

L'Ordre du chant divin:
Polyphony, Organ, and Plainchant at Notre-Dame de Paris
and the Major Secular Churches of France, 1500–1800

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The familiar elements of an uncharted overview

In the 16th as in the 18th century, nearly all French cathedrals were endowed with both an organ and a polyphonic choir, as were some of the Sainte-Chapelles and the wealthiest collegiate churches. A rich spectrum of musical practices unfolded in a dynamic dialogue: psalmody harmonized in fauxbourdon, counterpoint improvised on plainchant (*cantus super librum*), polyphonic compositions for the principal items of the liturgy, and organ solos alternating with the voices or solemnizing silent actions. These complementary elements coexisted, contrasting both in musical structure and in their sonic character. But how were they combined? During a solemn Mass, for example, what pattern prevailed in the arrangement of improvised polyphonic sections, composed ones, and organ solos?

The question is all the more significant since it recurs wherever the sacred polyphonic repertoire was created, from the time of Certon to that of Charpentier and Lesueur. Yet it has received little attention in the historiography. Disciplinary boundaries have certainly not encouraged a holistic approach to instrumental and vocal, monodic and polyphonic, composed and improvised musical elements of the liturgy. Furthermore, the nature of the musical sources poses an obstacle in itself: plainchant books are separate from polyphonic scores, which in turn remain silent regarding the organ solos that might alternate with or precede them (prelude). Additional difficulties lie in the ephemeral nature of polyphonic improvisation and in the complexity of the musical organization in question (the patterns for Matins, Vespers, etc. were graded according to liturgical solemnity and marked by pronounced local particularities).

Locating and Analyzing a Large and Unexplored Archival Corpus

Obstacles can be overcome by investigating a previously little-examined body of literature: liturgical regulations produced for the exclusive use of individual churches. Ceremonials printed in France—generally intended for the use of a diocese or a religious order—often remain vague regarding musical elements, or omit them entirely.

By contrast, certain manuscript ceremonials, ordinaries and directories provide a finely detailed account. This is why our thesis constitutes as much a comprehensive undertaking in documentation as it provides a critical analysis. Research conducted in libraries and archives has made it possible to identify some fifty ceremonials that together offer a coherent and detailed picture of the musical practices of thirty churches, from the cathedral of Paris to Amiens, from Reims to Lille, and from Beauvais to Arles, spanning the second half of the sixteenth century to 1789.

Their serial reading is supported, for each text, by tables presenting the musical norms graded for Matins, Lauds, the Mass, and so on. This systematic approach to a vast corpus (over 20,000 pages in total) has overcome the difficulties encountered: variable textual structures and uneven editorial priorities from one work to another, lexical instability, regulatory layers implicit beneath the directives, and the dispersion of musical information across writings that are sometimes monumental, often in Latin.

Extensive and sometimes surprising observations

The findings of this work yield several surprising insights:

- The standard definition of alternatim, involving organ and plainchant with few exceptions, does not hold in churches with a polyphonic choir. In these, the organ almost always interacts with some form of polyphony.
- Even the movements of polyphonic Masses were generally performed in alternation with the organ, which supplied four versets in the Kyrie, two in the Sanctus, and two in the Agnus Dei.
- Cross-referencing local norms (organized by feast categories) with local calendars (listing the feasts in each rank) enables a quantitative assessment of musical practices. Contrary to received wisdom, polyphony was used during the Mass on two out of every three days or more in most of the churches studied.
- Differences between churches (for example, in the musical patterns of the Vespers) resist generalization in terms of regional tendencies, and the reasons for such local particularities remain elusive.
- With respect to chronology, the few churches where musical norms can be compared at intervals of a century or more show no significant differences. Musical styles undergo evolution within a constant structural framework.
- One striking feature emerges beyond local specificities: the use of polyphonic compositions was markedly lower than the combined use of fauxbourdon and chant on the book.

These findings are particularly instructive at a time when musicology recognizes the importance of moving beyond musical notation to engage with historical practices in all their diversity and depth. The “consumption” of polyphonic compositions can be considered in specific contexts. The daily life of church musicians, the training of children, the responsibilities of choirmasters, and the modes of interaction between organ and voices are revealed under a new analytical lens.

Implementing a Forgotten Dramaturgy

The various musical expressions integrated into the ceremonial of France's major churches offered far more than mere pageantry. They followed one another in subtle continuities, accumulations, striking juxtapositions, and meditative progressions, amplifying the underlying theatricality of the liturgy through a true sonic dramaturgy and dynamic, whose precise interplay and movement can now be discerned.

Five concerts, planned between 2021 and 2026 in collaboration with the Centre de musique baroque de Versailles, made it possible to implement several of the conclusions of this study—gradually refining the approach at each stage and documenting the results (recording and videos). Beyond a simple reflective process, this experimental component has helped to renew the line of inquiry by bringing to light issues that are not easily discernible through historical sources alone. The stages of this experimentation are outlined in the conclusion (pp. 813–818), with the detailed programmes the concerts provided in the appendices (pp. 987–989).

Finally, the collaboration with the performers came to fruition in a recording by Sébastien Daucé and his ensemble Correspondance, made in August 2025 (Harmonia Mundi, release 2026). Conceived around the coronation of Louis XIV, it incorporates the organ in dialogue with the polyphonic choir—a leitmotif of this research and a musical perspective of the utmost stimulation.