

GREGORIAN CHANT ON THE GRAMOPHONE*

IT is probable that many students of liturgy and plainsong shared the scepticism of the present writer on hearing that successful gramophone records had been taken of the chant of the Benedictine Fathers at Solesmes. The gramophone. Yes, we knew it had been vastly improved in recent years, and even before the war, on account of the accuracy of its tempo, we remembered welcoming the day when it superseded the unfortunate pianist thumping in his corner after the carpet had been rolled back for an impromptu dance in the long dining room at home. On those and other occasions, however, considerations of tone and timbre were secondary. Then we thought of later records of orchestral pieces—very successful except for a certain hardness which mattered nothing to the brass but lost a good deal to the strings—and lastly, we recalled less successful vocal items in which the human touch was sorely sacrificed to mechanical accuracy.

And this latest announcement led to reflection on the chant as the monks sing it. We listened again in imagination to the fine diction of the syllabic recitative, the subdued yet thunderous might of the unison, and felt the rhythm as a tenuous pervading atmosphere, which the singers did not create, but rather glided into, as swimmers might into a moving tide. The prayer-spirit which brooded and hovered and soared and sang, could one conceive of it caged up in a machine, however marvellous? Emphatically no.

Nor was this preconception at once dispelled when curiosity had so far overcome prejudice as to persuade us to a hearing of the new records. The novelty of timbre, for which one was scarcely prepared, added to the strangeness inseparable from listening to the melo-

* His Master's Voice (The Gramophone Company, Ltd.)

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dies apart from their setting; this came as a shock at first. Then there was the perfect reproduction of the rhythm. It was too perfect, that was just it. The fast-fleeting beauty that escaped under the arches of Solesmes or Quarr was here almost hitting one in the eye at every turn. Why should it obtrude itself so much more in the record than in the reality? And was it the fault of the soft needle that the decrescendo passages were so faint as to be at times nearly inaudible? If so, there was no remedy; a medium one made the tone too harsh for most of the pieces. It was just that the rise and fall, like the rhythm, was slightly, very slightly, exaggerated. And where, finally, was that dull thunderous undercurrent or swell that we remembered, when the whole choir sang together like the morning stars in the book of Job? It was as we thought, no sound-box could contain that.

Not all these objections made themselves felt in a moment, but they constituted a first impression, which it is well to state at once, because afterwards the process of conversion was so rapid that it became difficult to revert to or even remember them. Difference of timbre is a thing one gets used to. As for the rhythm, after all it is beautiful enough to stand a little exaggeration, especially in view of the fact that the records are destined for demonstration and teaching purposes. The other drawbacks petered out to a large extent on closer acquaintance.

Closer acquaintance indeed proved to be all that was needed to bring to light the treasures stored up in this splendid album. Text books, though necessary, can only play quite a secondary part in Gregorian education; for it is almost impossible, except to an expert, to convey musical ideas by printed words. But in these living models, whose superb artistry grows upon the listener at each hearing, it is possible to study the Solesmes method at one's leisure at firsthand. The

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very isolation from a setting has this advantage; that it focusses attention upon the technique for the time being. What a boon these records will be to enclosed convents, whose renderings of chant are so often spoilt by bad habits which are simply and solely the result of never hearing anyone but themselves. And what an encouragement to the teacher who is trying to train a choir in like case. Much painstaking explanation will now be effectively superseded by listening to the pieces recorded while following them in the book. And if, here and there, the listener finds the Solesmes interpreters apparently breaking their own rules, he may remember that the records are only making plainer what an English Gregorian authority, Dom Alphege Shebbeare, pointed out some years ago (writing in BLACKFRIARS, November 1921); namely that at Solesmes the singers are not the slaves of their very precise theories. They are sufficiently great artists to know just when and where to break away. Especially is this the case, of course, when it is a question of sacrificing smaller indications for the sake of 'le grand rythme de la phrase.'

One of the first things which will please the critical listener to these records is the just predominance given to the words, the high quality of their pronunciation and enunciation. One sits down to learn over again with a new delight the oft-repeated lesson that in plain-song the text is everything. Every word of the liturgy is holy and must therefore be uttered with due care and reverence. The melody is only heightened speech, or song beginning where speech breaks off, *exultatio mentis prorumpens in vocem*. This is 'Latin music,' as Dom Gajard points out in his introductory booklet, the Latin accent is its very soul, and a thorough comprehension of the Latin text is essential for its appreciation. The photographic accuracy of the gramophone makes it a very searching test of accent and pro-

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nunciation. There are small faults here and there, of course, but the whole effect is natural and beautiful, and if one regrets that the singer who gave out some of the intonations was surely placed too near the microphone, one can at any rate reflect that few could bear a 'close-up' as well as he.

A special cause for rejoicing is that these records will tend to correct the great fault of English choirs, the tendency to a sentimental 'wailing' style. We suspect that it is from hearing such that many people are still found to complain that plainchant is melancholy and depressing. Yet how wise Dom Mocquereau was when he advised choirmasters to be patient with faults arising from misdirected efforts to put 'expression' into the rendering; because, he said, as soon as the chant became really known, its own native dramatic power would easily oust such errors without need for further exertion on their part. To listen to the records of the Holy Week pieces, to *Montes Gelboë*, *Quinque prudentes* or *Media vita*, is to become convinced that the liturgy possesses sufficient resources of her own to voice the joy and sorrow of Holy Church, without the aid of our personal religious sensibilities.

Valuable hints have already been given, here and there, as to the best way of profiting by the records when they are being used for actual choir training. Humming or singing the melody in an undertone while the record is being played has been suggested as a means of acquiring the rhythmic flow; or the choirmaster may steep himself in the rendering and then impart it to his pupils; beginning, naturally, with the simpler pieces, such as the hymns, and gradually working up to the more elaborate. For such as cannot afford to purchase the entire album, yet desire typical specimens of its contents, one may venture, though diffidently, as it is so much a matter of personal taste, to recommend D. 1978, with the lovely Pentecost

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Introit on one side, and the Kyrie *Orbis factor*, a real gem, faultlessly sung, on the other. If D. 1981 can also be managed, then *Christus resurgens*, the naïve Alleluias of Easter, and Notker's great responsory will provide a further source of delight. It is often matter for regret that some of the finest examples of Gregorian art are seldom heard in church, perhaps only once or twice in the whole course of the year. Less musical ears miss a great deal in this way and never get to know certain of the best pieces. Now, however, they will have an opportunity of familiarising themselves with such and being better prepared for them when they re-appear in the course of the liturgical cycle.

One final point, of such lofty importance that we shall not venture to do more than touch upon it here. In spite of being isolated from their setting, the Solesmes records pray. Everyone remarks this, and it provides overwhelming proof of the spiritual value of an objective and traditional method in the chant. Those who sing it are performing a hieratic function in which the least slovenliness would be unworthy of the divine etiquette. 'God loves discipline,' as Saint Augustine reminds us. Only if we do our part humbly, offering nothing but the best, denying individual predilections, yielding to no personal idiosyncrasy, losing ourselves in the mind of the Church, as interpreters of whom faithfulness alone is demanded, performing each gesture, uttering each word, as she prescribes, building our altars, in short, upon strong foundations, then certainly the fire from heaven will come down and kindle our sacrifice.

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