



On the Execution of Music, and Principally, of Ancient Music (Classic Reprint)

M. Camille Saint-Saens

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Excerpt from On the Execution of Music, and Principally, of Ancient Music

In the last century when it was desired to restore Plain Song to its primitive purity, one met with insurmountable obstacles due to its prodigious prolixity of long series of notes, repeating indefinitely the same musical forms; but in considering this in the light of explanations given by St. Isidore, and in view of the Oriental origin of the Christian religion, we are led to infer that these long series of notes were chants or vocalizations analogous to the songs of the Muezzins of the Orient. At the beginning of the sixteenth century musical laws began to be elaborated without, however, in this evolution towards modern tonal art, departing entirely from all influence of the antique methods. The school named after Palestrina employed as yet only the triads or perfect chords; this prevented absolutely all expression, although some traces of it appear in the "Stabat Mater" of that composer. This music, ecclesiastical in character, in which it would have been chimerical to try to introduce modern expression, flourished in France, in Flanders, in Spain at the same time as in Italy, and enjoyed the favor of Pope Marcellus, who recognized the merit of Palestrina in breaking loose from the grievous practice of adapting popular songs to church music.

In the middle ages, as in antiquity, the laws of harmony were unknown; when it was desired to sing in two parts, they sang at first in intervals of fifths and fourths, where it would have seemed much more natural to sing in thirds and sixths.

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