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### **The Progress of Semiological Interpretation**

An extraordinarily fascinating topic to be sure – which combines science and art; tastes and opinions; and, why not, painful conflicts as well; European cultures on one side, the need for common points on the other, neither more nor less than in musical interpretation generally, where one encounters schools and traditions, which must however reckon with the history of forms and of aesthetics.

In our sector it must be added that Gregorian chant is essentially music for the liturgy: a fact that must very much be kept in mind, if we do not want this music to become just any kind of musical expression, which would cause the chant to deviate from its nature. To treat of it, then, constitutes a serious responsibility, when one thinks that, taking the Solesmes reform which began in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the obvious point of reference, semiological interpretation has not only provoked what one would call a break with the past, but has also unleashed enormous problems of reconstitution and recasting of a musical taste and of an interpretive style.

To the extent they can be known, the first seedlings of what has come to be a veritable revolution must be traced back to the arrival of Dom Eugène Cardine at the Pontifical Institute of Musica Sacra of Rome, following his appointment as professor of Gregorian paleography. Cardine arrived in this seat already endowed with an extensive fund of experience in his monastery, where he had been organist accompanist, as well as member of the schola, and where he had acquired renown through a number of very perspicacious essays. What consumed him above all was a love for the neumatic signs and for the secrets related to their connections. For the sake of historical veracity it must be said that decades earlier André Mocquereau had already noted certain particular behaviors; certain simple breaks between neumes – very important annotations, to be sure. And it is not known to what extent the research of Mocquereau inspired Cardine. But without detracting in any way from the genius of the great Gregorian specialist and founder of Musical Paleography, it must be said that his observations can be compared to those not infrequent phenomena of history, where certain primary intuitions provide the launching pad for a whole prophetic beginning, while at the same time an adequately prepared genius does not develop those potentialities, which therefore remain beyond the grasp of the initiator himself. So Cardine is rightly considered an epochal watershed, a figure of monumental distinction.

To re-read, at a distance of more than forty years, the treatise: *Neumes et Rythme: les coupures neumatiques e Preuves paléographiques du principe des "coupures" dans les neumes* is once again to touch as it were with the hands not

only the perennial freshness of a truly great work, but also the beginnings of a new era.

The principle of the *coupure* (break) and, more generally, the new reading of the neumatic signs, put into motion a phenomenon of enormous profundity, namely, that all-embracing, fully powered engine which imposes the overturning of interpretive criteria.

This is, then, the beginning of a time of great transitions, which I have been privileged to be able to experience first hand, since 1965, but also, and above all, in a second moment, through public discussion in congresses that have taken place since 1977. Indeed, on the occasion of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, when the maestro was considering leaving his chair at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music due to age limits, two women, the Japanese Michiko Hirayama and the Frenchwoman Marie-Claire Billecocque, the first a singer and fan, the second a student, came up with the idea that embraced other individuals – myself among them – of founding in Rome an association, namely our own, which thus assumed from the start the name Associazione Internazionale Studi di Canto Gregoriano.

With the completion of the initial broadcasting phase, the first congress was organized that very year (1977), and in the city of Cremona. An important event, because it was the first protracted and *public* attempt to put into practice what was in process of maturing in research, when one thinks that the principle protagonist was Godehard Joppich, who had the idea of inviting a number of international choirs to record one passage each, which would be listened to, and then to dissect parts of the piece, so as to facilitate a minute analysis regarding the rendering of the individual semiotic signs.

Besides the theoretical talks, then, the congress based its work on this ingenious initiative, which represented, I repeat, in *public* form, a first, difficult and noteworthy effort to put into practice a style of singing consonant with the semiological innovation of Cardine. Truly happy times were these, with the maestro and top level experts in Gregorian chant, among whom it is only right to mention Luigi Agustoni, the oldest of Cardine's disciples, and director of that "Nova Schola Gregoriana", whose very name bespeaks its programmatic character.

The first congress, however, constitutes one of the two pivot points of our enterprise. The first, which was older, was supplied of course by the activity of Cardine and of his disciples in the ambit of the Pontifical Institute of Musica Sacra, because semiological interpretation obviously presupposes the foundation of scientific work. Above all, in this case, that of Cardine, to which reference has already been made; then, from 1958 onward, that of his school. Thus, if you look at the *corpus* of the masters and doctoral theses produced, what you see is itself a "war engine", and it is so in the afterthought of the current tradition. Practically speaking nothing was spared. Even if it is read in brief overview, the scope of

what is treated in this corpus remains striking to this day. Such as the characteristics of the punctum in Laon, an element of adaptability in movement; or of the oriscus, where its orientation is taken into account. Then, among other things, the salicus, strongly transformed and orientated in its movement with respect to the previous conception; the neumes that are intentionally angular at their highpoint; the appositional strophæ, even if still in “scientific” individualization, not therefore exclusively linked to the chant. Then the pause on the second note of the scandicus; a great work on the quilisma, where there is a definite movement toward the third note; another, which is an exhaustive treatment of the torculus fluidus; then the torculus *initio debilis* in Benevento 33; lengthening signs in descending contexts, the neumatic pause in Angelica 123; the virga strata, the little uncinus in descending contexts in the Laon manuscript 239; works on the letters in both the St. Gallen and the Metten manuscripts. These last involve the sense of the oriscus in the salicus of Laon 239, about which Cardine affirmed that they were notes hardly differentiated, as to their value, with respect to the punctum of the scandicus, the only difference being their transitional, or lead function. Then we come to the strophic groups, and we have arrived at 1973. And after the scandicus with a pause on the second note (1962), now a thesis (1974) on the scandicus with a pause on the first note. Then, still in 1974, another great thesis on the liquescence of the epiphonus praepunctis. 1975 sees the foundation of the Associazione Internazionale Studi di Canto Gregoriano. We cite also a thesis on the pes quassus in Benevento 33 of 1976; while 1977 sees the first congress of the AISCGre. And it is here that the work of the school grafts onto the beginning of the public activity, and that the preparatory work moves toward implementation in Europe, if not beyond. The research of the Cardine circle will see two more very important contributions, on the double oriscus in Chartres and on the pes *initio debilis*. All in all, a truly impressive apparatus.

In the congressional sector, one aspect appeared clear to all with respect to the era of Solesmes. This school represented a style that was of universal appeal. It seemed that to break with this style was tantamount to departing from Gregorian chant itself, fighting a battle that made alternative solutions appear improper. In fact, it did mean diverging from a phenomenon that had dominated the particular universe of the chant, rich in history and in genius, composed of great reformers and scholars, sustained by a monastic choir, master of the legato, with an unmistakable vocal style – a style whose stamp Dom Cardine himself will continue to bear, with all his extraordinarily innovative capacity. It also perhaps implied a break with a certain balance that had been achieved at the theoretical level.

I myself endured this conflict for many long years. I was even plagued with an occasional doubt as to directions we were taking, conditioned as I was by the history of Gregorian chant seen as the history of Solesmes. Other colleagues seem not to have been affected by such a conditioning, and I say this in a positive sense. Perhaps it was a matter of cultural type or education, perhaps a

healthy freedom of conscience on their part, perhaps some trait of a personal nature. Today however such a distancing from what once was, and, though it has evolved, continues to be the Solesmes style, is no longer a settled matter. The new phase has all but exploded in a series of possibilities that characterize the individual who conducts a choir. Is this last observation something positive, or not? Certainly it is a reality, if not a problem. Choirs take on a distinctive character often through a variety of factors, beginning with the way they express the textual phonetics; or in the way they treat the melodic style, which can appear more or less mellow, or even downright harsh in tendency. However, the grammatical principle on which they are based is one and the same for all. But on a common semiological denominator, I repeat, the freedom of the individual conductor rules the day.

On further reflection, however, the situation is really no different in other genres of musical expression. I am old enough to remember famous interpretations of great symphonic conductors. I cite two of the greatest: Wilhelm Furtwängler and Arturo Toscanini, both capable of producing historic interpretations, but vastly different from each other. Why should there not be a variety of cultures? But despite all this the line of balance should not be abandoned. Since Gregorian chant is music for the liturgy, it cannot yield to interpretations that would betray its functions. The same applies to measured music. Not all the masses that have been composed are suitable for worship. To be sure, here too, in a judgment on what is appropriate, the tradition possesses a weight of its own. But there is no need to think that this tradition is only the fruit of subjectivity, because even historical sensitivity itself is not born only of subjective judgments, but rather of the sum total of reflections that see the desire of a common meter in which it can be recognized.

Another great problem that semiological knowledge posed to interpretation was that related to the value of the notes. A problem from the solution of which a conception of "modernity" was to develop, which would assume a very prominent role in the process of evolution and of the distancing that took place from the style of Solesmes. Dom Cardine possessed a very balanced conception of the question, with his subdivision, but *not schematic*, of the possibilities of notational value, which did indeed have as its basis the differentiation of signs, but which was modified to some degree, in our opinion, in the circle of the original school. The one who did however effect a radical innovation was Luigi Agustoni. He did so I would not honestly be able to say with what kind of theoretical coherency, but not, to be sure, without a secure semiological competency and a profound aesthetic sensitivity. Once he had expressed the idea in an initial essay, precisely on the value of notes, he advanced with great personal confidence a kind of aesthetic line in which the adaptability of his type of musicality played a notable role. At the same time, Godehard Joppich was producing analyses, which at the time appeared foreign to the sensibilities of our group, but which were based on a very vivid awareness of the relationship Gregorian chant is supposed to have with the text. To be sure, Solesmes too based its very

existence on such an awareness, and this it did since the days of that great initiator who was Abbot Guéranger. Nevertheless, the new way of framing the problem made use of that powerful and revolutionary analytical tool that had become the awareness of the ancient signs. Perhaps it is not unthinkable that, consciously or not, the Agustoni way of understanding notational values had come in contact with the research of Joppich on the music-text relationship.

In any case, a new era had begun. And it should be said that meetings among scholars and mutual influences were possible, not only because people working in the field tended to know each other, but also through the organization of public courses, which provided a way for many individuals to enter into, or to improve their knowledge of the Gregorian repertoire, as well as their singing style, and also a way for colleagues to collaborate. It is correct to recall that the first new courses began in 1980 in the city of Cremona, which had become the seat of the Association: courses that were truly international at the beginning, then gradually more limited with this kind of audience, after Essen began giving its own courses in the German language which had a strong Central European attendance. The Cremona courses were launched somehow in connection with the second Congress of the Association, which took place in the same city in 1979, and whose Acts, together with other independent contributions, would be collected, under the editorship of Johannes Berchmans Göschl, in the *Festschrift Eugène Cardine*, on the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Master (1980).

The Acts saw important contributions. But allow me to cite but one of them, which perhaps summarizes them all, *Die rhythmische Natur des Pes*, by my late friend Rupert Fischer, who certainly, for his part, contributed in a powerful way to the clarification, also at the level of interpretation, of the ascending movement not only of the sign in question, but of ascending movement in chant generally.

We would have to continue our survey with what was produced in other, already existing seats of higher research, such as the Pontificio Istituto Ambrosiano di Musica Sacra, or by way of seats in process of being established in other countries of Central Europe – such as also specific articles, some of them truly excellent, that have appeared in the two journals of the Association, the *Beiträge zur Gregorianik* and the Italian *Studi gregoriani*, both happily active, which would see the light of day in about the mid-80s, to take their place alongside the *Études grégoriennes* of Solesmes. Not to mention some new treatises that have broadened and developed the data of the discipline, often in very original ways. The time, then, of great intersection between schools, congresses, courses and general interpretation, which was launched in grand style by the Cardine circle, has become, one might say European. And choirs that have remained far removed from these developments, even if appreciable from the point of view of musical performance, reveal this lack in an evident way.

In spite of all this, we must repeat that interpretative problems in the semiological field are far from being resolved to common satisfaction, and it is not yet known if

a univocal solution along the lines of the dominant style of Solesmes is possible or even desirable. At the present moment such uniformity is clearly impossible, because of the strong influence, as we said, of director personalities, and also because of the diverse conceptions of the text-music relationship, which sometimes differ quite markedly from one another.

On the other hand, we are clearly faced with another problem, that of vocalization. How are we to sing? Solesmes had habituated us to a very well-known vocal style, which seemed also to be the most appropriate, and appropriate for the spirit of the liturgy it certainly was – while on the other hand most choirs today do not normally sing the chant in connection with worship, but rather in concert settings – which says something about the present situation.

When I speak of vocalization, of vocal quality, I intend to allude also to the *legato*. Today it is difficult to grasp the mind of individual choirs on this matter. Choirs sing in every imaginable way: with full voice, suffused voice, with a legato sound, with a non-legato sound. Solesmes, in contrast, had affirmed a legato style of voice, I would say even very legato.

Here too, perhaps, it would be well to seek a somewhat more unified way. What I mean to say is that, just as in the heyday of Solesmes the style of that monastery was spread throughout the world of the Roman Rite, the semiological style should also be looking for a common denominator in this matter of vocal style. And what should this be? There will probably be an element of subjectivity in my response. My personal experience, not only because linked for the most part to feminine voices, but also through the exercise of my own voice, orientates me decidedly toward the *legato*. I do not exclude the possibility that my opinion takes into account also the nature of Gregorian accentuation, which, in my opinion, enjoys the double, intensive-musical nature, as I had occasion to say some four years ago now at Hildesheim. I do not want to exclude the fact that I continue to be impressed with the way of singing modeled by Dom Cardine, who employed a personal technique that was extraordinarily mellow. To be sure, however, *legato* strikes me as the technique most consonant with the potentialities of semiology, to the extent that it allows a movement of textual-musical type, which I like to define as of *two phonetics*, textual and musical, *fused into one*, which Guido Arezzo already seems to have hoped for, and which gives to the chant a fullness and a mellowness, and to the text an appropriately expressive clarity, as well as the capacity to overcome the thousand obstacles with which the variety of phonetic combinations lines the course of the singer or choir.

The Gregorian accents, just as in speaking, are of the most diverse nature and, one might say, continuous, inserting into a given statement neumatic accents as well as those proper to the word itself. With respect to the former, in a very special way, it is my strong conviction that, if they are not knitted together through a legato style, the risk is above all one which I constantly stress in teaching, namely that, for example, the attacks of the neumes risk being viewed

as discrete units even when there is no indication that they should be treated as such. This gives to the movement of the music an erratic, stop-and-go progression, sounding almost like metered units, at least disguisedly. On the other hand, if they are treated as discrete, articulated units, there is also the danger, as I have suggested, that one will impede the progression of the chant's movement in its need for *linearity*.

As a little appendix, a "minor" aspect that is particularly dear to me is that of the development of an awareness of the strophici, which were earlier conceived I will not say as repercussions, but surely not as "pulsations", a very light succession of a type of sign I like to define as *mobility*; or of the bivirga, which, in contrast to the strophicus, is of course a sign of *stability*, but without it becoming for this reason viewed as a forced neume. Indeed, the bivirga can be very plastic, even if well-grounded. The torculus *initio debilis* too, above all at the conclusion of a word, is to be considered as an effective way of highlighting the very word it terminates, as has been demonstrated.

An evolution, above all, has taken place and continues to take place in the aesthetic key, understood in the most profound sense. By which I mean in a new sense of a style that embraces and combines and compresses into one everything that has been discovered in the research: a new planet, in sum, a new era. Movement and plasticity, sense of a text which has itself become music, through an operation, to which the incisions bear witness, and in which the better choirs continue their process of becoming: an art that remains liturgical in character, to be sure, but that has become open to the world of universal music, with which and with whose history it can stand face to face as an equal.

I have preferred to develop the theme of the present paper rather than according to a criterion of detail, which would have led me into the blind alley of the particular, and perhaps to views that conflict with others or even my own, while at the same time looking to the *historical* situation, past and present. What can safely be affirmed is that, after initial attempts and an early period of maturation, semiological method, based as it is on solid grounds of scientific research, appears today as an immense sea of possibilities, as an enormous explorative potentiality above all of aesthetics and of the sung liturgy. In this too, though perhaps not yet with the present degree of awareness, Don Cardine was a prophet. Indeed, when he was concluding his *First year of Gregorian chant*, he wrote that, after the first year, and this means *after* semiology, there is the final step – semiology therefore is not it – which consists in the "study of the synthesis of the word and the neume, which leads directly to interpretation and to musical direction." Cardine then continues: "One could then present a few general principles, which would allow students to take their bearings in the immense field of Gregorian aesthetics". Aesthetics, which constitutes the terrain on which we now move with matured security.

I participated a short time ago with my choir in a concert at which was present an extraordinary Swiss organist, with some pieces performed *alternatim*, but others in mutual autonomy, and with the presence, for the organ part, of a famous Bach monument. With all due respect to the greatest composer who ever lived, not for a moment did I feel intimidated, as a practitioner of Gregorian chant, by the presence of that man of prodigious greatness. This too we must affirm when we speak of the semiological interpretation of Gregorian chant.

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