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Conclusion

It is with reluctance and hesitation, even with a touch of resistance, that I conclude this book, because to conclude is to exclude. The work is not finished, *topoi* remain to be visited and revisited, questions are left unanswered, answers contain conditional clauses, and the effort of an endless array of new Exertions is still ahead of us. So if I conclude here, even when consciously using the word 'Conclusion' as a title to these pages, I should stress that in the presentation of the results of this artistic research project on the world of late medieval plainchant performance practices, I am happy to allow, to include, even to greet and welcome all odds and ends, uncertainties and ('fantastic') insecurities. To put it somewhat pedantically: precisely these leftovers, these uncertainties and insecurities create the necessary preconditions that will guarantee an open-endedness and an open-mindedness without which future artistic work with late medieval chant manuscripts would be impossible, or would at least be severely hampered.

I have called myself 'a present-day performer of plainchant' and 'a bricoleur', although as I have pointed out (in the very first footnote) there is not only an 'I' but also a 'we' (Psallentes) to it, and I should also like to add a 'you' (the reader) and a 'they' (other people's practices). More impor-

tantly, I have attempted to paint a picture of a relationship between a plainchant performer and late medieval chant sources. Hence the central and dominant question, also the title of this book: what do late medieval chant manuscripts do to a present-day performer of plainchant?

In attempting to answer that question, I have from this book's very first words on (Munera's *Quod etiam usus manifeste confirmat*) and from there referred again and again to the importance of the practice itself, the singing and the performing, the voices with which research is conducted and with which research results resound. I have stressed that in assessing outcomes of artistic research projects like these, often the 'historic validity' is superseded, maybe even suppressed by what I have called 'artistic validity and persuasiveness'. That may sound simple and straightforward, and maybe it is. However, giving priority as well as the last word to this artistic validity over historic considerations may easily be viewed as an 'anything-goes'-dogma, in which we could bluntly overrule any historic fact relating to a performance practice whenever that fact would not coincide with our artistic intentions. That in itself is allowed and exciting, but it is not what this project is about. I have tried to indicate how the things that we learn from late medieval sources, whether it be chant manuscripts or treatises, or any other kind of historical fact or documentation (see Question 3—What we can learn, in Chapter Two), helps performers develop their own identity, their signature, by which their plainchant performance practice not only becomes recognisable, but also demonstrates historical as well as artistic grounds and value.

Having said that, putting artistic soundness first is not merely a present-day habit or concern, nor is it necessarily opposed to historical credibility, as something that through different types of research can simply be extracted from primary and secondary sources. Considering the great variety of chant through many sources over time and place, and considering the many gradations of that variety (from the single note or neume slightly different in one source as opposed to another, to whole passages of plainchant altered and amended through the centuries; and the variety as testified by contemporary writers), the image has been confirmed of a multitude of plainchant performance practices, of which

doubtless various manifestations of artistic validity or integrity have always been a constituent force.

So if Conrad von Zabern complains about the widespread abuse of the rhythmical performance practice of plainchant (as opposed to his view that in plainchant all notes should be equal), he actually confirms that fifteenth-century practitioners had an artistic rapport with the music. We have seen that Von Zabern objects to singers lengthening the highest note of a phrase or word, shortening the following note. Many instances of exactly this artistic habit are already traceable in Sankt Gallen manuscripts of the tenth century. Of course there is also a basic rule in vocal music that melodies should follow the natural line of speech, and would therefore go up, often towards central words in a sentence and certainly towards accented syllables within a word. This may mean that whereas indeed many of the famous details and subtleties (in proportional rhythmical values or not) of early chant notation have been lost throughout the centuries leaving us with square notation or gothic notation with severely diminished variation of neumatic forms (as seen in Chapter Four—Morphology), it is certainly not impossible that singers were intuitively drawn towards interpretations of chant, holding what I would call universal artistic characteristics, more or less independent from time and place. A simple example will clarify this statement. Liquescent neume-forms as seen in the earliest sources had all but disappeared in later sources (within any type of gothic or square notation), but the liquescent performance practice may well have subsisted, even more so when considering the growing habit of using incisi between the words, which had as a prime object of ameliorating the pronunciation of the words sung—a phenomenon that must have had consequences for the treatment of consonants. And all of this with little consideration for the force of an oral transmission of performance practices over centuries, an aspect of transmission that may have been stronger than we think and is now possibly severely underestimated.

Seen this way, many historical facts or presumptions open up to an artistic context which in itself is historical. Artistic reflexes, performance habits, aesthetic perspectives may change, but they have always been

related and will always be related to written and unwritten rules of delivery, of how people speak, sing, perform. Performance practices of plainchant have always been part of a continuum of vocal delivery of text that may stretch beyond millennia and across religions and artforms.

We should also be aware of the fact that any musical performance through history presents itself as an unrepeatable experiment — similar to how an archeological excavation may be viewed: fragile, finite and non-renewable. Compared to an excavation, musical performance may be considered less destructive, but in both cases charting a course through the past is the most difficult thing to do. Difficult (because of the uncertainties and insecurities, with many aspects of historical performances being completely and permanently beyond recall), but exciting (because of the limitless artistic possibilities, and the strong connections with the past these artistic possibilities represent).

This book has offered a present-day mapping of our relationship with plainchant performance practices, trying to make sense of its contradictions. The story consisted of (or was enriched by and interleaved with) examples from the day-to-day artistic practice of a group of professional singers, developing a practical as well as theoretical connection with late medieval chant; accounts of relationships that emerged with many different types of late medieval chant manuscripts; descriptions of the neumes by which late medieval plainchant was written down; analyses of what these neumes may have tried to transmit; considerations about how this transmission is then translated into a present-day performance practice; thoughts about how personal stories, listening histories and performance experiences contribute to the development of a highly personal signature performance style, and how this style relates to historical facts, realities, situations and instructions; reports on how to tackle plainchant performance challenges of all sorts; pleas for the emancipation of later manuscripts and the plainchant these contain; lists of what we can learn looking at these manuscripts, or from any other source of information about plainchant performance in history; explorations of how the human voice can be used as a research tool; observations on how this musician's research can help understand bygone practices and the development of

new practices in chant performance; suggestions of how a chant performer can in diverse ways relate to chant as seen in late medieval manuscripts; presentations of projects in past, present and future, proposing an open and lively contemplation of plainchant's big concert music potential.

The Book

Concluding this reluctant conclusion, I think the relationship between a present-day performer of plainchant and its late medieval sources is a relationship between past and present, between history and artistry, although not seen as antipodes. This relationship is also about (making) the connection between the universal and the particular, between repetition and unrepeatability. In that relationship, the performer stands as an intermediary, a conciliator, a moderator, a reconciler, a go-between, also as an intervener and an interceder, and as a friend, an admirer, a devotee, a lover. Because ultimately, this is a relationship of love.

To describe such a relationship, we may want to turn to poetry. By the time I was sketching this conclusion, the English newspaper *The Guardian* had as its 'Poem of the week' a love poem, possibly written in 1943, by the South African poet Frank Templeton Prince (1912-2003). I include the four stanzas of that poem in Appendix Seven, and I would recommend anyone to read it and learn it, and to read Carol Rumens's analysis of it (*The Guardian*, 4 August 2014). In Rumens's words, it is "a metaphysical love poem that orchestrates a wealth of feeling at the edges of body and soul". The main themes of the poem immediately struck me as congruent with the things I was summarizing here and have been describing in this book — certainly if we do what we are allowed to do in poetry: make up our own meanings and make unexpected or possibly unintended connections, adding our own layer to the multi-layered text.

Against the background of the Second World War, lovers "have closed the book of the day, and gone to bed". The images of violence in the first few lines, as well as in further stanzas of the poem, strikingly echo present-day conflicts in the world (Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, Gaza...) against the backdrop of which I feel all the more privileged to be allowed to handle and

study medieval manuscripts and perform music. Added to that, this month marks the hundredth anniversary of the commencement of the First World War. In the next few weeks a hundred years ago, my home city of Leuven will be burnt down by the Germans, in retaliation for the strong resistance they had encountered while invading the eastern part of Belgium on their way to France. The University Library will be destroyed by fire, and over a thousand medieval manuscripts will be lost forever.

Our lovers too feel privileged, lying hand in hand in what seems to be a post-coital repose. They feel as though wars and guns and gallows and barracks “seem to have laboured but to fetch us love”. As a familiar image in love poetry, they feel they have destroyed the universe: “distraught cosmogonies”. That is an interesting image, thinking of how a wealth of research, mainly since the nineteenth century, has been focusing on the “cosmogony” of plainchant, looking to reconstruct the oldest and most original melodies, all the way up to the mythical ‘antiphonary of Saint Gregory’. Unable as we are to accomplish such a reconstruction (for the simple fact that there may never have been such a thing as an ‘original’ plainchant), this cosmogony will remain distraught.

And then, in the second stanza of Prince’s poem, the poet explores his relationship with ‘the book’. It is an imaginary book, it is “the book of the day”, it is a metaphor. But using these words in this conclusion, I want it to be a medieval chant manuscript. Prince makes a plea for a good conservation of the manuscript: “Keep your foxed and wormed and rusty pages whole”, in order for us to be able to read it, to use it, to make it our own: “that we may read our way”. We want the manuscript to be kept in excellent conditions, but we will read it when and as we please. We will scrutinize it and look at it in many different ways.

*Like and old lantern by whose ray
We hope to find a better light,
Glow feebly as you may*

In that process, the book will present itself as worn and used, incomplete (“torn and tattered, interleaved”), and that is why we will go beyond just looking at it. As a method of connection with our ancestors, we will “read by touch as well as sight, and learn to turn the pages, kiss and write”. We make the manuscript our own, handle it, manipulate it, love it. (Think of the One-on-One room in our Exhibition, introduction to Chapter Four.) Inevitably, this intense handling of the manuscripts will lead to new uses, new ideas, new performances.

Although at first the manuscript will be at the centre of our work, on our own and in group (“inconceivably ourselves our multitude and solitude”, “but single, as the purpose of our mind”) we will soon detach our singing from the book, returning to unwritten conventions, developing our own language “having passed through [the manuscript] and through ourselves”.

*You are periphery;
And we would be the centre, if we could
But break your circle, or could be
Without you*

Finally, we admit the true nature of this relationship. It is pure love: we may have read the book, touched it, but at last we go beyond that. The musical performance is born out of a physical connection with the manuscript. But in the long run the book has blinded us into the magic and invisibility of the music we love.

*For if by love we mean,
To seek and find a go-between
Spelt from your incunabula
And see at length what can be seen
By some new light beyond decay
Through you we must burn time away,
And wither with the force of our idea
The world of visible phenomena.*

