



A Study on the Interaction and Influence between Gregorian Chant and Early Secular Songs

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Abstract: Gregorian chant constituted the official liturgical music of the medieval Roman Church, with monks and clergy expressing praise and reverence for God through its chanting. It held a pivotal position within medieval religious life. However, with the rise of cities and the development of commerce, the bourgeoisie gradually expanded, developing a desire for musical forms capable of expressing everyday emotions and reflecting secular life. Given these divergences, traditional scholarship has predominantly examined the contrasting relationship between the two, with scant exploration of their mutual interaction. This paper therefore adopts this perspective to analyse how the two forms permeated and influenced one another.

Keywords: Gregorian chant, secular song, mutual permeation

1. Introduction

Medieval European musical culture exhibited a distinctive dual structure. Gregorian chant, with its monophonic, unaccompanied vocal style, embodied sacred, unified, and transcendent order. Through its systematic modes, refined melodies, and adherence to Latin liturgical texts, it laid the foundations for Western musical notation, theory, and even auditory aesthetics. Meanwhile, early secular songs, centred on knightly love, heroic epics, nature, and political satire, brimmed with earthly humanistic concern and emotional vitality, equally representing the pinnacle of medieval cultural achievement[1].

2. The Origins and Characteristics of Gregorian Chant

2.1 The Origins and Development of Gregorian Chant

The origins and development of Gregorian chant represent a protracted and intricate process, emerging as the systematisation, standardisation, and unification of early Christian musical traditions. Early Christianity, rooted in Judaism, incorporated liturgical music practices including psalmody, responsorial singing, and melodic elements inherited from synagogue traditions. As the Roman Empire expanded, musical elements from its eastern provinces gradually integrated into this tradition, influencing its melodic ornamentation and modal concepts. After Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, local liturgical practices and musical traditions developed across regions. However, later political and religious initiatives drove their gradual unification and standardisation. Pope Gregory I vigorously promoted the reform and unification of Roman liturgical rites and music during his pontificate.

2.2 Musical Characteristics of Gregorian Chant

The musical characteristics of Gregorian chant are entirely subservient to its religious function, aiming to create an atmosphere of solemnity, transcendence, and otherworldly sanctity. Consequently, the chant is purely monophonic, with all voices singing a single melodic line. This symbolises the unity and devotion of the faithful, directing their attention wholly towards God and the text itself. Unlike modern music, Gregorian chant lacks the regular, repetitive concept of strong and weak beats. Its rhythm is free and prose-like, entirely following the cadence, intonation, and breathing pauses of the Latin text. This rhythm, termed 'non-metrical cadence,' avoids sensory pleasure derived from the music itself, ensuring the text remains paramount[2].

3. The Emergence and Characteristics of Early Secular Songs

3.1 The Emergence and Types of Early Secular Songs

Early secular songs originated in courts, castles, and market towns. Their emergence signalled the dawn of secular cultural consciousness and the burgeoning humanist spirit in medieval Europe[3]. The flourishing of early secular song was no accident, but rather the inevitable outcome of a series of social, economic, and political transformations during the High Middle Ages. With the consolidation of feudalism and the wealth brought by the Crusades, the lifestyles of Europe's

nobility grew increasingly refined. Castles thus became centres of art, literature, and social interaction, giving rise to courtly culture. This culture emphasised chivalry and courtly manners, providing an ideal sanctuary and patronage for artistic creation. Moreover, the rise of cities and flourishing commerce gave birth to an affluent bourgeoisie. Possessing both wealth and leisure, this class propelled the commercialisation of cultural demand

3.2 Musical Expression in Early Secular Songs

The musical expression of early secular songs borrowed formally from the achievements of sacred chant, yet diverged fundamentally in spirit, forging its own artistic realm. Secular songs were poetry first and song second; music served to enhance and amplify the poetic imagery and emotion. Song structure was entirely dictated by poetic metre, with the most common form being the strophic song—a single melody paired with multiple verses. Though employing ecclesiastical modes, secular melodies often possessed greater danceability and pronounced rhythmic character. Unlike the free, prose-like rhythms of psalms, many secular songs already possessed clear, regular metrical patterns. Melodic contours were more directly linked to the emotions conveyed by the lyrics: melodies expressing joy were bright and leaping, while those conveying the anguish of lost love might descend, filled with chromatic, sighing patterns.

4. The Mutual Influence Between Gregorian Chant and Early Secular Songs

4.1 The Infiltration of Chant into Secular Songs

As the most mature and authoritative musical system of its time, Gregorian chant exerted a foundational, almost “maternal” influence on the composition of early secular songs. Creators of secular songs, whether nobles or wandering scholars, developed within the auditory environment shaped by the chant. Consequently, the chant’s eight ecclesiastical modes, fundamental melodic patterns, and cadences naturally became the shared musical vocabulary for secular song composition. This ensured that secular songs, despite differing emotional content, maintained an intrinsic connection with the chant in their musical syntax. Building upon this foundation, secular songwriters frequently selected a widely circulated sacred chant melody and directly set it to entirely new secular lyrics. Such an approach proved not only efficient but also implicitly appropriated and secularised the authority of sacred chant, thereby enabling sacred melodies to convey secular sentiments.

4.2 The Impact of Secular Song on Chant

Though secular song could not rival chant in status or systematisation, its vibrant vitality and worldly spirit exerted a grassroots influence and impact upon religious music. The more danceable, rhythmically driven melodic styles found in secular song gradually permeated later religious musical composition. In Gothic polyphony, particularly the works of the Notre Dame school, one can distinctly discern more regular and lively rhythmic patterns. This is undoubtedly the result of secular musical tastes influencing sacred music, infusing solemn religious compositions with renewed vitality. While sacred chant pursued a transcendent sense of the divine, secular song focused on expressing concrete, personal emotions. This emphasis on human sentiment indirectly shaped the expressive qualities of later religious music.

4.3 The Influence of Interactions Between Chant and Secular Song on Music

4.3.1 The Reshaping of Musical Style Through Their Interaction

The most direct revolutionary outcome of the interaction between chant and secular song was the birth and enrichment of polyphonic music, which fundamentally reshaped the stylistic landscape of Western music. Sacred chant, being purely monophonic, symbolised unity and devotion. The secular song’s pursuit of richer sonorities spurred the addition of new melodic lines above or below the single chant melody. Early polyphonic forms, such as the organum, introduced a voice a perfect fourth or fifth below the chant melody, transforming the sonic plane into a three-dimensional space. This shift in musical thinking was inseparable from the pursuit of secular, ornamental beauty in music.

4.3.2 The Interaction Between the Two and Innovation in Musical Subject Matter

This interaction broke through the barriers of musical themes, creating unprecedented polyphonic themes and ultimately giving birth to hymns. The revolutionary leap of this hymn occurred when the composer filled the fast and smooth upper part with brand-new lyrics created in a native language. It originated from alternative techniques in isolated hymns. This gives rise to a special polyphonic phenomenon: a piece of music conveys two completely different messages. The low notes sang Latin hymns promoting sacred doctrines, while the high notes sang French love songs depicting secular passions. The parallelism and overlap of such themes constitute one of the most innovative feats in medieval music.

5. Conclusion

Gregorian hymns and early secular songs respectively represent the sacred and secular poles of the medieval spiritual

world. However, their relationship is far from being a simple opposition; On the contrary, it constitutes a continuous and fruitful dynamic dialogue. Poems provide the formal and technical foundation for secular songs, while secular songs nourish religious music with their vivid emotions and secular vitality. Their collision not only directly gave rise to profound compound genres such as hymns, opening the door to the vigorous development of polyphonic music, but also profoundly reshaped the style, subject matter and cultural significance of Western music.

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