

The following book review appeared in The Tablet on 1st November 2003

The Beginner's Book of Chant
A Simple Guide for Parishes, Schools and Communities
By a Benedictine Monk
Michael's Abbey Press £9.95

Reviewed by Jeremy de Satgé

In recent years there seems to have been something of a revival of interest in Gregorian chant. The reasons for this are varied and are as much secular as religious! In our "New Age" era the sound of plainsong is attractive even to those who know little of its meaning; and monastic recordings sell remarkably well.

It might have been thought that with the introduction of the vernacular into the liturgy following Vatican II, Gregorian chant might be dead and buried. Not so! Although there are those who consider such ancient chants as being anachronistic, many people still remember with affection the *Missa de Angelis* (Mass VIII) and other traditional plainsong Mass settings. Parish choirs and congregations are often itching to sing these, if only they knew how.

Contrary to popular opinion, the continued use of Latin plainsong singing in the Mass was encouraged, not discouraged, by the Council Fathers. Vatican II's document concerning the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, states that Gregorian chant should be given "pride of place".

It is therefore timely that the monks of St. Michael's Abbey, Farnborough should produce a book on plainsong singing entitled ***The Beginner's Book of Chant***. The idea behind the book is to offer a guide to those beginners who wish to dive head-first into the singing of the chant.

After a brief historical overview of plainsong, the book explains the intricacies of plainsong notation, with a useful glossary of the terms involved. Plainsong can, of course, be sung using modern notation although some subtlety and in-built *rubato* is lost. For congregational singing it is arguably more practicable to use modern notation, although the book argues strongly that plainsong notation is preferable.

The book contains in-depth tutorials on Mass XVIII and Gloria XV and a chapter is devoted to rehearsing a choir in plainsong singing - with a lot of useful hints. The modes (plainsong scales) are also carefully described. The question as to whether plainsong should be accompanied is addressed. Although, ideally plainsong should be unaccompanied, circumstances may dictate that a suitable accompaniment be helpful. A chapter on chant accompaniment is therefore included.

For plainsong novices, I recommend this book highly.

Copyright Jeremy de Satgé, November 2003