

W O M E N I N C H A N T :

While first impressions might lead one to believe that the development of Chant as the pre-eminent musical form of the church was primarily the work of monks, the fact is that, while abbots and their confreres were gaining notoriety and power during the fifth through fifteenth centuries, orders of women religious were flourishing at an even greater rate.

While acknowledging the power of true religious vocation, it would be important to remember that, during this period of history, the nunnery was the only acceptable alternative to marriage for European women.

Not surprisingly, convents attracted more than their fair share of determined, free spirited, creative women who put their gifts at the service of their community and their God.

A haven relatively safe from the patriarchal critique of society, convents became hotbeds for what today we would call “Women’s Studies” Here, women who were educated (almost without exception, those of the privileged class) became the teachers and assumed leadership roles that were not available to them in the outside world. With freedom to draw from patriarch- forbidden wells, nuns had the opportunity to consider, in art, prose and music, the history of their gender’s contribution to Christianity, and ideas like the feminine divine. In such a supportive environment, many women

found themselves free and open to mystical religious experiences.

This spirited framework made convents ripe for the acceptance, and development of chant. More importantly, from a music evolution perspective, this was an environment where, rather than merely perfecting the art handed to them by their monk counterparts, the nuns began experimenting with the elements of chant.

The first deviation was the re-introduction of musical instruments for use in sacred music. The Church, in an effort to set its music apart from that of the secular world, discouraged instrumental accompaniment for liturgical music. Women composers, like the 12th century mystic Hildegard of Bingen, composed pieces with (and encouraged the use of) instruments to support the melodic line of chant. Soon, experimental composers began the style of organum, the layering of multiple voice parts to imitate the harmonies of multi-stringed instruments.

This re-embracing of instrumental accompaniment and voice-on-voice harmonizing set the stage for one of the most important movements in music history—the bridge from monophonic music (where there is a single melodic line) to polyphonic music (where multiple music lines weave together in harmonic rather than purely melodic fashion.)

What we today call Western music is, in large part, based on the harmonic improvisations developed by the post-chant experimentalist

tradition which, though formalized in the Ars Nova, Baroque, Classical, Romantic and Modern movements of the centuries to follow, was rooted in the simple creative musical adaptations of the convents of Western Europe.

As it was for so many women of the middle ages, the religious life is still the place where many women literally and figuratively find their voice. Whether in social ministry or carrying on the communal prayer/song tradition of their ancestors, today’s religious houses and cloisters still ring with the beauty and clarity of delicately harmonized and simply accompanied music that sings the praise of Creation and the Creator.

Still observed in its traditional form, Chant remains as the ministry and spiritual practice of thousands of convents all throughout the world.

Many orders of religious women have produced recordings of their prayer services. For a quick-pick review of the best recordings, please see this article’s sidebar.

SIDEBAR REVIEW:

#1 CANTATE DOMINO: Sing to the Lord
Choir of the Benedictine Nuns of Sainte Marie de Maumont
27 Cuts; 60 minutes
Milan Entertainment

If you’ve ever wondered what is the attraction to

vowed, cloistered life, listening to the ethereal sounds of these women and reading the lyrics of their psalm texts will give you a clue. The texts sung are from the rites where newcomers to the abbey are consecrated, in essence “married” to Christ.

#2 WOMEN IN CHANT: Gregorian Chants for the Festal Celebrations of the Virgin Martyrs and Our Lady of Sorrows
Choir of the Benedictine Nuns of the Abbey of Regina Laudis
24 Cuts: 60 minutes
Sounds True

It's said “Everybody needs a hero.” This CD, with it's sweet solo and velvety choral homages to early church martyrs Agatha, Lucy and Cecilia, sings the strength and courage of simple women who gave their lives to God. Founded by Lady Abbess Benedict Duss, O.S.B., the Regina Laudis convent is haven for the less-than likely- nun types: retired executives, scientists, and even an ex-Elvis movie star.

#3 HILDEGARD: A Feather on the Breath of God
Gothic Voices, Christopher Page, Director,
Emma Kirby, Soprano
12 Cuts: 64 Minutes
Hyperion Music

The colorful story of of Hildegard comes through in this lively, artistically accurate (actual medieval instruments were constructed for realistic accompaniment) representation of her largest collections of poetry “The Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations.”