



Music and the Church

Part I - Plainchant

Curtis Rogers

Plainchant can be boldly stated to be the bedrock from which almost the whole of the subsequent tradition of Western art music developed in terms of the technical and theoretical possibilities that were to ensue until the present day. Of course plainchant itself has a pre-history and a great deal of the theory that underpins the language of Western music derives from scientific discoveries made by the Ancient Greeks, who worked out that what constituted harmonic and melodic order was governed by the mathematical relationships of the sounds as aural phenomena. But plainchant is the earliest body of music which survives in the Western tradition to any significant extent and to which this tradition's origin can therefore be traced.

Plainchant is a generic term that encompasses a range of liturgical rites, reflecting the different practices of various ecclesiastical communities within Christendom at large. Gregorian chant is probably the best-known and most prevalent species, such that it is often thought of as almost synonymous with 'plainchant', but this is not quite correct. Gregorian chant is simply the tradition that became most widespread within the Western (i.e. Latin or Roman) Christian Church, roughly after the time that the Holy Roman Empire was consolidated following the coronation of Charlemagne in 800 AD; to the extent that the Roman Catholic Church still utilises any plainchant within its liturgy today, it is this Gregorian type that will be encountered.¹ Within