Marcel Pérès and his Ensemble Organum have made a fascinating collection of re-created Roman Church chants of the 7th and 8th centuries, before Gregorian codification had repressed the florid, middle-Eastern influences of Byzantine chant. The disk is compelling on a historical, intellectual and emotional level.

New York Times

The repertory to which the works on this record belong is commonly called the ‘Old Roman’. It is the early chant of the Church of Rome, anterior to that which is today called the ‘Gregorian’, which came into existence in the Carolingian Empire, probably in the region of Metz, deriving its structure from the Roman chant, but completely modifying its ornamentation.

Rediscovered at the beginning of the 20th century by Dom Andoyer, Old Roman chant posed numerous problems, particularly ideological ones: how to reconcile the dominant ideology of the period of the Gregorian chant composed by Saint Gregory (6th century), which was to have been the universal chant of the Catholic Church, with the historical reality, since there are no extant manuscripts of Gregorian chant in Rome dating from before the 13th century; 11th and 12th century manuscripts transmit only the Old Roman chant. What is more, this repertory is unsingable if we apply the theories of the 19th and 20th century Gregorianists of the indivisible first beat.

The subject had already been thoroughly studied, but no one had come to a conclusion on all its aspects, especially the imperative ones of an aesthetic and vocal nature regarding the eminently Greek characteristics of this music. This is what we proposed to undertake in our researches. This was done with the assistance of the ‘Institut Lorrain des Musiques Anciennes’ and the ‘Association pour la Recherche et l’Interprétation des Musiques Médiévales’, presided by Michel Huglo. The aesthetic approach to the repertory was conducted with the collaboration of Lycourgos Angelopoulos, the director of the Greek Byzantine Choir, whose historical and practical authority on the subject of Byzantine chant made him an enlightened guide. Thus similarities between Old Roman and Byzantine chant were brought to light: modal, cadential and ornamental formulas, some of which are still used in Greek chant today. In certain ways the Old Roman presents itself as a direct testimony of Old Byzantine chant. Thus the Greek alleluiaic verses, preserved in the Old Roman manuscripts, would have been direct evidence of the use of the Alleluia as it was practised in Byzantium in the 8th century.

The early chant of the Church of Rome took shape during the 7th and 8th centuries. Its distinctly Oriental character, which gives it the aspect of an ornamented cantillation, is by no means surprising when one remembers that at this period Italy was not only dependent on the Byzantine Emperor, but was also a land of asylum for a large Greek colony which had sought refuge there. In fact, after the invasion of Palestine by the Persians, the number of Syrian and Greek monasteries multiplied in Italy, from the South up as far as Rome itself. And the Iconoclast controversy was all the more reason for the monks to flee from the Orient and re-assemble in the Italian peninsula. Between 726 and 775 nearly fifty thousand monks took refuge in Southern Italy.

Many popes of Syrian or Greek origin presided over the destinies of the Church of Rome at the period (fourteen out of twenty popes between 644 and 772 were Greek-speaking). The ‘Liber pontificalis’ mentions, besides their Oriental origins, the musical competence of three of them: Leo II, Sergius I, and Gregory III. It was under the influence of these popes that the Roman liturgy became profoundly Eastern in character.

Introduced into Gaul by Pippin the Short and then under Charlemagne, the Old Roman chant gave birth to the Carolingian chant, similar in musical structure, but very different in ornamentation.

Paradoxically the Carolingian chant later became the official 'Gregorian' chant, even to the point of supplanting in Rome itself the Old Roman, which finally disappeared in the 13th century.

All of the pieces chosen for this recording come from the manuscript ‘Latin 5319’ in the Vatican Library. The chants in Latin are taken from the Mass for Easter Day. The alleluiatic verses in Greek were sung at other places in the Easter services:

- Alleluia O Pimenon : Vespers for Easter Monday.
- Alleluia Epi si Kyrie : Good Friday Mass, and Mass for the 2nd Sunday after Easter.

THE PERFORMANCE

How is this music, which came into existence almost thirteen centuries ago, to be sung today? Far be it from us to claim the intention of restoring an ‘authentic’ performance, in the words of the current modish expression. This recording is only the result of the first stage of our researches. Our encounter and collaboration with an Eastern precentor formed the catalysing element of our work.

Quite logically, it is far less absurd to turn to a Greek cantor to sing this repertory than to a contemporary Western singer. The problem is still to be able to distinguish that which has been transmitted from that which developed in the Byzantine vocal tradition. The question is so vast that it is far from having been fully encompassed, and there is, unfortunately no way of going into it in a few lines. Nevertheless, we can affirm that many of the very early elements have been preserved. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 did not bring about a break, contrary to what certain Western musicologists have thought. Quite the opposite is true: it becomes increasingly apparent that Turkish and Arabic music inherited an enormous amount of the Byzantine aesthetic. The confrontation with Old Roman chant is illuminating on this point. Certain pieces in this repertory which cannot be considered to have been subjected to any kind of Islamic influence, present constructions and formulas which are absolutely identical to pieces from the Byzantine repertory.

The use of an Ison, i.e. the note sustained by the bass in order to underscore the modal transformations, was suggested to us by certain observations. A large number of texts of various periods make mention – unfortunately in rather obscure terms – of a polyphonic tradition in Rome, particularly in the Papal Chapel, said to go back to Pope Vitalius (657-672). What was the nature of this tradition? We do not know. However, the organization of the Schola Cantorum might possibly furnish an indication. Each of the seven singers composing it had a title which naturally corresponded to a function:

- Prius Scholae (Primicerius)
- Secundus Scholae
- Tertius Scholae
- Archiparaphonista
- Paraphonista
- Paraphonista
- Paraphonista

The function of the Paraphonist (para-phonos, one who sings beside the melody) was perhaps to accompany the chanting by ornamenting it with another voice.

But what determined our choice, above all, was the analysis of the music itself which seemed constructed around specific degrees of one mode or another, and which it seems natural to manifest in order to reveal it in its true musical dimension.

We also tried to respect the scales of the modes, i.e. the relationship of the intervals specific to each mode, which sometimes led us to sing certain micro-intervals. In conclusion, we should add that all the ornaments performed are indicated in the notation.

In our interpretation of the Old Roman chant a large number of preconceived ideas have been turned upside down. But far from wishing to confer a note of exoticism on our performance, we have aimed above all at revealing, in the words of Michel Huglo, the cultural and spiritual unity in which East and West were merged at the time.

Marcel Pérès
1 | Alleluia
Alleluia
v 1. O pimenon ton isrhal prochese, odigon osi probaton ten isioth.
v 2. O cathimenon epy ton cherubin empananthi enantio effrem cem beniamin ce manasin.
v 3. Ampelon ex epygo metiras exembalias ethni ke kataphiteusas autin, odofisas emprosthen autis ke katafiteusas ta rizas autis, ke epliros ati gin.
Alleluia.

2 | Introit : Resurrexi
Resurrexi et adhuc tecum sum, alleluia.
Pouisi super me manum tuam, alleluia.
Mirabilis facta est scientia tua, alleluia, alleluia.
v 1. Domine probasti me et cognovisti me, tu cognovisti sessionem meam et resurrectionem meam.
v 2. Ecce tu Domine cognovisti omnia novissima et antiqua, tu formasti me et pouisi super me manum tuam.

3 | Graduel : Hec dies
Hec dies quam fecit Dominus, exultemus et letemur in ea.
v 1. Confenitini Domino quoniam bonus, quoniam in seculum misericordia eius.
v 2. Dicat nunc Israel quoniam bonus, quoniam in seculum misericordia eius.

4 | Alleluia v/ Pascha nostrum v/ Epulemur
Alleluia.
v 1. Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus.
v 2. Epulemur in azymis sinceritatis et veritatis.
Alleluia.

5 | Offertoire : Terra tremuit v/ Notus in ludea
Terra tremuit et quievit dum resurgent in iudicio Deus, alleluia.
v 1. Notus in ludea Deus, in Israhel magnum nomen eius, alleluia.
v 2. Et factus est in pace locus eius, et habitatio eius in Syon, alleluia.
v 3. Ibi confregit cumu, arcum, scutum, gladius et bellum, illuminans tu mirabiliter a montibus eternis, alleluia.

6 | Alleluia : Epis kyrile
Alleluia.
Epis kyrile ipsysa, mi catecintirin is ton eona, em ti diceossini su rixe me ce xeul men, cilon pros me ton us u, tachinon tu esseleste me.

7 | Communion : Pascha nostrum
Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus, Alleluia.
Itaque epulemur in azymis sinceritatis et veritatis, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.
Confenitini Domino quoniam bonus, quoniam in seculum misericordia eius. Pascha.
Pascha.
v 1. O pimenon ton isrhal prochese, odigon osi probaton ten isioth.
v 2. O cathimenon epy ton cherubin empananthi enantio effrem cem beniamin ce manasin.
v 3. Ampelon ex epygo metiras exembalias ethni ke kataphiteusas autin, odofisas emprosthen autis ke katafiteusas ta rizas autis, ke epliros ati gin.

Alleluia!
v 1. Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadeast Joseph like a flock, for His mercy endureth for ever.
v 2. O thou that dwellest between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
v 3. Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt; thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it. Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take and it filled the land.
Alleluia!

I arose, and am still with Thee, alleluia!
Thou hast laid thine hand upon me, alleluia!
Thy knowledge hath become wonderful, alleluia!
v 1. O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me, thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising.
v 2. Lo, Lord, thou knowest it altogether, thou hast beset me behind and before, thou hast made me, and laid thine hand upon me.
v 3. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, amen!

This is the day which the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!
v 1. Give praise unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever.
v 2. Let Israel now say that He is good, and that His mercy endureth for ever.

Alleluia!
v 1. Christ our Pasch is sacrificed, alleluia!
v 2. Therefore let us feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

The earth trembled and was still when God arose in judgement, alleluia!
v 1. In Judah is our God known; his name is great in Israel, alleluia!
v 2. And in peace he hath established his abode, and his dwelling place in Zion, alleluia!
v 3. There brake he the arrows of the bow, the shield, and the sword, and the battle. Yea, thou art more excellent and glorious than the mountains of prey, alleluia!

Alleluia!
O Lord, in thee I have put my trust, leave not my soul destitute, deliver me and lead me in the ways of thy justice, give ear unto my voice, and make haste to grant me refuge!

Christ our Pasch is sacrificed, Therefore let us feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! Give praise unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever.

This is the day which the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, amen.

Christ our Pasch...
8 | Alleluia. \(v\) O Kyrios

Alleluia.
O Kirioc keba kyleocen
euprepi enedisato
enedisatom Kirioc dinamin
ke nepleiocrat
ke gar estereocsen in icumeni
Itis u saleuthisete.
Alleluia.

Alleluia!
Now the Lord reigneth,
he is clothed with majesty;
he is clothed with strength, wherewith he hath girded himself;
yea, he hath established our world,
that it cannot be moved.
Alleluia!