aspects of our ‘private selves’ that may have remained hitherto unexplored: values, emotions, questions, dreams and motivations – the stuff needed to create those ‘Galleries of Meaning’ that can nourish our souls on their journey through modern life.

47 The human capacity for self-transcendence is powerfully evoked in the writings of Viktor Frankl (2004), the influential psycho-therapist and Holocaust survivor. Frankl made the practice of self-transcendence a pivotal part of his logotherapy: ‘It is not the neurotic’s self-concern, whether pity or contempt, which breaks the circle ... the cue to cure is self-transcendence!’ (Frankl 2004: 131).

3. *What new, live and inclusive opportunities can be created to capture and communicate the power of this ancient religious art form for diverse modern audiences?*

Gregorian chant is often identified with Western monasticism, especially with the Benedictine order and its derivatives.⁴⁸ Writers of the contemplative orders often describe the experience of chant as a ‘foretaste of heaven’, much the way that monastic life itself is idealised as a foretaste of the blessed afterlife.⁴⁹ Today the beauty and power of Gregorian chant can be a gift for *all* humanity, not just cloistered religious specialists – or even religious believers.⁵⁰

Obviously, I do respond, as a Christian, to the devotional aspects of our chant and I also find that it deepens my faith, but I am more interested in seeing those who don’t necessarily share my faith also respond, often in a similar way.

- 48 The contribution of the Benedictine order to the emergence of chant, much emphasised by Katharine Le Mée, is certainly immense. However, traditional rivalries between regular and secular clergy have tended to downplay the contribution of secular clergy in accounts of chant history. Cathedral clergy often lived in highly regulated communities with rigorous liturgical protocols and contributed greatly to the enrichment of the chant repertoire. A historically balanced picture for medieval England can be gained from the various chapters dedicated to secular and monastic liturgies and their sources in Richard Pfaff (2009).
- 49 For example, abbot Gregor Henckel Donnersmarck of Heiligenkreuz states that ‘Cistercian monks live their lives in a community where everyone has the same simple goal of getting to heaven ... Gregorian chant is so beautiful because it aims for the highest, for the greatest of all goals. Chant will move everyone who listens, because it is “music for paradise”’ (insert leaflet for *Chant. Music for Paradise*, 2008).
- 50 The notion of the universality of Roman chant (or what was thought of as Roman chant), in opposition to the many regional forms of chant in the early Middle Ages, is a central concern of liturgists and secular rulers from the early Carolingian period. It may be read symbolically in the founding legend of Roman chant, illustrated in a famous eleventh-century image from St Gall: St Gregory the Great is seen sitting at his desk while the dove of the Paraclete hovers near his ear, inspiring the chant melodies being written down on Gregory’s parchment. On the history of this image see Hiley 1993: 503–513, esp. 511. For a summary of scholarly debate on the ascendancy of Roman chant in general see in Hiley 2009: 90–107.

The music ... stands alone in its beauty and its inspirational and uplifting qualities. My having no religious faith personally makes no difference ... I do find it deeply spiritual.

In order for modern people to access this power on a deeper level, more is needed than merely consuming the recordings of singing monks. By creatively re-contextualising chant outside the traditional framework of faith and liturgy, it is possible for modern listeners to encounter the content of the chanted words as well as the music, much in the way Alain De Botton envisions for the visual arts. One attempt in this direction is the collaborative project between *Schola Nova Silvana* and poet Hilary Stobbs, which has been described in this chapter.

In bringing Gregorian chant into the secular world there can be no question of stripping chant of its history, of ‘sanitising’ it or robbing it of its religious identity. On the contrary, chant can and should stimulate and empower imaginative responses to the mystery of being, just as it has always done. The difference is that, within a secular and inclusive ethos, people can feel free to explore the meaning of that mystery without being dictated ‘what that meaning should be’ (Boyce-Tillman 2017: 17).

Being a secular choir ... allows me the freedom to sing and experience unfettered the exceptional sensory and deeply spiritual emotion which our repertoire certainly arouses in me.

The secular nature of the choir gives a far wider reach and openness to our singing.

Gently reclaimed from normative theologies, exclusionary institutions and often violent histories, the ancient art of Gregorian chant can become a source of joy and of personal and spiritual growth for modern people of every persuasion, believers and non-believers alike. By engaging creatively with the ‘myths that think us’ (Jeffrey Alexander, quoted in Lynch 2012: 46, 115), the powerful narratives that have fuelled Western spirituality for many centuries, we can seek new, free and inclusive experiences to resonate with that ‘ever shifting flock’, the better angels of our nature:

Like all artistic endeavour, especially those that survive the passage of centuries, the value [of chant] is in the inspiration that created it, which is universally human, and has the possibility to touch human hearts.

In conspectu angelorum psallam tibi.

[In singing to the highest being that dwells within me and in the cosmos around me, I become aware of the many radiant faces within that gaze upon me with love, that offer me nourishment and strengthen within me the core of my humanity.]

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