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## Plainchant primer

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### Music

**Vox Clara – Schola Cantorum Riga,  
Guntars Pranis, Ieva Nimane**  
Skani

Whether it's the arching beauty of the "Veni Creator", the comfortingly stolid "Pater Noster" or the graceful "Ave Maris Stella", there's a sense of plainchant as something immutable, eternal – a language we've always known and all share. But a new recording from the award-winning Schola Cantorum Riga reveals a tradition full of flexibility and variation, even improvisation – music that, far from being fixed, evolves and adapts to different countries and contexts.

The birth of plainchant is the birth of musical notation; the two traditions are so intertwined, so mutually dependent, that it's hard to conceive a medieval performance tradition that was far from bound by or to those carefully illuminated neumes that decorate the pages of twelfth- and thirteenth-century manuscripts. Instead, as Guntars Pranis and his musicians demonstrate here, often these notes were just the starting point for

performances that blended official chant melodies with polyphonic and folk influences, voices with local instrumental textures and accompaniments.

The ensemble's home town of Riga (at whose cathedral the Schola Cantorum is the resident male-voice choir) is the geographical centre of a recording that roams across northern Europe from Limoges to Hamburg and Lund in Sweden, offering a musical tour through subtly different styles and colours of chant.

Any expectations of severe musical simplicity are banished in the opening seconds of the recording. A drum sets up a marching pulse, quickly joined by the buzzing hum of the hurdy-gurdy, whose drone is the anchor for a flighty, bird-like recorder. There's a processional energy to this "Res est admirabilis" – one of several non-liturgical sacred songs that frame the hymns and antiphons included here.

After the ascetic, white-scrubbed approach of so many British groups to this repertoire, it's refreshingly relaxed – an attempt to recreate not just the sound but the spirit of works that dissolve distinctions between sacred and secular. The singing itself is soft-edged, cloudy, solo verses delivered with a ballad singer's fluid phrasing and inflection, taking full advantage of the rhythmic freedom built into these works.

Some of the group's interventions are subtle: the strange harmonies extrapolated from the familiar "Miserere" by Ieva Nimane's evocative kokle (a kind of Baltic box zither), the wild instrumental dance that breaks out between verses of the

Responsory “Ingrediente Domino”. Others are bolder, like the rustling, and rattling forest of sound effects that set the scene before “Unicornis captivator”, with its vivid descriptions of pelicans, crocodiles, lions and more, and – most striking – the collapse into an echoing Babel of drifting voices that cluster towards the end of “Gaude Maria” in what feels like an extraordinarily modern effect.

Home to the largest medieval church in the Baltics, Riga also houses the Riga Missal – the first musical document in Latvian history. This fifteenth-century manuscript is the source for one of several premiere recordings included here – the keening “Kyrie eleison ymas”, with its alternating verses of solo and unison chant. Six centuries after monks originally notated it, it’s hard not to feel chills when you hear the city once again filled with the same chant.

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