

THE NAKED VOICE

1. A DOOR OPENS

I first encountered the early chant of the western church in a music history course at Swarthmore College. Professor Peter Graham Swing introduced the topic with descriptions and interpretations of the chant as a precursor to polyphony; he kept it short, pressing on to pieces built on organum, cantus firmus, and other compositional devices. My mind could not travel with him. I had fallen in love with the chant at first sight, and wished to stay. I searched in the library for the Liber Usualis (the Book of Use) — the compendium of chant created by the monks of Solesmes, France as part of their overhaul of the repertoire around the turn of the twentieth century. In those days, it was the Bible of Gregorian chant.

Professor Swing allowed me to create and record a service of chanted evening prayer as my final project for the course. I stayed up late at night to record cleanly in the resonant open lobby of Lang Hall. I remember holding the Liber Usualis, its pages mindfully sized to be cradled in my hands — more than 900 pages, each onion-skin-thin, together making the book satisfyingly weighty and chunky, like a loaf of bread: food for body and soul.

My roommate and I chanted, sending our voices soaring from balcony to balcony across the wide open expanse; just her voice and mine, sometimes alternating, sometimes joined as one, spinning a web of melody. Just like a spider's web, this web of song was intricate, elegant, and stronger per unit than any other musical material. We sang our way on tightropes of melody through air set shimmering with power and mystery. We felt the intimacy of our naked voices. We danced with luminous silence. I was filled to overflowing with the sense of finding the secret path in plain sight into a world I had never known existed, but immediately recognized as my home.

I have traveled that path for more than 30 years since that magical night. What follows here I offer as field reports from a pilgrim still on the move, still discovering, still in love.

2. SOURCES AND SHAPES

The chant I sing has its roots in the chanting of the ancient Hebrews and other Near Eastern peoples. It is the inheritance of a lineage reaching back at least three or four thousand years.

According to musicologist Stephan van Dijk, a reform of Christian chant and liturgy was begun by Pope Vitalian (657-672), a Byzantine, and continued by Pope Gregory II (715-731). Building on their work, Pepin III (died 768) and then Charlemagne (768-814) brought the reformed chant from the papal court in Rome to the major religious and cultural centers of Europe. From there it spread to monasteries across the land. The tradition was passed on from preceptor to novice, from traveling monk to host community, and from living song to written manuscript. We have the chant today because of the devoted stewardship of monastic communities over the centuries.

My singing of the chant springs from five 10th-century manuscripts: Chartres 47, Laon 239, St. Gall 339 and 359, and Einsiedeln 121. It is reasonable to presume that these manuscripts document an aural tradition of the reformed chant — a tradition already several centuries old. We may also suppose that the manuscripts were created because the living tradition was threatened. In fact, these manuscripts contain rhythmic information that fell into disuse after the turn of the millennium, as performance practice moved to equalist and modal rhythmic styles.

These five sources were written across a span of 120 years and a wide geographical area. The manuscripts use different notational systems but agree on melodic configuration and rhythm. There are four congruent diastematic manuscripts dating from the 12th through the 14th centuries: Graz 807, Montpellier H-159, Verdun 759, and the Thomaskirche Graduale. These manuscripts present a musical staff and precise pitch information. Again, the agreement among these manuscripts of widely divergent provenance bears witness to the integrity of the chant as it was reformed and disseminated throughout Europe before the year 1000. The musical scores we use today are created by first gleaning the melodic shapes, text underlay, and rhythmic information from the early manuscripts — and then checking any questions of specific pitch against the later manuscripts. Most of these manuscripts can be found in facsimile in Paléographie Musicale (Tournai or Solesmes; reprinted in Berne).

I sometimes call the chant, as I sing it, Carolingian. I use this term to distinguish my performance practice from the equalist practice that became the norm after the year 1000. Many people are familiar with the later, equalist style of singing chant through the work of the monks at Solesmes, France: a light and floating head-tone, singing every note as more or less the same length, with exquisite subtleties of rhythm and phrasing.

My approach is somewhat different, being rooted in the rhythmic information embedded in the earliest manuscripts, where some notes are very clearly long (*lunga*) and some notes are short (*brevis*). Along with the definite sense of longs-and-shorts comes a vocal tone which is full-throated, robust, and “earthy” — and a vibrancy, even humor, in the use of ornamentation. Solid, round, Romanesque architecture is the visual counterpart to this sound. Likewise, after the turn

of the millennium, as chant took on a different aesthetic prefiguring the birth of Western polyphony, the sound of the music was beautifully mirrored in the soaring architecture of the Gothic cathedrals.

Historically, this music has found its home primarily in monastic communities — though it has also lived in parish churches and cathedrals. It is the music of people who study, work, play, worship, laugh, cry, cook, nurse, keep silence, live and die together — rooted in one place, rooted in one time, grafted onto one tree of life together. This music is the sound of a way of life. Monks sing together for several hours every day and night. The vast bulk of the song consists of psalms chanted with short melodic formulas. The more elaborate pieces are shimmering jewels set in this broad empyrean expanse of very simple sung prayer.

The chant was made for resonant spaces. In such places — a building, a body or both — the echo of a single melody line creates a delicate and ever-changing dance of overtones and aftersounds. When performed in these spaces a single line of chant becomes polyphonic and multidimensional — emerging with elegance, complexity, and subtlety rarely embodied in other kinds of music. This “conversation” between singer and resonating space, between so-called “animate” and “inanimate” is integral to the mystical experience of the chant. Everything vibrates, everything is alive, all sing the song of being.

The chant was not designed to entertain, titillate, or educate. It makes no appeal to passing emotions or driving instincts. There is no steady beat. The phrases are mightily long. Modern ears are not used to this. Listening to and singing the chant demands that I stretch my attention span. This music was written for the long haul, to be sung week by week, year in and year out, decade after decade, generation unto generation. In my experience, it wears well. It was created and is sung to invite and support mystical, contemplative consciousness. It nurtures vibrancy and balance of soul and body. It produces deep breathing and penetrating vibrations, both of which are being reintroduced in mainstream Western medicine to promote healing. I experience chant as both the same and different every time I sing it, in the way that sunrise is both the same and different every morning.

3. A SINGING PRESENCE

We few are gathered in the whitewashed stone chapel of the Order of Saint Anne-Bethany. The vibrations from generations of chanting hum silently in the granite walls, clay tile floor, and oaken choir stalls. Tonight we complete six weeks of exploration and training in the chant.

We begin with chanting one note, then shift to an improvisation in which everyone chooses their own pitches and vowels. At the start, the sound is tentative, fragile, with hints of self-conscious limiting; as we continue, committed as a group to move through the resistance of boredom, fatigue, and apprehension, we enter a new aural landscape: the vibrations become fulsome, electric, pulsating. It is hard to discriminate individual voices — the sound seems to be

emanating from everywhere at once. Then the chanting itself — distinct from us — becomes a palpable presence like a strong wind, moving us, shaping us: we can lean into it, it blows all through us, it has its own identity and integrity, we are in conversation with it, we energize one another with breath and spirit. Our voices dance with Presence, and then, quite suddenly, without any one person controlling it, it is over and gone, and we are quiet, still astonishingly charged with Presence, now in its silent form.

Miriam proclaims words from the Book of Job: “... and in my flesh I shall behold God.” Like an echo, we sing an ancient response to the reading of Scripture:

*The word was made flesh, Alleluia, Alleluia.
The word was made flesh, Alleluia, Alleluia.
And dwelt among us, Alleluia, Alleluia.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
The words was made flesh, Alleluia, Alleluia. [John 1:14]*

Traditionally, this piece is sung in the deep watches of the night on Christmas Eve, the great festival celebrating embodiment. Like a flock of snow geese after a day’s flight in the journey of migration, text and tune circle round, combining and recombining in varied groupings, finally settling. We sing; we both create and absorb the vibrations; we taste, savor, and digest the Word through these vibrations. The mystery of which we sing is happening at this very moment, right here among us: words made flesh, a most intimate and transforming communion.

4. WAKING UP

I teach chanting from the body’s point of view. I begin with stretching and breathing exercises. I set up simple sound experiments, encouraging people to use their breath and their voice as investigative tools with which to explore their bodies and their consciousness “from the inside out.” I introduce the, primal sounds of grunting, sighing, moaning, whining, and calling to engage in the most basic practice of sounding ourselves.

As it is true that “we are what we eat” it is also true that “we sing what we are.” That is, our bodies do not lie. They bear faithful witness to our habits of diet and exercise. Our attitudes, our wounds, our accomplishments, our memories, and our hopes also shape our bodies. When we set our flesh sounding with our voice, our bodies resonate with the full and specific truths of our state of being in that moment. We don’t need to verbally articulate the details of those truths — or even be consciously aware of them; this rich and authentic “performance” of all that we are happens each time we sing.

I take extra time with whining. We hear in the baby’s cry and the toddler’s complaint masterful examples of superb vocal technique: The breath is fully supported with the muscles of diaphragm, back, abdomen and pelvic floor; it flows freely and powerfully; the throat is wide

open and the tongue is loose; the skull and chest along with the whole body amplify the vibrations of the vocal cords; the result is a remarkably efficient and effective sound.

Most people have been trained from an early age to stifle and censor these powerful and penetrating vocalizations; and to replace them with less vivid, more “pleasant” and “refined” expressions. I am aware of my own aversion to whining: to my own, as I use it in vocal training, and to my kids’, which I hear many times a week. Why this aversion? Perhaps others’ whining sets my own repressed whining resonating in my body, and I don’t want to face up to what is bothering me. Perhaps I am demonstrating the immense evolutionary value of whining — vulnerable children whine and cry when they need something; parents will do almost anything to make the whining stop; and the children receive the care they need to survive.

At another level, I wonder whether the aversion to whining has something to do with a more generalized human lethargy covering up existential angst. Scientists tell us that we use no more than 10 percent of our brain power. Surely most of us use no more than 10 percent of our vocal power. We choose to live in a deaf, mute, dull stupor. We live our lives asleep. Why? We fear the vitality of God, resplendent everywhere in the universe, pulsing, overflowing, exploding in chaos and creativity. We think we will be destroyed in this outrageous, glorious extravagance, and we will be, we are: destroyed and made new, over and over again, our billions of cells, our flesh and blood and bones, our souls and hearts and minds, dying and rising. The spiritual masters all speak of waking up. We long for it, and we fear it — our origin and our destiny — to be fully alive: naked, glorified, and immersed in God.

Singing wakes us up.

Breath deepens and permeates our being, blood pumps and suffuses, flesh resonates, mind quickens, heart opens, soul soars. Twelfth-century Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen understood singing as the greatest sacrament: the action through which the material and the immaterial commune and most completely transfigure one another, creating heaven on earth, wherein human and divine are intimately and truly made one.

Singing is the way we re-connect with our “full-contact” natural, free, human voice.

About 65 percent of the human body is water. Atoms are 99.9 percent empty space. What we experience as solid, even intransigent materiality is, at the atomic level, an almost completely wide-open expanse, free to resonate. Think of what happens when you drop a stone into a pond: the ripples travel in all directions, and dissipate only as they meet friction or obstacle. Likewise, when we set our vocal cords in motion with the flow of breath, our resonant cavities amplify the sound waves, and vibrations fill our bodies. If we pay attention, we can feel these vibrations continuing on after we have stopped singing.

Great singers do not repress any aspect of their voices. On the contrary, they fire the passion of their singing in the blast furnace of the human primal cry. “Cry out full-throated and unsparingly!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet blast!” the prophet Isaiah enjoins; and great singers do, honing power with strength, skill, courage and grace. The vibrations they set in motion are transmitted directly from their bodies to ours, bypassing our rational thought. The exact waveforms — of breath pressure, pitch, vowels, consonants — touch and shape the cells of our being in faithful particularity, and we are changed.

The singer sings, and our bodies and souls resonate in response. Great singers thus move us — physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We are moved. Anthropologists tell us that before there was speech there was Song and before Song there was Dance. As great singers perform, we travel with them, riding their vibrations, becoming partners with them in the Dance. The performance amplifies and intensifies the act of living, waking us up. We are riveted by this miraculous alchemy. This is our heart’s desire, and here it is, palpable in our very body. We are stripped of our stupor and taken into God.

5. CATHEDRAL OF CHANT

2009, Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres, France. I have been invited to sing a solo unaccompanied concert in the cathedral one afternoon, and to record it the next evening. I will perform chants from the dawn time of the repertoire; and pieces composed by individuals steeped in the chant: Fulbert, bishop of Chartres (970-1028). Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1176), and, I dare to say: me.

The chant repertoire evolves over generations in community through inheritance and improvisation. There is no one “composer,” but a vast ocean of daily practice, consciousness and creativity. Still, in any given moment, it is the imagination and voices of individuals that rise from the matrix of collective practice and let loose a unique embodiment of the tradition. Today, I realize with amazement and some amount of terror, that it will be my imagination and voice that carry the song in this time and place.

The site on which the cathedral is built was held as sacred for hundreds of generations before Christians arrived there. The cave under the hill on which the cathedral stands was an ancient shrine for divine presence. In the cave a rough wooden sculpture of womanly shape was venerated as an image of the archetypal goddess who is paradoxically both virgin and mother, and who continually gives birth to creation, manifesting spiritual reality in physicality.¹ The Latin name given to this goddess is Virgo Paritura. Paritura means “about to give birth.” It describes not a static position or characteristic, but an active ongoing process of becoming. Christians recognized in this archaic, mysterious, and powerful feminine image an icon of Mary, mother of Jesus, mother of the church, and Mother of God. Over the course of centuries, they deliberately blended devotion to the biblical Mary with homage to the pagan Virgo Paritura — producing the figure we know as Our Lady of Chartres.

¹ Jean Markale, *Cathedral of the Black Madonna* (Inner Traditions, 1988).

So the cathedral was built to be the home of Mary — she who is herself the earthly home of God's eternal "becoming." The cathedral was built for the chant, for the act of singing Incarnation. It would even be fair to say that the cathedral was built by the chant, as its architectural elements and proportions reflect in stone the natural proportions of musical vibrations. In company with Mary, singing the chant becomes for me paritura — sometimes agonizing, sometimes ecstatic participation in the divine ongoing birthing of reality. In Mary's home, the cathedral, I experience myself to be taken onto her lap, nursed at her breast, filled with her grace, singing as she sang, when her cousin Elizabeth assured her that she would indeed give birth to the Most High:

My soul magnifies the Holy One, and my spirit delights in God my Savior. (Luke 1: 46-47)

The morning of the concert my nerves express themselves in a tight, sore throat and aching right ear. Just before the concert, I sit hidden behind a pillar. Gargoyles of judgment torment me: shame at my imperfection, fear of not measuring up, of being called out and condemned, of being written off as a dilettante, as someone who never really got it together, trivial and worthy of scorn — Who the hell do you think you are to perform in Chartres cathedral? Your technique sucks. You are not worthy. The onslaught paralyzes me. It freezes my breath, cutting off its suppleness and access to my pelvic floor. I pray to Mary and she answers me. Waves of warmth and comfort relax me. My breath comes alive, melts away my ingrained habits of self-hatred, and moves me to claim my place in this space and time, to be here fully, to sing.

About twenty people sit to listen. Many more come and go as I sing, ambling through the cathedral in the time-honored tradition of tourists and pilgrims. The audience sets me aflame. I breathe in their life energy. I look out at their faces, and offer my singing to them. Listen to this, hear how this goes, can you find this feeling in your own heart? Correspondence. Entrainment. Excited nervous pressure. Under everything a strong sense of appropriateness, of matching, of being matched. My voice and this space reflecting each other, belonging to one another. It feels like an act of damnable blasphemy to say this; yet I cannot help but notice how the cathedral hears even the very softest sound I make. When I allow resonance free rein inside my body, it transcends the boundaries and limits of my body. I send out a melody, and I feel the building take it up. I hear my voice making its way like a river through the landscape of the cathedral. It is more than six seconds before each tone is fully incorporated into flesh and glass, stone and air. Gradually the tide turns once more to stillness; and in the stillness I realize that the vibrations of the cathedral have in turn entered into me, and I feel my own inner landscape expand, part of the ongoing expansion of the entire universe. Singing the chant is not about me. It is about flowing the flow.

The next night, the cathedral closes to the public at 7:30 after evening prayer. The director of music, the sexton, and an assistant meet me, my niece, and my mother in front of the main altar. They give us instructions and wish us well. They will lock us in to keep the cathedral and us safe;

and the recording free from interruptions. This cathedral, this holy ground, this world heritage site is entrusted to us alone, unsupervised, for two and a half hours in the dark of night. How many people on the planet in the history of the world have been allowed this? Honor, privilege, excitement, humility, fear and joy make me weak in the knees. The windows, like ancient gems, treasure the very last of the light in sensual, intricate, muted tones. The high-as-heaven stone pillars and arches dance in the rising night; a forest of shadows, layers and layers of shadows, silently takes shape; the stillness astonishes me. My mother sits in the back pew so her coughing will not disturb the recording; my niece perches at the foot of one of the four enormous columns in the crossing to operate the recorder. The space is so huge and they are so far away they disappear to my sight.

After I record the whole concert, I go back to the Fulbert songs and Hildegard's O Most Radiant Mother to sing the long versions of them, including all the verses. My voice is scratchy and tired. But finally, I feel my breath, integrated with my body, mind and heart, responding intimately, in full communion. My compulsive obsession to fixate on my vocal technique and condemn myself second by second fades away. My singing is loose, free, elegant, delicate, extremely efficient, both very powerful and effortless. I look back at all the practice I have put in to get to that place: to get controlling, rigid thought out of the way; to simply sing from the subconscious.

It is late when I finish recording. I kneel. I lie down, pouring myself across the stone floor, resting my forehead on the cool, hard surface, worn smooth by thousands upon thousands of human steps. I kiss this holy ground. I walk the ambulatory by feel, not by sight. Votive candles cast tiny, far-flung seeds of light. I walk, arms stretched out and up, blowing kisses as I go to the cathedral, to Mary, to the Divine Voice — murmuring softly thank you, thank you, thank you, overflowing with gratitude.

6. DOORKEEPER

Chant is a door opening onto mystery. It is an ancient practice that has been translated and imported into many modern contexts. It is generous, offering a place and a gift for everyone. Even the casually curious benefit from its beauty and healing qualities. The serious apprentice is challenged and strengthened by its musical and scriptural demands and rewarded with its ever-unfolding richness.

For those who have bound themselves to it, the chant is the sound of a way of life. It is perhaps better to say it is the *sounding* of a way of life. It is vocation and echolocation. It is work and rest. It is love and sacrifice. It is wellspring and ocean. The goal of chanting in the Christian tradition is to put on Christ, to embody God. This is an intimate process of ever-deepening knowledge of — and surrender to — communion with the divine in flesh and blood, persevering over the course of a lifetime. It is undertaken with open and vulnerable heart, mind, spirit, and voice. “The naked voice” I like to call it. It is no accident that chant is unaccompanied. There is

here a devotion to the ongoing revelation of God in the poverty and the glory of being human, made of humus, an earth creature, naked and unashamed.

The chant is an endangered species these days. The religious tradition that gave it birth hardly uses it today; many of the centuries-old institutions of that tradition are themselves dissolving. Chant is sung and studied more in academic institutions than in communities of faith. To most people it appears opaque, oppressive, and irrelevant. It is a cry in the wilderness of a post-9/11 world driven by fundamentalism, technology, acquisition, and addiction to the hip and the new.

Not knowing the final meaning, value and ultimate fate of the chant in the grand scheme of things, I keep singing. I lean into the awareness that the mystical flame of chant has always been tended by a small minority of the world's people; it has been kept burning like a hearth fire in the midst of social and economic insecurity, cultural chaos and the ever-increasing pace of change. I thread the arrow of my intention to sing on the bow of Howard Thurman's words:

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it; because what the world needs is people who have come alive.²

It is easy to bring our conditioning as affluent American consumers to all kinds of experiences. We imagine that we can sit back and evaluate this music from a safe distance: "Do I think this is good music?" "Do I like this music?" "What use can I make of this music?" As an alternative, I choose to imagine that this music is receiving and welcoming and embracing us; supporting us, gently healing and balancing us; forming and reforming us; leading us on pathways of life we can travel in no other way.

What might happen if we allow the chant to sing us?

7. EVENING PRAYER AT HOLY FAMILY PARISH

wssshhhhh . . .

*the church door swings open
and i enter into eternity
this moment
night rising
circling and singing silence
wild and still and liminal
the wild and still and liminal in me
respond in my native tongue*

² As far as I know, the only place this quotation occurs in print is in Gil Bailie's *Violence Unveiled* (Crossroad Publishing, 1996), p. xv, where he attributes the quotation to a conversation he had with Thurman.

*i rest in God
feeling her presence in the darkness
breath by breath
heartbeat by heartbeat
she is in me
i am in her
here i am*

*footsteps, papers rustling, the occasional cough
deepen the great well of silence
filling up in our midst
the ground-waters of God*

*"Light of Christ!" "Thanks be to God!"
i gaze at the flame until my vision catches fire
now i see clearly
this face and that one and your face
so beautiful
shadow and radiance in communion
every face the face of Christ*

*naked voices we dare
to reveal ourselves
tiny and glorious
in this immense silence
we sing
every voice the voice of Christ*

*sweet smoke
tenderly tracing each curve and corner
reaching into every cranny inside and out
our breath, our soul, visible
the shape of our desire
for God
we touch, and light is born again
we embrace, and peace finds a home
every body the body of Christ*

*at every mention of God
blessed, mysterious, Three-in-One
we bow
as prisoners of war*

*thrown to their knees before the victor
no
as a father kisses his child goodnight
as the exile drops down to greet her homeland
as the starving fall onto food
as best friends sit by the fire
as the creature lies open in adoration
to be once again made new
we bow
we let go
into the one we love
in whom we belong*

*we sign ourselves
with the sign of the cross
becoming what we believe
first three fingers for the Three-in-One
last two fingers for the two natures of Christ
bent toward the palm for Christ's humble way
loving earth
homing heaven
touch our forehead holy the thinking
touch our belly holy the feeling
touch our shoulders holy the being body
holy the indwelling
holy the beyond all telling
holy holy
moment by moment
blessed be*

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