Chant and Transformation: The Benedictine Monks of Christ in the Desert Monastery

Amy Suzanne Gillespie

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Amy Suzanne Gillespie
Candidate
Music
Department

This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Thesis Committee:

Dr. Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Chairperson

Dr. Kristina M. Jacobsen

Dr. David M. Bashwiner
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CHANT AND TRANSFORMATION: THE BENEDICTINE MONKS OF
CHRIST IN THE DESERT MONASTERY

by

Amy Suzanne Gillespie

B. A., Mathematics, Western New Mexico University, 1975
M. M., University of New Mexico, 1987
B. A., Contemporary Music, College of Santa Fe, 2009
M. Mu., Musicology, University of New Mexico, 2016

ABSTRACT

Music scholars have devoted significant attention to the vast repertoire of chant, the cults from which it is said to have sprung, semiology, or its place in Western Christian worship, but a limited number of studies address the chanter and how chant renders affective and cognitive processes. The monks of Christ in the Desert Monastery are engaged four hours a day, every day, in the antiphonal rhythm of psalmody, constructing its expressivity and sculpting, from forty members, one voice. Here, the Divine Office, as prescribed by St. Benedict, is strictly followed. The monk’s repetitive and synchronized practice, suffused with chanting, cultivates deeper levels of personal awareness and authenticity. I explore introspective and inspirational aspects of the desert soundscape and its ability to cultivate acute awareness and sharpened attention. Drawing upon ethnographic research with the community, I argue that the brothers’ singing is a transformative pathway that leads to strong group cohesiveness and well-being.
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Standing where the road disappears is the small Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert. The chapel rises above the yellow chamisa shrubs, junipers, an occasional piñon tree, and clumps of sagebrush. Stately yet simple, its essence of an ancient Puebloan time¹ is illuminated by the sun, a constant companion. Summoning the monks to mid-day prayer is the sound of the bell, which tolls from the chapel tower, breaking the astounding silence of this high desert land. As Thomas Merton once described, the tower "is like a watchman looking for something or someone of whom it does not speak."²

The canyon carries sounds from far and near. As the brothers gather from various duty locations nearby, the scuffing of boots on the stony dirt paths has a determined character. Soon, the chanting of the psalms, the practice the brothers perform seven times daily and once during the night, can be heard drifting from the chapel. As I sit in the garden outside the chapel on my first summer afternoon of fieldwork, I am overwhelmed by all that I am observing. The warm breeze transports the sound to the towering red sandstone cliff walls that surround this desert amphitheater. Passing clouds dot the endless blue sky, which connects all life in this river canyon. The Rio Chama flows steadily, its far-off hum is mesmerizing and calming. Spotted sandpipers chirp their greetings as larger fowl lurk atop high pinnacles.

¹ The Ancient Pueblo culture dates from the Pueblo Eras of AD 900 to 1350. It is best recognized by stone and earth dwellings built along cliff walls. The Ancient Pueblo homeland centers in the Colorado Plateau extending into New Mexico and Nevada. The chapel at the monastery is constructed of thick adobe walls and wooden ceiling beams, materials available in the canyon.
There is a paradox here. From this silence and beauty emerge extremes of sacrifice, simplicity, community, and dedication. The monks who inhabit this space are proceeding from a worldly life to a spiritual one. Pursued in this sacred place is a God-centered life. The brothers follow the monastic existence as set down by St. Benedict of Nursia fifteen centuries ago. At the heart of monastic life, music and worship are inseparable. This tradition structures the communal life. To the monk, a renouncement of a convenient and practical life surpasses all hardship and transcends all struggles. These men reach a state of heightened acceptance of the world: participation in thoughtful reflection upon it, while retaining distance from it.

The monk is devoted to a daily life of prayer, study, and labor. Is there something about the practice of chant, a central element of their prayer that significantly changes the state of the practitioner? Can it be argued that this one tool of the spiritual craft as outlined in the Rule of St. Benedict—the chanting of the psalms, antiphons, and hymns during the Divine Offices—is perceived by the brothers as having a life-changing effect? What is achieved by their repetitive rituals? Through the execution of hours of singing daily, I assert that the practice of chanting creates an atmosphere of social cohesion. This sense of belonging, and group unity, is reinforced by the genre of chant being linked to the past and sanctioned by the church, of which the Monastery of Christ in the Desert is an institution. In order to explore the extent to which singing influences individual and group well-being, I draw upon scholarship regarding neuroscience, deep listening and trance, and the promotion of social constructs such as the effect of group singing on trust, bonding, and cooperation.
Writing extensively on the topic of medieval chant, Peter Jeffery notes that, in spite of the extensive research devoted to the topic, little has been done to acknowledge the individuals’ experiences while chanting. In discussing expert chant singers (monks, friars, and nuns) performing in communities, Jeffery addresses the scarcity of information regarding these individuals over the course of their careers:

An ethnomusicologist who turned his attention to medieval chant would immediately want to learn as much as possible about both the structure of the communities and the lives and educations of the individuals who belonged to them. Yet chant scholars have devoted hardly any attention at all to the subject. In the musicological literature, one typically encounters only one acknowledgment that the chant was created and performed within a human community.³

Subsequent to Jeffery, others such as Katherine Bergeron, Kenneth Levy, and Margot Fassler, have attended to the origin of Gregorian chant, transmission and notation. Christopher Page, one of today’s widely read medieval scholars, constructs in his 2010 publication a comprehensive history of liturgical and medieval music with an emphasis on those who sang it: the hymnodist, psalmist, lector and cantor. From an impressively large array of detailed source material and theological writings, Page traces the roots of European music from Mediterranean antiquity forward. Along the way, singers of sacred music, including the early desert monks, from about the second century to 1100 A.D., were chronicled from memorial inscriptions and writings of Church fathers. "The principal purpose of Christian singing was to laud a divine power and to intensify the bonds of community,"⁴ writes Page.

Investigating the transformative effects of monks in a present-day environment presents an opportunity to expand this field of scholarship. Overlooked by scholars are the musical practices of the monks of Christ in the Desert. Central to this study is the work of Maria Guarino who spent two years with the Monks of Weston Priory, a Benedictine community in northern Vermont. Unlike her study that focused on their musical compositions and compositional process, this project concentrates on the monks’ music practice and its effect on the cohesiveness of the community. However, in both studies, the transformative effect of music is in the forefront. What do the monks perceive regarding chant and its influence over individual action and group cohesiveness? Are the effects strictly transitory? Of the different emotion states, such as happiness, sorrow, or joy, can the brothers attribute change of these feelings to their chanting? In the present study I aim to explore various aspects of the brothers’ chant practice in order to determine its effect on the life of each practitioner.

Research in the area of singing, and its impact on the physiology can aid in interpreting what the brothers report. Strong experiences as listeners and performers have made their way to the forefront of multiple perspectives and disciplines. This research coupled with an exploration of the musical practices of the brothers in the monastery could lead one to interpret that, in fact, there is an effect of singing on the individual and the ritual environment. Psychologist Alf Gabrielsson credibly documents music-related situations that bridge sociology and phenomenology, revealing the life-altering capacity of music. He details from study participants

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instances of what he describes as peak-experiences. These can be both active and adverse, as well as transforming, mystical, transcendental, existential, or rapturous.⁶ Arguably, there are points at the extremes. I will refer to research specifically related to singing.

The primary focus of this study is to understand the sometimes ineffable effect that the practice of chant, in this communal and contemplative setting, has on the brothers. Many at the monastery have performed this craft with a heightened attention for decades. I aim to demonstrate that these musical activities contribute uniquely to this population, addressing something essential in their human experience.

I adopt an ethnographic research methodology to explore the musical practices of the brothers of the monastery as they perform their daily prayer life. My fieldwork began in June 2014 and concluded in August 2015. Throughout this period, I traveled to the monastery five times, staying on-site a total of fourteen days. My experience of being there, attentive and involved, provided a glimpse into the life of this group of men. Although moved by their devotion to psalmody and their stories of its divine purpose, I wanted to dig deeper into their normative modes. Through my participation in the Divine Offices and Masses, the relationships created through interviews, and by simply being present, I can link the information gathered to the effects of singing strengthening the hypothesis that their musical practice assists them in achieving new levels of personal awareness, and group cohesiveness.

It is not customary for guests to converse with the monks. Their demanding daily schedule of shared work, individual study and prayer, and the Divine Offices

⁶ Gabrielsson, 389.
and Mass prohibits leisure time and casual interacting. After a review by the monastery's council, permission to conduct private interviews with the brothers was granted. The council reviewed the project concept and approved a Letter of Invitation to the brothers. In the invitation, I outlined the study objectives and expectations, and summarized my academic background. I stressed that I was a musician and choral singer that was genuinely interested in their chanting practices. The nine monks who subsequently volunteered ranged in age from early twenties to eighty-eight. Three of the brothers are from Kenya, two from East India, one from England, and three from the United States. During each interview session, I made it known that I practiced a Christ-centered faith. While being female or non-Catholic might have posed certain predisposition in the minds of my informants, I did not encounter any significant barrier to gaining reflective and salient information from the interviews.

My presence on-site, participating in their hours of prayer, activities in the refectory, and the public receptions after special events, allowed for trust and research intent to develop. On numerous occasions, I was able to sit and chat with a brother or speak to a study participant in passing. During one visit I was fortunate to be invited by Brother Raphael, the monastery’s organist, to spend an hour in the chapel singing and discussing psalm tones and modes. These interactions over multiple visits contributed to the formal interview process being an open discourse in pursuit of a clear understanding of this facet of their lives. These dialogues sought to

7 Rule of St. Benedict, 3:12-13, refers to the senior “executive council” that convenes to consider important decisions, for it is written: “Do all things with counsel, and afterward you will have nothing to regret.” From Terrence G. Kardong, Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 76.
explore the effects of chant: the difference English versus Latin makes, if any; whether musical training makes a difference; the context of their musical practices; and any observations they have to offer about changes in their physiology and even mystical experiences.

Each volunteer responded to a series of qualitative questions designed to stimulate thoughts regarding their perceptions of the effect of singing in the style of chant and the attributes related to the repetition of participating in the Offices. I was not looking for a brother’s motivation for choosing the contemplative life. My quest was to understand how their chanting practice contributes to the community. Their corporate music-making embodies a theological ideal—the interconnectedness of the daily ritual of communal prayer through chanting, work, and study, and the positive change in their lives and those around them—that was evident in their discourse.

In the opening chapter I offer a survey of the main events that have shaped the monastery during its first fifty years. The key to its history is the principle of community and the ongoing ritual of tradition that has contributed to its survival and well-being. Mari Graña’s *Brothers of the Desert*, provides an interpretive historical account of the first forty years of the monastery’s history. I enhance this work with my observations of the desert setting, the Divine Offices and the individual insights of the brothers. Chapter 2 moves to a more in-depth examination of the Benedictine framework upon which the brothers build the spiritual structure of their lives. Within the monk’s day, his time in the choir is essential to his development and the soundscape of the monastery a binding force. In the course of Chapter 3 I argue that
silence, which is at the heart of monasticism, cultivates acute awareness, sharpens attention, and stimulates receptivity. Chant is the dialogue between the brothers, and the desert is the backdrop and place for listening.

During the interviews the brothers offered their insights about the effects of chant on their spiritual journeys. What emerged from the discussions with the brothers regarding the process of and interactions with their ritual is interesting with regard to the expectations of the institution, the dynamics between brothers, and notions of monasticism. Chapter 4 expands upon these emergent considerations and the performative act of being a monk. Through deconstructing their stories, I attempt to link chanting with individual and cultural codes that are vital to their monastic unification. Drawing on neuroscientific and immune system research, I relate how group singing stimulates the brain and physiology, promoting and influencing trust, bonding, and cooperation.

I present a practice of singing that is a form of worship. Although I offer through my limited fieldwork and theorizations only a glimpse of the monk’s transformative pathway, chant conclusively defines identity while contributing positively to the whole.
Chapter One – The Founding Story: A Monastery Blossoms in the Desert

Then came the cathedrals in stone, some of them Romanesque, some of them Gothic . . . a wide river valley with great sentinels of high, multicolored cliffs . . . to guard and protect it, to make it a place of God's dwelling among men.

—Father Aelred Wall

I. A Place of Quiet Beauty

It is June 24, 2014 and this glorious summer day is a zenith in the history of Christ in the Desert Monastery. Today is filled with the spirit of monastic pioneers: their prophecy, faith, and unrelenting tenacity. Two hundred or so supporters, along with parishioners, monks, and nuns, have come to the monastery to be in this wilderness—a place of beauty and solemnity—and share with the brothers a Golden Jubilee Anniversary.

Erected in a field between the Chama River and the chapel is a large, white tent; I peek out from under it at the wisps of clouds that streak the pure blue morning sky. A welcome breeze rustles the tent cloth and refreshes the morning air as the chapel bell announces that the Mass is beginning. Onlookers shuffle to their seats as the procession of clergy and monks approach from the road that runs from the chapel west to the ranch house. They parade down the length of the tent then enter from the back, two by two, making their way down the cramped center aisle. The moment each pair enters the tent, their chanting becomes more focused and deliberate, more rhythmically accurate, and with smooth tone. Without hesitation or invitation, some congregants begin repeating the simple phrases, chanting along with the party. The introit antiphon they are singing is a passage commemorating
Saint John, as this in the Christian faith is his feast day (see example 1.1).\(^1\) The singing becomes increasingly intense as more join in. Soon the timbre of the brothers has mingled with that of the congregant participants. The environment has been transformed by this collective sharing of the morning’s beauty, the uniqueness of the event, and the contagious singing that has united all in this ritual.

\textit{Example 1.1. Introit Antiphon from the Gospel of John. Reproduced from the Mass Program, June 24, 2014.}

\begin{center}
\begin{music}
\begin{align*}
\text{There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came to bear witness to the light, to prepare an upright people for the Lord.}
\end{align*}
\end{music}
\end{center}

As the procession approaches the make-shift altar that has been constructed at the east end of the tent, each pair stops, simultaneously bows, separates, and continues in opposite directions to form an orderly group on each side of the altar. The abbot, who led the procession, is seated in a large but modest wooden chair. He rises and steps up onto the altar platform and begins to address the gathering. My attention is drawn to his gold and red linen vestments and conical shaped mitre,\(^2\) which has two long, red lappets hanging from it that adorn his back. His garments project a keen sacredness. Other clergy who surround the altar wear flowing shoulder-to-ankle garments trimmed in gold with red stoles; the resident monk’s

\(^1\) Referring to Latin, \textit{festum}, or festival, are commemorations of sacred events, saints, apostles, or martyrs important in the history of the church. These commemorations include special services and rest from work. Some feasts are \textit{moveable} and are related to the calendar, such as Easter or Christmas.

\(^2\) A tall folding cap in the shape of a pointed arch, generally made of embroidered linen or satin. In the Western Roman Catholic Church it is a ceremonial headdress reserved for bishops and abbots.
black tunic seems plain in comparison. Abbot Lawrence continues his celebratory Mass homily, reminding the crowd that the fifty-year journey that began on June 24, 1964, has had its fits and turns. He compares the expedition he and the brothers have completed to the thirteen-mile road all must traverse to reach this site; it is sometimes smooth and dry, but often treacherous and unforgiving. He recounts with humility the story of the seeking man Father Aelred Wall, who traveled to this remote river canyon fifty years ago, and with $25,000, established Christ in the Desert.³

In this chapter I look at the key events that shaped the monastery. This is a story of creating and sustaining, of rebuilding and transforming, based on the monastic principles of piety and community. The Rule of St. Benedict that the brothers follow provides the framework for living and within that is the discipline of chanting the Psalter: the endless cycle of prayer. My fieldwork begins here. I aim to observe the social phenomenon of the brothers’ music culture and their practices and to form interpretations from their individual perspectives. The key will be to observe their ritual and the collective act of chanting and relate these observations to research and scholarship that will support the thesis that their practices positively affect the individual and strengthen the group identity. What follows is a survey of the monastery’s first fifty years: financial struggles, the ever-fluctuating census of brothers, and unforeseen and significant opportunities. Unwavering is the brothers’ commitment to chant, and, I submit, central their well-being and growth.

A. The First Decade

The monastery's beginnings unfolded against a backdrop of significant political, economic, and social events occurring in the United States and the world in 1964. Monasticism was not immune to the social history that was evolving, and the monastery was not a refuge from it. Monasteries and congregations worldwide were feeling the currents of reform within the Catholic Church, which intersected with the radical changes developing in the secular world.

In July 1964 President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which enforced the constitutional right to vote and prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. However, demonstrations raged in response to what were believed to be racially motivated church bombings and shootings. Church leaders could not ignore conflicted opinions regarding integration and the escalating war in Vietnam. Student activists on campuses across the country initiated free speech sit-ins, while "Hell No, We Won't Go" became the anti-war slogan of draft-aged males. Fear of nuclear war prompted some people to construct bomb shelters in their backyards. Society's unrest, marked by disillusionment and distrust of authority, was transforming. Inspired by the idealism of the Civil Rights Movement and the promise of social reform, a renewed optimism was fueling the country.

Reinvigoration came. The Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show, breaking television viewing records, while release of Betty Friedman's The Feminine Mystique in paperback sparked renewed discussions regarding women's roles. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist pastor and campaigner for social justice, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Benedictine monasticism was moving away from a
centrifugal design—sending monks into the community to serve parishes—toward a centripetal orientation. Monasteries were becoming centers of retreat and solitude, attracting a wide range of people, not only those questing for a vocation but also scholars, artists, and clergy from Protestant denominations.⁴

While Ravi Shankar and Frank Sinatra battled the recording charts for album supremacy, Steve Reich, a young pianist, premiered Terry Riley's *In C*, ushering in minimalism. The musical elements characteristic of minimalist art emphasized patterns more so than the inherent significance of a particular part.⁵ The minimalists seemed to want to leave the past behind, focusing only on the music itself. In Rome the liturgical movement with respect to a restoration of Gregorian chant as active worship music was well underway. Pope Pius X's position as set forth in his *Tra Le Sollecitudine* of 1903 was one of including, by their participation, the faithful in singing during the ecclesiastical offices.⁶ It would be decades before cloistered choirs and congregants would embrace Gregorian chant. Subsequently, with the writings of the French Jesuit scholar and composer Joseph Gelineau and the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the liturgical reformers were calling "for the completion of the not-yet-issued official Gregorian chant books."⁷ Widely adopted and translated into English was Gelineau's psalmody, a collection of melodically simple responsorial song forms.⁸ Father Aelred and the residents of the

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⁷ Ibid, 322.
monastery would chant from the *Gelineau Psalter* during the Divine Office in the early years of Christ in the Desert. The esoteric modernist music of the 1960s was far from these frontier brothers' sonic world. Their devotion to psalmody remained a concrete tenet.

The first Benedictine abbey in the United States was established in Latrobe, Pennsylvania in 1846 by the Bavarian Father Boniface Wimmer (1809-87). Jerome Oetgen recounts the beginning of Benedictine monasticism in the United States in his *Mission to America: A History of Saint Vincent Archabbey* (2000). The tenets of St. Benedict: prayer, service, education, and hospitality, were at the forefront of Wimmer's objectives, as well as ministering to the needs of German Catholic immigrants in America. Wimmer writes in the spring of 1846 that "conditions in America today are like those of Europe a thousand years ago, when the Benedictine Order attained its fullest development and effectiveness by its wonderful adaptability and stability." Upon his death, Wimmer was credited for his vigor and tenacity in spawning Benedictine schools and communities in the East and Midwest. Saint Vincent one hundred years later was a thriving monastery with a strong liberal arts college. While attending the commemoration of its centennial, founder of Mount Saviour Monastery Damasus Winzen (1901-71) delivered a paper titled "The Monastery and Christian Art." Father Winzen left Nazi Germany in 1938 in search of a refuge for the brothers of his abbey, Maria Laach, located in the Rhineland north of Koblenz. A strong preacher and reformer, Father Winzen was able to garner

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9 Graña, 18.
11 Ibid., 57.
12 Ibid., 423.
support to enable his founding of Mount Saviour in Elmira, New York, in 1950.\textsuperscript{13} Father Aelred, a Princeton-educated teacher, joined Mount Saviour in 1960. Embodying Wimmer's and Winzen's westward-looking sensibilities and the directives from Mount Saviour, Father Aelred struck out in search of a place where current and future monks could be nurtured and the ancient ideals of St. Benedict could be experienced amidst the social tumult occurring in the nation.

Receiving a tip that there was an old farmhouse for sale on a river bank located down a winding dirt road, Father Aelred was elated when he made the discovery. He wrote to his brothers at Mount Saviour: "No words seem adequate to express the joy of that moment."\textsuperscript{14} Subsequently, the acres of land surrounded by the Carson and Santa Fe national forests was purchased. The founding brothers lived simply and frugally in the converted farmhouse; their days were spent irrigating a vegetable garden and orchard and constructing chicken coops, a barn, and living quarters for prospective monks.

As the population of brothers grew, so did the monastery's need for living and worship space. A friend of Father Aelred, George Nakashima, a Japanese American architect, and former monk, designed and oversaw the construction of the chapel (see figure 1.1).

\textsuperscript{13} Rippinger, 217.
\textsuperscript{14} Graña, 15.
Volunteers from the surrounding communities of Chama and Abiquiú came to assist the brothers in the construction effort. Embodying the spirit of the land, its subtle Southwestern adobe architecture took advantage of available materials: mud and grass for adobe bricks, logs for roof supports, and vigas and small branches for the ceiling. In the shape of a Greek cross, four wings sprawl from the central clerestory walls of glass. Rays of sunlight shining through these surrounding windows create vivid contrasts of light and dark, luminously showering the large stone altar below (see figure 1.2). Over the coming years stained glass windows were commissioned and installed. Elaborately hand-carved entry doors came to adorn the chapel entrance. The original log pews were eventually replaced with comfortable wooden chairs. Terraced choir stalls were constructed on each side of
the altar, replacing the modest benches used in the first years. Simple accommodations were constructed to provide for religious pilgrims and adventurous travelers who journey to the monastery. The upheavals and tensions of society and the insecurities surrounding the Vietnam War drove many to look for spiritual renewal or simply a place of tranquility. These retreatants found the atmosphere welcoming, while their visits provided much-needed income for the monastery.

Raising the visibility of the monastery would assist in growing its population of monks as well as revenue. Some monk-tourists came from other abbeys and monasteries to investigate possible relocation. Many had particular skills that could be applied to fledging projects such as goat cheese manufacturing or the ongoing construction and constant maintenance work. Nearby Abiquiú resident Georgia

Figure 1.2. The Chapel Stone Altar and Tabernacle. Photo by the author.
O'Keeffe visited the site often and engaged in particular ventures.\textsuperscript{15} Thomas Merton, on his first visit in 1968, describes the sharing in this monastic community:

A monastery is not a place where a few retire to deepen their own experience of the meaning of life: it is also a center where others can come to re-adjust their perspectives. While not blindly rejecting and negating the modern world, the monastery nevertheless retains a certain critical distance and perspective which are absolutely necessary as mass-society becomes at once more totally organized and more mindlessly violent. In its firm assertion of the basic human values as well as of God's message of salvation, the monastery bears witness to the most fundamental and most permanent truths of life. It remains a sanctuary where both monks and retreatants and others may experience something of that 'peace which the world cannot give.'\textsuperscript{16}

Merton, a dedicated friend of Christ in the Desert, aspired to create an international peace center there; however, his accidental death while traveling on a speaking engagement in Bangkok derailed this plan.

\textbf{B. The Seventies Bring Hardship and Hope}

The coming years brought multiple challenges. The extremes of the environment, the constant rotation of resident monks, and failure of efforts to sustain an income kept the monastery floundering. Winter snows and subsequent spring run-offs resulted in flooded fields, leaks in the chapel roof, and visitors commonly stranded on the road. By 1974 conditions were dire. Father Aelred had retreated to the Monastery of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad in Mexico two years earlier, the population of monks was down to three, and Mount Saviour was advocating for abandonment of Christ in the Desert.\textsuperscript{17} Many religious groups drawn to the canyon's

\textsuperscript{15} Graña, 35.
\textsuperscript{17} Graña, 80.
beauty expressed interest in the property. Their proposals would surely provide
financial impetus, but there was trepidation that developments would detract from or
potentially destroy the contemplative serenity of the site. Brothers from various
abbey traveled to New Mexico, residing at the monastery for brief periods to assist
the community. One such visitor who came from Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon to
assist in growing a choir and providing music for the liturgy was a youthful Brother
Philip Lawrence.\(^{18}\) His intentions were simply to visit. Mount Saviour, wanting Christ
in the Desert to be self-sufficient, encouraged him to stay by waiving their
requirements that he had to serve in New York for three years before he could
become an official member of the monastery in New Mexico. In 1977 Archbishop
Robert Sanchez of Santa Fe ordained Brother Philip and he became prior,\(^{19}\) a
position he held until 1996 when he was elected first abbot of the monastery.\(^{20}\)

Father Philip broadened the musical practices, providing sung blessings
before meals, playing guitar during some services, and composing responsorial
Psalms.\(^{21}\) Following the tradition of early church chanting, he organized a small
group of singers into his own *schola cantorum*.\(^{22}\) Their repertory consisted of more
elaborate chants sung during solemn Mass and celebrations such as Christmas and
Easter. The brothers became more involved by researching translations from
Hebrew and devoting practice time to perfect chanting in Latin as well as English.

\(^{18}\) Graña, 81.
\(^{19}\) More fully prior claustral. A superior officer in a house or order. The deputy of an abbot exercising
certain authorities, and maintaining order in the house.
\(^{20}\) Graña, 86.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 91.
\(^{22}\) The term dates to the period 450-650. “Guilds” or “corps” of men were trained by monasteries or
cathedrals to sing the liturgy. For a discussion of Gregorian chant’s dissemination from Rome to Metz
and the Frankish kingdom under Charlemagne’s rule, see Christopher Page, *The Christian West and
This active participation brought renewed energy to the liturgy and to the daily lives of the brothers. They became a medium for transmitting serenity through the ancient tones of the Psalms, contributing to the attraction of visitors to the monastery in search of an introspective experience. This became a mixed blessing: the money was good, but the traffic taxed the facilities and the finite number of brothers. Could it be that those stressors were lessened through the medium of sung prayer? Their days ended with the evening Office of Compline, the prayers before retiring. The musical elements included four psalms and a hymn appropriate for the liturgical season. The psalms were pleas, lamentations, and humble requests for protection, justice, and blessings for the coming day. The brothers did not surrender to the hardships of these years nor did they simply drift into a new day without singing.

Self-sufficiency became the monastery's refrain of the late 1970s. A solarium was constructed to heat the portico leading to the cloister, wood was collected and burned instead of expensive fuel oil, the meadowlands were tilled for vegetable fields and an orchard, and weavings from homespun and dyed wools became popular sales items. Although removed from the world, the monastery was not immune from regulation. Liability insurance required a redesign of the guest quarters that had been dubbed "a hazardous hotel" from the use of kerosene lamps and open-fire oil-drum stoves. The buildings from 1964 were in such disrepair that protection from the rain and snow was a constant struggle. Mount Saviour was not able to help. Financial stability and autonomy from Mount Saviour could only be accomplished through a comprehensive campaign. In 1983 the brothers began a $2

24 Graña, 113.
million, ten-year plan to draw more monks to the monastery and provide adequate guest comforts through a complete conversion of the facility from charmingly primitive to attractively practical. The campaign would require an arsenal of recruits: ardent supporters of the monastery who had influence and resources. In the foreground the brothers still maintained the daily schedule of Offices with the performance of Gregorian chants during Mass and completing the Psalter each week. I suggest that singing with its attendant benefits was a positive contribution to sustaining group cohesion, intentionality, and goal attainment during these years of expansion.

C. The 1980s and 1990s Position the Future

During the next decades the monastery navigated uncharted waters. Activities and endeavors during this time may, in fact, defy one’s expectations of traditional monasticism. Concurrent with fundraising and construction was the quest for independence. After three years of searching internationally, the monastery joined the Subiaco Cassinese Congregation’s English Province in 1983. The congregation unites contemplative Benedictine monasteries and convents throughout the world. Currently, the four members in the United States are Christ in the Desert and the monasteries of Holy Cross in Chicago, St. Mary’s in Petersham, Massachusetts, and St. Scholastica’s Priory, also in Petersham. The congregation structure provides a unique balance of autonomy, dependence, and growth through support and exchange. From 1987 to 1990, Christ in the Desert fostered five other communities, four monasteries and a convent: Thien Tam (Heavenly Heart) in
Kerens, Texas, Nuestra Señora del Tepeyac in Coyoacán, Nuestra Señora de La Soledad in Guanajuato, and Santa María y Todos los Santos in Coatepec, Mexico, and Our Lady of the Desert in Gobernador, New Mexico.

By 1992, with the renovation of the guest housing accomplished, the 1983 plan and accompanying financial forecast needed revision. A new, four-phase proposal would require $3 million. To raise the necessary resources, volunteers, celebrities, artists, writers, gallery owners, arm-twisters, contractors, and architects were recruited. The priority was to construct a new cloister area of cells for the monks with a portal to the chapel (see figure 1.3). This first phase also included the installation of the largest private photovoltaic system in New Mexico. Solar energy would provide the power to heat the facility using radiant floor heating, heat water for bathing and washing, and supply power for lighting. The walls of the cloister were constructed with straw bales, which were covered with plaster on the exterior and adobe on the interior. An overarching goal of the plan was to utilize sustainable resources and environmentally sensitive construction methods. It would be another ten years until the final phase of the renovation was completed, which included the refectory, kitchen, laundry, infirmary, guest reception area, and gift shop.

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25 Visit the Monastery’s website; photo gallery at https://christdesert.org/about/photo-gallery-and-virtual-tour/
26 Graña, 123.
The number of novices doubled in 1994. As a consequence, the brothers constantly looked for means to earn income. In 1995, the monastery’s website was launched. The site included a portal to efficiently book reservations for the guest program, an online store to sell books and items made by the brothers, and an online tour offering a glimpse of monastic life. A year after its launch, and in reaction to the brothers’ efforts to provide Web design for hire, Christ in the Desert found itself splashed on the cover of *Time Magazine*:

Remote as they may seem, the brothers of Christ in the Desert are plugged into the Internet. Using electricity generated by a dozen solar panels and a fragile data link through a single cellular phone, the
monks have developed a heavily trafficked Benedictine home page and started a new business designing and maintaining other people's Websites. The order's work has even caught the eye of the Holy See. Last month Webmaster Brother Mary Aquinas flew to Rome for consultations and to lend a hand building what the Vatican hopes will be the greatest—let alone holiest—site on the World Wide Web.27

The endeavor was short lived, as this modern-day scriptorium became a distraction and was economically unsupportable; however, the website maintains the guest registration system, gift sales, and current news of monastery activities.

Other revenue-producing activities included products made from the orchard and beekeeping, and the opening of a thrift shop and craft store near the Santa Fe Plaza. Taking advantage of the revival of Gregorian chant in popular culture and the skills of the monastery's schola contorum, the monks released their first compact disc in 1996, Monastic Chants in the High Desert. This would be the first of five CDs from the brothers of the monastery. Of the thousands of Gregorian chant melodies that could have been chosen, the recording’s twenty selections reflect the calendrical cycle the brothers follow, while paying homage to the exquisite Chama Canyon setting.

The monks of Christ in the Desert maintain the metaphors of unity and active prayer when referring to their motivations for singing. Their monophony is a choice and a discipline, and I propose that they achieve greater levels of self- and group awareness by its repetitive practice. Their voices are strong tools in establishing their individual and collective identity and are an extension of the setting in which they live. In the case of their chanting, the whole of their voices, grounded in the high New Mexico desert, sounds more beautiful than the one.

The first recording by the New Mexican monks was not wildly popular; it did, however, provide income and visibility as well as garnered invitations to perform in and around central New Mexico. Meanwhile, the new refectory, gift shop, and reception area were nearing completion. Not only were the facilities utilitarian in design and function, they reflected the aesthetics of the environment and significant generosity from donors, area artists, and craftsmen. The magnificent stained glass gable of the refectory, fashioned after Henri Matisse’s Chapelle du Rosaire in France, accentuates the changing of the day’s light and compliments the colors of the canyon (see figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4. Refectory Interior. Gabel Stained Glass by Margaret Nelson. Photo by the author.
Elaborate frescos adorn the walls of the hall. Opposite the gable is an expansive mural on the east end wall of the refectory. This painting is an iconographic depiction of the history of monasticism (see figure 1.5). In the center, and slightly elevated from the other characters, is a representation of the “Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah.”28 On each of the sides are Saints Benedict and his sister Scholastica, Saints Francis and Clare, the patron saints of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, and Saint John the patron saint of the monastery. The blessed Saint Kateri Tekawitha of the Algonquin-Mohawk Native peoples and Juan Diego of Mexico are also portrayed in the work.29 These are but two examples of fine art that adorns the facilities.

Figure 1.5. Refectory Mural by Father Damian Higgins. Photo by the author.

28 From the recordings of St. Augustine, the story in the book of Genesis 18:1-15, is one in which visitors are received with hospitality and reverence. It has been interpreted as a representation of the Holy Trinity. http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130102.htm.
29 Graña, 145.
The patience and focused activity of the brothers and their oblate teammates is evident in the completion of the phased construction, financial support, and an uptick in the population of novices. By 2005 the brothers number twenty-four and the initial 1992 proposal of an estimated $3 million project was approaching $9 million. "I joke with some of our benefactors at times, saying that it has cost us, so far, about $8.5 million to live poorly and simply in the desert," writes Abbot Philip Lawrence. He and the brothers seemed unfazed by the $1 million in debt they had accumulated during the project. In their true optimistic spirit, one might hear a phrase from one of them loosely quoting St. Benedict, who speaks of humility, perseverance, obedience, endurance, and embracing trials that seem beyond one’s understanding. Abbot Lawrence echoes, “Perseverance is about staying with something even when it seems impossible. Persevere in hope, no matter what happens. Have great hope, wonderful hope, hope that is truly good—not just for the things of this world”.

Their constant practice of psalmody, which by the repetition of the simple sequences of the psalm tones supporting words filled with hope, must allow at some point for familiarity to take over and actions to become automatic. Elizabeth Margulis observes of these states, “[B]odily and temporal awareness recede and a person

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30 A person dedicated to God’s service. As is the practice in many Benedictine communities, laypeople or clergy may choose to make a formal promise to follow the Rule in their private lives and maintain a commitment to a cloistered community.
33 Lawrence, OSB, An Abbot’s Notebook, 122.
finds himself totally immersed in the activity at hand.”34 Further, she links experiencing familiar music to increased activation in the reward systems of the brain, the basal ganglia, and the motor cortex: “By recruiting motor circuitry and engaging representation as automatic sequences, repetition facilitates the generation of this state, fostering an intimate connection to the music while bypassing conceptual cognition and allowing the sound to seem ‘lived’ rather than ‘perceived.’”35 Therefore, memorizing chant forms and performing them repetitively allow the monk to be more attuned to the ritual practice and to be bound more intimately to the group.

II. A Place Where People Journey

The heightened visibility brought about by fundraising, facility expansion, and recordings led to an increase in solitude seekers and day visitors to the monastery. This growth positioned the guest program as their most stable source of income. Among the guests were authors, photographers, composers, and researchers questing inspiration, renewal, or, in some accounts, unexpected experiences. Diane Marron’s 1994 video documentary, Seeking God: The Way of the Monk, Monastery of Christ in the Desert, captures the contemplative life of commitment to the monastic traditions of solitude, prayer, and transformation.36 Through a collage of interviews with clergy, postulants, and novices, Marron frames the monastery grounds with the surrounding landscape, while selections from the repertoire of

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35 Ibid.
36 Diane Marron, Seeking God: the Way of the Monk, Monastery of Christ in the Desert (Harrington Park, NJ: Janson Media, 2004), DVD.
chants, hymns, antiphons, and psalms provide the soundtrack for the scenes. The format follows the activities of each day and significant Catholic holidays during the year. Throughout the prevailing theme of the commitment to the life of the community and following the Rule of St. Benedict is portrayed by means of commentary, segments from the Divine Offices, and scenes of everyday monastic life.

Photojournalist Tony O'Brien lived among the brothers of the monastery for a year during 1994-95. His sojourn is documented in a collection of black-and-white images published in Light in the Desert: Photographs from the Monastery of Christ in the Desert. In June 1989, while on assignment for Life Magazine covering Muslim guerrillas in Kabul, Afghanistan, O'Brien was taken prisoner. After six weeks of captivity and in response to diplomatic appeals, he was freed. From his journal O'Brien professes: "I entered as a photographer. My idea, [was] to do an in-depth photography project on contemplative life, spending two weeks a month at Christ in the Desert. I soon found that this was more than a professional quest; it was a spiritual and personal one as well." Christopher Merrill writes in the introduction, "O'Brien’s riveting photographs reveal the silence at the heart of monasticism—the sacred aspect of every object and encounter, prayer and procession, shadow and light." O’Brien’s photographs tell a story by capturing the monk’s life on earth: struggle, storms, loneliness, brotherhood, reverence, simplicity, and humor. Just as

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37 Postulancy is a probationary period of one to ten days prior to the novitiate period of one to three years. The novitiate period is considered a preparation for admission to the institution of monasticism.
40 Ibid., 18.
the brilliant light comes from the darkness, chant emerges from the silence; its sound is fundamental to binding people to this place.

Belden Lane, professor of theological studies at St. Louis University, was questing for a mystical experience. He chronicled his pursuit of recovery from the death of his parents in his book, The Solace of Fierce Landscapes. His writing contrasts the beauty of the canyon with its haunting emptiness and the life-giving river with the unmerciful desert. Yet, his thesis positions the importance of geography in understanding who we are and how we relate to one another and to our spirituality.41 The stillness and silence experienced at Christ in the Desert, together with participation in the daily repetition of the psalms—many of which calling forth the land—has a uniting and communal effect. One is no longer indifferent to the stranger in the opposite pew; distractions give way to compassion and being content with simplicity is a delight.42 Lane then juxtaposes this New Mexico desert with the inner city, the hospice wing, and the deterioration of urban areas, which, he posits, are all in need of a recommitment and attentiveness to community. There is something numinous about a surrounding that we at first fear, which becomes comforting and healing (see figure 1.6). Lane states, “Thoreau was right: ‘We need the tonic of wildness’.”43 O’Brien and Lane experienced an emotional engagement with this geography; its features amplified in their memories by what they felt and most of all, by what they heard.

42 Ibid., 227.
43 Ibid., 4.
Visitors also came from distant lands. Ecumenical exchanges occurred between Christ in the Desert and the Menri Monastery of Himachal Pradesh, India, between 2000 and 2004. Dugsay and Sogyal, two Tibetan Bön monks from Menri, spent a month at the monastery in 2000. The two participated in the daily routine of work and prayer and engaged in conversations regarding their religious practices. Abbot Lawrence and select brothers from the monastery visited Menri in subsequent years. He reflects upon his experience of chanting there:

44 Graña, 151.
In the years 2002 and later, I visited northern India three or four times as a guest of the Bön monks. Chanting with them in their temple was always an incredibly moving experience. They sang in Tibetan and I chanted in English. They chanted their own prayers and I chanted Catholic prayers. They were delighted that I was chanting with them, even using my own Catholic prayers. The Bön chant is much lower in key than our Gregorian chant.45

Although the languages were different, he continued describing the corporal unity achieved when chanting with the Bön monks. Evident of that are their exchanges and communications that continue today.

The abbot referred to the decade of the 2000s as the time when the monastery was “going global.” As activities were mushrooming, brothers were traveling to the Menri Monastery, and monks from Argentina, South Africa, Europe, Mexico, the Philippines, and Vietnam were joining the monastery. The percentage of non-American-born brothers at the monastery was approaching sixty-five percent.46 The challenges of many languages and cultures did not dampen the abbot’s fervor of melding the monastic community. Christ in the Desert, like the flowering of the chamisa, had much to contribute to the world.

Opportunities and devotees continued to present themselves. In August 2005 the brothers were guest performers during the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival and released a live recording of their concert titled Sanctae Laetitiae (Holy Joy). The seventeen tracks reflect the liturgical cycle expressed in chants, both for festive holidays and ordinary time, and hymns in Latin and English. In 2006 the Abbey Brewing Company launched, producing 127 barrels annually of micro-brewed

45 Father Lawrence, e-mail message to author, August 08, 2014.
46 Graña, 149.
Belgian style ale. In the early years, the project was a partnership with Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey in Pecos, New Mexico; however, in 2009 Christ in the Desert became sole partner and began construction of its onsite brewery. By 2010 brewing capacities increased to enable distribution outside of New Mexico of the two products, Monks’ Ale and Monk’s Wit. Specialty draft products are brewed with indigenous hops grown on the monastery grounds. The hops garden, currently a half-acre area, is expected to expand to five acres in the near future (see figure 1.7). Today’s brewing capacity is 2,900 barrels per year. The brewery grounds are closed to visitors but Bode’s General Store in Abiquiú maintains a tasting room for Monks’ Ale. Christ in the Desert joins only two other monasteries in the country at present maintaining the tradition of brewing: Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon and St. Joseph’s Abbey in Massachusetts.

Figure 1.7. Humulus Lupulus Hops Garden. Photo by the author.

48 Consult http://christdesert.org/Abbey_Beverage_Company/index.html (site deleted)
49 Bob Hoover, “This Brewery in the New Mexico Desert is not a Mirage,” Pittsburg Post-Gazette, April 13, 2014.
For a period of six weeks during early 2006, a five-man film crew lived among the brothers at Christ in the Desert, capturing on film their daily regimen of work, prayer, and reflection. The premise of the project, replicating that of the original 2005 BBC production, *The Monastery*, was to explore whether the monastic life has something to offer in the search of self-discovery and life’s meaning. Each of the participants in what the producer Sarah Woodford referred to as an “observational documentary”—not a reality show—had personal narratives of struggle: childhood abuse, suicide, gang violence, or trauma, which was the case of the ex-marine who lost a leg in Iraq.50 Woodford said of the project, “We’re interested in exploring how people like us can live a good and purposeful life and what the 1,500-year-old monastic tradition can teach us.”51

The reception of the series was overwhelmingly positive.52 To the abbot’s delight, inquiries regarding the monastic vocation or how one could return to their Catholic faith were frequently received. Increasing too were purposed treks by other non-monk, soul-searching journalists and authors. Dana Micucci was one such visitor. Over several years, Micucci traveled to seven sacred places in the world and chronicled her personal insights and illuminations in her memoir, *Sojourns of the Soul*. From the Australian outback to the Valley of the Kings in Egypt and from Chichén Itzá in Yucatán to Christ in the Desert, Micucci describes her routine and sublime experiences. In a chapter titled “Hymn to New Mexico: Healing,” she details

51 Ibid.
52 The ten-part series aired on The Learning Channel during the winter of 2006.
her week spent at the monastery. Once over the uneasiness immense silence presents, she quickly adopted the daily ritual—the toll of the chapel bell signaling that all tasks are to be halted for reciting the psalms, silent meals in the refectory and absorbing the solemnity of the desert landscape. She too recounts the agonizing grief of her father’s passing and her transformation from angry and indifferent to surrender and acceptance. The result of each passing day was greater stillness and peace and a keen awareness of the present.

Composer, professor, and choral-work aficionado Robert Kyr has been retreating to Christ in the Desert for the past seventeen years. He journeys from his home in Eugene, Oregon, where he is chair of the Composition Department at the University of Oregon to the monastery whenever possible. There he composes, according to John Burnett of NPR, “Rapturous music that is inspired by this world of light, stone, stillness, and prayer.” Kyr confesses that the music comes to him when he is on long outings in the mesa lands and walks along the winding Chama River. “I come out on the river and create music inwardly, then, later in the deep night, usually 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m., that’s when I write it down.” Kyr, who has composed large-scale and chamber symphonies, works for vocal ensembles, and commissioned pieces for acclaimed groups worldwide, finds inspiration in the

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54 Ibid., 203.
56 Ibid.
luminous beauty surrounding the monastery. “Robert Kyr is a wonderful musician and a good friend of the community,” remarks Abbot Lawrence admiringly.\(^5^7\)

The brothers too continue to capture their inspired works. Their third and fourth discs were released in 2010. The first, *Lauda Sion, Zion Give Praise*, is a collection of chants from the Mass of Corpus Christi and *Gaudiamus, Let us Rejoice*, is a commemoration of the feast of Saint Benedict. The later work includes a repertoire of introits and antiphons appropriate for service music during the liturgical year. This was a live recording from a concert during the 2007 Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. These recordings and outings continued to expand the chant skills of the Abbots’ *schola*. Maintaining a skilled group of singers remains an important priority of monastery leadership, not only to be ambassadors, but also to provide support for novices.

The release of their 2011 recording, *Blessings, Peace and Harmony*, produced by Sony Music, has garnered the most attention to date. An ambitious undertaking, the album’s twenty-three tracks are a compilation and refinement of their previous works reflecting the Catholic Mass ordinaries and pieces chosen celebrating the festive seasons: Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. The work can be interpreted as a reflection of the monks as they journey through their year. "It is always our hope that our singing will bring others to peace, inner tranquility and an appreciation of beauty. These values can help create a world in which peace and tranquility prevail," writes Father Philip in the liner notes.\(^5^8\) The efforts to raise the visibility of the monastery through an online presence, welcoming visitors and

\(^5^7\) Abbot Lawrence, e-mail message to author, September, 24, 2014.
guests, and continuing to share their craft of chant by generating a fifth recording with an international label contributed to their receiving a most exciting invitation. In October 2012 six brothers traveled to New York City and appeared on NBC’s Today Show. They sang a chant from their long standing repertoire, “Alleluia, lustus germinabit.” The Alleluia, or glory-giving acclamation, is sung between the readings of scripture during Mass or the Divine Office. The text is Allelúia. Jústus germinábit sicut lílium: et florébit in aetérnum ante Dóminum. Praise the Lord. The just and righteous will blossom like a lily: and will flourish forever before the Lord.

A. The Next Half-Century

This blossoming, the founding story of the monastery, is reflected in today’s Golden Jubilee celebration and the abbot’s reminiscences of events and stories of entrusted patrons and devotees. The site is a testament to the pioneering brothers who walked an untrodden path guided by the compass of a shared consciousness centered on God. They are united by the fourth-century traditions of an ascetic life, which fostered a simple subsistence in predominantly rural communities. Psalmody—extolling the sacred texts in song-like fashion or a subdued murmur, more like a meditation—was ever present in the lives of the early Christian literary scholars such as Ambrose, Basil, and Augustine. Boniface Wimmer, fathers Winzen and Wall, and Brother Merton embodied this early history. The ideals of

59 Lawrence, OSB, An Abbot's Notebook, 81.
Christ in the Desert, inherited from these indelible stalwarts, have become concrete.
During the past five decades, hundreds of individuals have participated in and
contributed to this reality, and thousands of people have visited the monastery.
Monks too have come and gone. The monastic life to most is impossible to follow.
Their communal lifestyle is an organized and disciplined ritual from dawn until night,
ordered and focused on seeking God. And, as my study shows, singing affects the
brother’s journey and the cohesiveness of the community.

With suave spontaneity Brother Benedict begins to speak from a lectern at
the front of the tent. His rich and commanding baritone voice brings my attention
back to the activities at hand. He is performing in the capacity of a master of
ceremonies, providing logistical information for the afternoon. We are invited to
gather in the cloister garden, where a buffet luncheon will be served. Brother
Benedict glances at the abbot, indicating that he has concluded his remarks. Abbot
Lawrence chuckles as he warmly delivers his closing commentary, stating his
surprise that he and the brothers have made it this far. The community of Christ in
the Desert found its identity through the many challenges of struggling to survive. A
young boy in a crisply ironed blue-and-white-checked shirt and jeans drops an
envelope in a basket at the end of the row of chairs where he and his family are
seated. There are other envelopes, flowers, and small stuffed animals in the basket.
There is a vivid sense of humility and appreciation, hospitality and unreserved
welcome in this gathering’s atmosphere.
The abbot transitions to a blessing, ending the Mass. He extends his arms outward toward the congregation in a concluding gesture and remarks that we are houseguests of this earth and today guests of the monastery. Father Christian begins chanting the final hymn; slowly, others brave enough join in (see example 1.2).

**Example 1.2. Antra Deserti Teneris sub Annis.**
Reproduced from the Mass program, June 24, 2014.

![Example 1.2. Antra Deserti Teneris sub Annis.](image)

The brothers, nuns, and clergy rise while singing this commemoration to Saint John. The liturgical party reforms their ceremonious, two-by-two procession and departs the substitute chapel, and this time, joined by the attendees who follow in line. By the third verse, the tent is empty, and excited chatter fills the noon summer air. The procession winds past the graveyard up to the chapel, veering off to the
cloister, where the trains dissolve into one jovial troop. Many who began the day as strangers to one another are now united by a rare experience in a special place.

Five decades in the making, Christ in the Desert is home to forty-five monks, has overseen the development of affiliated communities, achieved abbey status, has a second Sony Music recording contract in place, and plans to expand the cloister by an additional twenty cells. Apparently, the Benedictine contemplative impulse spurring the early founders, which was to offer an environment removed from the world, resulted in an active presence in this secluded canyon. Pragmatically surveying these accomplishments, Abbot Lawrence modestly states, “We have a whole tradition that tells us that we shall be changed and transformed if we simply follow the tradition, opening our hearts and minds to God, praying daily, reading the scriptures and seeking to make our actions modeled on those of Christ Himself.”63

The common denominator along the way was the Rule and St. Benedict’s insistence to pray. Twelve of the seventy-three rules address the Divine Offices and their execution. In Rule 19, St. Benedict stresses that sung prayer is something done with great wisdom and awe.64 Terrence Kardong, commenting on St. Benedict’s awareness of choral prayer and its affective power, writes in his interpretation of Rule 53.3:

It is expected that choral prayer will lead some of the participants to a continued private colloquy with the Lord. The danger is, though, that the choral prayer be considered merely preparatory to individual contemplative prayer, or worse, that it be rushed in order to hasten the time for private prayer. Instead, we need to make the choral prayer as contemplative as possible by means of slow pacing and generous amounts of silence [emphasis in the original].65

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63 Lawrence, OSB, An Abbot’s Notebook, 93.
64 Kardong, 205.
65 Ibid., 417.
Living the tradition by following the *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, and how it defines the monks’ day, will be the subject of the following chapter. Since 1978 Christ in the Desert has consistently followed the Rule. Its clear structure contributes to the forming of a healthy community and its reflections are a guiding light of any age. Encompassed in this framework is the Divine Office, the four daily hours of manual labor and Lectio Divina, or a combination of scripture reading and meditation. A descriptive narration of events based on my fieldwork is the technique whereby I contextualize the information. To provide a musical perspective I highlight chants from the Offices and Gregorian chants from the Mass repertoire. Integral in the Offices is the attentive musical practice of chanting all one hundred and fifty psalms over seven days. St. Benedict’s Rule, composed of a prologue and the main document of seventy-three rules, is the prescription for monastic living. The point of praying seven times a day, as outlined in Rule 16, was, according to Kardong, not something ardently tied to scripture as much as it was intended to mean to “pray always.” I argue that the concepts put into practice as affirmed by St. Benedict establishes an atmosphere for a transformative experience.

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66 Kardong, 192.
Chapter Two – Living a Tradition

Over the years, through the conjoined exercise of body and soul, we are formed, reformed, and transformed.

—Michael Casey, OCSO

At the time of the Divine Office, as soon as he hears the signal the monk should drop whatever is in hand and rush there with the greatest haste.

—Rule of Saint Benedict, 43:1.

I. The Monastery: The Workshop of Spiritual Crafts

Christ in the Desert, enduring into the new millennium, suggests that its foundation is secure and it seeks no ambitious monastic aspirations other than to keep alive the Benedictine tenets in the silence of the uniquely stunning Chama River canyon. The monastery maintains the practice of the Liturgy of the Hours, with the exception of the morning office of Prime,¹ which was eliminated from the public schedule in 1987. The abbot has incorporated the prayers of Prime into the morning work meeting and the psalms of that Office are integrated in other hours.² This conviction to a daily life of praying by means of chanting during the Offices is the application of a major precept of the tradition of St. Benedict. Michael Casey, a Cistercian monk and theologian, observes of the Liturgy of the Hours and the monks’ daily work period: “Between them, these two signature activities occupy more than half of the monk’s waking hours, and Benedict himself devotes many chapters to

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¹ In accordance with the psalmist’s call to praise (Ps. 118) and codified in the Rule of St. Benedict, there are seven daytime Offices and one Night office: Lauds at 5:45 a.m., Prime at 6:30 a.m., Terce at 8:45 a.m., Sext at 1:00 p.m., None at 3:30 p.m., Vespers at 5:50 p.m., Compline at 7:30 p.m., and Vigils at 4:00 a.m. The Offices of Prime, Terce, Sext and None are termed “little hours” as they are brief, lasting only ten minutes; Vigils is approximately one hour, Lauds and Vespers are thirty minutes, and Compline is fifteen minutes.

² Lawrence, OSB, An Abbot’s Notebook, 61.
them." Written for the layman, the *Regula Sancti Benedicti* (c.535) is a treatise on the practical and liturgical matters of life in a monastery. It is a call to individual and community prayer, giving and receiving through meaningful work, kindness, generosity, and love through hospitality, has survived into modernity.

In this chapter I examine the Benedictine framework that defines the monks’ daily ritual. This ritual is surrounded by sounds: the chapel bell, the chants during the Offices and Masses, plus those occurring naturally in the New Mexican high desert. This soundscape is expressive of their unique character, as it binds them together and advances their individual spiritual journey. Further, with respect to the experiences of music and its power to transform, based on my ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that the music as practiced by the monks acts as an avenue to evoke meaningful responses, to alter mood, to deepen their self-awareness, and to strengthen their community. The daily ritual chant, its repetition of sequences of sound in synchronicity, benefits the whole while focusing individual intention.

Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino, not unlike many others, discusses the profoundness of music-making in relation to its value to groups in society, and asserts that participation in it is a fundamental aspect of our humanness. Drawing on thirty years of fieldwork, Turino argues that engagement in music supports social integration and identity formation. He writes, “Like the other arts, musical sounds

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4 The term defined by Schafer incorporates the sounds of the landscape: the flowing Chama River, the desert inhabitants, birds, and echoes brought about by the canyon walls. “Many of these sounds may possess archetypal significance, that is, they may have imprinted themselves so deeply on the people hearing them that life without them would be sensed as a distinct impoverishment.” R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, Inc., 1977), 9-10.

can be a special kind of communication and experience that draw upon and draw out different parts of the self."\textsuperscript{6} This coming together as a group and enrichment of individual awareness, as observed by Turino, is apparent in the following responses to questions I posed to two brothers at the monastery. “We probably sing more than anybody on earth,” comments Brother Benedict McCaffree, when asked about music. His monastic journey has spanned thirty-eight years, the last four at Christ in the Desert. “Our singing, well, it’s a constant. It is the warp that moves the light.” He continues, “The way we sing and what we sing helps unify our hearts.”\textsuperscript{7} Brother Charles Kariuki, a young man from Kenya who has been at the Monastery for two years, when asked how chant helped him pray, relayed an experience regarding a particular psalm, stating:

Psalm 118, when I say it and sing it, something strikes me and reminds me of what I am praying about and the text keeps coming back and back and back. Chant helps me to calm down; the chant manner keeps the prayer within me and reminds me who I am speaking to. When I am walking by myself, I sing the \textit{Kyrie} [he begins to sing a representation of the text by gently accentuating \textit{Kyrie} and ascending to \textit{eléison}] and project my voice. When I am low in spirit, I chant.\textsuperscript{8}

This self-report reflects positive, subjective feelings of mood affect being associated with repetitions of a particular chant. The melodic formula of the \textit{Kyrie éléison} in this instance also evoked a confident and self-assured response.

It would seem reasonable that the adjectives describing their experiences, such as “relaxing” and “calming,” and the resulting mood are congruent with the

\textsuperscript{6} Turino, 1.
\textsuperscript{7} Sub Prior Benedict McCaffree, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015, at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert.
\textsuperscript{8} Brother Charles Kariuki, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 15, 2015, at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert.
In general, the simple intonational singing style and structural musical factors of chant may influence expressions of calm, peacefulness, and tranquility. Some of these expressive qualities include stepwise motion and consonant intervals, legato articulation, soft timbre, and narrow pitch range, along with a conversation-like flowing rhythm and low complexity of form. I will use examples from the current repertoire to highlight these factors and perceived effects.

In the following narrative I describe my observation of monastic life, illuminating activities such as those during the Liturgy of the Hours and Masses, with the aim of strengthening the hypothesis that these musical practices assist the brothers in achieving heightened levels of self-awareness and social unity. Abbot Philip Lawrence unequivocally states that a monk’s formation begins in the choir. “First of all a monk must be present. Sometimes you're present at uncomfortable hours, like at 4 o’clock in the morning for Vigils. After time, young monks begin to embrace the choir. You know, I became a monk because of the singing, but the monk’s calling is not one to sing, it’s to serve the community.”

The turn-of-the-century French sociologist Émile Durkheim established that the basis of making, remaking, and strengthening a social group was first, assembly.

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11 In Chapter 4 I will provide additional examples of responses gathered during interviews with the brothers, as linked to the emotions aroused by singing and its contribution to their progress toward a divine way of life. It has been demonstrated with neuroimaging techniques that music can evoke dramatic as well as everyday emotions and affect mood. I will also investigate research regarding the physiological benefits of singing and link results to the brothers’ well-being and the monastery’s ability to flourish.
12 Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, in an interview with the author, August 17, 2015, at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert.
What forms from a gathering of individuals who are focused and intentioned in their sacred ritual is what Durkheim coined “collective effervescence”:

Some of the characteristics of collective effervescence are that it is at root an affective phenomenon: it involves states of intense emotion and excitement. It is also intrinsically collective in nature. Collective effervescence is also ephemeral or momentary in nature. Although it is real, it cannot exist in a permanent or prolonged state. It is a temporary condition, and must be ‘recharged.’

The brothers join throughout the day, experiencing the power of singing and the re-creative effervescence that is key to their religious life. The result of this activity strengthens their common bonds, unifying their community.

A. “Many Times a Day I Praise You.” Psalm 118:164

The monastic day begins before dawn, with the chapel bell breaking the chilled silence at 3:50 a.m. My dark walk to the chapel is quiet and serene; the clouds thicken, the smell of rain in the air, while flashes of lightning in the northern sky momentarily obscure the wash of stars above. This placidness is short lived, as an SUV approaches, forcing me into the soft shoulder of the freshly plowed road. It’s the middle-aged couple from Texas who are visiting for the week. I chatted with the wife in the library of the guest house last evening. A Catholic, she shared that her yearly visits rejuvenate her faith. She referred to needing a dose of the monks, or more specifically, participation in the day’s ritual, to make her resilient. We are all heading for Vigils, the Night Office, or the prayer for the coming light.

Thousands of Benedictines around the world start at this hour and follow a legislated pattern, obedient to the abbot and in humble fraternity with one another.

The monastic practices, as promised by St. Benedict in his Prologue to the Rule—relinquishing one’s own will, studying Scripture and praying, and growing in holiness and faith—will result in *conversatio*, or conversion of life. Terrence Kardong interprets St. Benedict’s insistence by stating, “monastic practices, difficult as they may be, will eventually result in personal transformation.”

While a comprehensive examination of St. Benedict’s theological development and analysis of the Rule is beyond the scope of this study, my focus is to provide a general understanding of St. Benedict’s importance as an exegetist of the patristic writings of Western Europe and as an enlightened monastic. Many who study St. Benedict’s writings and interpretations of theology view his approach to monasticism, and the ultimate goal of attaining a God consciousness, as being a union between experience and understanding. St. Benedict, speaking from the experience of living a solitary life influenced by the Egyptian monastic traditions, formed his Rule based on those traditions and adapted it for Western settings. It remains today a significantly vibrant contribution to ecclesial literature. For fourteen centuries its wisdom has endured and the accomplishment of its principles has resulted in rich communities of monks and nuns, monastic schools and universities, and cathedrals and churches across the world.

The Prologue and subsequent Rule outline the participation in the Liturgy of the Hours, the Mass, and *lectio divina* as the integration of the pedagogical and

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14 Kardong, 33.
15 An exegetist is one who interprets scripture and the writings and doctrines of the early Christian Church fathers, or patrists.
scholarly elements of the monastic way.\textsuperscript{17} Inseparable from both is the act of listening: opening one’s ear to the chanting of the Psalms, the messages in the Scriptures, and the inspired writings of the early church fathers. Benedict begins the Prologue of his Rule with, “Listen, O my son, to the teachings of your master, and turn to them with the ear of your heart,”\textsuperscript{18} and closes with Rule 73, which outlines the promise that \textit{perfectionis}, perfection, can be attained by following the traditions as he has laid out.\textsuperscript{19} Kardong addresses this idea of perfection and describes it as the monk’s ongoing journey.\textsuperscript{20} Casey as well as the abbot confesses that this journey is not entirely without strife and even the most intentioned fail.\textsuperscript{21}

My pace quickens as the cold mountain air bites through my jacket. The path and steps up to the chapel door are softly illuminated by the welcoming light emanating from the clerestory windows. I notice I am not the first to arrive, as I survey the four rows of benches in the chapel reserved for visitors. This morning I choose to sit on the right side, the second row. The monks enter randomly, kneeling at the tabernacle and bowing at the altar before taking their seats in the choir stalls. I begin leafing through the choir book, looking for the Office of Vigils, as the abbot taps his ring on his stall, signaling to the monks to rise and begin chanting the petition, “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.”\textsuperscript{22} By the third repetition, the few visitors in the chapel have joined with the brothers and the Vigil script as defined by the rule unfolds. This Office includes fourteen antiphons

\textsuperscript{17} Davis, 255.  
\textsuperscript{18} Kardong, 3.  
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 606.  
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 619.  
\textsuperscript{21} Casey, 74.  
\textsuperscript{22} Ps. 51:15 (New Revised Standard Version).
and psalms, a hymn, three readings, the singing of the Gospel of the day, and the prayers for all the living and departed. This psalmodic practice dates to the beginning of the fifth century and is recorded in the diary of the Spanish nun Egeria (ca. 381), a manuscript described by sacred music scholar Margot Fassler as “the single most important document for the study of early Christian liturgy.”

Egeria describes her experience of the night Office witnessed in Jerusalem:

> Before cockcrow all the doors of the church are opened and all the monks and nuns come down, and not only they, but also those lay people, men and women, who wish to keep vigil at so early an hour. From that time until it is light, hymns are sung and psalms responded to, and likewise antiphons; and with every hymn there is a prayer.

> I join in this antiquity with the brothers on the right side of the chapel as we chant the Psalms antiphonally. As we progress through the Psalms my breathing becomes less labored, as I relax into the rhythms of the exits and entrances of each phrase. The voices around me are not as accurate and focused as the brothers, whose voices leap upward and return in unison as they emphasize certain texts. As the hour progresses, their coordinated movements of standing to chant and sitting to pray or listen to the readings becomes more cohesive. At the conclusion of the Office, the brothers depart from their stalls row by row, and as they rise, they put the hoods of their cassocks over their heads, obscuring their faces. They exit the chapel as they entered, bowing at the altar and kneeling at the tabernacle. Brother Andre, the Guest Master, ambles over, greeting us with a smile and with a wave of his arm invites us to breakfast in the kitchen. As I depart the chapel, I review the Vigils ritual.

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that I have witnessed: from the monks’ random entry into the chapel, their reverent bows at the tabernacle and altar, through their program of worship and orderly exit. Their coordinated movements were seamless, and their responsiveness to the abbot and the cantor were spontaneously instinctive. Recalling Durkheim, they have revived Egeria’s night Office and collectively shared in their religious code.

Daily activities are defined by the monastic horarium, or schedule, officiated by the abbot. In Benedict’s time (ca. A.D. 540) the sun dictated the rhythm of the day, which varied depending on the season. St. Benedict’s intent was not one of ardent adherence to schedules, but of “wholehearted willingness to answer the call of God in the moment.”

Hearing and responding to the chapel bell is an act of obedience and commitment, the former the most important. St. Benedict’s maxim, as spelled out in Rule 43:3, which the scholars also describe as self-explanatory is, “Therefore nothing should be put ahead of the Work of God.”

I hurry to Lauds, the morning Office of praise. Late, I hastily grab the choir book and flip to the appropriate page. The antiphon is being chanted by only Brother Benedict. At its conclusion, Brother Raphael, who is at the chapel keyboard, plays the psalm tone that is appended to the end of the antiphon (see example 2.1).

25 Kardong, 353.
26 Ibid., 351.
The monks stand and the psalmody begins; the first stanza of Psalm 99 is chanted by the Cantor, Brother Charles (see figure 2.1). Initially the sound is thin, as the movement of this single pitch cast into the chapel space is supported by only a few, then joined by other voices of monks in the stalls on the north side of the chapel.

Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the Earth. Serve the Lord with gladness.

Come before Him, singing for joy. Know that He, the Lord, is God.

He made us, we belong to Him. We are His people, the sheep of His flock.

Go within his gates, giving thanks. Enter his courts with songs of praise.

Give thanks to Him and bless His name. Indeed, how good is the Lord?

Eternal His merciful Love. He is faithful from age to age.

Figure 2.1. Psalm 99. Reproduced from the Nov. 1, 2014, Choir Book, p. 56.
Gradually, the brothers find their pace and settle into the pattern of the melodic formula: the psalm tone rises to the reciting tone, which leads the way through the phrase, moving from pitch to pitch as directed by the words that are underlined. There is a pleasant nuance to the duration of the pitches that have dots after the punctum, as finally the verse gives way to the descending cadence. Then, with only enough silence to take a relaxed breath, the journey retraces its steps through the next stanza that is being chanted by the choir on the south side. The sound becomes a sonic wave, rich with the vocal qualities of the brothers’ voices. Their tone color, though similarly low, is a blend of characteristics: slow vibrato, few overtones, and relaxed attacks. The pattern of pitches that support the text leads each stanza to its repose. There is no push or pull, only a natural flow: similar to spring giving way to summer, night into day, or sound into silence. The structural pitches residing in the mode of the psalm tone, along with the delivery of the text emphasized by only tiny squares and dots, has a fundamental, soothing, and captivating power.

By the third stanza, I relax into the musical rhetoric, awaiting my turn to join and chant our verse. The tumbrel resonance of these simple voice-shaded lines, along with the act of moving and responding together to the change in pitches as indicated by the underlined text, takes over my consciousness. The sun casts the design of the window pane across my choir book—unaware of the passing of time; I realize that dawn has chased away the darkness.

Voices, not one valued over another, are producing these sounds. Weidman points out in her work regarding the voice that it is more than a natural means of
expression. She proposes that we see the voice, one that is situated in a particular culture, as a metaphor or representation of a social construct.\(^{27}\) The voice, and I extend this to voices, which are operating as one, are significant in embodying their social ideology. In other words, rather than viewing each brother as a singular contributor, I view their collective vocal performance as the practice of defining identity. The brothers are linked by a desire to experience profound reverence through song. By homogenizing this sound into one voice results in an expressive embodiment of their monastic ethos.

Dana Micucci, who chronicled her retreat at Christ in the Desert wrote, “This prayer, like the chanting of the Psalms, focuses my mind into a laser-like awareness. I notice that with each passing day this awareness seems to grow deeper, becoming less and less diluted by random wandering thoughts.”\(^{28}\) Maria Guarino observed similar phenomena at Weston Priory, writing:

The monastic approach opens up musical practices to a full immersion in the internal, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of musicking\(^{29}\), whether it is Fleetwood Mac or chanted Psalms. I think of this as a transformation of the mind that moves beyond current thought patterns and limitations to a new plane of awareness.\(^{30}\)

The office of Lauds carries with it much symbolism. The first is that, upon rising in the morning, one is to put one’s thoughts on God and prayer immediately. Second, according to the prophets of the Christian faith, the resurrection of Christ


\(^{29}\) Guarino and others have used this term to describe people in the process of making music. Christopher Small coined the term. See Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 15.

occurred at dawn. The combination of elements during Lauds—the Canticle, Psalms 148, 149, and 150—exalt the earth and praise creation. Psalm 150 is the climax of the psalter, the sixth verse proclaiming, “Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord.” These messages are being carried by the communicative properties and the aesthetic power of music, with its modes reflecting solemnity, joyfulness, and awe. This poetic genre of sacred plainchant psalmody, surviving from the fifth century and in motion this morning, maintains a particular historical authority as well as an effective energy of engagement. I am also observing the unity of movement by the monks, both physically and musically, and an almost intimate participation by the visitors around me, who, too, are wholly absorbed in the now evolving rhythm of the service. There is a pace to the activity: the psalm with its verses flowing and rising, the cadence, breathing, then flowing again. This motion, with the moments of stillness and the waves of tonal energy, order the couplets. The images of nature portrayed in the poetry of the Canticle: sun and the moon, shower and dew, ice and snow, and seas and rivers, impose a pleasantness, providing an energy detached from the printed letters and formed words. It is, using the musical declamation of the poetry’s phrasing, the melodic curve, which aligns with the natural breath, through which the journey from the concrete to the abstract occurs.

For this hour I have witnessed human and musical phenomena at work. I have listened intently to the interpretations of the semantic and syntactical properties of this sung speech, been enveloped in the setting, and have observed others taking part in the ritual that is structured around and influenced by the intimate power of the

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voice.³² Harris Berger, ethnomusicologist and folklorist, emphasizes that, “music does not exist by itself”, that, “it may play a substantial role in the participants’ lives, which in turn may affect their actions.”³³ Most music scholars would agree and Berger points out that their practices and shared experiences account for the relational nature of their identities. For the monks, music’s role in their lives is highly consequential. Of course, manifest in the experience is the influence of the theological texts. According to Lawrence Ferrara, “At both the composing and interpreting stages, music is imbued with a human presence.”³⁴ Musical moments are often experienced through the ears of many persons who are simultaneously indexing multiple memories and meanings. Similarly, Gabrielsson, in positioning his work regarding how we react to music, sets forth the premise, “Behind every music experience there is an interplay between three overall factors: the music, the person, and the situation.”³⁵ The auditory environment that the music creates, in this setting, is a fertile source of emotion with layers of import and interpretation. During Lauds I experienced moments of a clear and undistracted mind absorbed in the moment; I effortlessly traveled from silence to sound. Only by being jolted out of my trance by the rapping of the abbot’s ring upon the choir stall, did I realize I had been gone.

Lauds concludes and I amble back to the guest house, enjoying the warmth of the morning sun and the breeze fanning the long wild grass. The blackbirds peck among the roots and moist red dirt clods that had been tilled up by the monastery’s

³³ Ibid., 277.
³⁴ Lawrence Ferrara, “Phenomenology as a Tool for Musical Analysis,” Musical Quarterly 70, no. 3 (Summer, 1984), 357.
³⁵ Gabrielsson, 436.
resident road grader. I contemplate the musical formulas I observed during my attendance at Lauds this morning: form and mode, incipit and reciting tone, and mediant and final cadence. These seemingly wandering tone patterns used in the psalms and canticles provide a melodic formula to which any sentence of text may be sung. To perform them properly is to combine the syllabic accents of the prose, or rhythmic flow of speech, with the melodic pre-tonic pitches that carry the forward motion toward the structural pitches, which emphasize the phrase, and whose forward inertia contains the energy that is dissipated during the final cadence. The result is a meaningful representation of the text and, when sung, a musical dialogue between the choirs occurs.

The experience is amplified by the context of the people in the room: monk and visitor alike were connecting in a social, yet intimate, way. The phenomenologists suggest that there is a sense of solidarity and bonding manifest in the interpretation and the experience of religious ritual. In being there we are transported to an emotional realm, yet in our own time and place, absorbed in the simple undulating melodies. For a moment, participating in the act of chanting the antiphons and the psalmody, there is a communion, a human interrelatedness. Will I find that the monk has a similar interpretation? Is the experience more intense or revitalizing to the brother who is constantly immersed in this practice?

During the rise of Christian monasticism in the fourth century, reciting the Psalter became an important communal practice, eventually leading to a rule. Its purpose was, “to distract the mind from physical appetites, to fill the back of the mind with spiritually edifying concepts so as to free the higher levels of consciousness

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36 Ferrara, 358.
(the *intellectus*, as it was called) for mystical enlightenment."\(^{37}\) The early Greek theologian and Bishop of Caesarea St. Basil the Great (ca. 330-79) was influential in the spread of early Christian monasticism. Observing psalmody and its service, he writes:

> A psalm implies serenity of soul; it is the author of peace, which calms bewildering and seething thoughts. For it softens the wrath of the soul, and what is unbridled it chastens. A psalm forms friendships, unites those separated, conciliates those at enmity. Who, indeed, can still consider him an enemy with whom he has uttered the same prayer to God? So that psalmody, bringing about choral singing, a bond, as it were, toward unity, and joining the people into a harmonious union of one choir, produces also the greatest of blessing, charity.\(^{38}\)

St. Basil refers to the reconciling nature of voices united by singing and the resulting contribution: a life of balance, spontaneous generosity, and benevolence. St. Benedict, a student of the writings of St. Basil, promises that “the monastic life should produce its results here and now.”\(^{39}\) The phenomenologist Ferrara suggests that, “we do not step out of our own world but become more knowingly present,” when engaged in music. Further, “we do not discontinue dwelling in our own world; we come home to it with a renewed sense of curiosity and interest.”\(^{40}\) This monophonic song transports the practitioner from motionless to motion, from meaningless to meaning. Brother Leander Hogg, who has resided at Christ in the Desert for twenty-two years, remarks, “We come to choir to become contemplative, to come together as one, to be attentive to the text. The rhythmic breathing carries


\(^{39}\) Kardong, 33.

\(^{40}\) Ferrara, 358.
the person into their interior.”⁴¹ Over the course of a week, every week, all 150 Psalms, poetry of lament and battle, praise and thanksgiving, will be chanted in this way. This daily-weekly-yearly ritual of singing the familiar must access the “interior” that Brother Leander refers to in ways that emotionally engages, leads, and rewards the chanter.

Relaxing in the tranquility of the mid-morning, I look forward to today’s Mass, where the chants will be in Latin and more florid and diverse than the psalmody of the Office. In the Roman Catholic calendar today, November 1st is All Saints Day, a yearly celebration of saints and martyrs. This morning’s service will be particularly intriguing as a brother will profess his vows, an important step in the monastic journey.

B. Between the Hours of Terce and Sext: A Celebration

I arrive as the procession of clergy and monks are leaving the cloister and entering the chapel. The clergy are wearing white vestments with red stoles; the monks in their black cassocks in contrast to them and the golden adobe walls that glisten in the mid-morning sun. This ritual—the regal procession, the garments, the unity of the voices—is a musical invitation to the faithful, which sets the tone for the

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Mass and of the day. They are chanting the entrance antiphon *Gaudeámus ómnes* (see example 2.2). “Let us rejoice in the Lord and celebrate this festival in honor of all the Saints, on whose solemnity the angels rejoice and praise the Son of God. Rejoice in the Lord, O you just: praise becometh the upright. Glory to the Father, Amen.” This chant is more elaborate than the psalmody and antiphons of the Offices this morning. The declamation of text is an intricate expression of the phrases, free of any rhythmic punctuation, with movement approaching and retreating, leaping from and ornamenting the reciting pitch. This ornamentation,

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42 Saulnier, 79.
unlike that of later musical traditions, highlights the key notes, thus, identifying the mode. As I inspect the text, I note the groupings of the punctum notation. Simply stated, the densest, such as groups of two or three neumes, is a clue to the most important words of the phrase.

Etymologically, neume comes from the Greek word *pneuma*, or “breath.” These neumes, or inflective marks, originally signified a phrase or melodic unit that could be sung in one breath. Neumes are the compositional creativity and soul of chant showing relative pitches, which generally raise the pitch over the accents. Working from the ascending pattern, which comprises the approach to these accented words, one can interpret more precisely the objective of the phrase and aurally appreciate the delivery of text. The accents of the Latin text map out the melody, which is hidden in the structured arch. Daniel Saulnier, professor of Gregorian chant and priest at the Abbey of St. Peter of Solesmes in France, says of this creative art, “The other syllables are carried along by this movement: those preceding the accent are a preparation for the highest point; those following are a transition toward the ending. All this happens within the unity of a single rhythmic entity, that of the word.”44 This introit is characteristic of the repertoire, with its opening intonation and closing cadential figures, the Psalm text, and the concluding *allelúia*. The mood cast by the Dorian mode is sincere and earnest, qualities reflective of the occasion.

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44 Saulnier, 33.
There is a sense of eager anticipation as the abbot’s schola take their places near the congregant’s pews and begins chanting an especially elaborate allelúia.\(^{45}\) I note the expansive melismatic melodic patterning of the final syllable, Yah, or Jah, Jehovah, or Lord; an apropos chant acclamation for what is to come.

This is a special Mass today, as Brother John Baptist Dziko, a young man from Chikolokoto, a small village in Malawi, Africa, will make his profession vows. Based on Rule 58:17, the novice promises for one year to observe three virtues: obedience to the Rule, fidelity to the monastic lifestyle, and stability in the community.\(^{46}\) The abbot, prior to beginning the ceremony, begins his remarks by referring to the many relics of the saints in the chapel: St. Benedict, St. John the Baptist, St. Cecilia and others. “They walked a blessed path, faithful and prayerful, as we too walk,” he stated while he gestured toward the shrine where the relics are displayed. Continuing, he waved his right arm in an outward motion, as though he were tossing something, affirming that, “we are all saints walking this path. A path of prayer is a long and hard one but possible, and the proof of a prayerful life is evident by the way we live, treat, and love others.”\(^{47}\)

The abbot then invites Brother John Baptist to profess his intentions, in the presence of God and the saints whose relics are preserved in the chapel, to the monks of the community. Brother John Baptist, standing in the center of the chapel with his arms extended and tears running down his cheeks, intones the Súscipe, the centerpiece of the monastic profession and the goal of monastic life as outlined in

\(^{45}\) From the Hebrew hallélyá, a literal translation is “Praise the Lord, a phrase common in both Jewish and Christian liturgies.

\(^{46}\) Kardong, 473.

Rule 58:21 (see example 2.3). *Súscipe me, Dómine, secúndum elóquium túum et vivam, et non confundas me ab expectatióne méa*, “Receive me Lord, as you have promised, and I shall live; do not disappoint me in my hope.”

*Example 2.3. Súscipe me. Reproduced from the Nov. 1, 2014, Mass Program.*

His soft tenor voice first uncertain, rises confidently, gliding on the reciting tone. Draped in the black scapular of his consecration, he is statuesque, embodying the beliefs of thousands of years—his voice carrying his offering. Rising to the peak, infusing a relaxed and contented mood, he makes his claim in song to live according to God’s promise. All in attendance repeat this verse, as though we are warranting his commitment. Continuing, he chants the conclusion of the *Súscipe: Glória Patri et Fílio et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in princípio et nunc et sempre, et in saécula saeculórum. Amen.* “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.”

Brother John is an ontological exemplification of this continuum and, at this moment, in this atmosphere of ritual, surrounded by the influence of art and the saints’ relics,

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48 Kardong, 475-6.
brothers and oblates, and transported by song, he may be filled with the ineffable manifestation of a covenant with God.

To complete his petition, Brother John reads in his determined English, in the presence of those gathered, his handwritten profession document. He is pledging to devote his life to the community and to the Benedictine practices for a period of one year. “May you keep in your heart that dedication to the Lord, which this habit outwardly proclaims,” says Abbot Lawrence, who then presents him with a copy of the rule while stating, “My son, look at this Rule of our Father Benedict. By its light you wish to fight for Christ. If you will promise to be guided by it, know that from this day forward throughout the time of your temporary vows, you are bound to this way of life.”49 Brother John Baptist responds by professing, “Trusting in the help of God, I promise.”50 To conclude the ceremony, and as a sign of acceptance into the monastic community, he receives the Kiss of Peace from the abbot and one by one, each brother files past Brother John, welcoming him with a hug and salutation. I see a different side of some of the brothers that I had discounted for being gruff and distant; this morning I see a renewed pleasantness in their eyes as though they were reliving their first profession.

Through a framework of participant-observer, I respond to this experience with respect and humility. Those around me witnessing this ritual may have shared similar or strikingly different emotions, depending on their beliefs and motivations for being present today. However, being here, I am witnessing a highly textured and potentially transformative event, influenced by the aesthetic power of song and the

49 Lawrence, OSB, “The Solemnity of All Saints.”
phenomenon of voice. Whether speaking or singing, the voice, from one individual to another, is minutely distinctive in its timbre. These acoustic differentiations become signatures or identifiers of the individual. The voice, resonating in the body through singing as a form of subjective or social self-expression, results in an extremely personal experience. Being attuned to the voice is to be attuned aurally through listening: “the voice is always for the ear, it is always relational.” The voice then can be seen as a nexus of physiology meeting the cultural environment. There is a trio of agency for the voice—intimate, physical, and social. The voice and listening are then key to, “understanding the shaping of the subjective and the intersubjective, the intimate and the public.” In the case of the brothers, their voices are a means of prayerful self-expression and during this extra musical experience, which contains explicit symbolism, a uniting or re-making force is at play within their monastic community. Assessing this event through the lens of Durkheim and the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, one could conclude that this profession ceremony was a concentration and reaffirmation of a social group’s customs and a powerful motivating force to act. Turner believed, “ritual is a periodic restatement of the terms in which men of a particular culture must interact if there is to be any kind of coherent social life.”

53 Ibid.
54 Meyer refers to meaning emerging from connotation, or mood, or the use of a program or texts, as extra-musical. Music adds uniqueness to the affective experience. See Leonard B. Meyer, Emotion and Meaning in Music (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 270.
Brother John’s profession was an experience shaped by ceremony, singing, and tradition. The innocently intoned Súcipe with its simple yet poignant text with the other elements of this ritualistic formality infused with monastic consignification, is but another representation of the brothers’ spiritual procession and group inclusiveness.

The communion antiphon, Beáti mundo córde, chanted in earnest by the monks, provides a solemn backdrop to the conclusion of the procession of communion and Mass (see example 2.4). This chant, taken from the Scriptures, is in a semi-elaborate style similar to the introit and is in the same mode. Its function, in addition to accompanying communion, is to provide a message and atmosphere of thanksgiving and unity. The text, from the Gospel of Matthew, is “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall
be called children of God. Blessed are they who suffer persecution for righteousness sake for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.\textsuperscript{57}

The Mass concludes with the celebrant, Father Simeon, inviting all to join the brothers in the guest area for a reception followed by lunch in the refectory. He then chants the dismissal blessing.

Lunch is truly a feast. Carved pumpkins, products of the previous evening’s monks-only party, adorn the main tables (see figure 2.2). The standard menu of chicken, rice, pinto beans, green beans, and potatoes, is topped off with gelato imported from Ecco’s in Santa Fe. After lunch, some of the brothers and guests mingle discussing such things as the new gravel on the monastery road and

\begin{center}
\textbf{Figure 2.2. Decorations in Refectory Created by the Brothers.}
\textit{Photo by the author.}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{57} Feast of All Saints, in \textit{The Roman Missal}, 688.
electricity in the guest rooms: “Thanks be to God,” Father Bernard proclaims (see figure 2.3). Soon, Abbot Lawrence rings the bell, signifying the end of the afternoon’s affair. The more junior brothers begin bussing dishes and cleaning up the hall, as the senior monks make their way to the cloister entrance. The afternoon is a display of Benedictine openmess and hospitality, “a bedrock monastic principle,”\textsuperscript{58} whereby all the guests are received into an inclusive and cherishing environment of \textit{suscipiantur} .\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{58} Kardong, 421.
\textsuperscript{59} Rule 53, The Reception of Guests, is one of Benedict’s best-known and revered treatises. \textit{Suscipiantur, be received}, is one of the keywords of the Rule, appearing seven times. The monks’ profession of vows is a readiness to receive others in hospitality.
The unexpectedness of the cordial and open atmosphere in the refectory makes the experience of the afternoon all the more winsome. I return to my cell, looking forward to Vespers. Similar to Lauds, which praises the daylight, Vespers is the great Office of the evening. Stemming from fourth-century Roman tradition, Vespers has remained popular among Christians worldwide; the Anglican faith and many Protestant religions practice an Evensong or Twilight service.

C. Vespers: Dusk in the Canyon

The monks file into the chapel, taking their places in the choir stalls while Brother Dominic lights the candelabra that is placed on the altar (see figure 2.4). The atmosphere is punctuated with incense and the soft pink and red hues of the light of sunset emanating through the clerestory windows. The vessel containing the relic of

![Figure 2.4. Chapel Interior. Altar Set for Vespers. Photo by the author.](image)
St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of the monastery, accompanies the altar adornments. Vespers begins with a short versicle: “O God, come to my assistance,” and responsory: “O Lord, make haste to help me.” The chanting of the prescribed psalms begins.

Exemplifying centuries past, after the Psalms and antiphons, there is a short lesson from Scriptures, a responsory and hymn, then, unique to Vespers and first prescribed by St. Benedict in his Rule 17.8, a Magnificat is sung before the Canticle. The Magnificat is taken from the opening text of the Gospel of Luke: “My soul doth magnify the Lord” (see example 2.5). The canticle tone, appended to the end of the Magnificat, is more elaborate than those prior, and the mood cast by the mode is one of contentment.

Example 2.5. Antiphon for the Magnificat. Reproduced from the Nov.1, 2014, Choir Book, p. 100. With Canticle tone Mode VII.

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60 Kardong, 196.
The prose verses of the canticle are suffused in language of the fulfillment of prophecy (see figure 2.5). Providing an interconnection are the mediational qualities in relation to the chapel space and the chanting. Georgia Born, anthropologist and musician whose ethnographic research includes studies of the mediational qualities of sound, states, “music is always (but variably) experienced through a constellation of aural, notational, visual, performative, corporeal, social and technological forms.”

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

For He has looked upon his servant in her lowliness; all ages to come shall call me blessed.

God who is mighty has done great things for me and Holy is His Name;

His mercy is from generation to generation on all those who fear Him.

He has shown the power of his arm; He has confused the proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places.

The hungry He has given every good thing, while the rich he has sent empty away.

He has come to the help of Israel His servant, ever mindful of His mercy.

According to the promise He made to our ancestors of His mercy to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Figure 2.5. The Canticle from Luke 1:46-55. Reproduced from the Nov. 1, 2014, Choir Book, p. 100-1.

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The atmosphere created during this hour is an ensemble of aural and visual elements conveying meaning and expression. Almost like theater, there is a sense of timelessness and other-worldliness within this multi-textural environment.

The mediational components present here—the temporal weight of the chapel setting, liturgical content, and ritual, which are punctuated by the music—seem to amplify the emotional effect of the atmosphere.

The service ends with prayers common to all Offices: for peace and justice throughout the world, for the community, the poor, hungry, and lonely, for those who lead the monastic life, for the brothers and sisters who are away from the Monastery, and for the souls of the departed. I leave the chapel in silence, contemplating the celebratory responsorial psalms and the *Magnificat* that composed the Office of Vespers and how they provided much inspiration to later composers who set these works polyphonically. They too heard something splendid, something relational, then compositionally expanded these monophonic sources into masterpieces.

D. A Commemoration of the Faithfully Departed

After a night of soothing rain, I woke to the chapel bell ringing for Vigils on this All Souls’ Day. The psalmody of Vigils is, as St. Benedict describes, sung *in directum*, or without a refrain or responsorial from the congregants. The chanting of the verses proceeds one after another, alternating between the two choirs of monks. The lengthy opening antiphon, sung in mode VI, the patterns containing intervals no wider than a third, allow the monks to move quickly through the text and cast a tranquil and composed mood throughout the room. Reflective of the day, the subject
of the prose of the eleven psalms chanted during this Office include merciful pleas for all who die as believers in God. The modes, evolve from IV, reflective and meditative, to mode V, more joyful, to mode I, solemn and earnest. The Office of Lauds has a similar progression, and the psalmody during the short Office of Terce is preceded and followed by the antiphon, *Turn, O Lord, rescue my soul*; this and the prior Offices prodigiously preparing us for the mid-morning Mass to come.

A light drizzle accompanies the clergy and monks as they proceed from the cloister into the chapel. They chant the entrance antiphon, *Requiem aetérnam dona eis Dómine* (see example 2.6). The Mass takes its name from the first words of the introit: *Requiem aetérnam*, eternal rest. Today clergy across the Catholic world will commemorate those who have departed by reciting the Office of the Dead. This day is an extraordinary occasion in the Church; therefore, a variety of repertoire exists with textual sources for these Mass chants dating from the tenth century. The *Requiem aetérnam* text reoccurs during the Gradual, which, except for the Introit, Offertory, and Communion, is the oldest chant performed during the Mass. Revealed is a mosaic of expression and remembrance as the formula of the Mass unfolds with the *Kyrie eléison*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*, *Lux aetérna*, and *Liberame, Dómine*.

The soundscape envelops the few retreatants present this weekend as well as individuals from the surrounding communities who have traveled here today to attend the Mass. The twelve-member *schola* assembles in the walkway between the guest pews and attentively listens for the opening pitch of the elaborate mode VII

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Allelúia (see example 2.7). Abbot Lawrence chants the first Alleluia, after which the schola navigates the jubilus with ease. The verse is then chanted by the schola, with the abbot directing, using his hand and arm to indicate the rise and fall of the melismas and intricate neume groupings. His motions transcend the parallel lines of the notation, as the graceful curves drawn by his right hand blanket the tops of the melody’s cresting and receding and beginning again. The highlight of the verse is
the phrase *Dómine exáudi vocem meam*, “Lord, hear my voice.” There is an apparent increase in the group’s energy as they move toward the climax, *exáudi*. In six syllables, beginning with *Dómine*, the chant rises from the beginning pitch, g, first by a leap to c, then stepwise to a punctum above the c-clef line, to d, the reciting tone. At *exáudi*, the syllable *aú* is the peak emphasized with a two-note podatus. Note the episma line under the podatus. This indicates to the chanter that he or she is to sustain this lower note a bit longer. Then, the ornamentation of the final syllable, *di*, begins with a downward leap to the reciting tone and three-note

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63 The definitions of, and interpretations of chant notation can be found in the *Liber Usualis* or in various reference materials. These interpretations are taken from William Tortolano, *A Gregorian Chant Handbook* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2005).
grouping, torculus, which also has an episma line over the grouping. A quilisma, from the Greek kylio, “to roll,” is performed with a very light trilling while ascending in a legato fashion to unite with the two punctum, which also is notated with an episma. Finally, a climacus, a punctum with two diamond-shaped descending notes that are performed rapidly, embellishes the dotted clivis, ending the phrase. The chant continues with the elaborate extension of the final syllable, am, descending to the ending cadence. This extended jubilus of five neume groupings is a vocalized unfurling of the final element. This type of lyrical recitation, as observed by St. Augustine, “cuts itself free from the shackles of its syllables,” supporting a gracefully descending melodic line.64

This chant is detailed and demanding in control, pitch, and attention to moving from one neume grouping to another. The monks’ execution is impressive, as the majority have little singing or musical training. I sense an intensity in the more senior members as though they are coaching—by emphasizing the aural components of the chant, they are in some way rendering its meaning or how it is to be experienced. The schola repeats the opening Allelúia more accurately and more in unison than the first time. The abbot’s hand motions again indicate the delicate rising and falling pattern of this florid acclamation. The Allelúia has been a fitting introduction to the Mass message and has set a reverent tone in the room.

“This is the day we as a community pray for the repose of the souls of our loved ones, that they may be on their way to the Kingdom,” prefaces Abbot

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Lawrence as he begins his sermon. He jokes about how his life has not been perfect and how he “won’t just zip up to heaven in a whoosh,” as he waves his arm upward and smiles. He draws his homily to a close, speaking of bereavement and grief as natural responses and empathetically states, “All these are human thoughts. Challenge the mystery and think of death as a union with the saints and with those who have gone before.” While gesturing toward the chapel door, the abbot invites the communal to proceed to the monastery’s cemetery to take part in blessing those who are buried there.

At the small site of twenty to thirty graves, the participants are sandwiched between the clergy and the monks. The abbot blesses the graves with incense, while the antiphon for the deceased is chanted by the *scola*: *Lux aetérna lúceat eis, Dómine cum sanctis tuis in aetérnum qui a pius es.* “May eternal light shine upon them, Oh Lord, in the company of your saints for eternity, for you are full of goodness.” With a quivering voice, Brother Christian, the cantor, invites the congregants to sing the closing chant: “May the angels lead you into paradise, may the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem.” Voices stagger in as the chant progresses; the singing eases the gravity of the moment and changes the condition.

I realize I have witnessed a social process orchestrated by those devoted to it and mediated by the intensifying elements of song, the canyon setting, the light rain, and the formal ritual. Musicologist Kay Norton states that “spiritual or religious singing, reciting, and chanting play several important metaphysical and practical

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roles in belief communities." Specifically, “Singing contributes solemnity to Buddhist rituals. Jews, Christians, and other religious people request God’s blessing and presence at mealtimes, weddings, or in meditative moments through song.” At the conclusion of this ritual, the community departs the small graveyard and returns to the chapel, walking closer to one another, bound by this common experience (see figure 2.6). By this religious reenactment, our unity, as well as that of the brothers, is exemplified by a fusion of feelings and emotions.

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Ibid.

E. The Practice of Being Present: *Lectio divina*

Once again we are invited to enjoy Benedictine hospitality at the reception after Mass. I converse with a gentleman from France who has been at the Monastery for two weeks working on a research project. He is traveling to sites in America and Europe to conduct a comparative study of Benedictine practices with those of a sect of Buddhists. While we talk, my guesthouse neighbor, a middle-aged Austrian woman, had been attentively listening. She interjects, “My journeys here are a salve for a chaotic world.”

This morning’s shared and referential experiences have brought us together, transcending differences such as origin, occupation, and religion. Looking forward, I will enjoy the four-hour break before the Office of None. The brothers will retreat to their period of *lectio divina*, an educational and spiritual practice of their tradition unfamiliar to me before my fieldwork.

In this “school of the Lord’s service,” as St. Benedict describes the monastery—a “workshop” set apart from the world where spiritual crafts are exercised—includes a time of preparation and learning as well as prayer and work. A part of spiritual self-formation is the exploration of and discovery of one’s self through the meaning and message of the Scriptures. Commonplace in early Judaism were solemn readings of the Torah to people gathered near the synagogue. Later in Christian history, Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah to followers assembled

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69 Interview with an anonymous visitor, November 2, 2014.
70 Interview with an anonymous visitor, November 2, 2014.
71 Kardong, 31.
at the town synagogue at Nazareth. Today this hermeneutic tradition is more a *style* of reading texts rather than simply the *act* of reading.

*Lectio divina* is sometimes translated literally to mean “reading from God,” and can be used to refer to the Bible itself. St. Benedict reminds the cenobite in Rule 4.55 that he must, *lectiones sanctas libenter audire*, or, listen intently to holy reading. This immersion with divinely inspired writings will, as expressed in Rule 73, provide reliable guideposts for the journey toward perfection’s spiritual summit.

References throughout the Rule are made to *lectio*, such as the determined hours and place of its practice, how much reading is acceptable and how one is to *meditare, meditate*, or ruminate upon the biblical text or psalm verse.

The practice is an activity performed both in public and in private. The monastery’s commitment to reading is apparent everywhere: there are two libraries: one in the cloister and one in the guest house, the lectern in the chapel that is used for readings during every Office, the elevated lectern platform on the west wall of the refectory, and numerous volumes of the ancient Christian as well as contemporary writers are available in the gift shop. The importance of books and the patristic writings, transcripts of saints, mystics and desert fathers is central to monastic life. Integral to this are mealtimes. Meals are taken in silence in the refectory. After all are gathered and the abbot begins the meal by ringing a bell on his table, the blessing is chanted. The appointed reader for the day, who is seated at the lectern, reads the day’s Gospel. Once the meal is served, the reader proceeds in reading

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73 Kardong, 384.
74 Ibid., 607.
aloud selections from the ancient writers or chosen historical texts. To conclude the evening meal reading session, the necrology of the saints for the coming day is recounted.

“Lectio is not so much about the past as it is about the present and the future,” states Raymond Studzinski, OSB, Ph.D. and professor of spirituality at Fordham University. He continues that the monastic is not mining for facts through text or looking for a scholastic argument, but is engaging with a sacred narrative that will lead the reader to a divine comprehension of all things—wisdom. The social anthropologist Richard Irving, whose ethnographic research includes a year at Downside Abbey in Somerset, England, argues that “lectio divina aims to transform the relationship between the reader and text by changing the method through which we approach the written word.” That through its four-stage process: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation, a setting is created for a revelation or an encounter and the establishment of a relationship with God. The texts and the discoveries therein are the beginning of the process of opening the self to prayer. Brother Benedict of Christ in the Desert, when asked about the importance of lectio divina, stated, “Every monk from 4:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. needs to be involved in prayerful reading of the scriptures. Unless there is that in the monk’s life the Divine Office, what we do in church, the liturgy, the Hours, is silliness and it becomes empty.”

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75 Studzinski, 222.
76 Ibid., 16.
78 Ibid., 403-7.
The monastery is the matrix where the practices of tradition flourish and the practitioner is formed through listening holistically in a spirit of thorough readiness to carry out the will of God. Listening for the texts to speak to the reader is not a passive act. In the case of the call and response antiphonal chanting, there is a sensory engagement with and between those around and across from the chanter—a uniting of voices into one. Listening intently, allowing the sound to enter and act upon the listener, adds a physical dimension to the communal aspect of musical expression. The visceral qualities of sound unite with the coordinated movements of the brothers in the choir stalls and in processions to bring about a profound and unifying experience. Ethnomusicologist Judith Becker writes, "Many persons, bound together by common aims, may experience revitalization and general good feeling. The situation is communal and individual, music descends upon all alike, while each person's joy is his or her own." Becker's observations and exploration of music in groups is echoed by Turino who, when discussing the disappearance of differences when performing music, states that musicians:

are fully focused on an activity that emphasizes our sameness—of time sense, of musical sensibility, of musical habits and knowledge, of patterns of thought and action, of spirit, of common goals—as well as our direct interaction. Within the bounded and concentrated frame of musical performance that sameness is all that matters, and for those moments when the performance is focused and in sync, that deep identification if felt as total (emphasis in original).  

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81 Turino, 18.
Maria Guarino observed that communal music making brings about a transformation of the mind, a musical metanoia.\textsuperscript{82} From the ancient Greek, this changing of one’s mind, or a reorientation to one’s life in the Christian sense, echoes the promise of St. Benedict that by following the traditions of monastic life a personal transformation or \textit{conversatio}, will occur.\textsuperscript{83} The overall function of chant is to illuminate the text, and this cantillation in the resonant chapel space, in unity and alliance, creates a strong ethos. In general, my interlocutors at Christ in the Desert admit to attaining a certain mindfulness and a transcendence of the ordinary via the practice. Revealed through this narrative is that singing intensifies their ritual, and their rituals empower the individual and revitalize and strengthen the commune of brothers.

It is an exploration of the high desert canyon, its light and darkness, stillness and enormity, and its enveloping influence that chapter 3 turns. The rich environment which surrounds the monastery is integral to their theology. Their desert could have been an inner-city or a mountain top, but their call to the wilderness—a place unfamiliar—represents a renunciation of a comfortable life for one built on faith. The Chama River Canyon, where the Monastery has flourished for fifty years, is where the conventional active force of monasticism—the challenging communal life focused on finding God, the \textit{Opus Dei}—occurs. This great room without walls that surrounds the monks’ lives possesses an ontological import, calling forth introspection and returning inspiration. The profound desert silence is broken only by the progression of the chanting of the Psalms defining the day.

\textsuperscript{82} Guarino, 233.  
\textsuperscript{83} Kardong, 24.
Chapter Three – The Sacred Desert Character

This place is extraordinary. You can actually hear the birds fly and the snow fall.

—Father Bernard Cranor, OSB

I. Where Silence Speaks

“Chama is a Native American term which means wrestling, and that’s what we do here,”¹ says Father Bernard with authority. He has been at Christ in the Desert for twenty-five years, and, through his infectious smile, articulates while he gestures toward the river. “I have to work at my disciplines, and this setting helps me. Its subtleties, that’s what I love about this place. Nature too. Sometimes during the Office you can hear the coyotes in the background—they’re just joining in!”²

The brothers who dwell here exhibit powers of attentiveness unlike other people. Father Bernard refers to this as refining his disciplines, or his practice of a life of prayer. Punctuated by the chapel bell, which signals the brothers’ commitment to deeds performed with great awareness, the brothers are connected to, and praise the desert earth. The Chama River, which flows through the canyon between the towering ancient cliffs on its way to join the Rio Grande further south, is a keynote in this landscape, influencing and outlining the lives of the men who live by it. This spot is a communion of sights and unique sounds, foliage warmth, and freshness that envelops the visitor with a sense of awe. To the explorers from Mount Saviour, the location where the monastery stands, was seen to possess archetypal significance;

¹ Father Bernard Cranor was not far off in his definition. Linguist William Bright defines in his dictionary of American place names derived from Native languages Chama to be a shortening of the Tewa “wrestling pueblo-ruin”; (tsąmą qŋwįį́), to wrestle, tsąmą.
² Father Bernard Cranor, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015, at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert.
to Native peoples, a sacredness.\(^3\) This is a place where the psalmody extolling nature is practiced by the novice, priest, and parishioner: a place of pilgrimage, with a history that includes indigenous peoples and where individuals could reconnect with the origins of the Christian faith. The monastery would affix itself in the red rock bed and continue to cultivate Benedictine monasticism in the hushed mountainous desert. This distraction-free and serene environment becomes a participant in the meaningful and diverse experiences of those in pursuit of inner silence, introspection, and thanksgiving. To the brothers dwelling within its solace, the desert brings fresh insights, and, for Thomas Merton, it was the place to "seek the deepest meaning of human existence."\(^4\) The desert is their cathedral—an antidote to conventions of the city—and serves to liberate one from subjectivity by calling forth gratitude and devotion to their community as well as service to others.

In this chapter, I explore introspective and inspirational aspects of the desert and its relationship to the brothers’ spiritual journey. I consider the unique and powerful desert setting—its soundscape and its metaphorical representation in the history of monasticism. While the extensive theological perspective of the desert as a symbol is beyond the scope of this work, here I focus on the bond the brothers have with the surrounding environment and the desert’s ability to evoke attentiveness and awareness. I argue that chant springs from the soundscape of their desert. Prayer, from its wordlessness of subtle and patient silence forms into the pure sound of a song which modulates the transition from individuality to the

\(^3\) Discovered pit houses, projectile points, tools, and storage structures date from 3100 BCE. Further, more artifacts are traced to the Puebloan Gallina culture, whose peoples inhabited the canyon from 1100 to 1275. See Mari Graña’s account of the canyon ancestral Puebloan inhabitants in *Brothers of the Desert*, 39-46.

communal. Silence, by contrast, signals the re-emergence at Christ in the Desert of a more solitary devotion. Living a practice of silence, enhanced by a surrounding that is noiseless, is transformative in itself: a liberation that provides a new and open space, individually and collectively, for thought, discourse, and worship practices. The daily antiphonal singing of the Psalms resembles this: moving from silence to sound and back, encompassing both kinetic and verbal expressions that become more attentive; all actions performed with reverent awareness within this space. Chanting is a dialog between one meaning-filled voice of devotion and another which have given primacy of place to the word, in the intimacy of silence.

The outside world—with its precariousness and unpredictability, trials, and restlessness—fade away, as the profundity of this assuaging dimension integrates all who experience it. To the monk, the desert is a place for listening—where the disciple is silent before the teacher in order to gain wisdom.

A. The Desert: What It Represents and How It Is Perceived

The thirteen-mile, forty-minute drive on Forest Service Road 151 to the Monastery starts along the high mesa (see figure 3.1). Traveling westward toward the remote site, a pink cloud of dust and the constant pings of gravel hitting against the body of the automobile provide unusual companionship. A glance in the rearview mirror reveals only traversed landscape, sky, and rugged mountain tops. The increasing switch-backs and blind turns force attention back to the chore of driving, as the forward momentum is inhibited by an occasional cattle guard and the narrowing, rutted, slippery surface of the washboard dirt road (see figure 3.2).
Figure 3.1. Forest Service Road 151, Rio Chama Canyon Road. Santa Fe National Forest. Photo by the author.

Figure 3.2. FSR 151 Winding Westward. Photo by the author.
In the sunset light, the surrounding landscape is a mix of golden and brown hues, some trees still showing hints of red from the change fall brings. The winding, narrow road that snakes down toward the Chama River is reddish in color, characteristic of the iron oxide in the soil of Northern New Mexico. The river’s sudden appearance is striking, its southward flow humming stridently—the bustling broken only by water lapping against rocks and around bends. At times it is the same color as the road, the glistening red-capped surges blending with the canyon rock and contrast against the grasses of the landscape (see figure 3.3). The darkening turquoise sky takes on a silver tone as the moon peeks over the canyon wall. This drive is, as a rite of passage and arrival is like entering into another world. The murmur of the river, now a half-mile away, and the cackling of night-nesting fowl provide a sonic backdrop to the evening’s scenic vastness. Soon, one is enveloped in the stillness and deep quiet. There is a sudden alertness—to the distant sounds

Figure 3.3. The Chama River Flowing Southward. Photo by the author.
from across the valley and feeling an anxiousness and uneasiness in this new and inspiring setting.

The silence, this new ambient normal interrupted only by nature, is a distinct presence that, as Richard Rohr observes, “is not just that which is around words and underneath images and events. It has a life of its own. It’s a phenomenon with almost a physical identity.” The idea that a visit to this place will be ordinary and unremarkable is replaced by the overwhelming presence of silence. From this quiet the surrounding beauty cries out, muzzling any internal preoccupations. There is a reverence to this external stillness, which, over time, brings a deeper inner silence. The desert is a paradox, eliciting a sense of both comfort yet fear, and beauty yet death. One unfamiliar with life surrounded by nothing but sky, rock, and land might romanticize this setting, musing about what forsaking the demands of life in the city might bring. The desert is indifferent to the unacquainted—to those accustomed to sound it could be unnerving, but, as I argue here, to live in intimacy with desert silence is to understand an integral facet of the contemplative life.

Thomas Merton writes of the immoral and misdirected society of the 4th century A.D. that the early Christian hermits abandoned to live in the solitude of the deserts of Egypt, Arabia, Palestine, and Persia. Merton points out that these men were not rebels against society or strictly individualistic, but they were questing for an environment where they would not be ruled by man nor would they rule over others. “The society they sought was one where all men were truly equal, where the only authority under God was the charismatic authority of wisdom, experience and

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love.”

Brother Benedict McCaffree of the monastery considers the desert setting, stating:

Traditionally, if you look at the role of the desert in the Hebrew Scriptures, it often times has a connotation of a place of great harshness. But the very simplicity of the desert, as the Jews reflected on their experience of having gone through the desert for 40 years and then living in the midst of the harsh environment, the desert is where you are stripped of all external distractions, so God can speak to your heart. So, living in a place without TV and much of modern distractions, daily trips to the 7-11, and the like, is really wonderful, because you live an intensely focused life. The monk exists to listen to the word of God, to hear it, and to act upon it. And that is all this environment is about.

Belden Lane, stressing the importance that geography plays in knowing who we are, posits that one learns the virtues of agrupnia and apatheia, meaning attentiveness, or wakefulness, and indifference from the desert environment. An awareness of these opposites: the ability to recognize and be awake to the important, while ignoring and detaching from what does not matter, is based on a discipline that is honed by being attuned to one’s inner condition and thoughts.

Similarly, Brother Benedict speaks of the environment of Christ in the Desert being one that allows a person to live a life of intention: abandoning what is not vital and acting upon what is. Lane continues, “Attentiveness and indifference are, respectively, the constructive and deconstructive poles of the spiritual life.”

Extrapolating then, to survive roaming the arid arroyos of Northern New Mexico, one must be alert to threats and landmarks, remain indifferent to fatigue and panic, and

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7 Sub prior Benedict McCaffree, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
9 Ibid., 195.
make deliberate choices based on only what is necessary. Detaching from the world, being indifferent to its values, is a product of the truly conscious and contemplative existence. The life of the monk is an intentioned and disciplined pilgrimage, lived close to the land, guided by rules, and revolves around hours of songful prayer and communal ritual.

The site of the monastery is not linked to any myths, mysterious paranormal phenomena, reported UFOs, or said to possess any healing qualities such as the “sacred soil” of the tiny church in Chimayó. Nor claims any national historical significance other than to the families who have inhabited the valley along the Chama. Its many defining characteristics—the canyon rock walls, the river, the darkness at night, the brilliance of the stars, the soundscape, the smell of pine sap, the adobe chapel with its balanced choir stalls, the lack of idle conversation, and the swish of the monks’ robes—have an allure. To some, this is a place of pilgrimage where one can experience a symbolic ritual activity or simply enjoy the solitude of the environment. The brothers’ sojourn is a manifestation of the commitment to the ascetic’s life and an unwavering submission to a prayer-focused community embraced by desert silence. The desert is the fundament upon which their beliefs rest and to accept a life in its seclusion is to accept a premise of the institution.

Some revere the grounds, speaking of their subtle influence as though sacred. What would deem this site sacred? If one were to have a significant experience, a change of heart, or a revelation or sudden awareness resolving a perplexity, then perhaps the label fits. The site seems to speak with a voice of its

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10 A discussion of the history and devotion to the El Santuario de Chimayo is found in Stephan Francis De Borhegyi and E. Boyd, *El Santuario De Chimayo* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Ancient City Press, 1982).
own, as the natural environment participates with our ascribing of meaning to the unifying engagements that occur: the warm glances, the sharing of choir books, and communal meals in silence. One might label the evocative beauty, the noise-free setting punctuated with the voices of psalm singing, and the abundant hospitality and comfortable sharing of humanness as sacred. Sacredness is simply a perception, yet the experiences here seem to invite a reevaluation of interactions with familial, social, and environmental responsibilities and offer a renewed appreciation of life’s everyday gifts. The focus on individualism dims as the group and community become paramount. The accomplished of extraordinary things by living the communal life in the silence of the desert was a product of Saint Benedict’s provocative thinking.

Every day, stirred by the seasons, the Chama Canyon changes. The light, the foliage, and the river take on ever evolving shapes, shades, and sounds. The monk too changes. Slowly in this place of listening, he becomes more attuned to himself and his brothers. Their songful prayer connects them to each other and, as is their quest, to God.


Saint Benedict, the son of a nobleman, during his twenties, withdrew to a cave in Northern Italy to escape the corruption and religious schism of late fifth-century Rome. For three years, Benedict lived a life of prayer and study in solitude with only occasional contacts from the outside world. Soon others were attracted to his sanctity, and he gained a following. It is unknown how long Benedict remained in
seclusion at Subiaco, but a location where like-minded individuals could live out their ascetic traditions became his quest. He founded Monte Cassino in about 529, where it is likely he composed his rule.\textsuperscript{11} From its prologue one can interpret that the rule was not written for clerics, but for lay individuals on a quest to live a Christ-like life, and the monastery was “a school of the Lord’s service.”\textsuperscript{12} The detailed and precise contents include 73 rules, many of which specifically addressed human nature. Acutely aware that silence and speech were inseparable, Benedict made reference to the importance of silence in numerous passages; however, Rule 6 addresses direct aspects of how talk prevents one from listening.

Silence, as described in Rule 6—a short treatise of only eight verses—is a pursuit. Idle chatter, vulgarities, and evil words are the spiritual life’s enemies. Only through silent contemplation and humility will the patient and wise individual emerge.\textsuperscript{13} Through a doctrine of silence, the true experience of God would be attained. Further, an interpretation of the rules’ Latin title, \textit{De Tacitunitate}, implies more than purely physical silence. “The truly taciturn person will not use words to mask his inner emptiness, nor will he maintain a dumb silence when a good word is needed.”\textsuperscript{14} His implication was that out of an attitude of silence, eloquent speech would arise. There are other passages within the rule that address silence and the times of the day when it is strictly required—in the refectory, after the Office of Compline. One could conclude that a genuine experience of God transcends words,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
    \item The primary source of bibliographic information regarding St. Benedict, is Book 2 of the Dialogues of St. Gregory I. His representation is generally accepted as accurate. \textsuperscript{11}
    \item Rule of St. Benedict, Prologue: 45. \textsuperscript{12}
    \item Kardong, 126. \textsuperscript{13}
    \item Ibid. \textsuperscript{14}
\end{itemize}
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and the Desert Fathers sought silence to induce this atmosphere of deep communion.

Joseph Dispenza, who as a young man lived the life of a Benedictine monk for eight years, found that not speaking, that going into silence, was a most delightful surprise. He writes:

What happens when one is silent for a long period? The outer noise goes first, and then the inner noise starts to evaporate. Soon, quiet reigns everywhere, it seems. Time slows to a crawl. Sound becomes a curiosity—natural sounds, especially, like the flow of water or the rustle and sway of tall grass, become occasions for deeper listening and lead to a most profound inner calm.\(^\text{15}\)

When asked what silence provided, Brother Charles Kariuki, a young man from Eldoret, Kenya, who has been at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert two years, describes the extended periods of monastic silence as a gift:

I never knew that I would appreciate silence when I came to this place. You know I come from the city, a noisy, noisy place. In a city, you can’t ask people to put off the radio or get off the road if you want to pray. Maybe you are doing meditation in your own room, and your neighbor puts on a movie; you can’t tell him to stop it! But here the long periods of silence to me are a treasure, because, despite thinking about God, it gives you answers to many other things: you reflect upon yourself and reflect on your life, and when you reflect on your life and look at where you are right now, it is something that you can say, “Ok, thank you, God, for this.” So silence by its own nature helps you to reflect on so many things. If you’re honest enough, all your reflection is a thanksgiving to God. You just look outside—it’s quiet. To me, it is one of the things that bonds all of us, it’s a treasure to me.\(^\text{16}\)

D. H. Lawrence, the English modernist writer, lived on a ranch near Taos during the early 1920s, referred to his time in New Mexico as, “the greatest experience of the outside world I have ever had.” Drained from life in New York, he

\(^{16}\) Brother Charles Kariuki, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 15, 2015.
returned revitalized, describing the sacred and transcendent landscape: “it had a splendid silent terror.”\textsuperscript{17} Lawrence recognized the desert’s gifts and challenges and equated the landscape with something multi-dimensional. Concluding, Lawrence declares, “actually touch the country, and you will never be the same again.”\textsuperscript{18}

The brothers who dwell here describe an array of distinguishing features that, in combination, reveal the natural, intervening force of the desert. The surrounding landscape, the geography of the canyon as it sweeps from north to south, and the encompassing atmosphere of silence align, acting as participants in their personal narratives. “Each day there is something new in the landscape communicating to me,” Brother Raphael Ndirangu says, while he gestures toward the eastern cliffs behind the chapel (see figure 3.4), “Everything I see: the river, the canyon, is all a

\begin{flushright}
Figure 3.4. The Cloister, Chapel and Reception-Refectory. Photo by the author.
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\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 30.
reflection of God. Each day there is something new. At night, I go out when the moon is high and listen for an owl.”¹⁹

Brother Charles boasts of his love of the high desert—with one exception.

“Well, summer, it comes with snakes! Seriously, I love this place simply because it’s cool and silent. If you are really looking for a discussion with God, this is the place. Just to be away from the bustle of the city, where you can listen to nature; God speaks through nature.”²⁰

Abbot Lawrence observes that silence not only accommodates deep contemplation, but it simply allows for the discovery of what is already present. When describing winter, he writes:

Now is the time of silence in the canyon. The river is quite frozen, so there is no sound of water. The birds have migrated, except for the eagles that come here to spend the winter. Traffic on the fairly deserted road is even less than usual. Nature keeps a silence, and the monks and nuns can join in. All of nature serves as a symbol of the spiritual life. Spiritually, there is a need for silence and quiet and dormancy so that new life can grow. This is symbolic of [the] resurrection, but also of the cycles that all of us have in our personal lives and the inner life of the spirit.²¹

The abbot and brothers speak of the silence that the environment provides as more than simply an escape from external noise. Being silent is an awareness, a consciousness that develops abilities to be fully present to one’s inner wisdom and outer community. The daily antiphonal singing of the Psalms illustrate moving from silence to sound and back, encompassing both kinetic and verbal expressions that become more acute over time: all actions performed with great awareness within this

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²¹ Lawrence, OSB, An Abbot’s Notebook, 141.
space. Chanting is the dialogue between one voice of devotion and another giving prominence to the texts of the psalms.\textsuperscript{22}

C. Silence as Dialogue

Morgan Atkinson’s first visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky was over an Easter weekend. He writes, “It’s amazing how much presence the absence of something can have. No phones, TV, radio, idle chitchat. Just silence.”\textsuperscript{23} Atkinson, an author and documentarian, visited both the Abbey and the Monastery of Christ in the Desert while researching the life of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Merton spent the years from 1965 to 1968 in solitude at the Abbey, living a life much like those of the Desert Fathers. Merton found that the life of solitude was not a withdrawal from society, but that it provided an atmosphere to advance his writing, to live with purposeful intention to deepen his consciousness, and more fully commune with the world.\textsuperscript{24} Atkinson, who studied Merton’s journals, describes Merton’s reflections of solitude “with a fervor you might find in someone’s description of their first trip to Paris.”\textsuperscript{25} Many of Merton’s writings refer to the constructive value an interior life can have in liberating the imagination and allowing it to be used for the purposeful discovery of new meaning and new ideas “beyond this superficial, busy-busy existence”—a way of being refreshed for living.\textsuperscript{26}

Silence can create an environment for an uninterrupted inner dialogue from which springs artistic intuition, dutiful planning, desires, and hopes, or experiences of

\textsuperscript{22} Sub prior Benedict McCaffree, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 112.
remorse, fear, or pain. Contemplation, this attentive form of thinking and a kind of mental viewing, brings a knowingness that becomes a catalyst for actions. Prior Christian Leisy of Christ in the Desert responds to an inquiry regarding the noise-free atmosphere: “We embrace the silence of the desert so that we may both listen to God speaking to us and so that God may hear and be receptive to our voices of prayer. Our greatest desire in this desert living is that God may graciously grant what it is we ask on behalf of the humans of this world.”

Richard Rohr, founder and director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, writes that, “From silence emerges peace, calm, and well-chosen words.” From the Abbot’s Notebook, Father Lawrence writes of the monks’ journey, “As they grow, they become very aware that silence is not just about external noise. Along with external silence is the importance of being at peace within one’s self. This inner peace is the best of all silences, since this is a freedom that allows one’s energy to be used for prayer and for love.”

Life in the community revolves around a fixed framework of activities, which comprises a dense daily schedule. When words are exchanged and when they are not defines the day. The liturgical-devotional periods, marked by the tolling of the chapel bell, signals not time per se, but the forthcoming communal, sonorous soundscape of the Offices and Mass. This is also a time of auditory sensations—psalmody, readings and homilies, and hymns and chants—accentuated by periods of silence. These patterns become the routine, the norm of this space. One develops

28 Rohr, 8.
29 Lawrence, OSB, An Abbot’s Notebook, 142.
an awareness of non-verbal hints of communication and cues and restricting of movements in order to be quiet. The monk’s actions during the day are limited to the few hours devoted to *lectio divina* and chores or craft making performed in silence. The moratorium on speech continues throughout meal times. Only the lector’s voice, who reads from antiquity or the commentaries of modern theologians, is heard. Brother Benedict’s sees the silence in the refectory space as more than a mere disengagement from typical dialogue:

> Our meals are in silence, but in common. We have eight days a year when we have talking meals: these are Christmas, Pentecost, and things like that, religious confessions, and they are a lot of fun. You end up talking to the person on your right and the person on your left. But when the meals are in silence you commune with everybody, in a way it’s a richer experience.  

Other ethnographic studies highlighting devotional functions and social constructs aid in contextualizing these observations. Two scholars, Francesca Spardella and Maria Guarino, resided in cloistered communities and documented the behaviors and cultural characteristics they observed. Spardella, a professor of anthropology at the University of Bologna, lived for five months as a postulant in two French Carmelite convents. Her emersion into the nun’s daily life allowed unique access to these communities, who live by the 13th-century rule of the Italian Saint Albert Avogadro. Spardella’s ethnographic research focused on the group’s identity construction based on the absence of sound and how the overall soundscape within the convent shaped shared behaviors and individual values. As a layperson, she, like Atkinson, documented the absolute presence silence has and, like Rohr and the

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30 Sub prior Benedict McCaffree, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
Brothers Lawrence and Leisy, writes of its being integral to any interaction. She speaks of the absent dialogue that develops among the nuns:

Except for recreation time, what could be considered as a sort of horizontal communication among nuns, seems to disappear to the benefit of a sort of vertical communication (controlled and repetitive) directed towards the assumed divinity (prayers and psalms, hymns and chants, silent prayers). A closer look reveals that silence is however a carrier of active communication between the nuns: by sharing the different forms of silence they tacitly agree to believe in the same creed, thus they express their desire to belong to that particular group.\(^{32}\)

Silence is not only a routine, but it becomes a powerful social construct, contributing to a readiness for prayer by, but also shaping the processes of the dweller’s world.\(^{33}\) Spardella’s work highlights the fundamental role silence plays in the cloistered life and its performative, identity-building interactions. This is also observable in the monastery. Brother Andre, the guest master, prefers hand gestures over speech when herding the guests to lunch.\(^{34}\) When passing monks on the grounds, a nod and smile are often the greetings, the “excuse me,” or “thank you” muttered with little-to-no eye contact. When discussing early novice life in an environment where silence is the rule, Brother Benedict comments, “One of the trickiest things for the modern American young male is getting pulled away from constant noise and distractions. The monk learns obedience through his brothers, and God uses the environment to feed our souls.”\(^{35}\) Concurrent with Brother Benedict’s comment, Lane observes that giving voice to a place recovers “a sense

\(^{32}\) Spardella, 523.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 517.
\(^{34}\) The Guest master administers all aspects of visiting the monastery: reservations, payments, providing information and general guidance around the public grounds.
\(^{35}\) Sub prior Benedict McCaffree, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
of the highly embodied and imaginative way the natural environment participates with us in the creation of meaning and the mystery of experience.”

Maria Guarino writes, “Silence cultivates a spirit of listening and stillness; it is an active, attentive silence in which one can gain a heightened awareness of one’s individual presence in the communal space.” For the monks of Christ in the Desert and Weston Priory and Spardella’s nuns, the individual and groups’ observance of silence becomes the socialized norm that guides the patterns of behavior within the institutional arena. These practices are enduring yet can be changed by shifts in the structure of the group. Amplified by their Roman Catholic beliefs, these habits guide the social patterns and thought processes of the individuals who are members of the group. Adhering to silence, then, becomes a marker of an individual’s commitment.

II. Music in this Place: The Soundscape

The canyon remains the amphitheater for the conscious opening up of the mind for knowing, for prayer, and for communion among the brothers, guests, and neighbors. The monk’s inner narrative is shaped and reinforced by the group’s ongoing contemplative dialogue and the cumulative experiences of their structured environment that are only interrupted by canonical hours of plainchant psalmody and worship. From silence spawns acute listening. From sound, as Ong’s work regarding language argues, comes unity “achieved largely through the voice.” Daily the brothers share in their ritual of singing, relating intellectually, and connecting

36 Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 56.
37 Guarino, 125.
spiritually. Brother Benedict, who enthusiastically describes his experiences from the decade he spent living as a hermit, appreciates the “coenobitic life, of course, that comes from bios and cenobite; meaning life and common, or a life lived in common.” He continues expressing his appreciation for both the solitude of his hermitage years and the richness of sharing in the psalmody with the community:

You look around, and you’re surrounded by brothers who believe in prayer and believe in God, who are enthusiastic about these things, and they put their beliefs into action in prayer. The most effective witness is, first of all, presence. When a brother is absent from prayer for illness or travel, it’s not the same; it’s not as rich (his emphasis). Only when your whole community is there praying together, praying the Psalms in common, chanting them together—this is the beauty of the coenobitic life.

In his narrative he referenced occasions when some brothers were not as enthusiastic as others, labeling them “dullards,” or merely brothers who were “present,” but ineffective. Conversely, he described occasions when all were “wonderfully intense,” and that intensity “transcends the atmosphere. When people pray together, it’s a bonfire!”

Guarino’s observations of the Benedictine community in Vermont included her immersion in the life there as well as interviews with the brothers and recordings of their original compositions. She notes the important relationship between music and the monastic life and the synchronicity among the brothers when they were involved in their music making. Here, she recounts a particular evening during the Office of Vespers:

Communal prayer is a collective craft. All of the brothers are unique individuals who contribute their own sound to the Weston voice, but

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
they must align themselves not only musically, but also spiritually. In this unity, they can allow music to become prayer as it transcends the confines that limit the experience.42

Guarino concludes that music making, as much an integral part of the Weston monastic life as their daily work and lectio divina, grounds them and shifts their individual focus to a collective one. Communal prayer becomes a time when revelations and inspiration can be experienced.43 From silence springs the voices united in a deep presence, which to some results in healing and reconciliation, to others resolution, to many connections to the earth, and, in the words of the monk, ultimately, the divine. The eldest at Christ in the Desert, Brother Leander Hogg, at eighty-eight, refers to the brothers’ time in choir as a symbol of unity and of chanting being a process:

Some days the process is absolutely wonderful: you feel that everybody is participating as he should. Chant, of course, is only there to accompany us in contemplative prayer. That is the whole idea of going to choir. You have come from an atmosphere of quiet and silence and private prayer, in your course of the day, and we all come together as a community to continue this prayer. That is what the music is for. It’s very subtle. The rhythm of the chant carries the person, and the breathing carries the person to their interior.44

For Brother Leander, becoming a contemplative—someone who is constantly attentive in thought and deed to something greater—develops over time, and chant readies the mind for this intersubjectivity. The communal act of coming to choir mediates this transformation.

42 Guarino, 238.
43 Ibid., 237.
44 Brother Leander Hogg, OSB, March 14, 2015. During the interview, biographic details were collected.
A. Chant Forms in the Felicity of Desert Silence

Space in and around the monastery and its soundscape preserves the common behaviors and values of the brothers. As Spardella posits, “The focus is not so much on silence and its generally accepted devotional function as a medium for prayer; rather, the emphasis is placed on its social value as a performative, group-building and identity construction and deconstruction tool.”45 At the monastery silence is more than a reverent state assumed by participants prior to something happening. It is operative in the environment and is key to a monk’s development. Abbot Lawrence of Christ in the Desert refers to the novice period and the years before a monk’s solemn vows as their time of formation.46 He is specific in his description of transformation being what occurs after formation. “Transformation is a choice nobody can make for you. Reaching a deep commitment within oneself is transforming. We reach this through a commitment to the rule, the full Offices, and the community.”47

The discipline of the desert and its silent, natural soundscape provides a foundation through which one can make sense of one’s modern landscape of community and home. The brothers, in their quest for the grace and divinity of God, have adopted the repetitive pattern of prayer of the desert Christians, attentive to the subtle presence of the divine in all they see and experience around them. Again and again, the Psalm narratives waft from the chapel, a discipline hard for the outsider to comprehend. From my viewpoint as an observer, and an interviewer, the brothers

45 Spardella, 515.
46 The Abbot defines the formation period at Christ in the Desert as one year of Postulancy, one year as a novice, then three years before Solemn Vows.
47 Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, in an interview with the author, August 17, 2015.
consider the singing of psalmody a dynamic aspect of their community and a means of contextualizing their faith. My fieldwork reveals the musical emphasis: the ecclesial function and ritual meaning of music in the worship settings. Their music is not neutral; however, the brothers spend four hours a day making music in a worship context. “The choir is the first place a monk is formed,” states Abbot Philip, chuckling while commenting on the importance of participating in the uncomfortable hours of some Offices:

“The advantage of our Divine Office is that the music does not change. It is not only something of beauty, but it forms your mind and forms you as an individual. You’re not constantly learning new music, so you don’t have to worry about singing. You do your part, of course, but you know the melody, and you know what the choir is going to do; thus, the experience becomes devotional.”

Other brothers also commented on the psalmody as being a time of sharing with the community and that there is a richness and intensity in being surrounded by prayer. Brother Leander speaks of his “many conversions in the plural, and that the conversion process is ongoing. Fidelity to the observances of the work of the monastery transforms the person.” Guarino asserts in her work with the monks of Weston that they were being shaped individually and as a group by their musical practices. She referred to this as metanoia, or embracing a new path, “transcending current limitations and thought patterns to achieve a new layer of understanding or experience.” At Christ in the Desert, there is a binding together between the brothers’ ritual and music making with the natural, physical world. Their soundscape

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48 Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, in an interview with the author, August 17, 2015.
49 Brother Leander Hogg, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
50 Guarino, 234.
breathes life into their contemplation and provides the backdrop over which their chant passes from one to another.

The brothers share with the Desert Fathers the ability to pay attention to the ordinary, everyday—a refined discipline that results in insight and revelation. Through their practices, the observances, as Brother Leander refers to them, the divine, they believe will be revealed. This contemplative presence requires years to attain, as the abbot and the brothers affirm. Belden Lane remarks, “Desert attentiveness is not easily acquired. The desert Christians sought it carefully in the pattern of prayer they adopted for themselves, paying meticulous, repetitive attention to the subtle presence of God in a sparse and meager landscape.”

The monastery is enshrined in a physical setting that is far from scant and bare. Not unlike the deserts of antiquity, the presence of silence attracts meaning to those who are attentive and motivates the devoted. Here, silence is the beginning and the end of everything.

The piñon and creosote bush-studded river valley, rock-faced canyon walls, and vast cloud-filled sky provides language for those who have run out of words (see figure 3.5). This location offers an invitation to abandon what was previously deemed necessary and give space to experience fresh perspectives and inspiration. The murmur of the vital and life-giving river, its tempo changing with the seasons, joins with the squawk of a migrating goose and a far-off coyote. The smell of piñon, sage, and red dirt are signatures of this desert. These environmental features together form the trellis upon which the brothers’ chant emerges.

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51 Belden Lane, “Desert Attentiveness,” 197.
Historically, Christians describe the three stages of the spiritual life as "purgation, illumination, and union." The brothers' journey is symbolized in this uninhabited forest land, which strips them of their old self and creates through reiteration a new personae supported by the unity and determinism of the monastic group: formation leading to transformation. The monk ventures in and out of a sound world, much more than in any other contexts; their daily ritual involves the production of sound through singing and the auditory element of listening, then being silent until the pattern begins again. This mosaic is the basis from which one becomes emptied and filled thus uniting together forming an active community rooted in their local identity.

Transformation is something that occurs slowly and through a veil of emotion, pure silence, and by the repetition of the Psalm narratives. Gregorian chants and

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52 Belden Lane, *Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 6.
psalm verses in song form, to the monk, become a tonal offering to God. Chanting serves as a nexus embodying practices performed in desert silence and community solitude. Indeed, the brothers are most alert amidst the nurturing stillness that surrounds them, while sharing in the accord of mind and voice.

In the following chapter, I explore the notion of chant mediating transformation by critical assessments of interview material obtained during fieldwork at the monastery. The brothers’ devotional chant, practiced throughout the canonical hours, connecting music with prophecy, forms a concrete assembly. From this, the individual monk and collective monastic ethos emerge. Possibly and realistically, it might be revealed that all is not sublime.
Chapter Four – Chanting Together as the Pathway to Achieving Unity and Well-Being.

One should not think lightly of doing good, imagining 'A little will not affect me'; just as a water-jar is filled up by falling drops of rain, so also, the wise one is filled up with merit, by accumulating it little by little.

—Buddha
_Dhammapada, Chapter 9:122_

Certain forms of meditation actually change the way our brain works inside of us, and chant is one of those.

—Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB

I. The Brothers’ Pilgrimage: Becoming Attuned by Climbing and Descending, and Again.

The mid-August early evening sun reflecting off the river provides a shimmering hue of color to the water. South of the monastery, a quarter of a mile, is a trail off the road that leads to a bend in the river. Hidden by other foliage, a stand of Gambel oak trees form a canopy over the trail, their limbs arching toward the water as though they are ropes to safety (see figure 4.1). This setting, imbued with the changing light, is the backdrop for a conversation with Robert Kyr, who is halfway through his month’s stay, enjoying the tranquility while working on two substantial compositional commissions for Conspirare, a choral ensemble from Austin, Texas. This brief stroll is a short-lived escape from the schedule of Offices—Compline will commence in thirty minutes. As we approach the river’s edge, our pace slows. I asked, “What do you observe of the brother's chanting practices?” Kyr, while gesturing over his shoulder toward the monastery, remarks, “I do believe the brothers chant better in Latin. They do a more superior job with the vowels and
connecting the phrases. Thus, they are much more together.”

Field interviews reveal a preference to chanting in Latin, specifically from the brothers whose native languages are not English. I share with Kyr my observation that the brothers have a tendency to not complete consonants, wherein Kyr responds with, “Good ear! The multi-ethnic composition of the group has something to do with that, but primarily it is their demeanor of devotion. They do not view their singing as performing. To them it is contemplative, prayerful, and unifying.”

Our conversation moves to observations of the historical roots of chant and cantillation, specifically that the psalms, with their themes of praise and prayer, are

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1 Robert Kyr, in an interview with author, August 16, 2015, at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert.
2 Cantillation refers to the speech like chanting of liturgical text. The term used especially, although not exclusively, concerning Jewish music or from readings from the Hebrew Bible.
the basis for the Jewish liturgy and the offshoots of Christianity. Speculating, Kyr continues, “Reciting the psalms in unison had to be so unfulfilling to the early followers of Christ that intoning together became the reverential preference.” Historical narratives corroborate Kyr’s opinion as the straightforward and proper plainsong of “the Psalter and Canticles became the foundation of liturgical prayer and chant.” From the north, the chapel bell interrupts our conversation, and as the sunset becomes brilliant in the western sky, we head back to Compline. Its content will be delivered entirely in Latin.

Prayer notwithstanding, do the brothers experience something beyond the simple contemplation of the texts when they sing the psalms together? Does song intensify the experience for some, and are there physiological and neurological explanations? In this chapter, I explore these questions and the role of chant in forming the monk and the community. What emerged from the fieldwork is a confluence of ritual, findings related to brain chemistry, and a music culture mediated by their prescribed monody. I regard the monks’ chanting practice, which they describe as prayer, as a point of convergence between the personal and the social. This assertion is based on the power of the voice being relational, wherein it invokes others’ attention, resulting in a sonorous bond. The sounded voice stimulates the brain, bringing about a meeting of the physiology and the social. From here, the actual social practice of their daily ritual results in group unification,

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4 Ibid., 2.
and, in the case of the individual monk, a shaping of his spirituality. Throughout this chapter, I put forth that singing together is the activator which contributes to group cohesion and personal and community well-being.

The elements mined from the brothers’ stories include religious metaphors, institutional instruction, and personal quests. Revealed is a music practice that reflects and reinforces the social norms and sanctioned ways of behaving within the monastery. Contributing to this is the intimate worship space, the evocative psalm texts, the habits formed in the choir, and the repetition of the music. The ritual of singing the divine offices, the inscribed program of the Rule as observed by Talal Asad, is practiced, “in order to make the self approximate more and more to a pre-defined model of excellence.” On the other hand, the monk is a powerful agent over his cohorts and guests and can affect the collective, via their musically enhanced rituals. What results, in Durkheim’s sense, is a group of worshipers motivated and strengthened in their beliefs and generative in their actions. Discovering the role the individual monk plays in affecting the group by critically assessing the brothers’ discourse is significant in presenting an objective picture of their music culture.

Egalitarianism is a central part of the ethos of this place, and this is expressed musically and in conversation. The brothers expressed their thoughts about chant and their musical experiences openly and were quite exuberant during the interview process. The effects of singing, both individually and on the group, appeared harder to articulate, especially for the younger, less tenured monks. The more experienced brothers provided interesting observations of and insights into their lifeways and

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modes of thought. Moreover, their devotion to psalmody and singing for extended periods of time support the notion that the practice is rewarding as well as formative. Enrichment is not the only attribute of the emotional effect of singing. Conjunctively, this formation is critical to the unification and positive long-term health of the community. There is substantial evidence linking the experience of singing to physiological benefits that validate the behaviors described by my study participants. The recounts that follow of the effect of singing are telling. In general, the stories reflect that song provides an overall enrichment of life. Conversely, the brothers’ obedience to the daily ritual yields a certain authority and, in some cases, tensions could be extrapolated from the dialogue. Both demonstrate that the emotional engagement shared by singing reinforces the hypothesis that their musical practice assists them in achieving deeper levels of personal awareness and is a mechanism to construct a robust, cohesive group identity rooted in their Roman Catholic beliefs.

A. How Good and How Pleasant It is: Brothers Dwelling in Unity. (Ps. 33:1)

“As a community, we are giving our time wholly. The rhythm of the choir, the volume of the choir, everything comes together to contribute towards that gentle rhythm that is helping all of us to enter into prayer,” comments Brother Leander.⁹ Similarly, when queried about the choirs’ psalmody, Brother Benedict continues with a more external perspective: “Chant belongs to everybody, the psalms belong to everybody, and it is wonderful when people come and participate in it because it is not ours, you know, people share in our prayer, people share in our work, and our

⁹ Brother Leander Hogg, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
work is for everybody.”\textsuperscript{10} Brother Leander and Brother Benedict have been monks sixty and thirty-eight years, respectively. Although from different continents and generations, their perspectives are rich and informative. Brother Leander, from Great Britain and educated as an accountant, is retired from assisting the Guest Master and the gift shop personnel with bookkeeping activities. Brother Benedict holds a Bachelor’s degree from St. Anselm College in New Hampshire in Philosophy and a Master’s and Doctorate degrees from Notre Dame in Medieval and Intellectual History, as well as a law degree from New York University. In addition to being the Master of Novices at Christ in the Desert, Brother Benedict is actively engaged in immigration work assisting about twenty monasteries, convents, and dioceses in the United States. He exemplifies his comment above regarding their work being for everyone when he reflects on his role as an attorney, stating, “and so I help various contemplative monasteries, mostly bringing members from abroad, have a greater convivial sharing with their fellow brother-houses or sister-houses in other countries.”\textsuperscript{11}

Encounters at the monastery aided my understanding of the individual who chooses the cenobitic life. Although today’s world is drastically different from that of the first Christian hermits, what is similar is the monk’s quest for life not influenced by social compulsion and attachments. The monastic belief is that contemplation, daily labor, and prayer provide the structure of their journey and result in the emergence of a spiritual life focused on humility and faith. The brothers who participated in this study spoke openly about their faith and took pride in the

\textsuperscript{10} Sub prior Benedict McCaffree, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
monastery and their traditions. Infused with an envisioning spirit, and an aura of being at peace with their lives were the older participants. Those younger were more academic in their approach to answering questions; Brother Lawrence came to his interview with pages of prepared notes. Nonetheless, the context from which their deep consciousness flows incorporates the worship space steeped in icons and art and the patterned practice of music that integrates and unites, all surrounded by their heaven in a wild flower desert. Thomas Turino develops the argument that art is a unique form of communication that has an integrative function, that of uniting the members of social groups but also integrating individual selves, and selves with the world. The monks’ surroundings and song are full of metaphoric expression, religious signs, and language. “Indexical experience plus a perception of iconic similarity with other people and forms of life is the basis for feeling direct empathic connection. Spending time in artistic activities where such signs are emphasized enhances individual sensitivity and ability to connect.” Accruing from these shared experiences and traditions then, is their interconnectedness made all the more salient through their chanting.

For the brothers, their practice of psalmody cues particular subjective interpretations—the repetition of an individual psalm being the vehicle that creates the effect in the perceiver. Feelings of piety, gratitude, and delight to physical reactions based on anger or grief can result. The Psalter, the collection of 150 “sacred songs, the single most influential source of texts in all of music history,” is a collage of limitless expression that both positively and negatively reaches where

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12 Turino, 16.
genuine humanness resides.\textsuperscript{13} Wanting to understand the effects the psalms transmit and their contribution to the social structure, I inquired specifically about the monks’ daily encounter with them. During his interview, Brother Benedict exclaims with a chuckle that the Office of Vigils “is my favorite.” His voice softens as he continues candidly, “We are fed daily not only the scriptures but also patristic literature. At Vigils especially. Most novices come to the monastery and \textit{hate} [his emphasis] Vigils, and most monks in solemn vows probably count it as their favorite office.” He continues, “When you’re a novice your view of Vigils is altered by the setting, [now, with a high-pitched, whiny voice]:

You have to get up at 4 o’clock in the morning. It’s got fourteen psalms, it lasts an hour, there is little movement, and then you’ve got those two long readings in the middle. [He pauses and his voice returns to normal.] But, I think when you nurture your contemplative gifts, praying in the church through the darkness to the light; the seemingly endless psalms. The monks learn the order of psalms over time. You know that on Mondays, for example, after the two introduction psalms, Vigils is from Psalm 32 to 44, and there are beautiful psalms in there such as 33 and its gifts and 38. You can look forward to Mondays and Tuesdays.\textsuperscript{14}

As he references to the worship space and the changing light and its effect on the psalm narratives sung by the brothers, his strident demeanor lightens, and he nestles comfortably in his chair. Brother Benedict admits that he too as a younger monk had to “get into it Vigils.” His experience of the Vigils’ pattern of prayer, the texts, and the memorization of content through repetition is enveloped with the operative elements of the environment and the integrative function of singing. Brother Benedict gives us a glimpse of a semiotic chain of effects set in motion by a chant, where he may not be thinking real thoughts but is at sensory levels feeling

\textsuperscript{13} Stern, xiii.
\textsuperscript{14} Sub prior Benedict McCaffree, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
and reacting physically to the changing environment and integrating all aspects of the self during the event. As Turino observes, for those genuinely engaged in the music, “word-based thought may be suspended entirely during those periods in which a flow state is achieved, and the person is in the moment.”¹⁵ These experiences, such as Brother Benedict’s rich Office of Vigils, when repeated and shared with others, takes on a mutual reality of its own, connecting those participating.

Brother Raphael, age thirty-three, from a small village in Kenya, talks about the impact of particular psalms:

“I’ve gone through a lot of dark valleys in my life, but the way I come out is Psalm 22. Also, Psalm 66, that says something like, ‘God be gracious and bless us. No matter our inequities or our infirmities, be gracious and bless us in our humanness and travels and everything.’”¹⁶

Obviously, no two brothers’ experiences are identical, as they come from different cultures, experiences, and tenures; however, they share the same associations, symbols, and iconic connections. As Kyr and Turino suggest, it is possible to presume that feelings, perceptions, and symbolic thought may be more affective in the individual when there is the musical stimulus of chanting versus oration. Furthermore, the brothers base their beliefs on a framework of what is possible. Their daily ritual, they believe, is a display of what is and what can be—the Psalter foregrounding that belief. The brothers profess a profound sense of oneness when they are chanting the psalms of the Office, and that unity extends beyond them to a concern for the community’s cohesiveness, and finally to a mindfulness for the world. Abbot Lawrence describes the symbol and phenomena of prayer as “an

¹⁵ Turino, 16.
act that brings about a transformation where my life becomes a life for others, where myself becomes less and less and less. Where my ability to give myself to others becomes more and more and more.”\textsuperscript{17} Here the abbot is describing how their group prayer moves from the individual to the collective. When asked to describe chanting and what coming to choir was like, Brother Leander responds:

> Chant, of course, is only there to accompany us in contemplative prayer. That is the whole idea of the choir. We’re not there to simply \textit{rattle off the psalms!} [his emphasis as he chuckles] Yes, we come to choir to be a symbol of unity and to sing the psalms and to hope for the best that the chants are going to be chanted revolutionarily!\textsuperscript{18}

Encouraged to explain what \textit{revolutionarily} means to him, he continues:

> Some brothers sing too loudly or are sloppy or do not end a phrase gently. But over time, the process becomes absolutely wonderful. You feel that everybody is participating as he should. The young monks are attentive to the text and attentive to his own voice and the voices around him; light volume and his energy softens at the end. Yes, then it is enlightening!\textsuperscript{19}

Brother Benedict, Abbot Lawrence, and Brother Leander speak of a process that \textit{over time} results in a new way of coexisting in the world. How do I as an observer and researcher quantify this change? Is it simply age and contentment that have resulted in the peaceful demeanor of this eighty-eight-year-old British monk? Is it the institution that is caring for all its members’ health and needs that has eased the anxiousness of and encouraged a thirty-three-year-old Kenyan organist to confess his dark valleys to a stranger? To attest to the transformative nature of the brothers’ chant practices, I turn to a critical assessment of field notes aided by scholarship that integrates individual and social group identity with musical practices.

\textsuperscript{17} Diane Marron, \textit{Seeking God: the Way of the Monk, Monastery of Christ in the Desert} (Harrington Park, NJ: Janson Media, 2004), DVD.
\textsuperscript{18} Brother Leander Hogg, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
B. Interiority and One Voice

The performative act of chanting is more than maintaining a melodic line and antiphonal rhythm. The act of chanting constructs its expressivity and, over time, as Brother Leander and Brother Benedict state, creates a sense of identity rooted in their Roman Catholic belief. The brothers come to the chapel as individuals, to sculpt one voice as a choir. Created is a powerful group consciousness whereby the individuals disappear and transform into a shared collective experiencing music. Marion Guck writes, “Sounds do not become music until they have entered a person until they have been heard or imagined and attended to. Music exists only in the interaction between sound and the body-and-mind of an individual.”20 A brother’s interpretations of, and the interactions with, a chanted psalm or a florid Gregorian Mass chant are inexorably subjective. Fully engaged in the experience, the monk is linked to the genre’s history, and to his belief that the practice is a form of calling on the divine. Lawrence Kramer, Judith Becker and other scholars who have extensively studied music’s affective character support this claim. It is plausible then that a brother may have a spiritual or mystical experience while engaged in the process of antiphonal chant. If we consider a brother as much a listener as a performer, Kramer’s view supports this: “music acts like what psychoanalysis calls a transitional object, an object that, charged with charisma, temporarily crosses, blurs, and may even dissolve the listener’s ego boundaries.”21

20 Marion A. Guck, “Music Loving, or the Relationship with the Piece,” The Journal of Musicology 15, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 343-52.
Becker, who has studied trance concepts dating from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s eighteenth-century writings to William James’s in 1890 to Gilbert Rouget’s 1980 contribution, writes of the manifestations of trance being on a continuum from absent-minded dreaminess to a total disassociation or a pathology of possession.²² Becker studied the ceremonies of the Sufis of North India, the bebuten trancers of Bali, and American Pentecostals. Some elements described in her studies apply to the monks, such as scripted physical movements, environmental modifications, and symbolic representations. The monks acquire physical and mental habits based on the musical events occurring in the particular setting such as processing and recessing or the schola forming around the altar and singing an elaborate Gregorian chant. Resulting actions, Becker argues, can be as mild as being simply one with the music, to experiencing a sense of the divine.²³ She remarks that, “The emotions are private and public, interior and exterior, individual and communal.”²⁴ Congruently, chanting requires auditory attention and breath control to sustain pitch. Regarding Becker’s assertions, focused attention on maintaining an even rhythm, mid-verse pauses, and the antiphonal dialogue creates the atmosphere of public and private, interior and exterior, to finally a sense of oneness.

When asked to describe what chanting the Offices is like, whether it was invigorating or more contemplative, the interlocutors provide a variety of both anticipated and unexpected responses. Brother Philip, a young man from Southern

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²³ Ibid., 134.
India who has been at the monastery for four years, states, “It’s peaceful, for me. If I am angry, and I come to the Office, starting the prayer calms me down. I think, 'Ok, I don't want to say that to them.' Or, if I say it like that, ‘I'll not be a good man.’ I'm not perfect. Nobody is perfect; you can think about who you are, and reflect on your feelings.”  

Brother Philip underscores three aspects of their life: how singing relieves stress, the human imperfections of the monk, and how the psalm poetry leads to introspection. More reflectively, Father Bernard Cranor, who has been at Christ in the Desert for twenty-five years, considers how he was able to keep psalmody refreshed every day:

I never had a vision or anything, or what I'd call a mystical experience, but yes, [he pauses] it’s a chore. Sometimes I get distracted. I'll go through a whole psalm, singing, but my mind and my heart are disconnected. St. Benedict mentions in the Rule, singing the chant, the duty of the Office, is that your mind has to be in tune with your voice. Well, some days it's just not there. I'm through a whole Vigils, and I'm thinking about this, and I'm thinking about that problem. Usually, it has to do with some conflict with somebody else or my complaining [he chuckles]. So, it’s a discipline in that sense that you have to work at. You have to focus. That is the interior part. The other part is to focus on the music, to keep together, to keep on the pitch, and listen to others. At different times of the day, people cannot sing! Unity, keeping together, is the difficult part. You have some people who sing better, who hold pitch better. Sometimes we have the Opus Dei on our side and the Opera Day is on the other side! When we are blending, the singing really works. When someone is sticking out or trying to lead because nobody is singing, especially in the morning, that’s bad. It’s a discipline; we have to keep going. This is where charity and compassion and forgiveness comes in. Thank God I am not like others! All things come together, I think, it’s God's plan. Here [in the choir] he allows us to get all these things, this consternation, your consciousness worked out.  

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26 Father Bernard Cranor, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
Father Cranor candidly describes the process of psalm singing during the Offices as monotonous and “a chore” at times and admitted discipline. He acknowledges that his actions are sometimes not in alignment with the Rule; however, he is very much attuned to the discipline of his lifestyle: the performative act of being a monk. His remarks reflect the choirs’ imperfections and his frustrations with some experiences. He intimates that others may not be as flexible or forgiving as he, and conflicts exist. However, notes positive attributes of choir singing. The choir, Father Cranor believes, provides the scaffold where meaningful relationships form and when “the singing really works,” one can achieve an interiority (see figure 4.2). Kramer’s perspective is germane: “Music has the power to give its makers and auditors alike a
profound sense of their own identities, to form a kind of precious materialization of their most authentic selves, in the mode of both personal and group identity.”

While Abbot Lawrence walks into the gallery and pulls up his chair in preparation for our interview, he says, “You know, I became a monk because of the singing.” He chuckles and strikes the arm of his chair lightly with his fist and continues, “I am thirteen years old. The minute I heard the singing, I knew the monastic life was what I wanted to do. I never lost the desire. I have not lived it so well over time, but I never lost that thing that says, ‘Oh that is what I am supposed to be doing, I am supposed to be a monk.’”

He relays the story of his arrival in New Mexico, “By the time I left Mount Angel Monastery in Oregon, there were one hundred monks maybe ninety, and when I came here, I was number three in 1974 and was made Superior in 1976. I tell people, ‘Don’t think it was because I had great virtues and great gifts. I was the only one left; me and two novices!’”

The conversation moves beyond his tenure to the importance music and singing play in the lives of the brothers and the parishioners who visit from the surrounding communities. “The music becomes one with you. The people sing it with us, both in English and Latin, whether it is good or bad it doesn’t make any difference. You can feel the unity; it is very powerful.”

Abbot Lawrence echoes the brothers who have referenced the unification that occurs through the template of the choir. Further, the aesthetic of the voice, the songfulness, “the fusion of vocal and musical utterance”, evokes “a sense of

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28 Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, in an interview with the author, August 17, 2015.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
immediate, intimate contact between the listener and the subject behind the voice.”31

The one voice created in the chapel among the brothers and those joining in the chants of the Office or Mass crafts a positive social environment reinforced by the participatory and synchronized movements of the ritual. Too, one cannot discount the dominant emotion brought about as the strophes of the psalm narratives build. Joining ritual and music by engaging both the mind and body heightens a participant’s internal state, enriching and codifying the experience.

Scholars began linking musical activities and the brain dating back to the early nineteenth century.32 Although the early work in cognitive neuroscience rarely detailed singing as the initial investigation objective, since 1990 advances in behavioral neuroscience have resulted in interest in singing and its therapeutic value.33 Newer evidence demonstrates the benefits of singing, showing that it can evoke emotion and influence mood, shape group identity, and strengthen social cohesion.

II. Singing: The Brain and Body Connection

Deliberated over the millennia is the question of whether music can arouse emotion. Research in recent decades has documented the major reaction components of emotion evoked by music.34 Surveys and experimental approaches to measuring music-induced emotions began appearing in early 2000 with the work

31 Kramer, Musical Meaning, 53.
33 Norton, 22.
of Patrik Juslin and John Sloboda, Marcel Zentner, Klaus Scherer, and Daniel Västfjäll. Their conclusions highlight the complexity of the music-emotion link, the numerous activation mechanisms at play, and resulting differences in response. Individuals’ strong experiences with music have been documented objectively through measurements of the body and brain, and subjectively through the use of survey tools. These devices include self-report instruments ranging from as simple as selecting adjectives from a list to keeping daily diaries of personal experiences with music, to comprehensive written reports from interviews.

The music-emotion research field has expanded to include multiple disciplines tracking a variety of musical activities. Psychologists have investigated the positive and adverse effects of music experienced during childhood, and an individual’s involvement in music as an adult as it relates to vitality and longevity. Psychotherapists study correlations between music, rhythm, and dance and successful learning. Neurologists and other medical professionals focused on brain injuries, depression, and pain management find qualities of music useful in their therapies. Kay Norton suggests that, “advances in behavioral neuroscience and brain mapping have caused researchers world-wide to think differently about music and singing.” Further, she believes, as supported by the behavioral discipline of music therapy, that singing wields power over key human events and situations.

By deciphering the experiences that the brothers report about their chanting

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36 Norton, 21.
37 Ibid., 22.
practices, one can understand how singing and health intersect and how singing promotes individual and group well-being, and creates a sense of community.

A. Singing Positively Affects the Body

Motivated by the ever-increasing evidence that listening to music influences the physiology positively, Gunter Kreutz and Christina Grape and Tores Theorell have investigated and documented the effects of more active musical activities such as singing.\textsuperscript{38} There is research that supports the positive effects of singing beyond anecdotal claims. The investigation methodologies vary, and the protocols are unique; however, the results link singing and well-being. Some studies included singing and playing an instrument, or that the singing participants had a particular disease or psychological disorder. Applicable to the brothers of the monastery would be findings of studies whose participants included amateurs. Germaine conclusions would be positive mood and increased energy and enthusiasm after episodes of singing. Of course, the monk may find these endeavors irrelevant as they view their singing as an act of devotion; however, the results have validity.

Specifically considering the immune system, Gunter Kreutz’s team of investigators studied thirty-one members of an amateur choir, made up of twenty-three females and eight males, whose ages ranged from twenty-nine to seventy-four years. The study design compared an hour of rehearsing pieces from Mozart’s \textit{Requiem} with an hour of listening to the same selections. Before and after each session, the participants completed a questionnaire that assessed their emotional

state and each gave a saliva sample. The results indicated changes in the patterns of the antibody immunoglobulin A (S-IgA), and the stress hormone cortisol between the two trial conditions of singing and listening. Kreutz summarizes the results:

Singing led to a decrease in negative mood and an increase in positive mood and S-IgA, but did not affect cortisol responses. Listening, on the other hand, led to an increase in negative mood, a decrease in cortisol, and no significant changes in positive mood and S-IgA. These results support the hypothesis that choir singing influences positive emotions as well as immune functions in humans.39

From this, it could be assumed that the brothers experience some level of positive mood change during their hours of singing. The qualitative interview process did yield positive responses related to chanting and enhanced mood at the conclusion of Offices. Brother Dominic, from the port city Tuticorin in Southern India, has been at the monastery for two years. In addition to supporting the gift shop, he is the assistant manager of the monastery kitchen. During his interview he commented on chant as a tool: “When we feel that something is difficult, the Offices help us feel something good.” He begins to sing a segment from a psalm then grins and says, “The singing makes me very happy.”40

A second study, led by Grape and Theorell, assessed heart rate variability (HRV), concentrations of the protein TNF-Alpha, and the hormones prolactin, cortisol, and oxytocin of eight amateur and eight professional singers attending singing lessons for six months. The ages of the participants ranged from twenty-six to fifty-three and, of the professionals, four were male and four were female. Two men and six women composed the mix of amateurs. Each participant gave a blood

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40 Brother Dominic Paulraj, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015, at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert.
sample before the forty-five-minute singing lesson, and the subjects completed a questionnaire assessing their emotional states: sad or joyful, anxious or calm, worried or elated, listless or energetic, and tense or relaxed. Electrocardiography monitoring equipment continuously recorded each participant. After the lesson, the study members gave a second blood sample and repeated the questionnaire. A brief qualitative interview captured verbal reactions to the lessons. The results of this study found similar HRV in both groups; however, the professionals showed more cardio-physiological fitness for singing compared to the amateurs. Analogous to the previous study, the positive findings of oxytocin, which inhibits the release of the stress hormone cortisol, is particularly relevant to bolstering the immune system and relieving anxiety. The results found clear differences in the two groups:

Oxytocin concentrations increased significantly in both groups after the singing lessons. Amateurs reported increasing joy and elation, whereas professionals did not. However, both groups felt more energetic and relaxed after the singing lesson. In summary, in this study, singing during a lesson seemed to promote more well-being and less arousal for amateurs compared to professional singers, who seemed to experience less well-being and more arousal.41

This study also demonstrates the positive effects of oxytocin and singing and documented more well-being among the amateur participants. Most brothers enter the monastery with little musical training and learn to chant by doing it, guided by colleagues who recognize the needs of the less experienced. I view the brothers as amateurs from the standpoint that their motivations are value-based and personal, with focused intentions on mutual benefit, versus a professional singer who might be artificially creating meaning and whose purposes are driven by material ends. The

brothers describe chanting with emotional terms that are positive. Brother Philip uses the words “peaceful” and “calmed” when recounting singing, and Brother Charles relays that chanting lifts his spirits. They attribute a decrease of interpersonal conflict and greater camaraderie to time spent in the choir. Brother Leander describes the rhythm and breathing of chanting as the mechanism that carries the person into his interior.

As exposed by Becker and demonstrated by the testimony of Father Cranor, emotional experiences felt while chanting have a simultaneous interiority and public expression. The brothers’ music practice—the daily re-performance, reiteration, re-setting and re-situating psalmody and chant—refreshes and re-energizes the chanter. Collectively, this threads together the community, creating a more affirming, harmonious, and holistic environment.

Brother Benedict’s comments hint at the physical aspects of their singing as well as social and community constructs. He describes the effect music has had on his monastic journey, and the role singing has played:

It’s funny, monks probably don’t think about music a lot, but we probably sing more than anybody on earth. We sing more than professional singers. A professional singer might give a concert where she uses her voice for two hours or three. You know we sing four hours a day, every day. And we practice too, so to get a little introspective about music is an interesting challenge. I know its fullness most of all. Gregorian chant is sung in one voice. It is univocal. It’s not polyphonic. I hardly don’t know that word because we don’t sing that way. Music, the way we sing and what we sing helps unify our hearts. When the Abbot criticizes us to make us do better, he says, ‘you are singing like a bunch of bachelors,’ which means that everyone is singing their own thing as opposed to singing in one voice. You can tell the difference when we’re not focused during a ritual with a common voice; it loses something.42

42 Sub prior Benedict McCaffree, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
Brother Benedict’s remark about the sheer amount of singing the monks do and his inference that they sing more than professional singers is significant. The number of hours the brothers spend singing must affect their neurophysiology, albeit difficult to measure without a more scientific protocol. Again, neuroscience has demonstrated that one’s neurophysiology can potentially be changed by music-making.43 Psychologist Rick Hanson states, “But intense, prolonged, or repeated mental/neural activity—especially if it is conscious—will leave an enduring imprint in neural structure, like a surging current reshaping a riverbed.”44 I would venture that the brothers’ cardio-physiological fitness and constant elevated oxytocin levels influence their ability to handle stressful situations more positively.

Brother Benedict states emphatically that the goal of their singing is to create a unified voice and to “sing like a bunch of bachelors” is counter to that. Aside from the context of an unmarried male, one could infer that in the mind of Brother Benedict, a bachelor is a youngster or a junior, or someone who is inexperienced. Moreover, in the monastic environment, a bachelor is an index for non-normative behavior. During my interview with the abbot, this concept emerged: “A bachelor is somebody who is committed to no one. A monk is a man who is committed to and embraces his community.”45 With this remark, one can infer that Brother Benedict regards a bachelor as an anti-social individual, while a monk is someone who forms a relationship with the collective monastic community. In his view, the brothers’

43 Today the brain’s ability to develop and reorganize pathways is well-documented. Norton cites Gottfried Schlaug and others who compare adult non-musicians’ brains with that of musicians. In restoring speech and improving language, Schlaug, referring to plasticity changes as a result of singing-based therapy: “it is the perfect confirmation [of our hypothesis]—basically, the hardware of the system really changed to support this increased vocal output.” Norton, Singing and Well-Being, 25.
45 Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, in an interview with the author, August 17, 2015.
shaping, redefining, and committing to one another occurs during the ritual of chanting. He continues reinforcing the notions of unity and mutuality when describing the Divine Office, “There is nothing like celebrating it communally. That is where the monk has intimacy with God and that intimacy then can have an expression in the Divine Office. However, without the intimacy, the Divine Office becomes shallow.” This intimacy, as expressed by Brother Benedict, is a closeness and bond formed through the affiliation of communal prayer. Throughout this formation, the monk does not resign his individuality but maintains his distinctive personality in the fraternity. In a similar vein, Margot Fassler remarks:

> Antiphonal, or back-and-forth, singing promotes the idea that the members of the community are in a relationship, mutually supportive of each other. Each singer rendering a psalm verse could look at a familiar group of faces across the choir, and hear the voices of people who had been singing throughout their entire lives.

Father Bernard, with a broad smile and eyes sparkling, comments on a lifestyle filled with singing: “You know I turned eighty-three in July and singing the Offices has always helped me through my troubles and difficulties.” Likewise, Brother Leander, when asked if he felt better after song-filled prayer, retorts with: “Surely! Music is a beauty. So often it is music that helps us in all its forms.”

The majority of the brothers report positive emotions when referring to singing. More so than the younger monks, the senior brothers were introspective about the outward giving of their songs in the Offices and Masses to co-participants, or visitors. I believe this is a reflection of the commitment to their faith and

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46 Sub prior Benedict McCaffree, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
48 Father Bernard Cranor, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
49 Brother Leander Hogg, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
community. Additionally, descriptors such as peaceful, joyous, and spiritual, and social constructs such as unity, community, and of one voice, indicate positive individual and group experiences resulting from singing.

B. Cognitive Processes and Social Bonding and Cohesion.

Many questions remain regarding the neurobiological basis of music-evoked emotions. The domain is complex. As Isabelle Peretz states, “There is not a single, unitary emotional system underlying all emotional responses to music.” However, there is a consensus on music’s unique role and social value. In Stefan Koelsch’s words, “Making music in a group is a tremendously demanding task for the human brain that elicits a large array of cognitive (and affective) processes, including perception, multimodal integration, learning, memory, action, social cognition, syntactic processing, and processing of meaning information.” Research in the areas of music and emotions aided by neuroimaging provide conclusive evidence that music fulfills important social needs. Koelsch states that musicality is also a natural ability.

Father Bernard supports the view that all humans possess an innate capacity to understand and process music when he attests, “You don’t have to be a singer or know how to read music to be a monk.” Chanting four hours every day, actively participating in this musical activity that has a shared goal, intentionality, and

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Father Bernard Cranor, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
emotionality is a highly social function. Koelsch and colleagues have linked these social contexts of musical engagement with a positive effect on health and life expectancy. The social functions stimulated by music making include human needs such as contact and communication. The coordinating actions such as synchronizing with a beat and the cooperative actions among choir mates and several musicians have been shown to increase trust and group identity. Empathy or an increase in the homogeneousness of a subculture or group of individuals leading a particular lifestyle can be a benefit derived from musical involvement. The “need to belong,” or the desire to be attached cohesively to a group, can lead to feelings of spirituality or other aesthetic emotions. Music simultaneously engages these social functions, strengthening the group identity and dissolving boundaries. Thus, musicologists and scientists seem to align, substantiating Guck’s opinion that, “Music has the power strongly to control or fill up one’s consciousness and, in the process, to affect one’s physical state; it has the power to engage the whole individual, mind, and body”.

Music psychologist Katie Overy notes that shared music and synchronized physical motions “can create a sense of empathy and social bonding, which is potentially of value in education, therapeutic, and social contexts. Overy links her work to that of other projects that found an increase in cooperative behaviors and communication as a result of synchronized musical activities. Congruently, she argues that “What music is capable of providing, rather than communication, is communion—an intimately shared experience between listener and listener and

56 Guck, “Music Loving, or the Relationship with the Piece.” 347.
between listener and performer.⁵⁸ There may be emotional contagion at play when the brothers are responding unconsciously to the motor actions of others during their ritual; however, one could speculate that their responses are at a more reflective consciousness level. Brother Benedict and Abbot Lawrence refer to the intentioned life of the monastic. The brothers interpret these intentions as joint actions based on the agentive understanding of their conjoint and intimately shared goals.

This unity of the culture brought about by the practice of their common Benedictine tradition is a coalescence of their personal experiences. At the heart of the contemplative tradition is their musical and social cohesion as displayed and attested to by the brothers. Chant is mediating this cohesion contributing to the unification of the individual with his community.

C. Singing and the Well-Being of the Monk

As presented in the studies above, there are clear benefits of singing for immunity and cardio health, as well as for social constructs such as empathy, and bonding. Other attributes of the effects of group singing are increased imagination, self-expression, confidence, awareness, trust, and coping.⁵⁹ Psychologist Mary Gick reviewed research conducted over the last decade about singing and its contribution to health and well-being and found promising evidence. In addition to improved respiratory functioning, other physical factors included stress reduction and


The psychological benefits such as mood enhancement.\textsuperscript{60} The well-being of a person or community is a subjective state understood to be healthy and happy. Gick describes hedonic and eudemonic well-being. The former relates to pleasure characterized by positive mood and an overall satisfaction with life. Eudemonic well-being is a philosophical concept whereby the shift is away from pleasure to the maximization of life. Attaining the actual self through personal growth results in feeling one’s life is purposeful and relationships are positive and mutually productive.\textsuperscript{61}

Expressed in the commentary of the study participants, was a general sense of well-being. Brother Benedict states that the brothers who surround him are enthusiastic about their prayer life, and they put their beliefs into action.

The abbot was more introspective and realistic about their community life:

Most men cannot live our way of life. It is not a difficult, but it is intense, and over many years most men leave. One of the challenges of monastic life, perhaps the greatest, is to live with other men and learn how to serve them. I believe this is no more difficult than a marriage or a family, but our life is ordered in a different way as we are with each other day in and day out. Our bonds of faith and belief do not keep strife from happening, or conflicts or disagreements. Our challenge is to follow Christ and accept, love, and serve all people, no matter how they treat you.\textsuperscript{62}

I asked the abbot what was key to a monk’s success in assimilating to the lifestyle, to which he replied:

For the brothers, it is the conviction that this is what God wants them to do. It takes a long time to form that. It used to be that you could presume that if a person makes all the vows they would stay. Also, it used to be you could presume that if a person got married, they would stay married. Not so. So what makes a person stay? First of all is faith and then certainly part of this is the aspect of formation. But how do

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Lawrence, OSB, An Abbot’s Notebook, 12.
you form people? The formation is the process to help you do the transformation. What makes a monk stay? A good community, a good clear direction and when you look at formation in our community, the choir is the first place. You have to be in choir, and you have to participate. I had to grow into it and to begin to embrace it and to let it transform my life.63

The abbot cites that the process of monastic formation is for most who attempt it, impossible. However, over time, the practice leads to a personal commitment to the community. He states that the choir is central to the monk’s development and contentment. In the choir, chanting together becomes the catalytic agent in achieving their cohesion. Here the brothers listen to each other and respond in pitch, volume, nuance, and sincerity. The internalization of this active ritual is life changing, pushing the monk to emerge aware of his humanness and in unity with his brothers. Abbot Lawrence expresses that their commitment to the Divine Offices as outlined in the Rule, with only slight modifications during the monastery's history, is an important contributing factor to their growth. Formation beginning in the choir and continuing therein supports the thesis that their practice of chant and psalm singing is a transformative pathway leading to personal contentment and group unity.

The brothers refer to their states of mind and how chanting and hymn singing and recalling specific chants in their minds positively affect them. They could be referencing, though not stated directly, how music, how the psalm tone by its melodic gesture, offers, through its tonal and metrical structure, sequences of movement and repose. Can this be analogous to a psychological process that results in an invigorated emotional state? Their active musical involvement is inducing affective mood states. The influence of repetition, of repeating

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63 Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, in an interview with the author, August 17, 2015.
synchronized behaviors and repeating psalms and chants over time, contributes to a high engagement of the chanter and the spirit in which he pursues the doctrine of the tradition. To this point is John Rink’s premise that, “music’s gestural properties are neither captured by nor fully encoded within musical notation, but instead require the agency of performance to achieve their full realization.” Rink refers to meaningful patterns, such as those given shape by the chanter. Performative factors such as dynamics, tempo, and timbre, combine, contributing to the emergent qualities springing forth from the chanted material. When asked to elaborate upon his attraction to Psalm 66, Brother Raphael draws a relationship between the psalm tone and the text:

It starts on [the] pitch A. Sometimes I ornament it to emphasize the beauty, the periods of musical movement. You can reflect on the text, meditate on the content of it. Only for seconds. And when you start playing again because music in its beginning is silence, that silence is meditative for the text. Then when you start chanting, it will uplift you, and instantly the prayers start flowing, and you, your spirit—everything—gets connected with the Creator.

To Brother Raphael, the music is captivating and enveloping. “Yes, sometimes I have felt it. It is not an illusion [he laughs]. It is not an illusion; I’m sure I go into it in the right state of mind, without intoxication!” At play are silence, contour, and what Brother Raphael could be identifying as flow. Turino interprets this full integration of self as, “a state of heightened concentration when one is so intent on the activity at hand that all other thoughts, concerns, and distractions disappear, and the actor is

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66 Ibid.
fully in the present. The experience actually leads to a feeling of timelessness, or being out of normal time, and to transcending one’s normal self.”

The brothers attest that they over time memorize their chants and their modes and operate on a level of anticipatory reaction. “I can easily remember what I am singing. I’m not a musician in terms of the notes and all that, but I sing through memory,” states Brother Charles the Cantor (see figure 4.3). “Yes, when it is played [the psalm tone] I know what I am supposed to do and if the guy goes wrong [referring to the organist], oh, this is not it. From my memory I am able to adjust.”

Brother Charles’s comments display his active engagement in the music and the synchronous and repetitive behaviors that have become instilled by performance.

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Figure 4.3. Brother Bede Bissonnette, Abbot Philip Lawrence, and Brother Charles Kariuki. Photo courtesy of the Webmaster.

68 Turino, 4.
69 Brother Charles Kariuki, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 15.
Brother Benedict concurred: “The best way to learn to participate fully in the
Office is to pray the Office and it becomes one with you. Over time, you memorize
the psalms and most of your monks can close their eyes and keep up with the
written words.” Abbot Lawrence reiterates this perspective of the choir’s effect:

The calling of a monk is not a call to sing; it is a call to serve the
community. Not only is there beauty in repetition [of the psalms and
service music] but it forms your mind. And it just becomes part of you.
You do not expect to memorize the whole thing in the first two or three
or four years but if you’ve had the same music for 20 years basically,
you know the music, you know the melody. The choir begins to form
then for the larger commitment.

The abbot’s comments address the aspect of the unifying principle of
repetition and the contribution choral singing makes to neural structures. Inherent in
his remarks are the implied cultural code of the unlearned voice and the aesthetic of
their practice. The low complexity, average dynamism, and smooth rhythms of the
psalm tones may well contribute to a peaceful, positive, and productive experience.
Familiarity with the music, as Margulis suggests, could also enhance the effect. The
participants’ aesthetic responses to the music are diverse. For example, Brother
Dominic from southern India prefers the Latin Kyrie to English psalmody. Brother
Leander expresses a preference for the Latin Mass settings to the “hard sounds of
English.” When reviewing their responses, however, there is a correlation between
the repeated exposure to their familiar music and reported physiological response.
Research directed at familiarity and musical preference provides insight into the
brothers’ emotional engagement with their repertoire.

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70 Sub Prior Benedict McCaffree, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
71 Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, in an interview with the author, August 17, 2015.
Neuroscientist Carlos Silva Pereira and colleagues, utilizing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) equipment, conducted a study measuring participants’ reactions to familiar music. This study used excerpts from commercially available pop/rock songs and, although not the genre of Christ in the Desert, Pereira was able to link the results of his study with one that investigated monophonic melodies and found consistent results.\(^\text{72}\) Pereira states:

> Our results not only strengthen the body of evidence showing that music is very efficient in recruiting emotional centers of the brain but also clearly provide evidence that familiarity with a particular piece of music is an extremely important factor for emotional engagement and thus furnished ‘direct access’ to these emotional centers of the brain.\(^\text{73}\)

Pereira, as well as David Hargreaves and Adrian North, has studied “repeated exposure”\(^\text{74}\) to familiar pieces of music. I assert that the monks’ familiarity with the psalms, hymns, and liturgical repertoire results in a heightened sense of involvement with the music and positive emotional reward by doing so. This work and that of Gick, Rink, Grape and Theorell, highlight the biological and psychological factors that contribute to an individuals’ satisfaction with life and an overall state of well-being.

III. The Legacy: A Process of Prayerful Brotherhood.

After Compline, the few parishioners who drove in this evening depart.

Slowly, the noise of their vehicles drifts away. Others silently leave the chapel and

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\(^{73}\) Ibid., 8.

stroll back to the guest house. The shift in the light from afternoon to sunset supports their silent walk. The Psalms for this Office, 4, 90, and 133, were prescribed by the Rule of St. Benedict. Each asks for peaceful sleep and gives thanks in return; all were chanted in Latin tonight, by heart in the shadows of the twilight dusk. There is a sense of balance in their regimented day of prayer, work, and sleep. Considering the history of Christ in the Desert—the number of monks who reside there and their ability to be materially self-sufficient—there is something to the philosophy of a fruitful life found in living collectively.

Brother Philip, also a member of the abbot’s schola, describes how he has changed over the course of his four years at the monastery and what has aided his progress:

When I came here, it was like arriving on another planet! I did not know how to sing or pray. I watched the seniors in the choir. When I look at them, oh, my goodness, they are like my grandfathers! They are my survival. When I go up and down emotionally, you know, I look at them, and I can keep going. Father Bernard and Brother Leander have been doing this all their life! When you see the monastic life of prayer from the outside, you say ‘oh, all that prayer, that is beautiful, their life must be great.’ When you come into the life, it is totally different. A different culture, different language, it is not like at my home in India. Sometimes you do not understand what the culture is, and you just accept everything without question.

Brother Philip indicates that transition to the monastic life is not easy nor is it all charm and glamour. He confesses to being acquiescent while his familiarity with the way of life grew. Through his reverence for the elders of the community, he conveys that they are key to a young monk’s acculturation. Certainly some brothers are not able to conform to the lifestyle and leave the community. The abbot is candid in

75 Kardong, 193.
76 Brother Philip Thomas, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 15, 2015.
saying that he may release a brother if he deems him not appropriate for the calling or judges his actions and participation as inadequate. Brother Lawrence left a few months after our conversation, after living at the monastery for eighteen months. I asked the abbot what happened:

It is not unusual for a young brother to leave. About 80 percent cannot cope with the rigors of the lifestyle. But there is always a path! Our Brother Lawrence has been accepted to study at the Archdiocese of Baltimore and takes with him many valuable lessons. We will provide support for him because we believe in his vocation. Again, no, we don't abandon our brothers.\footnote{Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, in an interview with the author, August 17, 2015}

On the other hand, “people [new monks] love to come here,” says Brother Benedict with a beaming grin. “I am the Novice Master, and we have sixteen novices now, did I mention sixteen,” as he raises his voice and tilts his head toward the recorder. He speaks of the great graces the contemplative life bestows upon the intentioned individual. The growth of the number of novices is simply an attribute of our life of prayer.\footnote{Sub Prior Benedict McCaffree, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 15, 2015.} The abbot’s commitment to the Divine Offices and adhering to the well-established format of the Rule are contributing factors to the fraternity’s strength. Their cohesiveness and bond are seen in how they respond to the needs and situations of their population.

In the vernacular of Abbot Lawrence, those who have become monks and ultimately transformed are transforming others. Infused with the elders are younger monks whom they lead through unlearning, letting go, and learning anew. Through the antiphony of psalmody, the monk’s intention and commitment is heard by his choir mates and himself. Eight times a day, a shared consciousness is recreated. By way of their religious ritual, the participants are reconnected and moved to action.
This collective effervescence is the assembly remaking itself and belief forces reawakening in their consciences.\(^{79}\) The monk is summoned by the first verse of Saint Benedict’s prologue to his Rule to listen with great attention and devotion.\(^{80}\) Through performance, by listening to the subtlest of corporeal rhythms and vocalizing the strophes at just the right moment, with the long notes richly timbered and modulations arriving in sync, the brothers link their exterior actions. The act of listening—being attentive to one another’s nuance, using silence as space for thoughts and feelings to emerge—has been a thread throughout. How might one bridge the metaphysical with the concrete? Ansuman Biswas describes the act of conscious listening:

> The ear and the voice are connected in a loop. The voice projects both inward and outward. It makes oneself audible to oneself and others. The voicing of intention beginning at the surface of the mind is heard by the body and soaks through to its depths. Ultimately the sound knits together—integrates—intention with actuality.\(^{81}\)

Kay Norton concludes that singing in religious communities is a means of “intensifying and empowering praise and prayer.”\(^{82}\) I would concur when evaluating the brothers’ dialogues. There is congruence that their beliefs become tangible through song and that their chanting is a collective and symbolic act of faith. Norton makes similar observations, substantiating the profound, complex, and personal experiences individuals have. She adds that chanting is not only a symbolic act:

> Song or recitation is generated deep within the human body and resonates in many parts of our anatomy—chest cavity, pharynx, throat,

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\(^{80}\) Kardong, 3.


\(^{82}\) Norton, 163.
nasal passages—as it passes outward to the external world. This physical connection between inner and outer, paired with the inherent expressivity of a melody with or without text, gives the believer tangible ways to identify with her faith.\textsuperscript{83}

In this community, the brother’s practice of psalmody and chant and their conviction to it strengthens the union they have with each other. I have, in this chapter, addressed this monastic environment from the points of view of the interview participants and the place chanting holds within it. Eight times daily the brothers tap into the power of song. We know from the work of Kreutz, and Grape and Theorell, that singing contributes positively to mood and relieves anxiety by bolstering immune functions. Increased cardio-physiological fitness was confirmed by Grape and Theorell, leaving singers energized and motivated, undoubtedly contributing to the brothers’ ability to maintain the rigors of their daily schedule. Hanson’s work regarding neural structure imprinting as a result of repeated and focused mental activity, and Norton’s observations of improved memory and speech, intersect with the number of hours the monks spend chanting. Concerning the brothers whose first language is not English, singing the Offices in English is an active contributor to their integration. The brothers’ chanting in Latin is more serene and together. Although not expressed by any of my interlocutors, this could be seen as a uniting and “in-common” medium of communication. Koelsch’s work also supports the cognitive benefits and the social value of singing. The brothers’ cohesiveness is a byproduct of the activities they perform amplified by the atmosphere in which they sing together.\textsuperscript{84} The groups willingness to support the

\textsuperscript{83} Norton, 164.

norms of the Benedictine lifestyle and to act individually and voluntarily to achieve its goals are contributing factors to social cohesion and positive welfare.

There is efficacy in chanting, and the results are that it affects the brain and physiology, changing the condition of the individual. The brothers’ singing, they say, engages their unity and amplifies their devotion (see figure 4.4). Their voices catalyze the transformation of men living lives individualistically to monks mutually committed to the whole and the well-being of the community. Chant renders ritual, tradition, is sensorial and reflective, and for the brother, is the sonification of his beliefs.

Figure 4.4. The Brothers of Christ in the Desert. Photo courtesy of the Webmaster.
Conclusion

The monks of Christ in the Desert practice a legislated and dedicated life of work, the study of canonical scripture, and constant, chant-filled prayer. By these acts, the community believes that it will thrive, and the individual will become enlightened and see themselves as they truthfully are before God. Immersion in this lifestyle would bring about a _conversio_—a “turning-around” of one’s life. This transformation, as St. Benedict attests, is a process by which the monk turns from the world to a dynamic and joyful life focused on faith, the monastic enterprise, and God’s love.¹

Indeed, the idea of the pursuit of a contemplative life and its rewards was not an abstraction to my interlocutors. Their quest for a spiritual life is their life. What became evident to me during my fieldwork were the brothers’ humility, intent, and devotion to psalmody and service in the silence of the high desert.

My methodology allowed for observation of and participation in the Divine Office, casual social interactions with the monks, and detailed insights into their views regarding chant through individual interviews with volunteer participants. By spending extended periods of time at the monastery, I shared in the essence of the location, met people who found the ritual rejuvenating, and gained insights that served the structure of this thesis.

Chapter 1 surveyed the true nature of the inhabitants of the monastery over the past fifty years. As seen in the first chapter, the brother’s ability to not merely maintain their census, but to grow their program and other cloistered communities reveal leadership and commitment to the spirit filled life. Chapter 2 considered the framework

¹ Kardong, 24.
of the Rule of St. Benedict and its effect on the community. The institution’s goal is that the monk experiences a spiritual presence grounded in the psalm texts and scriptures represented in Gregorian chants. The compositional elements of the music contribute to their experience. One cannot overlook the binding force of Benedictine history as they place themselves in a lineage carrying forth a belief system of which chant is an index. The environment around the monastery was the subject of chapter 3. The desert, this sanctuary and place for listening, is where the monks’ voyage of discovery begins, and for some, ends. Drawing on the findings of neuroscience, physiology, and social science, in chapter 4 my aim was to link the monk’s active, repetitive, and uninterrupted singing to stimulation of brain systems and endorphin activation, and their resulting effects. Singing transforms the environment. Through the impact on the brain and physiology, song captures the attention of the inattentive, moves the despairing to hope, and draws people together.

Where do the chanting practices of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert fit into musicological discussions? The interdisciplinary approach to the brothers' form of music making contributes to chant’s status as a genre. Chant does not merely reflect history but, through its living transmission, represents the continuum of those devoted to ascetic communal life. The brothers at Christ in the Desert are modern-day participants who use this monastic tool to move and unite.

Reflecting on a life lived in balance with psalmody, united and conciliated with his brothers, Father Bernard made the following assessment: “I'm just waiting, waiting my turn.” He grins widely, taps the arm of the chair, and points out the window in the direction of the monastery’s cemetery. “My life has come to an end.” Sensing my
surprise and wanting to reassure me, he quickly says, “It’s not a problem. We pray these songs for people who are so down and so crushed that they can't pray.” One could argue that aging has subdued Father Bernard; however, his peacefulness and fortitude, and his singing or praying for others, is a display of his attentiveness to living a life focused beyond himself. Although these men live a solitary life of routine, usual and unusual tasks, their habits are formed by deep faith. “If I’m not praying, I have nothing to offer,” says the abbot in response to the same question. A reflective and thoughtful individual, the abbot is committed to the community of brothers and his dedication to a God-centered life. His trope is, “Relationships, relationships! The choir, marriage. All relationships have a purpose. Our relationships transform us, and this is unending.”

The brothers find their living God amidst the worshiping community in the solitude of the canyon. Those men that are able to live the contemplative life and remain at the monastery are bound together by the rule, work, their directed study, the communal act of singing, and everyday experiences.

In preparation for my departure, I sweep my cell, deposit my linen and garbage in the appropriate receptacles, and make the short walk from the guest house to the visitors’ parking lot. On this bright August morning the sky is deep blue and the air is crisp and still, broken only by an occasional blackbird or sparrow flying over. Daydreaming, I load the car and pull away. Driving demands my attention. I begin reviewing this last weekend’s experience and I am feeling somewhat jolted by the change of routine and the quickening of the pace. I will miss the deliberate silence, the non-verbal communications, the engagement with other guests, and the practice of

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2 Farther Bernard Cranor, OSB, in an interview with the author, March 14, 2015.
3 Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB, in an interview with the author, August 17, 2015.
4 Ibid.
listening and dwelling in stillness. I contemplate my pursuit and the resulting collection of concepts, views, and what emerged related to the role singing plays in the religious life of the monks. It was all these things: a display of a keen awareness, the importance of individual contribution and responsibility, and the gentle drawing together of voices in the worship space. What could further study reveal? At a minimum, re-interviewing this subset of monks, probing for specific linkages between social behaviors and chant practices, would build upon my observations and strengthen this work. Expanding this study to include the nuns of the Monastery of Our Lady of the Desert might also reveal rich contrasts between the two communities. Located in northeast New Mexico near the Colorado border, Our Lady of the Desert, established in 1990, supports a population of eight Benedictine nuns. Their choice of psalm tones, accommodating the ranges and timbres of female voices, may reveal unique and distinctive performative indicators. The small census may be an important factor affecting group cohesion measures such as trust, cooperation, and autonomous actions in support of the community.

Considering how much singing they do, could it be shown that a monk’s brain is markedly different in some way? Extrapolating upon Norton’s premise of singing and brain plasticity and improved memory, it may be plausible that a singing monk has more cognitive flexibility, higher consciousness states, and is more creative and adaptable than comparable men living outside the environment. An investigation of a brother’s brain regions during chant episodes measured over a long term would contribute to these assumptions and those regarding the acoustic features of singing music of slow tempo and other musical factors related to chant’s expressiveness. A more scientific protocol including baseline physiology markers and electrocardiography monitoring pre-
and post-Offices would also be instrumental in supporting the therapeutic effects of singing. Obtaining a composite of the brothers’ perceptions of his standing within the group, or sense of belonging, and assessing the individuals’ morale would enrich conclusions concerning unity and cohesiveness. Additionally, particular precepts of the Rule of St. Benedict may be beneficial to apply to corporate business models: mutual benefit over competition or hierarchy.

Finally, at the highway, I slow to merge. I recall Morgan Atkinson’s assessment upon his departure from the Abbey of Gethsemani, “It’s time to leave. I take with me what I brought, but I am not as I came.” Many who come down this road feel the same. Some are troubled individuals looking to make amends; some people just desire a change of routine or a walk in the woods. The monk gives up his name, puts on a black tunic, and with faith in the tradition, he embraces the life. Transformation can be as simple as becoming open to new ways of viewing yourself and the world, or as profound as the monastic who seeks God day and night. Their transformation occurs through a lifetime of commitment to the journey with a song as their beacon.

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5 Atkinson, 47.
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