Sing to Mary / Learn about Chant: Salve Regina

By Cecilia Curran

In this time when multiculturalism and the use of world music are two criteria for a successful music education program, Catholic music educators have a special resource to draw on: the heritage of Gregorian chant. Chant was born out of a transcultural need to find a music appropriate for a liturgical rite that crossed the various cultures of Europe, or at least of the Holy Roman Empire but, with the re-emergence in our time of national or cultural translations and adaptations of that unified liturgy, chant has become, in many quarters, an oddity of musical history often relegated to a dusty niche in the history of Western music or ceded to New Age devotees who listen to chant without understanding its text.

Chant certainly should be taught as part of our musical history, but it has other roles to play as well as a living part of the heritage of Catholic\ liturgical music which still has a place in current forms of worship, and as a musical introduction to the nature of ritual music, especially to forms of ritual music in which the text shapes the musical form. One piece of music which may serve in all three ways, as a voice out of the past, as an example of ritual music, and as a form of contemporary prayer, is a composition that looks like a hymn but which is, technically, a "Marian antiphon": "Salve, Regina."

Text and Tune

No one knows who composed the text or the tune of this song to Mary, though it seems probable that the same person who wrote the text also composed the music. The most likely candidates for author/composer are the monk Herman the Cripple (Hermanus Contractus, 1013-1054) and the bishop Adhemar of Pui (or of Puy, d. 1098).

Herman got his nickname from a disease which struck when he was a young child; it left him limited in movement and with speech problems for the rest of his life (he could barely speak above a whisper). He became a Benedictine monk at the Abbey of Reichenau, which stood on an island in Lake Constance, when he was about thirty, though he had probably lived at this monastery or at the Monastery of St. Gall from the time he was seven years old. Besides writing about the related scientific subjects of astronomy, arithmetic, and music, Herman was also a composer, a maker of musical instruments, and a clock maker.

Adhemar, a member of the royal house of the Counts of Valentinois, became bishop of the town of Le Puy in the year 1080. He seems to have spent most of his ministry not so much as a bishop but on horseback, as a fighter. First he fought to regain for his diocese some church lands that had been confiscated by nobles in the surrounding countryside, then, in 1095, he joined the first crusade to recover the Holy Land from its Muslim conquerors. He was appointed the papal legate to the crusade by Pope Urban II, and the crusade's leader, Raymond IV, Count of Toulouse, made Adhemar his deputy. The warrior-bishop stayed with the crusade for three years, acting as a military adviser for some battles, a political reconciler among the squabbling Western leaders, and a religious peacemaker between the Eastern and Western clergy. Bishop Adhemar died while on the crusade, at Antioch, Syria, in 1098, without reaching Jerusalem, which was seized by the crusaders in the following year.

The text and music for "Salve Regina" were probably composed about the year 1080, and one of its earliest reported liturgical uses was as a "processional antiphon" in 1135, at the Abbey of Cluny, a center of Benedictine reform and renewal. Processional antiphons were generally used on days when the entrance procession had an elaborate ritual attached to it, such as the solemn entrance with palms on Passion (Palm) Sunday, or the Major Litanies chanted on April 25 at Rome each year, replacing a pagan procession on that same date. Monasteries occasionally had long processions from the monastery itself into the church, during which they chanted a hymn or an antiphon. Sometime after the year 1218, the "Salve Regina" became a daily processional chant for the monks at Cluny, sung as they entered the abbey church. In the year 1230 the members of the various Dominican

orders began to use the antiphon each day after compline (night prayer). Under the influence of the Dominicans, the antiphon became a seasonal part of compline for the rest of the Roman Rite; it was used from Trinity Sunday to the beginning of Advent. As part of this night prayer, it came to be identified as a "Marian antiphon."

This particular Marian antiphon was very popular during the Renaissance, so popular, in fact, that it influenced the development of religious societies of lay people devoted to giving honor to Mary and invoking her help through prayer. These societies were called "Salve confraternities." One of the largest was the Marian Brotherhood of Antwerp, organized in 1482. Each day, according to their charter, the members of the Marian Brotherhood were to celebrate a devotional service between five and six o clock in the evening, for which they employed four adult singers, twelve choir boys, a choirmaster, an organist, and a priest. Because of its popularity as the key element of these "Salve services," a great number of polyphonic settings of the antiphon were commissioned and composed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. [You may want to find one or more recordings of these settings to play after you ve studied and used the antiphon. Composers include Dufay, Agricola, Gombert, La Rue, Josquin des Pris, Obrecht, and Ockeghem.]

Antiphons, Marian and Other

Chant antiphons are normally settings of prose texts sung in association with a psalm. (The "response" currently used with the "responsorial psalm" at Massis such an antiphon.) But "Marian antiphons" are different. These antiphonsare usually settings of somewhat longer texts, some prose, some poetry, and they have been in regular use since the thirteenth century, sung at the close of compline (night prayer), the last "hour" of the liturgical day. Some of the texts for these antiphons are very ancient: The Sub tuum praesidium, for example, is a Latin translation of a Greek original that dates at least to the third century. Other texts date from the eighth through the thirteenth centuries. English translations of many of these antiphons are still used at night prayer, among them a translation of "Salve Regina" (Hail, Holy Queen), "Alma Redemptoris mater" (Loving Mother of the Redeemer), "Ave Maria" (Hail Mary, Full of Grace), and "Regina coeli" (Queen of Heaven, Rejoice).

Here is the Latin text of the "Salve Regina" and a contemporary English translation:

Salve Regina, mater misericordiae:
Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.
Ad te clamamus, exsules filii Hevae.
Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes
in hac lacrimarum valle.
Eia ergo, advocata nostra,
illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte.
Et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui,
nobis post hoc exsilium ostende.
O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria.

Hail queen, mother of mercy.
Hail, our life, our comfort, and our hope.
Exiled children of Eve, we cry out to you:
To you we breathe a prayer,
as we journey in sorrow and lament
through this "valley of tears."
Come then, our advocate,
turn your eyes filled with pity our way.
And when this time of exile is past,
show us Jesus, the blessed fruit of your womb,
gentle, loving, and kind virgin Mary.

You can find the chant for this text, using modern notation, in these hymnals:
Catholic Book of Worship III (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops), #469 (Latin text)
Journeysongs (OCP), #508 (Latin text)
The Collegeville Hymnal (The Liturgical Press), #331 (Latin text)
We Celebrate Worship Resource, Deluxe Hymnal (World Library Publications),
#266 (Latin and English)
Worship (GIA), # 703 (Latin and English)

How Chant Works

Using this antiphon, you can teach several things about chant and how it works. (You may want to use one of the hymnals that has both the Latin and the English text I recommend the setting in Worship, since it uses unstemmed notes, which will help students not to treat the music as if it were metered.) Here we ll highlight three things about chant: meter, mode, and melisma.

Meter
First, you can point out that chant, unlike the hymns and many of the songs that we use in church, is considered unmetered. Unlike some of the other compositions in the hymnal, the notes for the "Salve Regina" either have no stems or no time signatures or both compare with hymns on nearby pages. This is because the rhythm of the chant is determined by the rhythm of the text: The text doesn't conform to the music; the music conforms to the text. Chant is, in other words, "sung speech."

Mode
This antiphon is written in the "fifth mode," also called the "Lydian mode" in medieval music, an eight-note scale that begins and ends on F, with C as the dominant. The modes in Gregorian chant were developed from the modes of Greek music theory, borrowed by Western Christianity from the Eastern Churches, though chant music theorists changed the names of the Greek modes around, which helps to confuse people who try to study the origins of chant. Beginning in about the eighth century, composers began to apply modal theory to the body of chant that already existed, working sometimes to rewrite existing melodies to conform to the theory, and then composing new music that followed the lines of modal theory. Eventually, as used in chant, "mode" meant not only a particular scale, but also arrangements of notes within that scale, short melodic figures (motives) or groups of tones that would be repeated in a composition.

Medieval church music generally used eight modes, four that begin and end on the same note, and four others with the prefix "hypo-" that end on a different note than the one they start on. Here are the eight modes of chant with their range, final, and dominant:

Mode #/Name
I Dorian (D-D, final D, dominant A)
II Hypodorian (A-A, final D, dominant F)
III Phrygian (E-E, final E, dominant C)
IV Hypophrygian (B-B, final E, dominant A)
V Lydian (F-F, final F, dominant C)
VI Hypolydian (C-C, final F, dominant A)
VII Mixolydian (G-G, final G, dominant D)
VIII Hypomixolydian (D-D, final G, dominant C)

Notice how the "Salve Regina" begins and ends on the same note (which, in modern notation, is C in most hymnals, but D in Worship), how often the dominant appears in the music (G or A, depending on the hymnal you re using), and how the phrases in each sentence also end on the dominant, while each sentence concludes on the final note.

Melisma
A melisma is a kind of musical decoration in chant. The simplest chants are called "syllabic" one note per syllable; the most elaborate are "melismatic" five or more notes on same syllable, sometimes in its most elaborate form as many as twenty or thirty notes on one syllable. Between these are those compositions called "neumatic," which have several notes on the same syllable. At first glance, the melisma seems to violate the principle that chant is "sung speech," music that takes its shape from the shape of the text. In fact, though, the melisma is a kind of additional musical accent that highlights the word or phrase on which it occurs.

So, for example, most of the "Salve Regina" is syllabic; only occasionally is there more than one note on a syllable usually at the end of a sentence, with the exception of the word "Jesum," which is highlighted as the name of the Savior. Only at the end of the antiphon does this music become more elaborate: Each successive "O" is given more weight by the addition of more or longer notes. The last two "O"s may be considered melismatic, with five notes or more to extend and heighten the pleading that accompanies each adjective used to describe Mary.

Ritual Music

Gregorian chant, especially in its simpler forms, may be considered "ritual music," that is, music which sets one of the texts used at worship in a form which may be learned fairly easily and sung by a congregation, but which is strong enough to bear repeated use. It is music that does not "belong" to the choir or to soloists but to the whole assembly.

The "Salve Regina" is one example of such music from the chant repertoire. As I mentioned above, it became attached to compline (night prayer) early in the thirteenth century, where it was the standard Marian antiphon for the longest stretch of the year, from Trinity Sunday to Advent (about seven months). It is still used at night prayer in the current liturgy of the hours. Older Catholics may also remember praying a vernacular translation of this antiphon as part of the "Prayers after Mass" or "Prayers for the Conversion of Russia" a set of prayers originally added to Mass by Pope Leo XIII in 1884, discontinued after Vatican II.

Examples of ritual music that may be more familiar to your students would include the current setting of the Eucharistic prayer acclamations used in your parish, especially if they have been in use for some time, or other repeated and familiar settings of Mass texts (e.g., the antiphon for a seasonal responsorial psalm, the petitions of the penitential rite, the chanted response to the general intercessions, the Lord's Prayer, and so on).

Salve Regina as Prayer

You might find occasion to use the "Salve Regina" for prayer during Marian devotions in May, using either the traditional Latin text or an English translation. There are several ways you could teach and use this antiphon.

If you are working with elementary and middle school children (K-8), you might teach the whole antiphon to the middle school children, and have them sing it during devotions or at a Mass in which you are honoring Mary using it as a "processional antiphon" at the opening of the Mass or during the preparation of gifts.

Another possible way to sing the song at Marian devotions or at Mass incorporates some of the younger children. Teach only the first sentence to younger children (grades 3-4) as a kind of antiphon that they could sing and repeat after each sentence or set of sentences of the rest of the text, which could be sung by the middle school children, by a choir, or by an adult cantor. That would work like this:

Cantor or choir: Salve . . . salve (or an English translation).
Children: Salve . . . salve.

Cantor or choir: Ad te . . . valle (2 sentences).
Children: Salve . . . salve.

Cantor or choir: Eia, ergo . . . converte.
Children: Salve . . . salve.

Cantor or choir: Et Jesum . . . ostende.
Children: Salve . . . salve.

Cantor or choir: O clemens . . . Maria.
Children: Salve . . . salve.

High school students might be taught to sing this Marian antiphon "antiphonally," that is, alternating the verses between two groups of students, or between a cantor/choir and the whole assembly.

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