

Sound into Silence – The Democracy of Song

“Don’t let yourself forget that God’s grace rewards not only those who never slip, but also those who bend and fall. So sing! The song of rejoicing softens hard hearts....Singing summons the Holy Spirit.... Don’t stop singing.”

–Hildegard of Bingen

I do not know which came first—my love of Chaucer and the medieval point of view or my love of Gregorian Chant which must somehow be connected to my love of cathedrals. And of course, the first cathedrals—like Chartres—in the 12th

century were also monasteries—filled with the sound of plainchant. In the case of the very early church, the time of Hildegard de Bingen, visionary mystic and composer, the songs lifted to the rafters were sung by both men and women. So there was an ancient premise for communal song.

I am drawn not only to simple melodies and the harmony of unaccompanied voices, but also the idea of plainchant being sung as prayer. There were no auditions among the monks. There was no choir director deciphering which voices did not “belong.” I discovered proof of this fact in



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my research for American Luthier. The organistrum or symphonia, later referred to as a hurdy-gurdy, was a monochord played with a “continuous bow” wheel that

enabled a cantor or monk to teach himself to sing the liturgy sine magistro—without the help of a teacher.

Some years ago, my sister, a seminarian and former hospital chaplain, first told me about Taize, a little town in east-central France, home to about 100 people. It is not especially remarkable except in its legacy as a holy place because of one monk in World War II—Brother Roger. A native of Switzerland, Brother Roger came to France—his mother’s birthplace—to escape the Nazis and settled in Taize where he began sheltering Jews.



Courtesy photo

The Taize bell tower at the entrance to Taize, France.

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