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Abstract

This book is witness to Hendrik Elie Vanden Abeele's research into the development, construction and creation of a present-day performance practice of late medieval plainchant. Today's chant singer is faced with many challenges. These include questions concerning language and vocal techniques, such as the possible pronunciations of Latin, use of voice and pitch; performance practice issues such as rhythm, metre, tempo and phrasing; contextual considerations such as the composition of the ensemble, the place and time of performance; and repertoire matters, such as the transmission of the old repertoire and the making of new repertoire, regional differences within the repertoire itself, the use of simple polyphony, and the interaction of chant and polyphony.

The many challenges and obstacles faced may turn into opportunities, where the performer will have to fill in the blanks with his or her own ideas, colours and textures. He/she may even be tempted to draw outside the lines, countering any practical or historical constraints in a creative way. The double status of researcher and/as performer is a major factor in the whole process, influencing the theoretical and practical knowledge as well as the development towards an 'expert habitus' — celebrating the

embodied know-how or tacit knowledge of the artist. The resulting boundary-blurring activities have come together in three specific ambitions. First, to consider if and how the way in which neume notation as used in late medieval chant manuscripts provides clues to performance practice. Secondly, to see and experience in a more general way how the manuscripts themselves can suggest answers to performance-related questions, how certain features of these manuscripts can lead singers to surprising or unexpected sounds and perspectives, how present-day training in chant or in the performance of chant can alter our understanding of the different historical sources — in other words: what these manuscripts make us do as present-day performers. And thirdly, exploring the potential of the human voice as a research tool in the development of a performance practice of late medieval plainchant.

This book contains four chapters, starting from a quite broad outlook on late medieval chant, moving gradually towards specific performance questions, and finally focusing on chant's present-day artistic potential. Chapter One (Challenges) considers various practical challenges a performer faces, contemplates everyday chant performance problems, and discusses some first-hand solutions to these problems. Before continuing into the more detailed report of an artistic research project, we need to establish what 'artistic research' means in this context, and what procedures can be followed. This is Chapter Two (Research), which is devoted to the possibilities that musician's research and development offer to the understanding of bygone practices and the creation of new practices in chant performance, and music or art in general. Chapter Three (Morphology) first introduces the world of late medieval chant manuscripts and what they mean for a practice of plainchant performance. Although the chant contained in these manuscripts has long been considered 'decadent', chant in late medieval centuries remained very much at the heart of liturgy, and many of the manuscripts bear witness of a vibrant plainchant performance practice. Then the chapter turns to the practical heart of the matter. Amidst all kinds of performance challenges, the rhythmical question is indubitably the most pertinent, strongly connected with the visual rapport we have with neumes. This question is also definitely unanswerable.

ble, except maybe via the statement that chant in the Late Middle Ages had many performance traditions. Therefore, this chapter ultimately revolves around the notion that plainchant performance practice then — just as it is now — was not only highly diverse, but also controversial. An image emerges of a chant score as a grid, a scheme, to which the present-day performer can relate in diverse ways. Finally, plainchant's big concert music potential is contemplated in Chapter Four (Exertions), where seventeen projects of the chant group Psallentes are explored and explained, witnessing multi-faceted research results. It is there, in these projects presented to the public, that, starting with people's need for reflection and contemplation, and adding people's tendency to enter that place where music and spirituality meet, the creation of a chant emerges that relates to many aspects of modern day cultural life.

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

This book offers a present-day mapping of our relationship with plainchant performance practices, trying to make sense of its contradictions. The story consists of 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 younger 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.