

Improperie: The Medieval Practice

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It was very interesting to read your hesitation between the chant and polyphonic version of the *Popule meus*. I think, it is primarily not a music problem but is linked with the liturgical function of the piece. I suppose you all know *Popule meus* only in its Tridentine function. When the *Ecce lignum* is over, the celebrant, assistance, and congregation starts the procession of adoration, in the meanwhile the choir is singing the *Popule* as an impressive music for keeping up the feeling of devotion, or giving food to the meditation. Anyway, here the *Improperia* is a background-music.

In the medieval ceremony its position was different. It was sung while the Cross was brought into the church by a priest, (and if he was not capable singer along with one another singer) with two and young men (in most cases to-be-priests) who preceded the Cross with candles in their hand. Furthermore, in the Middle Ages Christ appeared as a High Priest: the Cross was not veiled, but the Corpus was veiled (in a red *casula*!) The procession stopped three times and the priest/singer (= Christ himself on the Cross) addressed his people with the *Improperia*. The reaction of the faithful was expressed in the invocations sung by two young men. The invocation of the venerable ancient Trishagion was an answer to Christ's word, and expressed astonishment, *latreia*, and *gratiarum actio*, and not only as the voice of those present but of the universal Church, East and West.

The procession is described in an Ordinary Book this way:

After the prayers the clergy with the bishop and the deacons in his retinue descend to the Holy Cross altar. In the meantime two canons putting on red chasuble bring from the sacristy the cross covered with red chasuble with a *pacifical* on the chest and one of them sings slowly *Popule meus* while two young men (*procedentes*) putting on red dalmatics on top of the bare surplice walk in front of them with lighted candles; and these young men sing after each verse of *Popule meus*: "*Agios o Theos*". The choir repeats after them: "*Sanctus Deus, Sanctus fortis*". Walking slowly with the cross, they proceed to the bishop at the Holy cross altar. After having finished *Popule meus* with all of its verses the bishop and two canons raise the cross and he sings in a lamentable voice: *Ecce lignum crucis*. The choir continues with *In quo salus mundi*. While doing so, they slightly remove the chasuble from the cross. The bishop sings *Ecce lignum crucis* a second time, raising his voice a bit higher and unveiling the cross even more. The bishop sings *Ecce lignum crucis* a third time in a similar way, raising his voice sorrowfully and unveiling also the front of cross completely. The choir continues with *In quo salus mundi* together with the verse *Beati immaculati*. And the bishop salutes and kisses the cross while the choir sings *Dum fabricator mundi*. And the canons also salute and kiss the cross in the order of age. Likewise the whole clergy while the children sing: *Crux fidelis*

(Parenthetically: the *Dum fabricator mundi* is one of the most moving and magnificent medieval chants!)

About a thirty years ago in Hungary this procession has been restored in a form suitable also for the small churches, too. The rubrics and melodies are as follows:

A singer vested in albs, with the Holy Cross in hands enter the church. (Or: the Cross is carried by the diacon and if is unable to sing, a singer comes behind him.) Before the Cross proceed to acolyths with candles and two young singers or two couple of singers (one “Greek” and one “Latin”; the task can be done even by children with good voice), they precede the Cross on its right and left. The the first station is at farthest point of the church. The singer recites the first section, after that all kneel down and the children answer with the invocation in Greek and Latin, then congregation in vernacular. Similarly the second and third verses are sung at the second and third stations (in the middle of the church and near to the sanctuary). Then the singer or diacon gives the Cross over to the celebrant who sings the *Ecce crucis* with the response of the congregation, unveiling it in the usual way. If the celebrant has difficulties with the gregorian tune, he may lifts up the Cross, while two singers on the right and left (with about 2 meter far from the celebrants) sing the *Ecce lignum*, showing with extended arms and closed palms to the Cross (cf. the figures of the two Johns in medieval great Crucifixes).

Thinking on the simple city, town or just village churches we need also a simple music setting (in great part in vernacular so that the complaint of Christ addresses directly the congregation: YOU, my people, think on what I did with you and how you returned it with your sins!). I do know, that the melody is poorer than the Liber Usualis version reproduced in your homepage. But is it not better to sing the liturgical text on a simple liturgical tune, than to sing “*alius cantus aptus*” INSTEAD? And it is an advantage, that the text and meaning can this way attain the listeners directly.

I cannot reproduce you this melody in pdf form, so I mark the notes with letters; they can be transcribed easily. Since the Hungarian text is alien for you, I mark the sections with citing the Latin text. What is in capital, is sung, in fact, in Greek/Latin. Underlined = more note on one syllable.

Motives to the verses:

Motive 1: GGG ... AB(flat)A G
Motive 2: FFF... EFG G
Motive 3: GGG... FE D
Motive 4: DDD... EDC C
Motive 5: C E GGG... AB(flat)A G

Verses (with reference numbers of the motives):

I. Popule meus 1
quid feci tibi? 2
aut in quo constrictavi te? 3
responde mihi. 4
Quia eduxi te de terra Aegypti: 5
parasti curcem Salvatori tuo. 2
HAGIOS. SANCTUS. SZENT.

II. Quia eduxi te per desertum quadraginta annis, 3
et manna cibavi te, 4
et introduxi in terram satis optimam, 5
arasti cruces Salvatori tuo. 2
HAGIOS.

III. Quid ultra debui facere tibi, 1
et non feci, 2
ego quidem plantavi te vineam meam speciosissimam, 3
et tu facis es mihi nimis amara; 4
aceto namque sitim meam potasti, 5
et lancea perforasti latus Salvatoris tuo. 2
HAGIOS.

Invocations (Singers 1-2. alternatively, the last note of each can be sustained during the reply)

1. HAGIOS HO THEOS! (GGG FGA G)

2. SANCTUS DEUS! (GGG FGA G)

1. HAGIOS ISCHYROS! (GGG FGA G)

2. SANCTUS FORTIS! (GGG FGA G)

1. HAGIOS ATHANATOS, ELEISON IMAS!

(GGG AB(flat)A G / G G F D FGA G)

2. SANCTUS IMMORTALIS MISERERE NOBIS! (the same melody)

Congregation: SZENT AZ ISTEN! (GGG FGA G)

SZENT ÉS ERŐSSÉGES! (GGG FGA G)

SZENT ÉS HALHATATLAN, IRGALMAZZ NÉKÜNK!

GGG AB(flat)A G / G G F D FGA G

Celebrant: Ecce lignum... Congregation: Venite... (according to the GradRom)
or simple melody (an invitatory tone) either in Latin or vernacular:

Celebrant: ECCE LIGNUM CRUCIS, (FFF.... FG F)

IN QUO SALUS /MUNDI PEPENDIT (FFF G F G GA A)

Congregation: VENITE ADOREMUS! (A F GA GF G G F)