

Conflict and Reparation: The agency of music in modern monastic community dynamics

AMANDA HASTE

National Coalition of Independent Scholars | France*

ABSTRACT

Despite the social climate of individualism and freedom of choice which pervades the early twenty-first century, men and women still feel called to enter monastic life, a decision which brings with it not only vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Monastic life also involves a serious commitment to living in community and, as such community living often presents interrelational problems, the aim of this paper is to use ethnographic data to show the ways in which music acts as a crucial element in communal health and the resolution of social conflict in modern-day monastic communities. A monastic community brings together highly disparate individuals with the sole common aim of a personal theocentric existence: every individual will bring their own attitudes into community, and one of the hardest lessons to be learnt is that of giving up their own will and agenda to pursue this goal, while simultaneously establishing themselves within their own community. Music has always played a major role in monastic life, and chant has long proved an ideal medium for supporting a life of prayer, but recent research in twenty-first-century monasteries and convents has shown that it also has considerable agency in the psychosocial structure of monastic communities. In this paper ethnographic data are used to explore the role of communal singing, and specifically chant, as an integral part of twenty-first-century monastic life, and its impact as a source of both conflict and reparation, division and cohesion. Following a review of the current literature on monasticism and monastic music this paper outlines my own perspective and methodology for the collection and presentation of the ethnographic data; I then present and discuss my findings on the musical implications of joining a religious community, the role played by music in community bonding, and issues of elitism and exclusion which can complicate the ongoing community dynamics, before drawing conclusions on the agency of music in modern monastic life.

*amanda.haste@ncis.org

*'I tell you what drives me crazy here and that is when we recite the psalms and someone is out of time. I like it when we are all together, but when someone is too fast or too slow nothing is ever said. Gone are the days when [a tone deaf sister] would be politely asked not to sing. Now everyone sings and everyone speaks and if anyone is out of time it is too bad. But how beautiful it sounds when everything goes right!'*¹

INTRODUCTION

Despite the social climate of individualism and freedom of choice which pervades the early twenty-first century, men and women still feel called to enter monastic life, a decision which brings with it not only vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Monastic life also involves a serious commitment to living in community and, as such community living often presents interrelational problems, the aim of this paper is to use ethnographic data to show that the ways in which music acts as a crucial element in communal health and the resolution of social conflict in modern-day monastic communities.

The problem of this type of community living is that it brings together highly disparate individuals with the sole common aim of a personal theocentric existence: every individual will bring their own attitudes into community, and one of the hardest lessons to be learnt is that of giving up their own will and agenda to pursue this goal, while simultaneously establishing themselves within their own community. Music, and in particular plainchant and chant-based music, has always played a major role in monastic life, the chant having long been proved an ideal medium for supporting a life of prayer, but recent research in twenty-first-century monasteries and convents (Haste 2009; 2013a) has shown that music also has considerable agency in the psychosocial structure of monastic communities. In this paper ethnographic data are used to explore the role of communal singing, and specifically chant², as an integral part of twenty-first-century monastic life, and its impact as a source of both conflict and reparation, division and cohesion.

Following a review of the current literature on monasticism and monastic music this paper outlines my own perspective and methodology for the collection and presentation of the ethnographic data; I then present and discuss my findings on the musical implications of joining a religious community, the role played by music in community bonding, and issues of elitism and exclusion which can complicate the ongoing community dynamics, before drawing conclusions on the agency of music in modern monastic life.

¹ Sr Teresa CSC [Community of the Sisters of the Church, Surrey] but at the Society of the Sisters of Bethany, Hampshire at the time of interview. Quoted in Losada 1999, 20.

² The terms 'Gregorian' chant, 'plainchant' and 'plainsong' are all used by the Religious (the collective term for those living the vowed religious life, whether monks, nuns or friars). However their interpretation varies widely, referring to a chant 'canon' rather than the narrower definitions required by medieval music scholars. Such terminology is to be understood in the context of each individual's level of technical knowledge, education in music history, and, most tellingly, their experience of the (often highly derivative) chant repertory of their own community. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, I will be preserving the terms 'Gregorian,' 'plainchant' and 'plainsong' for direct quotations, while in all other instances I will use a generic description of 'chant' to denote an unmetered, monophonic, modal musical medium.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The bulk of current literature on monasticism is liturgical, theological or historical; latterly the practical and sociological aspects have also been addressed, particularly by authors such as Carey (1997) and Nygren and Ukeritis (1993). Evidence of the practicalities of living the monastic life in the twentieth century is provided through interviews with present-day nuns in Loudon's *Unveiled: Nuns Talking* (1993) and Losada's *New Habits* (1999). While there is a large body of existing literature on monastic music this has tended to concentrate on medieval and renaissance communities, notably through the work of Monson (1995; 2010), Kendrick (1996), Montford (2000), Yardley (2006) and Boynton (2006).

Information on music in monastic traditions, particularly that of the Benedictines in the Glenstal Liturgical Congresses, can be found in the work of Kavanagh (1998), Love (2006) and Phelan (2000); *The Irish Benedictines* by Brown and Ó Clabaigh (2005), and Pecklers' work on the Liturgical Movement in the USA (Pecklers 1998), also contain relevant information on contemporary monasticism and music. In the 1980s Dom David Nicholson OSB, an American monk, conducted a study on the musical impact of Vatican II on the Office and liturgy of Benedictine monastic communities (Nicholson 1986-90), but this body of literature offers explorations of the music itself rather than the ways in which music actually functions within present-day monastic life. This paper aims to redress this omission with a sociomusicological examination of the agency of music in the community dynamics of convents and monasteries, in which it functions as a vehicle for both conflict and reparation in the microcosm of twenty-first-century monasticism.

METHODOLOGY

The initial research leading to this paper was conducted in Roman Catholic and Anglican religious communities in Great Britain, the USA and Canada between 2004 and 2008, and has since been followed up, the last dialogue having taken place in 2013. Initial research comprised questionnaires sent to a wide range of communities, and the questionnaire responses were used to select a sample group which was representative of every type of extant community, whether active or contemplative; large, medium or small; male, female or mixed; old or new foundations. Numerous field trips were then made, during which it soon became clear that immersion in a community's life for at least twenty-four hours was necessary to get the 'feel' of a community's worship, and to show serious intent and establish a rapport. The resultant issues were then followed up through return visits and extended correspondence with selected individuals.

Considerable care has been taken to respect the sensibilities of the individual respondent while collecting reliable ethnographic data. Courtesy demanded that initial contact with a community would be made through the superior, after which a first interview would usually be granted with the superior or, with their consent, the choir director. Having established my academic credentials and intentions, I was often granted access to other members of the community, either individually or in

small groups. Further dialogue through correspondence was often established, mostly by email, which offered a valuable impersonal medium and overcame some of the reticence encountered in personal interviews. Interviews were only recorded with permission³. Any requests for anonymity have been respected, with care taken to ensure that no individuals can be identified by their conferees from information given in published work; these methods have led to a high degree of mutual confidence and trust which in turn have led to greater disclosure of information. This policy of confidentiality has been particularly relevant to this current work on music in community dynamics.

ETHNOGRAPHER'S BACKGROUND

As an ethnographic researcher, I should situate myself within this work by revealing myself to be a white, middle-class female and a classically-trained musician. Before embarking on musicological research I had enjoyed a thirty-year career performing on flute and saxophone in both classical and jazz fields, as well as teaching and composing music. Although I am now a confirmed agnostic, I was brought up in London with an American Episcopalian father and an English Anglican mother, exposed not only to a high-church Anglican Eucharist but to the Roman Catholic Mass which I occasionally attended in the early 1960s with my *au pair*. In my early teens I attended a Baptist church, where I was most impressed to discover that the vicar played drums in a band during the service; later I briefly attended a more fundamental church where I encountered Christian rock. Despite my agnosticism, this background may explain my enduring fascination with the role of music in worship, and the musical choices made by individuals and communities in their worship rituals.

Such autobiographical details demonstrate my auto-ethnographic (emic) perspective as someone brought up in the Christian tradition observing others in the same tradition, and also my simultaneous etic perspective as an agnostic secular musicologist investigating a monastic subculture to which I remain an outsider. My goal has been to achieve the emic perspective by acquiring ethnographic data, through observation, interviews and correspondence, in a way which minimizes as far as possible my own subjectivity; although my personal “horizon” (Gadamer 2004, 301-306) will always be defined by own life experience, I would hope that any prejudices lurking within me prove to be “enabling” rather than “disabling” in terms of my interpretation of the data presented to me⁴. Useful ethnographic literature which addresses such problems of ethnographic research include the *Handbook of Ethnography*, edited by Atkinson *et al* (2007) and Barz and Colley's *Shadows in the Field* (2008) while Chock discusses the particular problems facing the auto-ethnographer in “Irony and Ethnography: On Cultural Analysis of One's Own Culture” (1986).

³ The question of power relations in such oral histories is confronted by McKenna (2003).

⁴ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who reminded me of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (2004) (*Wahrheit und Methode*) in respect of enabling and disabling prejudice.

DISCUSSION

JOINING A COMMUNITY

There is a widespread misconception that becoming a monk or a nun represents an escape from a hostile world or the pain and uncertainty of personal relationships. While historically men and women have entered religious communities at an early age for many social reasons, these days would-be monastics always try their vocation voluntarily, and their choice is based on a firm faith and belief in their vocation⁵. New entrants (aspirants) are not accepted at an early age, and those who have not reached their mid-twenties are likely to be refused entry until they have experienced more of life in the secular world⁶. One of the most important requisites is that on entry each individual should have completed their emotional and sexual formation so that they have a strong sense of their own identity⁷:

Knowing ourselves and coming to terms with ourselves is one of the most important things in life When you come into community you are confronted with yourself and certain aspects of yourself that you have not addressed before . . . relating to the same people day in day out is part of discovering yourself.

Having chosen to explore their vocation, an aspiring monastic must find a community to which he or she feels well suited. They may achieve this in their first choice of community, or may try two or more communities before settling; in any case, they will be given a taste of several houses of the Order where this is possible, and may indeed be required to move between sister houses to fulfill a need at the request of the Order. While their faith and commitment are not in question, the reality of community life is almost invariably far harder than had been anticipated. However, some aspects of monastic life can be established before entry, and these include the 'uniform' which often comprises a habit, and the sound of the chant which is used to support the prayer life of virtually all the communities. So if the chant enjoys such a high profile as the 'voice' of monasticism, how much of the appeal of monastic life can be attributed to the music itself? One may well consider that such an idea belongs firmly in the realms of romantic fiction, as in Rumer Godden's *In this House of Brede*: 'my love of music brought me to the convent. I came to hear the plainchant, and then I knew' (Godden 1991, 67). However, while it would be very easy to dismiss this as romantic sentimentalism, Godden's novel was written with the collaboration of the nuns of Stanbrook Abbey, a Roman Catholic community with a very strong musical tradition, and although most Religious would not consider 'monastic' music to have played a significant part in their choice of vocation – at least not consciously – it certainly appears to have strong associations.

One British monk, Brother F, says that for him Latin plainchant was 'the language of heaven' with its own mystique, and that it was 'the real thing' and 'what monks did'.

⁵ Although my respondents have frequently told me that they did not choose the Religious Life, but rather that the call proved too strong to leave them any choice in the matter.

⁶ A new entrant is termed an aspirant, becoming a postulant a few weeks later. If all goes well, they are then accepted into community as a novice monk or nun, progressing after a few years to simple or temporary vows before later taking full vows. The whole process takes from three to ten years, although timescales vary between orders and in individual cases.

⁷ Sr Margaret Anne ASSP [All Saints Sisters of the Poor, Oxford], quoted in Losada 1999, 131.

One of his confrères, Brother B, affords chant an even more positive role in his decision, giving a clear illustration of its effect on him. He has told me that, as a small child growing up in a privileged background in New England, USA, he and his sister were being driven home by the family chauffeur one clear, starry night when they heard the sound of 250 monks singing at the local monastery; on asking about this unearthly sound he was told it was the angels singing. Although still a child when he discovered the truth Brother B felt himself inexorably drawn to the Religious Life, but this was not to be an easy journey. He entered the novitiate twice, having ‘lost [his] way’ at the first attempt, but maintains that it was music that drew him back to it: the chant ‘spoke to’ him, which he interpreted as God speaking through the music, and having been brought back to the monastic life he was finally solemnly professed at the age of fifty-one.⁸

For both Brother F and Brother B, the chant represented both musical and mystical bliss, a comprehension of beauty and the attainment of a higher plane which transcended the technical language and functionality of the music. Aldous Huxley writes of a similar ‘mystical blessedness’ (Blackwell 1999, 199), saying that ‘There is . . . a certain blessedness lying at the heart of things, a mysterious blessedness’ (Huxley 1970, 41) which we cannot adequately express in words: ‘We cannot isolate the truth contained in a piece of music; for it is a beauty-truth and inseparable from its partner’ (Huxley 1970, 43). For these would-be monks, later to become Brother F and Brother B, the chant was, from the beginning, inseparable from its monastic associations: just as cowls and habits characterize the visual image of monasticism, chant provides an identifiable sonic environment, in effect the ‘sound track’ to the monastic life.⁹ However, their references to the ‘mystique’ of monastic chant (as described by Brother F), and its ‘unearthly’ nature (Brother B), are evidence of the general perception of monasteries and convents as unworldly places, in which the modern social norms do not apply. This misconception can mean, as we shall see in the following section, that the realities of communal life often present a rude awakening for the novice Religious.

COMMUNITY BONDING

Several Religious have emphasized that the most difficult aspect of Community is community life, especially given that each member has rejected social convention. As Sr Teresa SSB says, ‘anyone that joins a community is nuts. What women do you know that would want to live with a bunch of twenty women that have weird habits and dress funny? It’s not natural’.¹⁰ Fortunately the monastic system makes allowances for the difficulties of living alongside other adults and has developed strategies – such as silence – which ‘enable people to live together without getting on each others’ nerves,’¹¹ but the long periods of silence which, as has been observed, can

⁸ Personal interview with the author, 30 Jan. 2006.

⁹ The concepts of mysticism and beauty in music have been widely addressed in the literature on aesthetics, and the topic is discussed more fully in Blackwell 1999, 202-221. The author is also indebted to the anonymous reviewer who brought to her attention a study of the relationship between the mystical experience, monastic life and music in “The Flesh of the Voice: Embodiment and the Homoerotics of Devotion in the Music of Hildegard of Bingen” (Holsinger 1993).

¹⁰ Sr Teresa SSB [Society of the Sisters of Bethany], now at CSC [Community of the Sisters of the Church]. Quoted in Losada 1999, 17.

¹¹ Lavinia Byrne, Institute of the Blessed Virgin, Hampstead, London, quoted in Loudon 1992, 154.

make it easier to tolerate the company of ‘obnoxious’ individuals (Carey 1999, 22), also deny the opportunity for healthy discourse which is so necessary for building interpersonal relationships and thus a community.

To this end, singing together is a physical demonstration of the communal bond: Ignatius of Antioch (d. c. AD 110) was one of many early writers who, when writing about the need for unity in the early Church, used choral singing ‘as an illustration of the required concord’¹² and the sociological ramifications have since been further explored. The pioneering music therapist Everett Thayer Gaston (1968) acknowledged the important role of music in building social cohesion, and more recently Tia DeNora writes of the ways in which music can be used as a device for social ordering, ‘organizing potentially disparate individuals such that their actions may appear to be intersubjective, mutually orientated,’ and that it is a valuable tool for entrainment (DeNora 2000, 109). She offers exemplars for musical entrainment which generally feature careful choices of recorded music to control public scenarios such as aerobic classes, and private ones such as romantic encounters; in these the physical state of the subjects is deliberately engineered in order to achieve a particular effect, whether it be increased energy levels or sexual receptivity, by the regularization and modification of physiological states (DeNora 2000, 79).

Chanting has long been used for entrainment in both Eastern and Western religious ritual practice as it provides a means of attaining a state of calm receptiveness in the individual and for social ordering in groups. Singing the chant requires effective synchronization, the singers breathing together to sustain the long phrases of the liturgical and Office texts, and any discord will inevitably disrupt this process. A community’s singing is thus a good indicator of its spiritual and social health: as Sister P says, ‘I can always tell the temperature of a community from their singing’.¹³ Music can also act as a conduit for interpersonal problems: Brother A quotes a former novice who complained of ‘all the stuff flying around in chapel’ as the frictions between people were aired in the chant, rather than the peace and communal love that he had expected.¹⁴

However, while singing together indubitably throws the frictions of communal living into sharp relief, it can also offer a medium for reparation. Certainly, ensemble singing, as with all ensemble music-making, necessitates listening to each other, and the monastic rhythm of meeting in chapel to sing the Daily Office anything from four to seven times a day means that not many hours go by without community members having to do this. One superior, Mother B, confirms that following a row between two cantors the effect on the liturgy is obvious as it pulls apart through lack of communication, but that the very need for concentrated mutual listening offers an ideal opportunity for re-establishing a bond.¹⁵ Joseph Gelineau echoes the first-century Ignatius of Antioch when he says (Gelineau 1964, 22):

¹² Ignatius, *Epistolae*, ad. Eph., 4; PG 5.648B. Quoted in Davies 1984, 37.

¹³ Personal interview with the author, 19 Dec. 2005.

¹⁴ Personal interview with the author, 27 Nov, 2006.

¹⁵ Personal interview with the author, 25 Nov, 2006.

Union of voices expresses union of hearts . . . it controls the steps of those who advance in pilgrimage or procession; it co-ordinates the movements of [sowers] or reapers; it unites the heart of a people in a hymn of victory; it strengthens the bonds of friendship among those who attend a marriage feast. In fact, it is impossible, without insincerity, to sing with other people and yet to hate them. How can members of the same chorus ignore one another?

While the entraining properties of group music-making are generally acknowledged as being inherently useful, in religious communities they are seen as divine gifts and more theological symbolism is attached. Mother B's interpretation of the difficulties experienced in community, and of the necessity to overcome them through the Office, reveals a much larger overview of the role of her community: 'they recognize and acknowledge that they must sing together, as a way of bearing witness to the community as a representation of the body of the Church and thus of Christ,' and in so doing the chant becomes a sign of reparation and of healing.

Medical research, on the other hand, has provided a physiological rationale for the mood-altering effects of communal chanting: the poetry of the liturgical texts is generally chanted at between two and four seconds, a pulse which appears to correspond to a neurological system for integrating the processing of information between the right and left hemispheres of the brain (Norris 1997, 329). The phenomenon of controlled breathing has been further explored in an Italian study of cardiovascular function (Bernardi *et al*, 2001) in which rhythmic formulae such as the rosary and yogic mantras were shown to slow respiration to almost exactly six breaths per minute, essentially identical to that of endogenous circulatory rhythms. The synchronization of blood pressure and respiration then affects the balance of the activating (sympathetic) and relaxing (parasympathetic) arms of the nervous system, with the heart responsible for switching between the two.¹⁶ The regulation of respiration through chant is effectively bringing the parasympathetic system into play, overriding the sympathetic stress response which causes the emotion-governing *amygdala* in the brain to prompt the adrenal gland to release adrenaline and cortisone (Burne 2006).

In their conclusions, the above-mentioned Italian researchers (Bernardi *et al*) propose that the rosary prayer in mediaeval Christianity, and mantras in Eastern religions, may have been adopted in order to regulate physiological and neurological systems. These systems for slowing respiration and synchronizing cardiovascular rhythms were seen to increase concentration and induce a sense of calm and well-being by actively focusing on spiritual thoughts rather than on breath and the body – a distinct advantage in an age when body-consciousness tended to be avoided. This struggle with physicality is particularly pertinent to monasticism and is a theme on which much has been written over the centuries, especially with regard to the beneficial effects of the chant: the early Christian monastic Evagrius Ponticus writes that 'psalmody lays the passions to rest and causes the stirrings of the body to be stilled' (Blackwell 1999, 224).

¹⁶ This system is known as heart variability factor (HRV).

In the evangelical tradition worshippers are often encouraged to express their own intimate relationship with the Divine ‘as the spirit moves them’ and changes in physical stance – standing, falling to the knees, raising the arms in supplication – are all accepted as valid indicators of religious intensity. Such public manifestations of high emotion will often trigger similar gestures from others, a situation remarked upon and positively encouraged in dramatic fashion by preachers; the effect on the congregation is to induce the sympathetic stress response, resulting in increased adrenaline and cortisone release, high heart and respiration rates. The monastic tradition, on the other hand, frowns upon such ‘whipping up’ and views such overstimulation as temporary, shallow, unsustainable, and carnal rather than spiritual. Instead, monasticism emphasizes commonality rather than blatant individual response, deliberately using chant to regularize physiological states for musical entrainment and synchronicity.

SOLIDARITY

Geoff Weaver cites the maxim ‘Tell me what you sing and I’ll tell you who you are,’ which recognizes the tendency of social groups to affirm both their identity and their unity through song (Weaver 2007, 22). In rejecting the accepted life-plan of mainstream society (marriage, children, career) the Religious have effectively marginalized themselves and created an alternative lifestyle; this estrangement requires that their new identity be validated. While the work of individuals may be varied, it is by singing the Office together that solidarity of purpose and a sense of continuing communal identity is achieved. This use of music is described by Tia DeNora as ‘a device’ not only of ‘artefactual memory’ but for ‘the generation of future identity and action structures, a mediator of future existence’ (DeNora 2000, 63), and the eminent German music therapist Isabelle Frohne-Hagemann also deals with this concept of *Entfremdung* (estrangement) from life in mainstream society, advocating music as a means of countering this estrangement through its potential as a communal activity and experience (Frohne-Hagemann 2001, 109-111). Frohne-Hagemann goes on to suggest that through the partial engagement of music as experience and expression of solidarity the individual can explore their position in their own subculture and, from this perspective as a historically situated human being, to develop intercultural solidarity (Frohne-Hagemann 112-113).

This need to develop a communal ethos is known as *koinonia*, the biblical term used to describe the early Church, and which was also the name given to the first monastic communities (Jamison 2006, 125). It is noticeable that efforts to provide communal music always begin with the voice, with unaccompanied chant featuring prominently; in theological terms, vocality has long been considered holy in many cultures, the living breath often equated with the breath of life. It is also an inclusive and enabling medium, available to virtually everyone and recognized by the early Church Fathers: the continuing desire to use singing as a means of achieving *koinonia* in many types of community illustrates that St Augustine’s Pythagorean perception of choral singing as an embodiment of the ‘principles of cosmic ordering’ and a source of ‘congregational solidarity’ (Warren 2006, 83) is still manifest well into the twenty-first century.

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

The soothing effect of chant has long been recognized: during the early days of the nineteenth-century plainchant revival writers were waxing lyrical about this phenomenon, with one anonymous contributor to *The Ecclesiastic* of 1846 asking that ‘doctors [should] be made aware of the particular ‘Vis Medica’ [in the] tranquillizing effect of the Ecclesiastical Chant’ (*The Ecclesiastic* 1846, 32). However, the aim of repetitive singing of elements such as the Psalms is to induce a state not of trance but of receptivity, and as such does not preclude the exercising of other emotions. When the same *Ecclesiastic* contributor refers to the ‘consolatory’ effect of the Psalms being recited to ‘the calm, subdued, Gregorian chant,’ (*The Ecclesiastic* 1846, 27-28) he has ignored the fact that the Psalms cover the gamut of human emotions, encompassing not only love and praise but also anger, fear and passion, all healthy human emotions which need to be expressed rather than internalized.

I would suggest that channelling these ‘negative’ emotions through the controlled and depersonalized medium of chant allows the individual to vent the frustrations of communal living, and that the effects can only be verified retrospectively. The positive benefits of communal singing can be compared to a healthy diet: much as a balanced nutritional regime will keep us healthy, if we lack a crucial element such as a vitamin or essential mineral then deficiencies will arise and we become ill; in this way it is only when the emotional outlet of communal singing is removed that its value is recognized. I offer as evidence the experience of an American abbey in the 1960s. In 1963 the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) decreed that Catholics could sing in the vernacular rather than in Latin.¹⁷ As a direct consequence, an American abbey of the silent Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, commonly known as Trappists, ceased to sing the Daily Office in Latin. In this case, they did not replace it with a vernacular version and, before long, their life started to unravel (Godwin 1987, 63):

most noticeably, they found that they could no longer survive with only four or five hours sleep a night, as some had done for years. Other troubles followed: sickness and psychological disturbances that threatened to upset the even tenor of their contemplative lives.

The Brothers tried conventional remedies but without success and began to suspect that the loss of their sung Office was to blame so, having obtained a special dispensation to sing Gregorian chant, they returned to their old routine, and over a period of time their troubles disappeared. The Trappists are of course an extreme case as, having forsworn conversation, exercising their voices in song was their only vocal means of self-expression as well as their only manifestation of a communal voice. This sublimation gave them a practical means of harmonizing personality and community in a life which, albeit freely chosen, is otherwise ‘devoid of human intercourse’ and thus unnatural enough to cause great psychological stress (Godwin 1987, 63); however, the extreme nature of their existence highlights the role of communal chant,

¹⁷ Despite the fact that this was not an obligation but a suggestion, many communities ceased using the Latin texts, with far-reaching effects on Catholic – and High Anglican – church and monastic communities.

and this incidence of the consequences of its absence offers confirmatory evidence of its therapeutic value in monastic communities.

ELITISM AND EXCLUSION

If communal chanting is, as I argue, of such benefit, it should follow that all the members of the community should be involved, so I would like to examine the consequences of both the singling out of a musical elite and the exclusion of less musically able individuals. It is the work of every Religious, irrespective of musical talent, to sing or say the Divine Office. The medieval model incorporated a two-tier system of choir and lay Religious, often with a parallel musical hierarchy in which the members of a community were ordered according to their musical ability; at its most extreme, this would entail a *schola cantorum* comprising the most talented, with the less able being told not to sing at all. Today's communities are organized far more democratically, although a tiny handful persist in excluding the less able. Quiet voices in inhibited personalities can be a problem, especially when early criticism has led to a lack of confidence in vocal abilities; some monastic choir directors have expressed exasperation with this state of affairs, with one expressing their desire to take inhibited singers to an empty cathedral so these 'non-singers' could experience their own voices soaring in a resonant acoustic.¹⁸

Even with inadequate voices a little practical help can sometimes solve the problem, as in the case of a nun who was excluded from singing in her community for thirty years: she eventually had the good fortune to receive some help from a music therapist who, within three sessions, had rectified a basic technical fault and freed her voice. The most illuminating aspect of this story is the dismay expressed by other Religious at thirty wasted years of exclusion, reflecting the late twentieth-century change in attitude towards valuing the contribution of the individual.

The consensus is that, although *ad hoc* groups of particularly capable individuals are perfectly acceptable for occasional liturgical enrichment, a regular *schola cantorum* will exclude the less talented and introduce an unwelcome elitism. Even an *ad hoc* event requires removal of the confident singers for extra rehearsals which can be a drain on time and energy and can also prove to be divisive, echoing the old model through which the community adopts a two-tier system, this time on musical ability alone. The question of elitism also arises when a conspicuous talent enters community. The 1983 papal *Magisterium on Religious Life* states that 'a gift which would virtually separate a member from the communion of the community cannot be rightly encouraged' (John Paul II, 1983) and in the past a postulant with outstanding musical gifts may at times have been forbidden from exercising them, with some instances of professional musicians being given menial work as an exercise in humility, as in the case of Sister M, who had graduated from the Royal Academy of Music before entering her convent in 1953 and being professed in 1956.¹⁹ More recently, novices are encouraged to continue their musical studies, as several female musician-Religious who entered the Religious Life between 1970 and 2010 have related.²⁰ This change of

¹⁸ Personal interview with the author, 31 Oct, 2005.

¹⁹ Letter to the author, 26 Jan. 2008.

²⁰ Historically there has been a regrettable difference in attitudes to continuing musical education among male and

attitude among female Religious is partly because of the dearth of musical skills available in smaller communities, but also due to a more enlightened attitude following decades of secular feminism: many community members, especially the younger ones, reject the requirement of nuns to be totally abnegating, making it clear that their notion of the Religious Life does not include ‘the pointless and defacing suppression of individuality’ (Strahan 1988, 253).

CONFLICT AND REPARATION

An able musician will often find themselves assuming the role of choir director in their community. However, they soon discover that a choir director’s duties entail far more than the music: disagreements during choir practices are not uncommon, and generally reflect the frustrations of communal living rather than a real problem with the music itself. Such tensions can also affect an individual’s ability to contribute to the community’s daily musical life; not infrequently, someone under stress finds themselves unable to sing, a situation exacerbated if the community is heavily dependent on that person’s musical abilities. One community has mentioned a sister with a ‘beautiful voice’ who, if mentally or physically stressed, ‘refuses to sing even though her community relies on her to lead the singing’.

The policy of inclusivity without regard to musical aptitude can also lead to frayed nerves, as expressed by Sr Teresa SSB in the epigram at the beginning of this paper. The vast majority of communities strive to be inclusive, while admitting that, although quiet voices do not constitute much of a problem, a tone-deaf or strident voice can cause others to stop singing. The presence of such voices, or a less-than-pleasing overall standard, may lead to an aversion to a sung Office, and Sr Joan of the Society of the Sacred Cross (Tymawr, Monmouthshire) is quoted as saying (Losada 1999, 152):

There are things here that drive me crazy. I don’t like the sung Communion service on Sundays because none of us sing very well and, with apologies to Sr Anne, our choir mistress, I would much rather have a spoken service.

In this instance, the effects of singing together appear to have been far from beneficial and in fact may have been divisive.

Even in otherwise musical people, conditions such as increasing deafness can be problematical, with several Religious citing this as a cause of someone starting to sing too loudly, or to be out of tune and out of time with the rest. Understandably, none of my sources have been willing to name names, but they would undoubtedly smile wryly at this 1909 account of an ageing Fr Richard Meux Benson SSJE (1824–1915), founder of the Cowley Fathers, following a prolonged period of hospitalization: ‘he could not hear well enough to follow nocturns, but when Te Deum came, how he did “let out”. All the love of public worship which had been pent up in his heart these many months found an outlet in his Christmas worship’ (Woodgate 1953, 176-

female communities, which seems to have come about due to gender-based attitudes to professionalism among Religious. The issues surrounding professionalism among monastic composers have recently been addressed in conference papers [Lofthouse (2013) and Haste (2013b)] given at the Institute for Music Sociology ‘Music, Gender and Difference’ conference in Vienna, and are also discussed in Haste (2014b).

7). And five months later, still as deaf but evidently stronger: ‘the great joy is that he gets to Mass now every morning, and on Sunday to the High Mass as well. He sings violently, to the complete overthrow of the plainsong’ (Woodgate 1953, 177). The effect on Father Benson’s confreres can only be guessed at, but his biographer – who may well have been one of them – seems to adopt an admirably tolerant approach which speaks volumes for the close familial bond within the Cowley community.

In the past, however, when monastic communities were often larger and contained many musically literate members, there have been jealousies and friction: areas of musical conflict in early seventeenth-century Italian convents include choir nuns flouting the authority of the choirmistress, arguments over the election of organists, and singers of the *decani* and *cantoris*²¹ contesting the superiority of ‘their’ side (Monson, 1995, 115-117). All of these led to ‘such wranglings and wars among [the nuns] because of musical rivalries that sometimes they would claw each other’s flesh if they could’ (Trans. Monson 1995, 116). Without wishing to suggest that such depths have been plumbed in modern communities, such historical accounts are indicative of music becoming a focus for a community’s ills. The attributes required in order to function successfully as choir director would appear to include not only highly developed teaching and communication skills but also an ability to mediate, an understanding of conflict resolution, and security not only in one’s own musical competence but in one’s standing within the community.

CONCLUSIONS

If music has been known to draw people into communal life, and particularly the monastic life, it cannot be the main reason. However, the findings presented here suggest that the nature of the music can be a very good guide to the spiritual and corporate health of the community, as well as its ethos, and that the need for communal singing as a tool for promoting *koinonia* seems to be universally recognized.

Monastic communities have expectations of a disciplined lifestyle with the aim of lifelong commitment to the Religious Life and to the community; to this end, the physical entrainment engendered by communal chanting is recognized, and the rigours of chant singing are looked on as a welcome discipline. It can be also seen that the use of such music provides otherwise socially estranged people with a sense of themselves not only as part of a community of like-minded individuals, but also with a role to play as part of the historic past, dynamic present and projected future of that community.

The discipline required to establish and maintain long-term solidarity as a monastic community, while sacrificing the chance for personal intimacy, demands that every method of entrainment and conflict resolution is employed, including the loss of a certain amount of personal freedom of choice. While there is undoubtedly a certain tension between striving for inclusivity and the attainment of high musical standards

²¹ *Decani* ('of the dean') refers to the choir stalls (generally on the south side of the church) while the *cantoris* ('of the cantor') refers to the cantor's side of the choir stalls. The two sides of the choir face each other across the chancel, the chant being sung antiphonally, i.e. by one side and then the other.

(which has already been explored more fully in Haste, 2014a), music can also be seen to act as a great social leveller: whereas a contrast of styles reveals and illustrates differences in goals, social class and cultural tradition, the imposition of a communal repertory obliterates such indicators, the only separation now being based on musical aptitude. While the regulation of repertoire for the common good precludes the individual from asserting their own personal preferences – the tension between music as regulation and music as inclusion – no-one is excluded from participating in communal singing on grounds of class, education or culture.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda Haste (B.Mus & MA, Exeter; Ph.D, Bristol) is an independent scholar based in the south of France, where she also teaches at Aix-Marseille University in the Music Department. She publishes on music, language and identity, is an invited lecturer and active peer reviewer, and is currently President of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars. <http://ncis.org/members/amanda-haste>