A Roman gentleman is working at his desk, in a handsome villa, somewhere in Ravenna. The year is shortly before 500 AD, and his name is Boethius. Still a young man, he has conceived an ambitious plan to translate the riches of Greek learning into Latin, and at this moment he has turned his attention to music. As he writes, he takes the patrician view of that art which came naturally to the member of an ancient and illustrious Roman clan like him. ‘The study of music as a rational pursuit’, he writes, ‘is much nobler than composition or mere performance’. Boethius believed that those who sing and play instruments have no knowledge of the intellectual basis of music – of music theory – for in every sense of the expression it is all Greek to them. They are therefore in a servile position. That is more than a figure of speech, for many of the instrumentalists and singers whom Boethius heard in sixth-century Italy were indeed slaves in the juridical sense; ranking no higher than domestic chattels, they were the possessions of their masters. In this scheme there could be no such thing as an accomplished performer who understands the theory of music and is deemed to have an important (indeed a vital) task to perform. In the world of Boethius, only those belonging to a patrician class received the education necessary to understand such things, and they were by long tradition contemptuous of the public display that performance requires. So the true musician is one who knows what performers do without actually doing it, just as performers do what he knows without actually knowing it. Ultimately, the true musician for Boethius is not concerned with audible sound at all for he realizes, with John Keats, that ‘Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter’.

This is all fundamentally un-Christian. The dignity, even the necessity, of music as a practice has long been accepted in Christian tradition and associated with its fondest hope: I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters...and I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps (Revelation 14:2). Not only did the early Christians gather to sing when they worshipped, they accepted that psalmody was spiritually profitable because of its sweetness, and not in spite of it. A psalm ‘penetrates the heart when it gives pleasure, is easily remembered when it is sung, and what the sternness of the Law cannot dispel from human minds, the psalms expel through the sweetness of music’. So says one early commentator. It was widely recognized that the outstanding value (and the great danger) of music was that it could move the mind and spirit more deeply than purely verbal persuasion. This was especially true when worshippers joined in a psallens fraternitas, a ‘psalmodising brotherhood’ or community. The surrender of the individual voice to the common chorus testified to the unity of the Church.

But the immense riches of medieval plainsong, notably the Gregorian chant which we have all heard in some form or another, did not come into existence because the churches favoured community singing. That is not how the foundations of the Western musical tradition were laid. They were gradually set in place as the laity – as you and I – were increasingly told to keep silent: to make way for the solo and choral performances of those who were, in a sense, the professionals. In other words, one of the defining things that made the rise of the Christian singer possible is the decline of the lay participant: the eclipse of you and me.

Let’s be clear about one thing: a singer in a church of the early Middle Ages, however necessary or admired his art might be, was generally appointed in much the same way as a gravedigger, or janitor; that is what the surviving rules for induction suggest. All the offices were considered too lowly for a new appointment to demand the bishop’s attention. A presbyter was enough. So whereas the task of ordaining a reader required the bishop to hear reports of the candidate’s reputation for honest living, and then to present him with a codex in a public ceremony, a singer who was often charged to voice the same divine words, but in song, could be admitted without taking up references or undergoing any codified rite of induction.

So let us ponder, for a moment, what may have been happening among singers in the churches of the early Middle Ages: those long centuries which we may well call a ‘dark’ age (I really have no problem with the term) in the sense that much about them is shadowed and obscure. To bring the work of these long silenced singers into focus, we need to distinguish two kinds of performance. In the first, the performer invented what he sang as he sang any given text, often by compounding musical elements learned during an apprenticeship. He was free, we might say, to improvise. In the second kind of performance, the singer repeated a fixed melody that he or she had learned because it was deemed important for music and text together to be the same as they were last time, the time before that, and so on back into the mists of tradition that worshippers of all faiths commonly (and sometimes uncritically) invoke in relation to what they do.

I am sure you will agree that these two kinds of performance should not be sharply distinguished. As those of you who admire any kind of jazz will know, improvisation is often a complex process, and it usually involves various kinds of memorized element that may be the same, or very nearly so, each time the musician mobilizes...
them. Yet the distinction holds good, and the history of Christian music from the New Testament to the Gothic cathedrals is in large measure a slow journey from improvisation to composition.

**Alleluia: Pascha Nostrum**

Now let us think about the words. Here is another way in which you and I inevitably ceased to be important as church singers during the first thousand years of Christian history. We all know that the Latin tongue - the language of worship in the Western churches - was transformed by slaves, traders and farmers to become what are now called French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian and the other Romance languages. The Latin used by singers in the services of the Church, however, continued to be spelled and pronounced in a conservative way, for liturgical languages are usually conservative (as in the Lord’s prayer: ‘Our Father, which art in heaven’). But outside the confines of the churches the common Latin speech evolved into the Romance tongues. Words were transformed, and very often shortened, all over the old lands of the western Empire. That is why, for example, the Latin word VIRIDIARIUM, meaning ‘a pleasure garden’, evolved into French verger, ‘an orchard’. Six syllables have become two. The silencing of the congregational voice in chanting, and the rise of the specialist singer, were connected with the deepening differences between a fossilized Latin used in worship and Latin as it was actually spoken on its journey to become French, Italian and Spanish. The archaic version was increasingly unintelligible to those not trained in it. The difference between the two varieties, in other words, was not just linguistic but social: the monks, nuns and clergy, forming literate groups, were for the most part the only ones trained to wield the variety used for worship.

Who were the key people in all this? I think we should be looking to the bishops. Today most bishops, save perhaps the bishop of Rome (the pope), have become rather peripheral figures in our lives. Sometimes perhaps their interventions into current political life seem ill judged or even at times comic. So it is difficult to think ourselves back into the minds of those for whom the bishops were public officials of a crucial kind. A late-antique prelate could be an emissary for his city and its ambassador, especially when a parley might avert some imminent danger. (Pope Leo’s journey to negotiate with Attila in the year 452 is only one example, albeit the most famous). The prayers and penitential processions a bishop led were the principal public response to such emergencies as a famine or an outbreak of disease. To a new barbarian king, who might have no Latin beyond what he could pick up in a barracks, the bishop was a valuable source of expertise in the Latin language and Roman law.

A bishop’s church, of course, is a cathedral. While many Western cities had acquired a cathedral by 500 the evidence for these buildings is for the most part extremely fragmentary and uncertain. They are often buried (if anything remains at all) beneath later structures, or the details must be recovered from texts that are often extremely late. We do at least know that many cathedrals were built within the walls of old Roman cities, but usually very close to those walls since the bishop’s church was generally the last public building added to the cityscape. Indeed, the cathedral and its ancillary buildings were often the only public structures by this date that were still being maintained to a relatively high standard. The rest were being left to decay or were being plundered for building material. Moreover, the cathedral complex was liable to be expanded and developed at a time when many of the older public buildings, notably the amphitheaters, were receiving a huddle of poor quality houses and shops, their original use abandoned. At Geneva, where excavations have yielded especially clear results, the cathedral acquired an impressive audience hall in the fifth century, supplied with a heating-system and floor-mosaics; other sites reveal reception chambers, dining rooms served by a kitchen, baptisteries, residences for senior clergy and of course quarters for the bishop’s wife (for clerical celibacy was not yet the law) together with a lodging house for guests or paupers.

It is in places like these that some form of collegiate organization for singers can first be traced, as early as 500 AD, and often in old Roman cities around the Mediterranean that are close to the sea or a major riverine route. Consider, for example, the harbour at Marseille which was still, in the early Middle Ages, a functioning gateway to the Mediterranean. Bulk goods such as olive oil, spices and wine were brought up from here, together with more luxurious things that included the many kinds of spices sought by the Frankish kings at Metz, Rheims or Trier. The earliest appearance in the Occident of a specialized name for the liturgical singer, cantor, can be traced in the diocese of Marseille around 475. For other examples, we also need to keep close to the sea. A cantor named Marinus, bearing the quasi-military or bureaucratic title ‘primicerius cantorum’, ‘leader of the singers’, appears at Naples soon after 500. He is perhaps the head of the first schola cantorum, or collegiate body of cathedral singers, on record. A generation later, four cantors from Ravenna can be found going to Rome on the business of their cathedral. Their names were Honorius, Tranquillus, Antonius and Meltus, and how thoroughly Roman they sound! There is not a trace of a Germanic barbarian name here: nothing Gothic, like ‘Sinderic’, and nothing Frankish, like ‘Theudebert’. In 530-5 AD we find another cantor commemorated in a mosaic pavement at Trent; his name was Laurentius, another solidly Roman name, and he was a man of some wealth if he could commemorate himself in this way.

Travelling up the Rhône valley a little, but still with excellent maritime contacts, we reach the city of Vienne. Here I can introduce you to a named singer of a fifth century cathedral: Mamertus Claudianus. I think by now I hardly
need emphasise how grandly Roman and indeed aristocratic his name sounds. Mamertus Claudianus was the brother of the bishop of Vienne, and he corresponded with a number of other Gallo-Roman gentlemen of the day whose letters we have. One of those letters describes our man him as everything a bishop could reasonably expect from one of his clergy, and more besides. In addition to being a singer he was a ‘counsellor in the bishop’s court’, a companion in his private reading and his advisor on matters of scriptural interpretation. He was also ‘a singer of psalms and choir-director; admired by his brother, he taught the trained companies to sing before the altar. He selected readings appropriate for each season for the yearly festivals’. Claudianus reveals a kind of musician who is entirely absent from the account given by Boethius, with whom I began. Both Claudianus and Boethius were aristocrats, and very near contemporaries, but what scope is there here for Boethius’s lofty disdain for the practical musician?

hymn of praise sung, ideally by a deacon, before the paschal candle during the Easter Vigil in the Roman Rite of Mass.

Exultet

May the heavenly host of angels exult,
may the divine mysteries exult,
and for the victory of so great a king
may the trumpet of salvation resound.

May the earth also rejoice
illumined by such great brightness,
and, lit up by the splendour of the eternal king, may it feel it has lost
the darkness of the whole globe....

Now we go on the trail of another named singer, but this time we venture northwards to the great grasslands of north-eastern France, Belgium and the Netherlands. We are a long way here from the port of Marseille and the sea. In the first decades of the sixth century, a Frankish king who ruled in Rheims, Cologne and Trier decided to look southwards for a singer: towards what remained of the world Mamertus Claudianus had known with its ‘trained companies’ of singers in southern Gaul and churches adorned with reused roman columns. This was King Theuderic. He and his line had come an immense distance in just some forty years, for in the year 482 his pagan grandfather Childeric had been buried with twenty-one horses, perhaps the entire stock of the royal stable, all of them slain in what must have been a horrendous ceremony and placed in pits nearby. Their massive and entangled skeletons, eventually discovered and photographed, provide an unnerving reminder of what being a pagan could entail in northern Europe towards 500. But Theuderic was a Christian and a kind of late-Roman governor writ large. The greatest city of his kingdom was Trier, formerly an imperial capital, and Theuderic certainly saw himself as a Constantine wrt small. The imperial basilica which still stands, is likely to have been the heart of his royal manor, allowing a barbarian king to rule from a hall where emperors had once received reports from provincial governors and listened to the panegyrics of the poets.

Theuderic recognised the responsibilities a Christian king bore to the Roman religion: that was part of being a little Constantine. He decided that he should ensure the cathedral were staffed with able clergy, including gifted singers, in what ranks as the first royal act of its kind in the annals of the barbarian West. To accomplish this, Theuderic looked to the regions of Gaul further south, specifically to Clermont in the black volcanic landscape of the Auvergne. As a chronicler says, ‘he ‘brought many clerics from Clermont, whom he ordered to serve in the church at Trier’. The bishop of Clermont was so vigilant on Theuderic’s behalf that he succeeded in recruiting a youth of excellent Gallo-Roman family, named Gallus. This young man refused the marriage envisaged for him by his father and entered a monastery near Clermont when he was still an adolescent, of marriageable age but only just. Gallus had ‘a voice of wonderful sweetness with a sweet melodiousness’. When the bishop of Clermont heard him sing at the abbey, presumably during an episcopal visitation of the house, he recognized at once that he should be nurtured and taught in the cathedral church in Clermont, and not left in a rural monastery. In a word, the bishop stole Gallus; he acted as a ‘spiritual father’ to him, and when it became clear to all that his voice ‘was becoming more and more prefect with each day’ he was stolen again, this time by king Theuderic. In the event, neither that king nor his queen could bear to let Gallus go from their court; he was simply too good a singer. The queen especially loved him ‘because of his beautiful voice’. So the royal family kept him. Here was a talented singer plucked (perhaps against his will) from the monastic life by a bishop who was scouting, in effect, for musical talent with his cathedral and the royal court chapels in mind.

There is no reason to suppose that any of this was exceptional, even though it is indeed exceptionally well documented. Capable singers in the great churches of the realm, or in the travelling contingents that later
became private chapels, were a valued part of what turned the kings of the barbarian West from warlords into magnates of a recognizable kind - as I said before, little Constantines. For their political strength and their salvation, these kings needed liturgies on a lavish scale with gifted singers, supported by textiles, precious metals and imported incense that raised the interiors of at least the cathedral churches to something meeting the Western and royal conception of court art in Constantinople.

We have glanced at France and Italy. What of Africa? Now we set ourselves down in one of the most fascinating of all the barbarian polities: the realm of the Vandals, a Germanic and household-based kingdom established in one of the richest areas of the old Empire. Given the reputation the Vandals have acquired, it is striking that an impressive sequence of Latin poets can be traced in Vandal Africa around 500. Their verses are as sensuous, in a somewhat studied way, as one would expect from authors living in a great port-city like Carthage, one whose hinterlands had formed one of the fullest grain baskets of the Roman Empire. These poets speak of mosaics, richly dressed tables and precious textiles; they praise the culture of a city that ‘abounds in teachers’, maintaining the distinguished African tradition of schooling in Latin grammar, and in some poems they heap praises upon the Vandal king Thrasamund (496-523) for building public baths of rich marble like an emperor or a Roman civic dignitary.

Four lines by Luxorius, one of the most prolific of these Afro-Roman authors, mention a singer. They form an epigram that mocks a cleric for indulging too deeply in the metropolitan pleasures of Carthage:

Quid festinus abis gula impellente, sacerdos?
   an tibi pro psalmis pocula corde sedent?
   pulpita templorum, ne pulpita quaere tabernae,
   almina quo caeli, non phialas referas.

‘Wherefore, O priest, do you hasten away, driven by gluttony? Surely your mind is fixed on goblets rather than psalms? Seek not the benches of taverns but the lecterns of churches, the food of heaven, not drinking vessels.’

This poem carries a title that identifies the sacerdos or ‘priest’ in line 1 as a deacon ‘hastening to an inkeeper’s dinner’. The poet associates his victim’s clerical duties with the Psalter (‘Surely your mind is fixed on goblets rather than psalms?'), and while this might be read as a fling at the deacon’s general want of devotion, epigrams usually seek more precise targets so that they can display a better mastery of their weapons. This deacon sometimes served as a psalmist when he exchanged the church for the tavern.

More information comes from a chronicle compiled in the later fifth century by Victor of Vita, and it gives a Catholic’s account of the persecutions his coreligionists suffered in Carthage, with few details of the violence spared. The Vandal kings were Christians, but they were not Catholics. They were Arians who believed that there was a time when Christ was not, and that Son was created by the Father to secure the redemption of Man. (Catholics and indeed Anglicans still deny that heresy every time they say ‘Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning...’). What is more, the Vandals worshipped in the Gothic language, the one in which they had first been converted, not in Latin. In his chronicle, Victor of Vita describes a Catholic Sunday service in a place called Regia, perhaps modern Arbal in Algeria, where a lector mounts the pulpit to sing the ‘Alleluia chant’, or Alleluia melos, using a book book. You will notice that the singer is called a reader, lector: we are still in the world I sketched in the last lecture. The chant is clearly something quite specific, but the congregation, as Victor explains, is both listening and singing, so we are at a transitional stage in another sense too, for what might be called an exclusively professional repertory, with the silencing of the laity, is still taking place. I suspect that the chant at issue was one of the psalms already supplied with an Alleluia refrain in the Psalter, in which case the performance probably unfolded with the congregation singing Alleluia between the verses of the lector soloist.

Now we cross into Spain, where the rich material provides an early illustration of what singers and their art could mean to the politics, indeed to the incipient nationhood, of an early medieval kingdom. In the year 589 the Spanish Church held a great council at Toledo; it marked the birth of a catholic Spain, in effect, for the king, who had hitherto been an Arian Christian, became a Catholic and took many eminent men of the kingdom with him. At another council in 633, the Spanish bishops ruled there was to be ‘one order of praying and of psalmody’ throughout the kingdom. A comprehensive regulation for the ordinance of liturgical plainsong was here issued on the scale of an entire kingdom from Seville and Granada in the south to Toulouse and Carcassonne in the north.

Almost immediately, it seems, the Spanish bishops and others set about the work of composing new chants:
melodies to be learned and correctly delivered by trained singers. Bishop Leander of Seville composed ‘many a sweet melody’ according to his brother Isidore. John of Saragossa, an aristocrat from the Ebro valley ‘composed certain things for liturgical celebrations, both words and music, in an elegant manner’. Bishop Conantius of Palentia ‘put forth many musical melodies in a distinguished fashion’. Bishop Braulio of Saragossa was ‘illustrious for his songs and writings’. That is quite a gathering of episcopal musicians. The way these eminent men composed in a ‘refined’ or ‘elegant’ manner leaves no doubt that each one had ‘put together’ or had ‘put forth’ both words and music in a sufficiently stable form that the results could be addressed and praised in writing. To those that remembered their names, the chants these bishops composed remained the property of their makers: I am on the verge of saying their composers.

Mozarabic chant

Text from Job 17, 11-16

Dies mei transierunt...

TRANSLATION

My days are past, my purposes are broken off, even the thoughts of my heart. I have said to corruption, Thou art my father: to the worm, Thou art my mother, and my sister. Free me, Lord, and put me next to thee.

An exceptional insight into the schooling of singers who sang these chants comes from a Latin poem, ‘Admonition to a Cantor’, which survives among the prefatory material to the tenth-century antiphoner of León. The poem may actually be much older than the book in which it appears, and I suspect that it is. From the very beginning, the verses communicate a clear sense of the cantor as a responsible member of the ecclesiastical personnel from whom much is expected. If they were originally conceived as the prologue to an antiphoner, which is how they now appear, then they present a flattering (and so perhaps an insider’s) view of the singers who might have a use for such a book. Nonetheless, the cantor must learn the ‘gift of humility’, and is advised to appreciate the difference between pleasing human as opposed to divine ears. Cantors should therefore avoid being carried away with what the poet call ‘vain human plaudits…poisonous human praise, drawing the soul into the terrible fires of hell’. Yet despite this appeal to the ear of God, there is a strong sense in the poem of a listening congregation, indeed of an audience. They are ‘those standing by’ and even ‘the listeners’. Most dangerous for the cantor, they may also be ‘admirers. The cantor should sing with a contrite heart and with a voice that accords with his inner disposition, for that is how he will inspire others to piety. As for the praise that the cantor is offered, he should regard it as a bag full of wind, but without ever lapsing into indifference so that he neglects his art. He must always strive to augment the talent entrusted to him because the heavenly King may come at any time to see how he has used it (Matthew 25:14-30).

The process of schooling singers, in what is almost certainly a cathedral, comes into view with the poet’s requirement that the cantor, now envisaged as the leader of a group or at least as a teacher, has an obligation to instruct promising pupils. He should scout around for those who can sing well. However, these successes are not to become the basis for seeking higher office in the Church. The cantor should follow Paul’s counsel and remain in the state to which he has been called (I Corinthians 7:20), a very revealing remark which implies some singers might use their position as a stepping stone to much higher office. Above all, cantors should be benign, peaceable and modest; they must be without guile and of good reputation, always behaving with rectitude and measure. Who says the Middle Ages have nothing to teach us?

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