

The Soundtrack of Western Civilization

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Monks sing at the Heiligenkreuz Abbey south of Vienna, Austria, on Oct. 28, 2008. AP Photo/Lilli Strauss



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Commentary

It's deeply saddening to hear of the passing of William H. Mahrt (1940–2025), musicologist and professor at Stanford University, and conductor of the [St. Ann Choir](#) in Palo Alto for fully 62 years. He was a friend, mentor, teacher, and deep inspiration in so many matters, a man who touched so many lives with his erudition, wisdom, scholarly insight, and deep dedication to a cause.

His book, which I was proud to shepherd and publish, "[The Musical Shape of the Liturgy](#)," stands as his lasting contribution to understanding the role of music in the great task of touching transcendence. The book explains the development and meaning of the musical side of the liturgical experience in the Western rite, from the first "Asperges me" to the last "deo Gratias." It might be the most theoretically sophisticated treatment of the topic ever to appear.

The story of his work begins not with the Second Vatican Council in 1963 but rather four centuries earlier, in 1563 with the closing of the Council of Trent. This council was called to deal with the crisis in the Catholic Church as represented by the Reformation, and part of the response certainly dealt with the liturgy, which is the way the faith reaches the people in worship. As part of the reform efforts, the rites of the Church were forcibly unified across many lands, which sadly involved the regrettable suppression of many local forms and traditions, along with the music of centuries.

We tend to think of that generation of Renaissance-era thinkers as wiser and more far-seeing than the nutty hipsters who so botched the liturgical reforms of the 1960s. In fact, the same rationalist impulses afflicted both. This comes down to the belief that a single generation of intellectuals and church officials can outthink and outwit long traditions of belief and practice, thus entitling them to reform, reconstruct, and thus modernize and improve stable forms.

As a result, the Council of Trent not only scrapped vast amounts of valuable liturgical tradition but oddly foreshadowed the disaster of the 1960s by completely forgetting about the musical aspects of liturgical experience. It was seven years after the close of the Council

of Trent before a new book for liturgy appeared, and the new chants were rolled out gradually over time but with an overwrought method.

The idea of the new chant books of the 16th–18th century was to more clearly elucidate the text, most often in didactic forms that flattened the long melismatic lines of great beauty that had been carefully preserved in chant books for the previous half-millennium. It was an overly narrow focus, typical of what happens when single-minded intellectuals are given the power to remake long traditions according to contemporary obsessions.

Pope Pius V even briefly considered banning the new forms of music called polyphony, which was itself an organic outgrowth of the previous thousand years of development. That style of music was saved from deprecation by the intervention of the King of Spain himself.

After centuries of neglect outside monasteries and convents, much of this had to be fixed by the late 19th century, a period in which every major religion worked to rediscover its roots. That included not only Catholicism but also Judaism, Protestantism, Islam, and Anglicanism. This period of religious revivalism reflected determination and also panic in the face of democracy, secularism, and liberalism that threatened faiths the world over. It was in this period when the chant books of the Roman Rite were restored. Following decades of intense fervor, the project lost energy after the Second World War and had largely died out by the 1970s.

The major task undertaken by Professor Mahrt in his research program was to come to the aesthetic, theological, and intellectual defense of the great chant tradition of the 4th to the 15th century and also defend the inclusion of polyphony repertoire of the period between 1450 and 1650. This was his passion and focus.

His theme concerned the structural and theological integrity of this repertoire, not just as a musical tradition but as part of a larger experience of worship that involved elaborate rubrics, soaring architecture, careful choreography of the ministers and servers, as

well as vestments, lighting, and much more. The theme was always the same: beauty in service of truth.

My intersection with his work began early in my professional career. Having left performance (I had played trombone with orchestras and jazz bands, including a brief time traveling with the Guy Lombardo Orchestra), and done with experimenting with the most avant garde post-bop improvisatory silliness of the 1980s, I craved something that spoke to fundamentals.

This was when I was guided toward plainchant. My first exposure came, I think, in the crypt church of the National Shrine in D.C. with an elderly priest quietly singing the chants of the liturgy under low light. The humility, simplicity, and simple piety of the space struck me as so much more meaningful than any concert hall or jazz bar, and I wanted to know more.

Later I became involved in the revival efforts of the early 2000s, joining up with the [Church Music Association of America](#), which was tiny and unfunded, just at the time that William Mahrt was set to take a leadership role. As director of my own choir now and actively involved in publishing, he asked me to be his managing editor in what was [Sacred Music](#), the oldest continuously published journal of music in the Western world. I was obviously unqualified but I had a can-do spirit that Mahrt liked.

We had some great years together. Each issue he would write an extensive and highly erudite commentary on some one individual chant. It could be a communion chant from the 8th century. It could be a suppressed sequence of the 11th century. It could be a wildly elaborate Psalm verse from early in church history. He would take it apart note by note and phrase by phrase to reveal its underlying meaning and integrity. Reading enough of this, you begin to see every chant (and there are probably more than 100,000 of them) as an elaborate musical painting that contains the whole of heaven and earth.

I variously tried my own hand at this style of commentary, noting, for example, the way in which a chant on one of Jesus' parables would mirror the text. When the pearl merchant finds a pearl ("margarita," in Latin) of low value and sells it for a higher value, the musical line of "Simile Est" would dip down as if diving and rise up again as if emerging from water. When he later went into deep debt to buy the one of highest value, the pitches would plunge and rise again before settling into a contented calm.

The image shows two staves of Gregorian chant notation. The first staff contains the lyrics: "vén- ta una pre- ti- ó- sa marga- rí- ta, de- dit ó-". The second staff contains the lyrics: "mni- a su- a, et compa- rá- vit e- am." The notation consists of square neumes on a four-line staff, with a clef at the beginning of each staff. The melody in the first staff shows a dip followed by a rise, and the second staff shows a similar pattern of dipping and rising.

No matter how hard I studied and tried, the results of my precise historical commentaries on particular chants were never suitable for publication in the journal, so I put them on blogs and other places. He did, however, publish my reflections on the choral management, the politics of chant, the corruption of the publishers, my ruminations on proprietary claims in chant history, and the botched reforms of the 1960s that led guitar crooners to replace choirs in church.

As part of that, we worked to bring back to print hundreds of older works, revive a great deal of interest in Gregorian chant in both Latin and English, commission new works and editions, and create something of a popular movement dedicated to the cause of restoration. Under Dr. Mahrt's influence, I also taught and lectured on this music at many institutions in the United States and abroad, and became involved in efforts to revise the English Missal.

This music became for me a metaphor for social and economic development itself, a soundtrack to Western history. Gregorian chant became for me a symbol of the structure of history itself, larger than any nation, longer-lasting than any regime, more intelligent than any

generation, and a window into the largest-possible perspective on the long struggle of the human mind to touch the face of God.

My single greatest achievement of this period—and probably the greatest achievement of my life—was convincing curial officials in Rome as well as the Solesmes monastery in France to allow all of the chants of the Church to be taken out of copyright, following a century of fights. It was under Dr. Mahrt's influence that all of this happened. Today you can download an app that sorts every chant by every day of the liturgical calendar. Moreover, every book of music we published was put into the commons immediately.

Speaking of which, people often ask how it came to be that William Mahrt was able to maintain his choir, carefully singing all the suitable chants and polyphonic pieces proper to the liturgy, throughout the whole period of upheaval from 1963 and continuing for decades, despite all resistance within and without.

The answer is that he simply never stopped doing it. If a new pastor showed up and demanded change, he would listen quietly and then carefully explain that this would not be suitable for purposes of worship as the long tradition of the church. Somehow his quiet and scholarly ways managed to convince.

As a result, his own choir sang a full Mass with all the correct Gregorian propers every week for decades. Looking through the choir's repertoire, you will find Machaut, DuFay, Josquin, Tallis, Byrd, Lasso, Obrecht, Palestrina, Vitoria, Lassus, Monteverdi, and just about every other great composer of the period, all of whom were inspired by the faith to give their best to God.

I sat under his direction for many years and his method was a bit shocking: minimalism doesn't quite describe it. He trusted the music to make itself and always saw himself as a pure servant of the masterpiece, whether a small line of chant or a 40-piece musical equivalent of a Gothic cathedral.

The personal drama and intensity of this world of work eventually exhausted me, as it does many, and I left it behind for others. But somehow Dr. Mahrt held on and maintained. As one can imagine, dealing constantly as he did with artsy types and church musicians involved a nonstop stream of personal dramas and crises. I would call him on the phone to report the latest that required his intervention. He would listen very carefully, wait, and say “Let me think on this.”

This happened every time and mostly the problem would mysteriously solve itself. Noticing this method I finally asked him about it. He explained that he had a mentor many years earlier who told him a great secret of good life management. He said that whenever something came up that seemed to demand an immediate answer, the best approach is simply to wait at least 48 hours. His mentor said that most troubles in life solve themselves in the time of simply waiting. He tried it and it worked.

Since then, I’ve tried to replicate that same approach but never with as much success and discipline. I also noticed that this period of waiting also prepared him to make wise judgments that involved a broader outlook. This was always his strategy: Instead of begrudging misfortune, arbitrary exercises of authority, and disappointing fortunes, simply look for the hidden opportunities and work from those. This is what he did all of his life, most often with a light demeanor and a brilliant smile.

Another secret to his success was in avoiding becoming attached to particular factions, which every movement has. The world of Gregorian chant had long been hamstrung and throttled by debates within and without. The factions became ferociously divided over the course of the 20th century, as this or that chant theorist or practitioner would push a particular method of approach while putting down all others as inauthentic or otherwise insufficiently rigorous.

He knew of all of the debates but was careful to find both merit and shortcomings in each, while encouraging a wide variety of charisms within this relatively small world that is the foundation of nearly all existing music in the West. It was an obvious solution, and his

personal example ended up healing many rifts and prepared the way for a worldwide revival.

The result was that William Mahrt became among the world's most widely cited and respected musicologists in early music suitable for liturgy. There is simply no dispute about that. He had one subject, focused on it his entire life, made an enormous difference in small and huge ways, and died peacefully with hundreds and thousands of devoted disciples and proteges the world over. This approach to life has much to recommend it.

Dr. William Mahrt was a gentle, brilliant, and even holy man with whom I was greatly privileged to work for nearly 10 years. His legacy lives on with his astonishing output and personal example to so many. Maestro Mahrt: requiescat in pace. May the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs receive you at your coming and lead you into the holy city of Jerusalem.

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