New Approaches in Research of Gregorian Chant: Ethnomusicological Aspect

GUNTARS PRĀNIS

Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music

ABSTRACT: The main issue of this paper is questions concerning the manuscript *Missale Rigense* (the Missal of Riga), dating back to the 14th century. The primary issue I am going to focus on is finding an answer to the question if the musical material of the above manuscript comprises any particular local music tradition at all, owing to the fact that this aspect, being directly linked with such issues as history and identity, in the music history of medieval Riga has never been investigated. This issue immediately entails the problem of choosing the most appropriate methodology and approaches towards investigating the relevant problem. This undoubtedly poses another question, concerning the notion of globality and locality in music.

Such posing of the problem naturally calls for an extended and interdisciplinary approach to the issue to be investigated which is characteristic of 'ethnomusicological approach', however, the scope of research presents also several problems where also the 'classical approach of music history' still proves to be essential. While investigating these two approaches, I will try to reveal the common as well as the distinctive features.

Solesmes chant research was established in 1833 by Solesmes Benedictine Abbey. Main principle: restoration of the chant melodies, coming from the source (comparative tables). The idea of determining and publishing the 'archetype', which actually never existed as a written medieval manuscript, was their goal. Establishment of Gregorian semiology by Eugène Cardine (1905–1988) brought a new, enriching perspective to the understanding of the earliest neumes.

In the later decades of the 20th century, one of the attempts to fill the gap between us and the medieval cantors was the appeal to ethnomusicology and the traditional music. The opening of new perspectives which consider Gregorian chant as a musical corpus in whose not only early history oral transmission had an essential role, represented an immense liberation and a chance to see aspects of chant **composition** and **performance** in a different light.

KEYWORDS: *Gregorian chant, local traditions, ethnomusicological approach, Missal of Riga, medieval Riga, performance-composition process*

"Ergo et nos qui de rivo corruptam lympham usque hactenus bibimus, ad perennis fontis necesse est fluenta principalia recurramus"[1]

(Johannes diaconus 1892).

[1] „Thus, we who up to now have also been drinking water from dirty streams need to return to the eternal source."

INTRODUCTION

THIS paper has stemmed out within the context of my dissertation work, the central theme of which is both the manuscript *Missale Rigense* (the Missal of Riga)[2], dating back to the 14th century and the local tradition of music in medieval Riga. These words above, attributed to Charlemagne – concerning the decadence of liturgical chant in the Carolingian empire and the necessity of returning to Roman models – come back almost in cycles, during the centuries of what we call Gregorian chant. The quotation probably does not express the historical truth, but what we can see, is – the question of the stream and its source has been important already many years ago. Uttered by different personalities, in periods stretched between the 9th and 21st centuries, these words often describe very different realities and witness to a lingering existence of conflicts around that mysterious ideal: the 'authenticity' of Gregorian chant. The primary issue I am going to focus on is finding an answer to the question if the musical material of the above manuscript comprises any particular local music tradition at all, owing to the fact that this aspect, being directly linked with such issues as history, identity and local music practice, in the music history of medieval Riga has never been investigated. This undoubtedly poses another question, concerning the notion of globality and locality in music, which is a very interesting question in research of Gregorian chant and its performance today. The big question is, if any local Gregorian chant tradition (written sources and performance practice) has its own value or, should we just try to come back to the one, authentic version of it?

[2] The manuscript is available in Academic Library of the University of Latvia (Riga, Latvia).

TEXT AND MELODY: DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Undoubtedly the main composition principle of Gregorian chant is the relation between the text and melody, where melody tries to express the deepest meaning of the text and its liturgical context. The interesting thing is, that this principle is interpreted differently in different sources, traditions and performance practices. During the decades of 20th century chant research, scholars specialized in musical paleography, and its links to interpretation considered some types of early neumatic notation as

rhytmically more precise. They gave a privileged role to the earliest neumes of the St. Gall and Metz schools.[3] Since the same text can reveal different truths to different readers, this knowledge cannot be reduced to a set of tables and recipes for a precise performance of each neume. The discipline known as Gregorian semiology brought a new, enriching perspective to the understanding of the earliest neumes. However, the several performance schools engendered by Gregorian semiology bear witness that each of them represents just one possible point of view, an interpretation of an interpretation.[4] It is also paradigmatical to compare different chant performances which all take as inspiration Cardine's research and believe in their accurate following of the principles of Gregorian semiology. We will be astonished by differences in their approach to the rhythm and articulation of chant melodies. The source is one and the same, but the outcomes so different...

[3] I'm speaking here mainly about Dom Eugène Cardine's research and his work *Semiologia Gregoriana*, 1968.

[4] See the very late text of Cardine (1980: 31).

Performances inspired by Dom Eugène Cardine's studies take into account all the subtleties provided by St. Gall manuscripts with their rich indications for rhythm and neume grouping. Still, besides the importance of careful references to rhythmical nuances in the neumatic script, there are many other levels one may also need to consider when incarnating these signs into sound. The same levels fit also with later manuscripts of 12th–14th centuries. There is the text, the rhetorical function of each piece with its profile crystallized over centuries of oral transmission, there is its modal identity, ornamental richness, the architectural space in which it should be performed and understood. And last but not least: the mentality, native tongue and musical taste of particular performers play a very significant role in the process of interpretation as well. All these elements influence decisions about performance. Yet we will never be able to know precisely which was the meaning of terms such as 'long' and 'short', 'fast' and 'slow' for St. Gall cantors and scribes, how these values relate to each other, and how flexible they where in their symbiosis with the text of a piece. Medieval chant did not survive only through the mirror of St. Gall neumes, and if we want to perform chant repertoire from other (also later) sources we should not be trapped by a St. Gall short-sightedness or apply parameters from one notation to another. The ultimate help and guide in the performance of neumes seems to be the text of the particular chant we are singing, the sense of the story we are telling. Only in connection with the text, and with the modal structure of a concrete chant melody, can neumes and the particular melody itself reveal their inner logic.

The matters of globality and locality in music are nothing new and we face these questions already in Middle Ages. We can even speak about the first Carolingian 'globalization' of liturgical song and its repercussions in the sound universe of chant traditions in 9th century Europe. Already then, in the 9th century, we can observe an almost legendary confrontation between the Carolingian cantors and the local musical traditions which they sought to replace by their own repertoires and vocal styles. We can imagine an astonishing diversity of chant styles of medieval Europe, at a time when chant traditions were competing for ascendancy in the young empire of Pippin, Charlemagne and their succesors.

The imperial reform of the liturgy and its musical structures arrived in the different regions of the Carolingian empire almost as a 'cultural revolution', finding in many places an established local liturgy with which it had to contend (see, for example, Rankin 1993). In the name of Roman authority, used by Charlemagne in a political goal of unification, many local liturgical and musical traditions were suppressed. Of the local musical traditions which survived this confrontation, each has been preserved in a different way: some survived for several centuries before being completely eradicated (Beneventan chant in southern Italy); and some were merged with layers of other traditions in building the complex, hybrid repertoire which we commonly call 'Gregorian chant'.

Texts written already in the Carolingian period by such personalities as John the Deacon (cf. Johannes diaconus 1892) or Notker of St. Gall (cf. Haefele 1959) often mention differences among these regional traditions. But, do they only refer to the differences between melodies? For Charlemagne's contemporaries, maybe the word 'difference' meant rather a diversity of performance styles, in the approach to the text articulation? Perhaps they referred to the variable numbers of singers involved in the performance in different regions, or to the pronunciation of Latin? In trying to find concrete vocal solutions to these dilemmas, one notices how delicate is the border between the 'same', 'similar' and 'different', as mentioned by medieval authors. A chant melody can be perceived as 'same' from place to place of its melody, but also because of its text, its liturgical assignment, its sound, the vocal technique of the performer, or its particular ornamentation style.

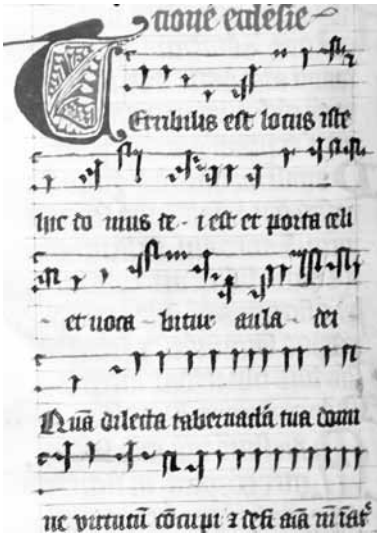
The Missal of Riga

Now I would like to briefly examine the oldest musical evidence that documents medieval music in Riga – the Missal of Riga. Although it dates from a considerably later time period than the earlier mentioned examples, the 14th-century Missal of Riga represents a local musical tradition that has

a particular place in the context of many late medieval local sacred music traditions.

Upon studying and analyzing in detail the chants in the Missal of Riga, and comparing them to other 14th-century manuscripts and the local traditions fixed therein, a certain regularity becomes clear that needs to be mentioned. In examining the melodic and modal peculiarities, it is possible to find factors common to several manuscripts that represent a certain medieval European region. One could call this the German choral tradition, but this does not mean only manuscripts from German sources, as is undoubtedly the case of the Missal of Riga, which includes sources from the territories of present-day Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and others. In musicology this tradition is also known as the German choral dialect. The author of this term, who juxtaposes the German choral dialect with the so-called Roman choral dialect, is one of the most signiticant 20th-century medieval music scholars, Peter Wagner (1865–1931), who defined the German choral dialect primarily by a concrete, unified, and altered intervallic structure that was found in Gregorian chant melodies.

As described by Peter Wagner, these changes are based on living development:



Medieval chant's inheritance is subject to laws that are in turn subject to the spirit of all of civilization's creative spirit: that which lives and blossoms, develops; only that which is dead and cold remains frozen and unchanging. The guiding strength that is active in all time periods and serves art is also active in the tradition of Gregorian chorales (quoted after Wagner 1970: 435)[5].

Figure 1. The Missal of Riga, a manuscript of the 14th century in German Hufnagel-notation.

In order to define the difference between Riga's musical tradition from the nowadays accepted *Vaticana* melody version, let us compare both on the basis of the introit chant *Terribilis est.* The *Vaticana* version is highlighted with those melodic fragments that differ in the Missal of Riga.

[5] *„Dennoch war auch die mittelalterliche Gesangsüberlieferung nicht von dem Gesetzte ausgenommen, dem alles lebendige Geisteswerk der Menschheit unterworfen ist: was lebt und blüht, verändert sich, nur das Tote, Kalte ist starr und unveränderlich. Die treibenden Kräfte, die dem Fortschritt der Zeiten und der Kunst dienen, waren auch in der Choraltradition tätig."*

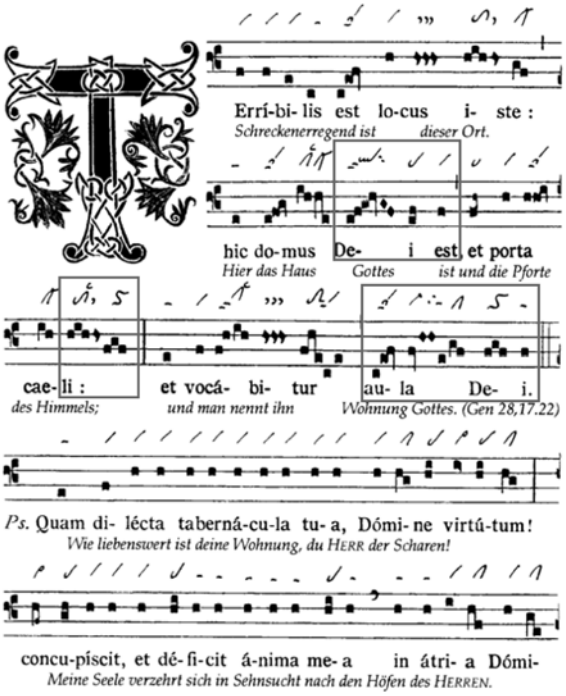


Figure 2. The manuscript of *Einsiedeln* (a picture from *Le codex 121 de la Bibliothèque d'Einsiedeln (Xe-XIe siècle). Antiphonale missarum Sancti Gregorii* 1974) and *Vaticana* (a picture from *Graduale Triplex* 1979). The manuscript of *Einsiedeln* reveals the tradition of St. Gall neumes (beginning of the 11th century), whereas the *Vaticana* is the authorized Roman Catholic Church version in square-note notation, edited most recently at the end of the 20th century.

The very big question now is how to analyze and understand these differences that we find in these two melody versions. Could it really be that cantors of medieval Riga sensed and performed music differently than in Italy or France? I will try now to give an idea of contemporary global methods of analysis and scientific investigation towards exploring the repertoire of Gregorian chant as such alongside with its diverse local traditions. Such a posing of the problem naturally calls for an extended and interdisciplinary approach to the issue to be investigated which is characteristic of the ethnomusicological approach, however, the scope of research presents several problems where also the classical approach of musicology still proves to be essential. While investigating these two approaches, I will try to reveal the distinctive feature of the ethnomusicological approach.

THE APPROACH OF CLASSICAL MUSICOLOGY

Solesmes chant research was established in 1833 by the Solesmes Benedictine Abbey. Main principle: restoration of the chant melodies, coming from the source (comparative tabeles). The idea of determining and publishing the 'archetype', which actually never existed as a written medieval manuscript, was their goal. Establishment of Gregorian semiology by Eugène Cardine brought a new, enriching perspective to the understanding of the earliest neumes. The idea is still alive, that every difference from that 'archetype' (or a concrete melody) must be considered as a mistake, which has to be corrected.

THE ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL APPROACH AND ITS BENEFITS

The problems concerning this set of questions has been examined in detail by the American musicologist Peter Jeffery, who emphasizes how necessary the ethnomusicological approach is in contemporary medieval musical research. He asserts that still, to a large extent, critical study of medieval chant is left to historical musicologists, because for this work very specialized knowledge of ancient handwriting and notation is essential, in theoretical concepts of ancient Latin and Greek, as well as in the history of liturgy and theology. With regard to this, Peter Jeffery writes the following:

> *But because ethnomusicologists have shied away from chant research, many very basic questions that they routinely raise about every musical tradition have gone virtually unasked. As a result, entire areas of chant study that ethnomusicologists would find especially interesting and useful are very poorly researched* (Jeffery 1995: 2).

Ethnomusicological Gregorian chant studies are necessary not only because they would place the chorale practice on a firms intercultural comparative footing, but also in order to reveal something that has been overlooked for many years in this ancient tradition that has been and is practiced in many countries and continents worldwide. This indicates an extremely important field of research that is also central to my own study – the influence of local musical culture on various aspects of notating and performing chant. The most obvious indicator of this fact is: for the past three decades, one of the most debated subjects in chant study has been the problem of oral and written transmission, a subject that was once regarded as the peculiar province of ethnomusicology. However, it is here that one can find explanations for why local traditions differ so much from one another.

The question of transmission in contemporary research becomes increasingly relevant, because in order to carry out research, it is necessary to turn to specific repertoire from a wide variety of aspects. This is discussed in the work of the American musicologist Janice Kleeman, who mentions various phenomena that must be encountered in this field of study:

> *The parameters of musical transmission extend to phenomena physiological and psyhological, acoustical and anthropological, as well as to matters musical that we conventionally consider. It is necessary to interrelate the seminal contributions of various disciplines to the study of transmission, with the aim of broadening what has been, up to now, a too often culturally-biased perspective upon a topic too narrowly defined* (Kleeman 1985/1986: 7).

There is no alternative to such an approach, and it is not new: the use of ethnomusicological perspectives in medieval musicology has been defended for several decades (for example, in Hungarian and Czech musicology – Bárdos 1975; Dobszay 1990). Such perspectives are used by several leading Eastern European scholars who have always held in equally high regard traditional and professional music for the purpose of research. Here local tradition is not regarded as a later appearing layer or even an aberration (as is often thought even nowadays), but rather as very valuable material that illustrates a specific musical tradition.

Speaking of the problems of transmission, today medieval music sholars need to more thoroughly address questions that pertain to local traditions, those of original, varied and oral forms in the Middle Ages.

Jeffery expresses the opinion that this is a serious problem that perhaps can only be solved in a hypothetical way, because it is impossible to precisely reconstruct melodies that arose before the appearance of musical notation. Such a hypothesis must include theories about the nature and essence of oral traditions, as well as the understanding that melodies were preserved orally until the moment when they were written down. And finally – what are the relationships between oral and written processes during the time when melodies were actively written down (cf. Jeffery 1995: 9–10). To formulate such a hypothesis would not be complicated if oral tradition were a relatively simple and well researched phenomenon. If this were the case, there would be no problem in applying the known facts to the Gregorian melodies fixed in the early period and to turn towards their interpretation. However, at present there is no unified theoretical model in the research of oral traditions. The most serious studies of the field of transmission of Gregorian chant is in the work of two musicologists – Helmut Hucke (1980) and Leo Treitler (1988).

The primary idea of both scholars is that the oral practice can be said to have 'left its mark' on the melodies that survive, so that they still reveal traces of their oral origin even though they are preserved only in written

form. Helmut Hucke calls this idea "The New Historical View" (Hucke 1980: 257).

The noteworthy music scholar Leo Treitler has developed this idea further over the years, advancing the hypothesis that every oral tradition includes improvizational practice to some extent, which he calls "The Generative System". He says: "The generative systems of the oral tradition [..] informed the music that was produced; the oral origin of the melodies is visible through the written surfaces that are its progeny" (Treitler 1988: 566). His view is that even after the widespread practice of written music arose, oral traditions remained active, and they are „never completely out of the picture as a factor in musical practice" (Treitler 1988: 571).

Essentially the key that would help understand Gregorian chant melodies is the correct understanding that the way that this music was created was in large part within the framework of oral traditions, and that could help better understand the processes of the transmission of this music.

Treitler also holds the view that the unwillingness by many scholars to accept the New Historical View is due to their unwillingness to embrace the fact that, at some point in history (and it is not even important how long ago) the inheritance of the Western musical tradition originated as an oral tradition. It is quite clear that singing in the early Christian church before the development of musical notation could not have been anything besides an oral tradition. The question, therefore, is not whether such an oral tradition existed, but rather how accurately does later written notation reflect the melodic content of the earlier oral practice. Are the written melodies precise transcriptions of orally created melodies?

Treitler further develops the idea in a direction that, in my opinion, would offer new solutions to problems in medieval music research, especially with regard to local music traditions. The question pertains to every performance process as a form of improvization or new composition. Written music notation plays only a limited role. Treitler refers to this as the **performance-composition** process. He says:

> [...] *we might think of a repeated process of performance-composition – something between the reproduction of a fixed, memorized melody and the extempore invention of a new one. I would call it a "reconstruction"; the performer had to think how the piece was to go and then actively reconstruct it according to what he remembered* (Treitler 1975: 11).

In my opinion, this should be understood as follows: singers had to abide by certain original chants and to sing them trying to reach a certain goal. In so doing, the adherence to concrete nuances stored in one's memory was with varying degrees of precision. Various melodic fragments were stored in the memory to varying levels. At different moments chants may have been repeated note for note, but other fragments may have been performed

according to singers' best intentions, trying to abide by notions of modal development retained in the memory. For example, within the confines of a single melisma the only certain aspect was on which note it began and on which note it ended. Everything in between could be regarded as a spontaneous improvization. It is quite possible that the aforementioned tradition developed in this way, through the utilization of stereotypical, previously fixed melodic formulas – centonization, that could be combined in various ways. Several ethnomusicologists, such as Helmut Hucke (1980) and Bruno Nettl (1981), feel that the role of centonization within the framework of a single chant may have stimulated the oral reconstruction of chant every time anew.

CONCLUSION

An especially significant role in the research of local musical practices is given by the approach of ethnomusicology. It opens new perspectives which consider Gregorian chant as a musical corpus in whose not only early history oral transmission had an essential role, represented an immense liberation and a chance to see aspects of chant composition, transmission (oral – written – literate) and performance in a different light. As an inspiration for the learning and transmission of chant melodies, these ideas provide significant support to chant scholars and performers. These scholarly initiatives encouraged a current in chant performances. The belief in a unique, Roman origin of Gregorian chant, which was put into question in the domain of research during the 20th century – ironically, after the discovery of Old Roman manuscripts (see a conscise synthesis of that process in: Huglo 1996: 72–75) – still seems to wait for a serious transformation in the world of performance. We admit the exsistence of a plurality of local chant traditions in the Middle Ages. We should first of all accept that they can sound very differently, or that they sounded (and still sound) differently to different listeners; and finally, that our visions of them can sound even more differently. As an inspiration for the learning and transmission of chant melodies, these ideas provide significant support to musicologists and performers.

References

Bárdos, K. (1975). *Volksmusikartige Variierungstechnik in den ungarischen Passionen (15.–18. Jahrhundert).* Aus dem Ungarischen übertragen von T. und P. Alpári (Musicologia Hungarica: neue Folge, Veröffentlichungen des Bartok-Archivs Nr. 5). Budapest, etc.: Akadémiai Kiadó , etc.

Cardine, E. (1979). *Semiologia gregoriana.* Roma: Pontificio di Musica Sacra.

Cardine, E. (1980). Sémiologie et interprétation. *Ut mens concordet voci. Festschrift Eugène Cardine zum 75. Geburtstag*. St. Ottilien: EOS-Verlag, pp. 30–33.

Dobszay, L. (1990). *Corpus antiphonalium officii, ecclesiarum centralis Europae. 1/A/.* Budapest: Zenetudomanyi Intézet = Institute for Musicology.

Graduale Triplex (1979). Paris-Tournai: Abbaye Saint-Pierre de Solesmes & Desclée.

Haefele, H. F. (Hrsg., 1959). *Notkeri Balbuli Gesta Karoli Magni imperatoris* (*Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorem rerum Germanicarum, Nova series*, 12). Berlin: Monumenta Germaniae Historica.

Hucke, H. (1980). Toward a new historical view of Gregorian chant. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 437–467.

Huglo, M. (1996). La recherche en musicologie médiévale au XXe siécle. *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, Vol. 39, pp. 67–84.

Jeffery, P. (1990). The formation of the earliest Christian chant traditions: Four processes that shaped the texts. *PRISM: Yale Institute of Sacred Music, Worship and the Arts 14* (December), pp. 10–13.

Jeffery, P. (1995). *Re-Envisioning Past Musical Cultures: Ethnomusicology in the Study of Gregorian Chant.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Johannes diaconus (1892). Vita Gregorii. In: J.-P. Migne (ed.). *Patrologia latina, cursus completus* 75. Paris: Garnier, pp. 59–242.

Kleeman, J. E. (1985/1986).The parameters of musical transmission. *The Journal of Musicology,* Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 1–22.

Le codex 121 de la Bibliothèque d'Einsiedeln (Xe-XIe siècle). Antiphonale missarum Sancti Gregorii (1974). Paléographie Musicale, Vol. 1, No. 4. Bern (Rpt. of Solesmes, 1894 edition).

Nettl, B. (1981). Some notes on the state of knowledge about oral transmission in music. In: D. Heartz, B. Wade (eds). *International Musicological Society*: *Report on the Twelfth Congress, Berkeley 1977.* Basel, London: Bärenreiter, pp. 139–144.

Rankin, S. K. (1993). Carolingian music. In: R. McKitterick (ed.): *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 274–316.

Treitler, L. (1975). "Centonate" chant: übles Flickwerk or E pluribus unus? *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 28, pp. 1–23.

Treitler, L. (1988). Communication regarding Levy's "Charlemagne's archetype of Gregorian chant". *Journal of The American Musicological Society*, Vol. 41, pp. 566–575.

Wagner, P. (1970). *Einführung in die Gregorianischen Melodien*. *Ein Handbuch der Choralwissenschaft.* Zweiter Teil: Neumenkunde. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag; Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books:

Agustoni, L., & J. B. Göschl (1987). *Einführung in die Interpretation des Gregorianischen Chorals*. Bd. 1: *Grundlagen*. Regensburg: Gustav Bosse Verlag.

Bárdos, K. (1975). *Volksmusikartige Variierungstechnik in den ungarischen Passionen (15.–18. Jahrhundert)***.** Aus dem Ungarischen übertragen von T. und P. Alpári. Musicologia Hungarica: neue Folge, Veröffentlichungen des Bartok-Archivs Nr. 5. Budapest, etc.: Akadémiai Kiadó , etc.

Cardine, E. (1979). *Semiologia gregoriana.* Roma: Pontificio di Musica Sacra.

Diehr, A. (2004). *Literatur und Musik im Mittelalter*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag.

Fellerer, K. G. (1941). *Deutsche Gregorianik im Frankenreich* (*Kölner Beiträge zur Musikforschung*, Bd. V). Regensburg: Gustav Bosse Verlag.

Graduale Triplex (1979). Paris-Tournai: Abbaye Saint-Pierre de Solesmes & Desclée.

Harnoncourt, N. (1982). *Musik als Klangrede. Wege zu neuen Musikverständnis*. Salzburg, Wien: Residenz-Verlag.

Jeffery, P. (1990). The formation of the earliest Christian chant traditions: four processes that shaped the texts. *PRISM: Yale Institute of Sacred Music, Worship and the Arts 14* (December), pp. 10–13.

Nettl, B. (1981). Some notes on the state of knowledge about oral transmission in music. In: D. Heartz, B. Wade (eds). *International Musicological Society*: *Report of the Twelfth Congress, Berkeley 1977.* Basel, London: Bärenreiter, pp. 139–144.

Rubenis, A. (1997). *Viduslaiku kultūra Eiropā.* Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC.

Schmidt, C. (2004). *Harmonia Modorum. Eine gregorianische Melodielehre* (*Publikationen der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis*). Winterthur: Amadeus Verlag.

Articles:

Hucke, H. (1980). Toward a new historical view of Gregorian chant. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 437–467.