

# New wine in old bottles: Creating a musical repertoire for a new religious community

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## Abstract

*Music forms an essential element in monastic life, but the musical diet of modern monastic communities is moving away from the staple food of plainchant. In-house musical composition therefore becomes commonplace as religious communities create their own musical traditions. This essay uses the experience of an American Episcopalian community (founded in the 1980s) to explore their musical decision-making, and to illustrate the tension between new communities' wish to align themselves to 1000 years of Western monasticism by drawing on the chant canon, and the need to create a musical repertory which reflects the relevance of their life and work in the early twenty-first century.*

Monastic life in England was suppressed from the English Reformation, when Henry VIII broke with the papal authority and established the Church of England, dissolving the monasteries in the process. 300 years later, under the ecclesiastical revival of the Oxford Movement, new Anglican monasteries and convents began to be founded, with 29 male and 90 female communities established in England between 1845 and 1960. In America a parallel high-church Episcopalian movement also led to 22 male and 42 female foundations between 1842 and 1985. Most of these new orders combined active work (e.g. founding schools and hospitals) with a life of prayer, although some were purely contemplative.

Music forms an essential element in monastic life: communities meet up to eight times a day to sing the Daily Office and liturgy, for which a large repertory of musical texts settings is needed. However, unlike their Roman Catholic counterparts, these Anglican religious communities have never been subject to any ruling hierarchy<sup>1</sup> and are thus free to create their own musical traditions. This essay uses the experience of one Episcopalian community (founded in 1985) to illustrate the tension between new communities' wish to align themselves to 1000 years of Western monasticism by drawing on the chant canon, and the need to create a musical repertory which reflects their relevance in the early twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> This contemplative mixed Episcopalian order, named after a 14<sup>th</sup>-century mystic but using modern inclusive language for their texts, was founded by a priest, Fr James. He is passionate about chant, and spent four years translating, composing and editing hymn texts for the new community's Office. Using sources including the Sarum and Paris breviaries as well as Ambrose, Clemens and Thomas Aquinas, and attempting to source "original" versions of the ancient Latin Office hymns, Fr Charles has produced settings of all 150 psalms, the traditional Office canticles to existing chant melodies, and some 130 'ancient' hymns. He describes his working methods thus:

"The challenge was to take the ancient medieval chant melodies and adapt them accurately to modern words and phrases without losing their 'spirit' (and that is very, very much harder than some think!) [...] the specific feasts were pre-determined [so then] I went to history, searching out Latin hymns (i.e., words) for the particular feasts. Then I re-translated the Latin (most of them had been translated by John Mason Neale, but I was afraid there would be copyright problems, and, also, his translations were all in Jacobean English with "thee" and "thou", and we use all modern language in our liturgies). Here and there, I composed an additional verse or two. There were a few feasts which had no ancient

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<sup>1</sup> They were only recognized by the Church of England in 1935, almost a century after the first foundations.

<sup>2</sup> Due to a request for anonymity, names of research participants have been changed throughout this essay.

historical precedence (e.g. James of Jerusalem, which was not kept until the 1970's, or Gilbert of Sempringham). In those cases, I composed a hymn myself’.

These hymns comprise a textual canon whose status is assured through its venerability, and which is supplemented by more modern texts. While most of the 173 hymns date from the 4th to the 19th centuries, 20 are original texts by Fr James himself and nine date from 20th-century hymn writers such as Sheila Upjohn and Laurence Housman. Fr James has approached his choice of new texts and translation of older texts from his twentieth-century perspective, saying that many of the sentiments expressed in “the most ancient hymns” seemed “out-of-place, overly sentimental, or inappropriately fervid for moderns if translated literally,” so he sought ways to “protect the intention of the author while pleasing the modern ear”.

Although Fr James has been responsible for the hymn texts, his ‘musical decision-making’ has been confined to searching out “all the ancient Gregorian hymn tunes I could find that matched the [metrical] patterns of the particular set of words”. In a few cases, there was a precedent in an ancient melody which had traditionally been used for certain hymns, so the community “stuck with the tradition,” but often new pairings were needed. In these cases, he then “turned things over” to the community’s Sr Cecilia, who “matched the music to the hymns,” trying to “let the content of the words determine the mode of the music”.<sup>3</sup>

The marriage of hitherto unrelated texts and melodies produces a set of functional musical works which can be said to be, in Adorno’s words, *stimmig* (“attuned”) by virtue of their “authentic” expression of what “the hour calls for historically and philosophically”.<sup>4</sup> The community’s methods have interesting parallels with medieval tradition, with hymn melodies often interchangeable with metre as the defining factor,<sup>5</sup> and in this sense the music is ‘matched’ to the words rather than being inspired by them – a matter of metre over meaning.

Through this marrying of texts and melodies, both mainly from ‘ancient’ sources, Fr James is appealing to the venerability of the chant repertory, and subscribing to the canonic ideology of timelessness. Nevertheless, he and Sr Cecilia have effectively created an entirely new repertory from music which is seen, heard, and known to be part of the ‘ancient’ chant canon.

## ***Religieuses***

*Religieuses* [French for ‘nuns’] are a favourite of French *patissiers*, and essentially consist of two choux buns (one large, with a small one on top, with a cream ruff between them). This recipe, using buttercream, is adapted from <http://eugeniekitchen.com/religieuse> where you will find videos of the whole process. *Religieuses* can be made with a wide choice of fillings, but essentially the whole pastry resembles a nun’s habit, hence the name.



<sup>3</sup> Sr Cecilia was well placed to help Fr James as she had a strong background in both music and history. She had studied Middle English linguistics in her native USA, subsequently moving to England to complete postgraduate work at Oxford [Sr Cecilia, email to the author, 1 Sept. 2006].

<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, quoted in Carl Dahlhaus, *Analysis and Value Judgment*, transl. Siegmund Levarie. Monographs in Musicology 1. Trans. of *Analyse un Werturteil*. Series *Musikpädagogik, Forschung und Lehre* 8. Mainz: Schott, 1970 (New York: Pendragon, 1983) 12.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Boynton, “Hymn: Monophonic Latin” in Warren Anderson *et al*, “Hymn,” in *Grove Music Online*. 24 May 2009 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com:80/subscriber/article/grove/music/13648>>.

## Ingredients (6-8 *religieuses*)

For the choux pastry

1/4 cup unsalted butter (57g)  
1/2 cup water (120ml)  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1/2 cup + 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour (75g)  
2 eggs

For the *craquelin*

2 tablespoons softened unsalted butter  
2 tablespoons + 2 teaspoons light brown sugar  
1/4 cup all-purpose flour (32g)

Buttercream

1/4 cup unsalted butter (56 g)  
3/4 cup confectioners' sugar (94 g)  
2 teaspoons whole milk  
1/4 teaspoon pure vanilla extract, optional

Pastry cream

6 egg yolks  
1/2 cup granulated sugar (100g)  
1/4 cup all-purpose flour (31g)  
1/4 cup cornstarch (35g)  
2 1/2 cups whole milk (600ml)  
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract, or 1 *gousse de vanille*

For icing:

1 cup confectioners' sugar  
2 tablespoons milk  
1/4 teaspoon pure vanilla extract, optional

## Method

First, make *choux au craquelin*. (video available on <http://eugeniekitchen.com/religieuse>)

You will need two different sizes of buns: small and large.

When they are cold, make a hole in the bottom, and pipe pastry cream into all the choux buns until they are full.

Make the icing with 1 cup of confectioners' sugar and 2 tablespoons of milk and whisk it. Add any food colour you like.

Dip the choux buns in the icing, making sure the top is smoothly covered. Before the icing dries, place the small buns on top of large ones. Decorate with buttercream with a small pointed star pastry tip. *Bon appetit!*