

The Influence of Gregorian Chant on  
Morten Lauridsen's *O Magnum Mysterium*

MUSC 371  
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12/9/12

Few aspects of prehistoric music can be assumed. Predating the writings and treatises of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the most reliable source of music performance practice and theory in antiquity was the treatise *De Institutione Musica* by Boethius (c. 525), with the cuneiform writings of the Babylonians (and greater Mesopotamia) as a distant second. The first major publication whose origins and practices can be specifically assumed and standardized is the *Liber Usualis*, a compilation of Gregorian chant developed in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century. Predating this work, plainchant existed in a number of different rites, the most notable being the Ambrosian (Milan), Byzantine, Mozarabic, and Old Roman rites. Gregorian chant is easily the most standardized and popular form of chant beyond the medieval era, and has been a source of stylistic and theoretical influence in later works ever since. Gregorian chant was influenced and informed by Greek music theory that can be traced back to Pythagorean tuning theories (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.) and the formation of this repertoire under these theories led to its standardization and widespread use throughout Medieval Europe.

Gregorian chant was named after Pope Gregory I, the Bishop of Rome from 590-604 C.E., credited for the organizing and notation of sacred vocal music for religious services. The style originated from monastic life, where monasteries and convents would use plainchant to enhance the text of the Mass Proper. Some chants were sung in perfect unison. Others were responsorial, also known as “viva voce”, meaning that the song leader, often the priest, would sing a line, and the congregation would sing it back. The “Schola Cantorum”, the papal choir of trained singers, would also lead responsorial Gregorian chant in Roman churches.<sup>1</sup> Though monophonic settings appear to be most common in the early Medieval, organal harmonies gained popularity in the 9<sup>th</sup> century (at the latest) before the publication of *Musica enchiriadis* (c. 895).

Greek music theory emphasized the importance of serving the text, and writing the vocal

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1. Mahrt, William P. *Gregorian Chant as a Paradigm of Sacred Music*: Sacred Music 133 (3): 5–14.

line in such a way that it is accessible to the singer. These goals, despite being challenged by numerous movements emphasizing virtuosity, have influenced music composition well beyond the end of the Medieval era. This is due in part to the comprehensive rule system that was created to meet these goals, and the success of their implementation. These rules have been bent or broken through the years as more training became available for musicians, and difficult literature became more accessible. Despite this, their rules remain relevant, and the music written using the Greek system are undoubtedly beautiful and effective. Due to its appealing melodic theory, text setting theory, and historical importance, Gregorian chant has remained influential into the modern era, especially in choral repertoire. This influence is apparent in Morten Lauridsen's piece, *O Magnum Mysterium*.

Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943) is an American composer based out of Los Angeles, California. He currently holds a position as distinguished Professor of Music at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music. He is a 2007 recipient of the National Medal of Arts, and held a residency at the Los Angeles Master Chorale from 1995-2001. He holds honorary doctorates from Oklahoma State University, Westminster Choir College and King's College, University of Aberdeen, Scotland. USC has awarded him the Phi Kappa Phi Creative Writing Prize and Lifetime Achievement Award, Thornton School of Music Outstanding Alumnus Award, Ramo Award, Lambda Delta Citation for Teaching Excellence, and the Dean's Award for Professional Achievement.<sup>2</sup>

Lauridsen was raised in the Pacific Northwest, and began studying music at a young age. Throughout his younger years, he did not see himself becoming a professional musician, and began his studies in English and History at Whitman College. He did not look into music as a career until he was inspired to do so while working as a firefighter near Mt. St. Helens. From

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2. Lauridsen, Morten. *Faculty Profile: Morten Lauridsen*: USC Thornton School of Music.

there, he left Whitman College to study composition at the University of Southern California with Halsey Stevens, Ingolf Dahl, Robert Linn, and Harold Owen. Upon graduation, he began teaching at USC as an introductory theory professor, and worked his way into teaching undergraduate composition. He later founded the advanced studies in film music program at the university. Lauridsen was chair of the graduate composition department from 1990-2002, and he is now one of seven full-time composition faculty at the Thornton school at USC.<sup>3</sup>

Morten Lauridsen is one of the most frequently performed living composers. His works span a number of disciplines and influences, including trumpet concertos, orchestral works, and chamber works. His most influential works, however, are undoubtedly his choral pieces. His choral works are based on sacred and secular texts alike, and each of them carries influence from the era in which the texts are written. His most purchased and most performed work is his setting of the *O Magnum Mysterium* text.

He wrote the *O Magnum Mysterium* setting as a commission from the Los Angeles Master Chorale in 1994. The now deceased director of the chorale at the time, Paul Salamunovich, according to Lauridsen, was “one of the great practitioners of Gregorian chant”,<sup>4</sup> and consequently, Lauridsen decided to “use the conjunct melodic ideas of chant as a base” in his setting. These influences included the use of Greek voice leading rules, the use of a “key note,”<sup>5</sup> and nods to melismatic text setting.

Gregorian chant is organized melodically into 4 sets of modes, where each set contains two modes, an “authentic mode” (odd numbered), and a “plagal mode” (even numbered), forming a total of 8 modes. These modes are determined by three characteristics; the range, final

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3. Lauridsen, Morten. *Interview by Bruce Duffie*: Chicago, IL, March 1999.

4. *Ibid.*

5. A “key note” is the modern term for a tonal center, or the “do” syllable in solfège. Though there are many other words used to describe this note, “key note” is frequently used when discussing chant-based writing in the modern era.

tone, and reciting tone (figure 1).

Figure 1. Modes in Gregorian Chant				
Mode	Name	Final Tone	Reciting Tone	Range (In relation to final tone)
1	Dorian	D	A	Whole step below, octave above
2	Hypodorian	D	F	4 <sup>th</sup> or 5 <sup>th</sup> below, 6 <sup>th</sup> above
3	Phrygian	E	C	Whole step below, octave above
4	Hypophrygian	E	A	4 <sup>th</sup> or 5 <sup>th</sup> below, 6 <sup>th</sup> above
5	Lydian	F	C	Half step below, octave above
6	Hypolydian	F	A	4 <sup>th</sup> below, 6 <sup>th</sup> above
7	Mixolydian	G	D	Whole step below, octave above
8	Hypomixolydian	G	C	4 <sup>th</sup> or 5 <sup>th</sup> below, 6 <sup>th</sup> above

The melody of a given chant is organized by what mode it uses. Chants are typically centered around a *reciting tone*, where most of the chant is sung either on the reciting tone, or around it (figure 2). When a phrase ends, it will cadence, ending on the *final tone* (figure 3). In this way, the melody can emphasize certain words or phrases by altering the melodic structure. When an important word or phrase needs to stand out from the rest of the text, the melody will change in order to illustrate that idea. The following figures are from “Viderunt omnes”, a chant in the fifth mode.

Figure 2. “Viderunt Omnes” opening line (Reciting tone - C; Final Tone – F).

Choir

Vi - de runt o - - - - - mnes

fi - nes ter - rae

Figure 3. “Viderunt Omnes” final cadence.

am

These figures display the typical melodic structures present in Gregorian chant. These pieces are written around reciting tones and final tones in order to provide the singer with a strong foundation within the key, and provide the listener with a pattern that is easy to follow. In these two figures, the melody is organized by groups of notes most often grouped in threes. In the Medieval era, it was considered proper to group notes in threes, to symbolize the Christian Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three parts of God. These two figures also show two main melodic ideas within the piece. It should also be noted that the final line of the chant in *figure 3* uses B $\square$  instead of B. This technique was commonplace in the Medieval era in order to avoid tritones, which would otherwise be common in the lydian mode (modes 5 and 6) between the first and fourth scale degree. This technique led to the eventual use of the *ionian mode*, more commonly known as the major scale, and both lydian and ionian colors are used in Lauridsen's setting.

Many plainchants are *strophic*, meaning that numerous sets of texts are set to the same repeated melodic idea. These strophic patterns can also be altered in order to bring about a cadence by ending a line on the final tone rather than the reciting tone.

Text setting in Gregorian chant is paired with melodic structure in order to provide emphasis on key phrases. Text setting is categorized in three different styles, syllabic, neumatic, and melismatic text setting. Syllabic text setting is where each syllable receives one note, neumatic setting, based on the term *neume* (grouping of notes), where each syllable receives one to seven syllables, and melismatic setting, from the term *melisma*, where a syllable is set to seven or more notes. Shifts in text setting in a chant were used alongside melodic variation to emphasize key phrases. As seen in *figure 2*, the “om” of “omnes” is set to ten notes, to emphasize the word “all” in the phrase “all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of God”.

In the same way in *figure 3* “suam” is emphasized, to draw attention to “him” (“God”).

These characteristics of Gregorian chant have been used in compositions throughout the history of classical and Christian music. Most often, these characteristics were maintained because of the preferences of the high courts and churches which governed the land throughout much of the Roman rule. They wished to maintain the style of Gregorian chant in order to remind the congregation of their past, and use the music as a tool for self-reflection. In the secularized modern era, there are few churches or religions that have direct command of the people, but the influence of Gregorian chant remains for the same reason. Modern composers also maintain this influence for its historical nature. Texts like *O Magnum Mysterium* have been “tested through time” in the words of Lauridsen<sup>6</sup>, and drawing influences from the music of the same time period as these texts often creates a strong connection to the music for an audience through this historical perspective.

In his setting of *O Magnum Mysterium*, Lauridsen uses theories and influences both from Gregorian chant and modern music. The melody of the piece is structured in the same way as a plainchant, but also includes voice leading patterns that are seen more often in modern music, including difficult leaps, ionian modes (major), and homophonic and polyphonic textures. While the mode is altered from its original patterns present in Gregorian chant, the melodic ideas remain similar.

The opening motive of *O Magnum Mysterium*, in the soprano line, draws influence from Gregorian chant through the use of a reciting tone. The key, and the relationship of the music to this key relate most nearly to the 5<sup>th</sup> mode (lydian), as it modulates between the ionian and lydian modes, and the reciting tone is the 5<sup>th</sup> above the final tone. The only difference is that scale is

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6. Stillwater, Michael. *Shining Night; A Portrait of Composer Morten Lauridsen: Songs Without Borders*, 7 February 2012.

centered around the final tone of D rather than F. The sopranos sing a melody centered around A, the reciting tone. At the end of the first phrase, the line ends on the final tone (figure 4).

Figure 4. “O Magnum Mysterium” mm. 1-8.

Adagio, molto legato e espressivo (♩ = c.72) *pp* *rit.* *a tempo* *pp*

Soprano

O magnum mys-te - rium, O magnum mys-te - rium,

This opening theme is repeated throughout the piece, again nodding to the reciting tone, and ending on the final. Melismatic writing is also present in this theme. Twice in this opening theme, the word “mysterium” is stretched to give emphasis to the word “mystery”, the subject of the opening line of the text. While the syllable “te” is only stretched over six notes, and thus falling under the definition of *neumatic setting*, the line is placed around text that is otherwise set syllabically, so it could be considered a reference to melismatic text setting. There are numerous examples of melismas throughout the piece. One particularly striking set of melismas appears in measures 11 and 14, where the word “admirabile” (wondrous) is set over seven beats (figure 5).

Figure 5. “O Magnum Mysterium” mm. 9-15.

*p* *mp* *mp* *p* *mp*

sa - cra - men - tum, et ad-mi - ra - - bi - le, et ad - - mi -  
 ra - bi - le sa - cra - men - tum, et ad-mi - ra - - bi - le, et ad - - mi -  
 sa - cra - men - tum, et ad-mi - ra - - bi - le, et ad - - mi -  
 sa - cra - men - tum, et ad-mi - ra - - bi - le, et ad - - mi -

It should also be noted that in the above figure, from the second half of measure 9 through the rest of the figure, there is always at least one voice singing a D, no matter what other harmonies are surrounding it. In Lauridsen's piece, this indicates the influence of *oblique organum*, where, in Medieval music, the lower voice would stay on or near the final tone while the upper voice, the *vox principalis*, is free to change. In Lauridsen's example, the tonic (D) represents the final tone, and voices trade between singing this pedal tone and singing more florid passages.

In his setting, Lauridsen sets “wondrous” and “mystery” to the semi-melismatic passages in order to emphasize what he believed were the most important words of the text (as chant composers would have in the Medieval era). Using the same melodic passage from *figure 5* on “sacramentum, et admirabile”, Lauridsen sets the phrase “viderent Dominum, ut animalia” with “animalia” being set over the melisma. In the video documentary of Morten Lauridsen, he emphasizes his interest in the word “animalia” in this text, because he is most perplexed by the idea of the Christ child being born in the humble presence of farm animals.

The influence of Gregorian chant is also present in the melodic line illustrated in *figure 5*. The Gregorian tradition to compose notes in sets of three is referenced through the passage over “sacramentum, et admi-” with the grouping occurring over “sa-cra” (2+1), “men-tum” (2+1, and 1+1+1), and “et ad-mi” (1+1+1). While the large intervallic jumps are uncharacteristic of Gregorian chant, these groups of notes help maintain the aural influence of plainchant in the piece as Lauridsen begins using modern influences in the melodic line. Lauridsen then utilizes the triplum style on a larger scale in the middle section, where he employs a metric modulation to a 3/2 time signature (figure 6).

Figure 6. “O Magnum Mysterium” mm. 40-45.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "O Magnum Mysterium" from measures 40 to 45. It consists of four staves. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom three are instrumental accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The score includes performance markings: *poco rit.* (slightly slower), *a tempo* (return to tempo), *cresc.* (crescendo), and *molto rit.* (very slow) at the end. The lyrics are: "vis-ce-ra me-ru - e-runt, Be-a-ta Vir - - go, por-ta-re Do-mi-num Chris-tum... Al - le -". The instrumental parts feature a prominent perfect fourth interval in the vocal line, which is noted as an accidental in the analysis.

As was previously discussed, Lauridsen most closely relates this piece to the fifth mode, which holds characteristics, of the major (ionian) scale, with the exception of the fourth (one semitone higher in the fifth/lydian mode). In this section, on the word “Virgo”, (*figure 6*, mm. 43, alto line) Lauridsen places the only accidental of the entire piece. This accidental is the fourth of the lydian scale. While the lydian modes would occasionally use the perfect fourth (characteristic of the ionian mode) it most often used the augmented fourth. This nod to the typical lydian mode greatly evokes the style and melodic quality of Gregorian chant.

In order to transition into a new section, or return to the beginning of a melodic idea in strophic works, Gregorian chant will reach a cadence point centered around the reciting tone. Lauridsen also uses this idea, but uses it in a harmonic setting. Since the reciting tone is the fifth above the final tone, Lauridsen mimics this cadential sequence by ending the section on a half cadence at mm. 36-37 (*figure 7*).

Figure 7. “O Magnum Mysterium” mm. 32-39.

In the final moments of the piece, this melodic idea returns, on the same lyrics “jacentem in praesepio”, but the phrase cadences on the tonic, similar to chant cadencing on the final tone, in order to bring the piece to a conclusion (*figure 8*, mm. 63). For the final section of the piece (starting at mm. 64) Lauridsen recapitulates the main themes from the earlier sections, imitating them in different voice parts. Lauridsen then ends the piece on an authentic cadence, indicative of finality in multiple-voice part writing, and much of the motion in the individual lines is typical of the plainchant style, where the notes center around the final tone. Given its modern influence, however, some plainchant rules do not apply. The sopranos do not end on the final tone, but instead end on the reciting tone (the 5<sup>th</sup>) as they have through the previous cadence points in the piece. The cadence to the final tone happens within the chordal structure, ending on the I chord, and within the tenor 2 part, where they cadence on the supertonic before singing the tonic/final tone (*figure 8*).

Figure 8. "O Magnum Mysterium" mm. 62-72.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "O Magnum Mysterium" from measures 62 to 72. It consists of four staves. The top three staves are vocal parts, and the bottom staff is a basso continuo part. The lyrics are: "cen-tem in prae-se - pio. Al-le-lu - - ia! Al-le-lu - lu - ia! Al-le-lu - lu - ia!". The score includes various performance markings: "molto rit." at the beginning, "a tempo" above the first vocal staff, "poco rit." above the second vocal staff, "mp" (mezzo-piano) above the third vocal staff, "molto rit." above the basso continuo staff, "Meno mosso" above the final vocal staff, and dynamic markings "pp" (pianissimo) and "ppp" (pianississimo) throughout. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C).

Lauridsen's setting of *O Magnum Mysterium* is purposefully set in the style of Gregorian chant, within an additional layer of modern harmony. This piece was not intended to be a solely Modern style choral work, but was instead intended to be a "20<sup>th</sup> century counterpart"<sup>7</sup> to previous settings, in the words of the composer. Through the use of Greek music theory in the writing of the melodic ideas, and the setting of the text, Lauridsen achieves this goal, creating a identifiably modern piece, while maintaining a strong foundation in the roots of Gregorian chant.

7. Lauridsen, Morten. *Interview by Bruce Duffie*: Chicago, IL, March 1999.

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