

Music at the Crossroads of Empire: Ambrose and Milanese Chant

Tradition says that Saint Ambrose (c.340-April 4, 397), in his twenty-years as bishop of Milan, compiled, composed, and arranged the Mass and other services for the church of Milan.¹ Born at Trier into the family of the Roman Prefect of Gaul, Ambrose was educated as a Lawyer. By 370, he had become the consular governor of Liguria and Aemilia, with headquarters in Milan. He was a catechumen, not yet baptized, when he was elected bishop of acclamation on December 7, 374.²

At the time of Ambrose's election, Milan was serving as the capital of the western Roman Empire: Constantine II had moved the imperial headquarters there in 352. It was also the crossroads of the empire, receiving influences particularly from the developing regions of the eastern empire and disseminating its practices across the whole of Roman Europe. While Ambrose may have encouraged the assimilation of new music and musical styles into the liturgy at Milan, he was certainly not the first bishop to do so. Liturgical chant in the west developed, in large part, out of eastern sources. Theodoret of Cyprus and Diodore of Tarsus—both near-contemporaries of Ambrose—taught that antiphonal chanting originated in the synagogue, passed to the church in Jerusalem, and then to the church in Antioch (see Acts 11:19-30). From there these early chant models passed to the churches of the western empire. Church historian Socrates Scholasticus, writing shortly after the death of Ambrose, mentioned that Bishop Ignatius of Antioch was instrumental in the development of responsorial singing in the liturgy.³ During his exile in Asia Minor (356-360), Bishop Hilary of Poitiers was influenced by the compositions and practices attributed to Ephrem of Syria and Gregory of Nazianzus; he brought these traditions back with him when he returned to Poitiers. Athanasius of Alexandria, exiled to Rome in 340, brought with him the practices and music of the church in Egypt.⁴

Ambrose and Music

The liturgical music in use in Milan at the time of Ambrose seems, according to surviving sources, to have been characterized by a strong eastern influence (Byzantine and Graeco-Syrian) that was added to a base of local music. Paulinus of Nola, Ambrose's secretary and biographer, suggests that the liturgy in Milan at this time—if not the liturgical and musical sensibilities of Ambrose himself—was changing because of such influences: "At this time antiphons, hymns, and vigils first began to be celebrated in the church of Milan. And dedication to this practice endures to the present day, not only in the same church but throughout every province of the west."⁵ At about the same time, as well, antiphonal singing may have been introduced to Milan—alternating verses or partial verses of a psalm between two choirs. Evidence for this comes from a passage in Augustine's *Confessions* (IX;17), quoted in its entirety below, in which he describes the introduction of "hymns and psalms. . . sung according to the custom of the east." Augustine was resident in Milan when Ambrose was bishop; in fact, Ambrose baptized Augustine in 387.⁶

For Ambrose, music was as much a tool of orthodox catechesis and propaganda as it

was a ritual element. Assuming a leadership role in the battle against Arianism (a heresy which claimed that the Logos was not truly God), Ambrose made use of anti-Arian hymnody, composed in imitation of eastern models, to combat the heresy which had been condemned at the Council of Nicaea (325) but not defeated: Arianism continued strongly to influence the western church, especially the emperors and the imperial court, for decades after its condemnation. He also used antiphonal singing as a way to inculcate familiarity with the psalms, which were often used as proof texts in arguments with the Arians. In one of his works, Ambrose wrote: "The psalm is our armor by night, our instructor by day. The dawn of the day resounds with the psalm, and with the psalm re-echoes at sunset."

One example of the interplay between liturgical music and propaganda for the orthodox cause came when Bishop Ambrose opposed the Empress Justina, who had attempted to seize one of the churches in Milan for use by Arians. Ambrose and his orthodox followers, fearing for their lives, took refuge in the cathedral and began to sing. Among the faithful was Monica, the mother of Augustine; Augustine himself was in the city at the time, though he did not join Ambrose and the other Christians in the church. In his *Confessions*, Augustine described what happened:

The church in Milan had not long begun this kind of consolation and exhortation, in which the voice and hearts of the brethren joined in zealous harmony. It was about a year, or not much more, since Justina, the mother of the boy emperor Valentinian, persecuted God's servant Ambrose, as a result of the heresy into which she had been seduced by the Arians. The faithful flock stayed night and day in the church, prepared to die with their bishop, God's servant. My mother, God's handmaid, was one of the leaders in these cares and vigils, living on prayers. I myself, as yet unheated by the warmth of the divine Spirit, began to feel the citywide emotion and unrest. At that time, the practice of singing hymns and psalms, according to the custom of the East, was established so that the people [of Milan] would not become weak as a result of boredom or sorrow. It has been retained from that day to this; many, in fact, nearly all of God's flocks now do likewise throughout the rest of the world. ⁷

Ambrose began to compose orthodox hymns to countermand the success of hymns composed by the Arians and other heretical movements. The earliest reference to hymns composed by Ambrose dates from 386.⁸ Scholars today credit Ambrose with the texts, if not the tunes, of four of the hymns attributed to him by various sources. According to Augustine, Ambrose composed *Aeterne rerum conditor* ("Eternal creator of the world"), *Deus creator omnium* ("Lord, creator of all things"), *Jam surgit hora tertia* ("Now as the third hour begins"), and *Veni redemptor gentium* ("Come, redeemer of the nations")—these four, at least, are acknowledged as authentic compositions by Ambrose. In the sixth century, Cassiodorus attributed to him *Illuxit orbi* ("He lights the world"), and other sources have added *Nunc sancte nobis Spiritus* ("Now, Holy Spirit"), *Splendor paternae gloriae* ("Splendor of the Father's glory"), *Aeterna Christi munera* ("To Christ's eternal gifts"), *Jesu corona virginum* ("Jesus, crown of virgins"), and other texts. Though some musicologists believe that the melodies for these hymns are compositions of the tenth and eleventh centuries, this thesis is hard to prove or disprove, because many of the melodies may antedate even pneumatic forms of musical notation.

Apart from the development of hymnody, in which Ambrose was certainly involved, and the use of antiphonal singing, which he may have introduced, Ambrose is credited with founding Milan's first *schola cantorum* to learn and preserve the music for worship.

In addition to these contributions to the development of sung worship in Milan at the

time of Ambrose's episcopacy, there are certain distinctive characteristics to the music of the Milanese (or Ambrosian) Rite as it was finally recorded that should be noted. Most likely, these elements developed long after Ambrose, though they may have been built on earlier models, introduced at about the time that Ambrose was bishop, for which evidence has not survived. It is possible that Ambrose introduced or, at least, supported the development of more elaborate chants through his championing of the new *schola cantorum* and its division into two choirs.⁹ In fact, the congregation as well as the schola sang antiphonally in Milan. At a later date, the evidence shows, the melodies of the psalms and hymns drawn from the canon of Scripture remained monotonic, while the settings for the Milanese propers became increasingly elaborate and ornate. Some of the melodies are syllabic, while others are very melismatic with melodic rhymes at the ends of phrases. Ambrosian alleluias have long melismas, sometimes totaling more than 200 notes. Stepwise motion and disjunct intervals both abound in these compositions, and frequent skips of a fourth occur. Sections of the melody and motives within the phrases repeat with subtle variations.

Chant scholars have sought to reference Ambrosian or Milanese chant compositions to the four plagal modes attributed to the Orient, but they agree that none of the compositions appear to be built on the four additional modes employed by the Gregorian repertoire.¹⁰ However, since Ambrosian chant, like early chants of the Gregorian repertoire, developed without reference to an organized modal system, many of the Ambrosian chants manage to elude any strong sense of a particular modality.

While similar to the various elements in Roman propers, the Ambrosian propers had different names and, sometimes, slightly different functions. The changeable texts in the Milanese Rite included the *ingressus*, the *alleluia (cantus)*, *psalmellus*, *post evangelium*, *offertorium*, *confractorium*, and *transitorium*.

Other Liturgical Practices in Ambrose's Milan

In addition to what they tell us about his interest in music for the liturgy, Ambrose's writings witness to some other liturgical practices in Milan which differed, at least to some extent, from what we know of ritual practices in other places. The fact that he makes note of some of these ritual elements indicates that he finds them unique, unusual, or especially valuable; sometimes, given his tendency to combine propaganda interests and liturgical interests, Ambrose seems to have found them more valuable as anti-Arian "proof texts" than as significant ritual activities.

Among the ritual behaviors that Ambrose singles out for particular mention is the way that the liturgy of the word unfolded in Milan. For example, he mentions that the church of Milan prescribed a period of silence before each Scripture reading. On Sundays, at least, there were four "readings" (though they all would have been chanted): from the prophets, epistles, psalms, and gospels. Between each of the other readings, Ambrose says, the cantor chanted the appointed psalm text, interspersing the psalms with the readings, he noted, so that the congregation would not become weary of perpetual psalmody.

The daily office (liturgy of the hours) included psalmody with certain other texts. For example, during the morning office psalms were sung after the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-11)

were chanted. The remaining morning services consisted of psalms sung alternately with the Lord's Prayer. In the church at Milan, the cantors also sang psalms at sunset and during the night. Psalmody also preceded the daily Eucharist, celebrated during the midday service. In his *De Virginibus*, written in 376, Ambrose said: "There are very many days on which punctually at the midday hours one may come to church for the singing of hymns and the celebration of the oblation" (111:19).

Other elements of the ritual observance of Milan which differed from what we know of the practice in Rome at that time included the washing of the feet of the baptized and never fasting on Saturdays.

Ambrose, unlike some other bishops, permitted married women and virgins to sing in church.¹¹ He believed that the passage in I Corinthians 14:34, quoted by other bishops against women singing, actually concerned talking, not singing. He also preached that a Christian woman should study the Bible and memorize the Psalter:

The apostle Paul commands women to be silent in church; yet they sing the psalms well. For the psalm is sweet and appropriate to every age and either sex . . . and even tender girls chant the psalms without the objection of licentiousness . . . [H]ow laboriously do we endeavor to maintain silence and order in the church, when the lessons are being read? If one talks, all silence [that person]; but if a psalm is chanted, everyone implements the silence, for all recite it, and no one silences them . . . [W]hat a great chain of unity is this toward one great chorus of all the people.

Ambrose also approved of liturgical dance as done by King David before the Lord (2 Sam. 6:14):

No, the dance should be conducted as did David when he danced before the Ark of the Lord, for everything is right which springs forth from God. Let us not be ashamed of a show of reverence which will enrich the cult and deepen the adoration of Christ . . . [B]ut when you come to the front, lift up your hands; you are exhorted to show swifter feet in order that you may thereby ascend to everlasting life. This dance is an ally of faith and an honoring of grace.¹²

Survival of the Rite

The major problem with studying the music of the Milanese Rite and Ambrose's place in the development of that ritual music is the late date of the sources. Apart from some early manuscript fragments written in neumes, surviving from the seventh century,¹³ the earliest surviving sources date from the ninth and eleventh or twelfth centuries. They include the *Musica enchiriadis* (ninth century), the *Codex Sacmmentorum Bergomene* (ninth century), and the *Antiphonarum Ambrosianum* (twelfth century). Despite the late evidence, it is clear that the music of Milan included early forms of chants that were later incorporated into Gregorian sources, and the manuscripts preserve chants or parts of chants absent from the Gregorian repertoire.

Though precise influences cannot be traced at this distance, we can suggest the influence of the practices of Milan on other churches through noting the similarities that exist between Milanese (Ambrosian) chant and the chants for Beneventan prayers and lessons, Gallican antiphons and offertories, and Mozarabic alleluias.¹⁴ Other sources include texts that are clearly borrowed from Ambrosian sources. These include the Gallican Bobbio Missal (seventh century) and the *Missale Gothicum*.¹⁵ And, of course, the hymn texts composed by Ambrose were incorporated into the Gregorian repertoire and were used in the liturgy of the hours at Rome.

Milanese chant is the earliest western repertoire of liturgical music to have survived parallel to Gregorian chant. It survived, in large part, because of the political position of Milan in the Roman Empire and its independence in both the ecclesial and political spheres during the Middle Ages. The fact that much of this repertoire was attributed by the later legend to Ambrose also helped to assure its survival.

Still, the ritual practices of Milan and its unique repertoire came under increasing attack, beginning in the eighth century with the Emperor Charlemagne (742-814), who restricted use of the rite to the churches of the Archdiocese of Milan as a way to enforce his efforts to unify his domains by imposing the use of the Roman Rite throughout the Frankish lands. In the ninth century, Pope Hadrian I also tried to replace all other liturgical practices in Europe in order to unify the church. By the eleventh century, these efforts had succeeded in reducing the Milanese Rite from its former widespread influence to the territory of the archdiocese.

At the time of the Council of Trent, Cardinal Charles Borromeo (1518-84), archbishop of Milan, and Cardinal Frederick Borromeo helped preserve the Milanese Rite. In a curious way, by acknowledging that older rites with an unbroken use might continue, even the liturgical reforms of Pope Pius V, which were intended to make the Roman Rite the model for all liturgical behavior, helped to preserve this rite. After the reforms of Trent were implemented, the Milanese or Ambrosian Rite stood as only one of two Latin rites to survive from the Middle Ages with non-Gregorian musical repertoire. This ritual tradition also received support from Pope Pius XI. By the second half of the twentieth century, in addition to its use in the Archdiocese of Milan, this rite was also in use in parishes in Lugano, Switzerland, and in Bergamo and Novara, Italy, continuing to provide a connection with a liturgy that developed at the crossroads of the empire with influences from east and west, and reminding us that the liturgy we share has taken many forms in its long history.

Notes

1. See "Milanese Rite" in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* IX (1967), 838.
2. According to legend, the Christian population of the city was deeply divided between the Arian and orthodox factions, and the political struggle to choose a new bishop after the death of Bishop Auxentius (an Arian) threatened the peace of the city. As governor, Ambrose entered the cathedral to calm the situation. A young child began to call out, "Ambrose, bishop!" Others took up the cry, and Ambrose was elected. Within eight days of his election, he was baptized, ordained, and consecrated bishop on December 7, 374.
3. Socrates [Scholasticus], *Church History in A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (London: Parker and Co., 1890), 11:144.
4. Patricia Anne Keyser, "Inter-relationships between Gregorian, Hebrew, and Byzantine Chant," dissertation for the University of Denver, August 1973, 17.
5. Paulinus of Nola, *Vita sancti Ambrosii*, quoted in James McKinnon, ed., *Music in Early Christian Literature* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 169.
6. Aurelius Augustinus (Augustine) was born near Hippo in North Africa on November 13, 354. Enrolled as a catechumen when he was an infant, he eventually became a teacher of grammar and rhetoric. He was appointed Public Orator in Milan after 382. Impressed with Bishop Ambrose's sermons and moved by a mystical experience, he embraced Christianity and he was baptized in 387. Returning to North Africa, he was ordained an auxiliary bishop for Hippo; he succeeded as ordinary in 395. As he reports in the *Confessions*, Augustine introduced into the church in North

- Africa several of Ambrose's hymns as well as antiphonal psalmody, which he had learned in Milan.
7. Augustine, Confessions IX:7. Trans. by Vernon J. Bourke, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (1953), 241-42. The translation has been slightly altered.
 8. See Otto Bardenhewer, *Patrology: The Lives and Works of the Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas J. Shahan (Freiburg in Breisgau and St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Publishing, 1908), 439.
 9. See the introduction to Saint Ambrose, *Theological and Dogmatic Works*, trans. Roy J. Defferari (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1963), xiv.
 10. Abbe Dobos, *Reflexions sur la Poesie et la Peniture*, 111:174-75.
 - II. See William Joseph Dooley, "Marriage According to St. Ambrose," dissertation (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 28.
 12. Saint Ambrose, *Letters*. Trans. by Sister Mary Melchior Beyenka, OP, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (1954), 145. The translation has been slightly altered.
 13. "Milanese Rite," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, IX.-842.
 14. See David Hiley, *Western Plainchant: A Handbook* (New York, NY: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1995), 549, 553-54.
 15. See "Milanese Rite," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, IX:839.

Ms Nessa Anne Marquez is a classical and flamenco guitarist, composer, music teacher, and researcher who lives and works in Glendale, CO.