



Florida Department of Commerce

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CHURCH MUSIC SINCE VATICAN II

It is impossible to consider the future of Catholic church music without an understanding of the reasons for the recent reform and the situation which caused it. At one time the Church was the main influence on the development of music; she employed musicians on a large scale and inspired many great composers. Today this has changed and musical patronage is largely the concern of the state and the broadcasting and recording companies. Inevitably, this has made the practice of liturgical music a bleak and uninviting task for most professional musicians. When one recalls the great Catholic composers of the past—Palestrina, Byrd, Victoria, Dufay, Josquin—and also the great secular composers who wrote for the liturgy—Monteverdi, Mozart and Haydn—one can see the decline that has taken place.

Immediately before the II Vatican Council contemporary Catholic music was largely uninspired and provoked little interest. Even the potential of a Catholic composer such as Elgar was left unexplored. The output of our musicians was slight in comparison with the period of the renaissance and it seemed that little



could be done to remedy the situation. The general standard of Catholic choirs was low. There were exceptions, but one can well remember when the Sunday sung Mass was usually avoided by most Catholics. Church music had to be endured and it had ceased to have any real contact with the ordinary Catholic. Music, whose main purpose is the communication of beauty, had by and large ceased to communicate.

It would be wrong, however, to analyze the situation as entirely bad. The Catholic Church possessed a fine and comprehensive tradition of music; its plainchant and polyphony were unique. The monks of Solesmes had collated and restored the melodies of the chant and also developed a highly artistic method of performance. In England, Cardinal Vaughan and Sir Richard Terry had founded the musical tradition of Westminster Cathedral with its residential choir school and professional men's choir. Richard Terry restored to daily use in England the Solesmes chant, sixteenth century polyphony and the best of contemporary music. St. Pius X had begun the reform of church music with his *Motu proprio* of 1903. He insisted that it should be liturgical in character and should "possess in the highest degree the qualities of . . . holiness and goodness of form." It must "exclude anything that is secular, both in itself and in the way in which it is performed." However, despite this re-awakening of interest, liturgical music had ceased to have any real impact, and Catholics, largely unaware of their past musical achievements, were generally prepared to accept an unhappy standard of mediocrity.

Seen against this background the recent reform was obviously necessary; but it is now becoming increasingly important to evaluate its effects and consider the future. The II Vatican Council laid down certain principles for the development of church music. It insists upon the retention of plainchant and polyphony; indeed, the chapter on sacred music in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy begins by stating quite bluntly that "the musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art." It goes on to stress that "the treasury of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care," and it again underlines the importance attached to plainsong: "The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy; therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical functions." The constitution then gave permission for the use of the vernacular and insisted upon the necessity for congregational participation. It demanded that choirs should be developed and modern choral music encouraged; it re-iterated the fundamental place of Latin in the liturgy and gave an implied permission for the use of popular music: "In certain parts of the world, especially in mission lands, there are nations which have their own musical traditions, and these play a great part in their religious and *social* life. For this reason, due importance is to be attached to their music, and a suitable place be given to it."

In fact, the constitution is a document of considerable vision, and when published, it was welcomed by most sensible church musicians. They saw in it not only a re-statement of traditional values, but also evidence that the council fathers were genuinely interested in musical development.

Most musicians were unprepared for the document but it was received with considerable initial euphoria. People were genuinely prepared to try to make the reform work and if any evidence of this is needed, one need only study the



membership of the English national music commission. It included men such as Lennox Berkeley, Egon Wellesz, Edmund Rubbra, Anthony Milner, George Malcolm, Alec Robertson and Henry Washington, all practicing musicians of international repute. However, despite initial goodwill, little real progress has been made and it is becoming increasingly important to understand the reasons for this.

Basically, the liturgical constitution has been interpreted in a one-sided manner. The reformers have failed to see the necessity of preserving the traditional alongside the new. Consequently much Catholic music has been discarded. There have been shocking instances of choirs being summarily dismissed and those that still remain are in many cases not very good. In the heady excitement of radical reform, it was overlooked that Catholic music had taken over 1500 years to develop. The impossibility of replacing this heritage within the space of a few years was not realized and consequently most of the new vernacular music is trite, marked by the speed with which it was written. Many people have turned to pop and folk music in the hope of finding an easy solution, but although initially successful, it tends to sound thin when the novelty value has worn off. The work of the church musician is becoming increasingly difficult as he faces the task of making new compositions attractive to congregations who are becoming more disturbed by the effects of "the changes." Because of the over-emphasis on congregational singing, the musician is finding it difficult to practice the art of music. In fact, many of those serious and able musicians, who were prepared to help the liturgical renewal, have been alienated by the manner in which the reforms have been put into effect. The future which seemed alive with opportunity has again become bleak.

It would be wrong, however, to accept a gloomy prognosis. The years of reform will eventually produce good results. Already there has been a rebirth of congregational singing, and a growing standard of discernment which was lacking before the council. The ferment of discussion and new ideas will eventually produce higher standards. Undoubtedly today is a time of great crisis, but difficult periods sometimes produce visionary ideas which result in great progress.

Cardinal John Wright in an interview quoted in *U.S. News and World Report* dated August 31, 1970, stated that we are facing a "winter for Christianity, a winter for belief." He went on to say that this could well last until the end of the century and then spoke of an "inevitable spring of renewed faith." If this is a reasonable assessment of the future, church musicians must think in terms of laying the foundations of church music for the next century. They must develop a composite policy for liturgical and secular music so that the depth and excellence of the former will inspire those working in the latter. To do this, however, it is necessary to understand the nature of music and its application to the liturgy.

Music has two complementary functions in worship. The liturgical constitution defined them as "the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful." Music has the power to lift man up to God and also to create a real sense of community. There is nothing more inspiring than hearing a large congregation singing well. It can be a most thrilling sound. On the other hand, a choir or orchestra has the ability to communicate beauty, which is, after all, an attribute of almighty God. A fine performance contains ordered thought which reflects



the logic of creation; it is therefore extremely important that man should be able to offer this back to God in worship. It is often overlooked that the beauty of music forms a very instructive part of the Mass. Who, when hearing a fine composition well sung, cannot be led to wonder at the nature of the supreme being who gave this sublime gift to man?

Liturgical music can have great pastoral value; art attracts people to religion and in a largely materialistic age, music could be a great help in the work of evangelization. To misuse it does immense harm and blunts one of the Church's more powerful weapons.

Church musicians must seriously consider the pastoral value of music. There is a great interdependence between secular and religious music and a growing interest in the former. It is not generally appreciated that music-making is one of the most profitable of western industries, and from the Church's point of view, it is extremely unwise to allow it to remain completely under humanistic influence and commercial control. Music is in a considerable state of flux and there is a great uncertainty as to how it should develop. Composers are experimenting with new and strange sounds in the hope of extending musical knowledge, but a lot of this is done with little apparent reference to the basic laws of music. The Church should aim to help these young composers and performers by setting out for them the inspiration of Christian idealism in a liturgy rich in contemporary artistic expression and bound by the great traditional music of the Church.

Another important aspect of the secular situation is the renaissance in musical education. It is vital to discover ways of relating educational music to Christian philosophy. The power of music has been amply demonstrated at recent pop festivals and it would be most unwise to allow young people to associate it entirely with their latest pop idols or the current "drug scene." Secular music represents a vast field of potential pastoral concern and it is expedient for church musicians to consider ways of re-establishing the status of liturgical music in the eyes of the secular world.

This cannot be done until the standards of church performances are greatly improved. Music badly sung is not only painful to the ear but is also an insult to the dignity of worship. No secular musician will take the Church seriously until performances reach the levels of competence which command real respect. The Church should be prepared to make financial resources available so that most dioceses have at least one choral establishment where standards are high.

Another important field opened up by the council is ecumenism. Its musical effects will be important because there is a great deal to learn from the traditions of other churches. Anglican music, for example, is extremely fine. Their cathedral tradition is something which Catholics, to our shame, abandoned years ago. The Anglican Royal School of Church Music is another organization from which the Catholic Church can learn. Music needs institutions and buildings and Catholic church music would improve rapidly if we adopted the Anglican system of cathedrals, collegiate chapels, and school of music.

The Lutherans also have a lot to offer. Their superb tradition of hymns and hymn singing is something which Catholics are only beginning to discover. Bach, in his church cantatas, points a way in which music for the new rite of Mass could develop. Over two hundred years ago he overcame the problems posed by the co-existence of congregational and choral singing. The cantatas contain music of deep meaning and spirituality which combine recitative, hymn



singing and complex choral writing. Here is a musical form which contemporary composers could well exploit.

However, a policy for music will get nowhere until church leaders are prepared to listen to the advice of their musicians. A lot of the current difficulties are due to the personality problems which musicians seem spontaneously to generate. The clergy must try to understand the temperament of the musician and make allowances for it. An excellent example of the difficulties caused by temperamental misunderstanding is the suspicion created in the minds of the musicians by the over-emphasis on congregational singing. One cannot expect a good organist to stay at a church where his duties consist merely of accompanying hymns. One of the mistakes of the recent reform has been to consider music and language purely as a vehicle for congregational participation. This has tended to reduce artistic expression to the level of the nursery rhyme. A good musician cannot be expected to work with dedication when he has no opportunity to practice the art of music. He must be asked to write and perform specialized choral music; he should be encouraged to produce work which not only satisfies men's voices, but also reaches deeply into their souls. This will not happen until there is respect and co-operation between the clergy and their musicians. The choirmaster, who by his nature is a highly sensitive and insecure animal, needs to be persuaded by the courtesy, intelligence and perception of the clergy that his work will be acknowledged and respected.

In many cases, however, the musician is responsible for personality problems. He sometimes finds it difficult to realize that music exists for the liturgy and not the other way round. He tends to react violently to innocent suggestions and seems to be incapable of patience. In fact, the delicate relationship between the artistic and administrative temperament always causes problems, but they must never be allowed to stand in the way of co-operation. Mutual respect is essential and liturgical progress will not be realized until this is achieved.

Undoubtedly, the greatest mistake since the Vatican Council has been the abandonment of so many traditional liturgical values. A lot of bad practices have been eliminated, but, at the same time, a great deal of good has been destroyed. This radical reversal of previous policy has been similar in some ways to disowning one's own father. The faithful, brought up in one tradition, have been puzzled by the drastic changes in religious practices. Musicians, who know so well the artistic inspiration of Catholic music, have been incredulous at the manner in which it has been cast aside and in many cases replaced with settings which would fail to admit the composer to a junior music school. It has been similar to telling concert promoters that all music written before 1950 can no longer be played: Beethoven, Bach and their like are now out of date in this new, thrusting, contemporary world. Imagine the astonishment this would cause among concert-goers, but this, in many cases, is the line taken by some of the more radical reformers. A policy for church music will get nowhere until those elements of our tradition which have a real spiritual value are restored.

The main element of Catholic music is undoubtedly plainchant. Originating in eastern and Jewish chant, it now consists of a comprehensive collection of settings for all the liturgical texts. It is fascinating to reflect that Christ would almost certainly have heard the tune which is used for the Holy Week lamentations. (Unfortunately these have now been deleted from our worship.) This tune was used in the synagogue at the time of Christ and impresses by its extreme simpli-





city. Plainchant has grown with the Church and it portrays Catholic belief in a manner which is vigorous yet ethereal, dramatic yet timeless. There is an extraordinary range of expression to be found in the chant. Some of the vesper antiphons, notably *Hodie Christus natus est*, color their texts in a most joyous way, yet the sequence *Dies irae* is set to music which excellently describes the sombre meaning of the words. Plainsong forms part of man's natural method of communication. Despite its ancient origins it still sounds absolutely fresh and spontaneous to contemporary ears. The chant reflects the history of the Church and also its Jewish origins. Alec Robertson sums it up when he describes hearing a lamentation sung by a solo tenor in the Basilica of St. John Lateran. He writes: "This simple refrain sounded as if the prophet was addressing mankind not only in the past, but all down the ages to this very day."

It is useful to recall a petition sent to the Holy Father asking for the preservation of chant. Signed by thirty people, including Ingmar Bergman, Benjamin Britten, Evelyn Waugh, Jacques Maritain, François Mauriac and Philip Toynbee, the petition described the chant as "one of the greatest cultural and spiritual patrimonies of the West." In a letter to *The Tablet* (March 19th, 1966) describing plainsong as "among the supreme achievements of Christian civilization," Robert Speaight pointed out that it was unusual to find the names of Maritain and Waugh on the same petition, and he then went on to recall how Eric Gill, before he became a Catholic, said after hearing the monks of Monte César sing *Deus in adiutorium meum intende* that he thought the "heavens were opening."

It is interesting to compare these statements with the following quotation from an article in *Notitiae* (December 1970) by Father (now Archbishop) A. Bugnini, secretary of the Congregation for the Divine Cult and one of the chief architects of the recent reform. Describing the canonization of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, he wrote of the plainchant *Alleluia* sung by the boys of the Westminster Cathedral Choir: "The triple *Alleluia* powerfully sung by all, wonderfully framed the chaste melody of the versicle *Nisi granum frumenti sunt*, performed in a manner quite perfect and, I would say, angelic by the choirboys of the schola. Thus we heard under the vaults of the Vatican Basilica chant in its ever stimulating freshness."

It may well be unusual to find the names of Jacques Maritain and Evelyn Waugh on the same petition, but it is even more unusual to find Archbishop Bugnini and the late Evelyn Waugh in unspoken agreement on any aspect of liturgy. The lesson to be drawn is that plainsong speaks to men of all views and is as valid today as it was in the twelfth century, or as it will be in the next. It enshrines an unearthly spirituality and has an ethereal, timeless quality which is both instructive and moving to all manner of people.

Polyphony exerts a similar fascination. It developed out of plainsong and became one of the most intricate styles of music. Even today it poses considerable problems in performance. Contemporary interest in it is extraordinary; there are many recordings available and it receives regular performances. It is very significant that a recent winter series of orchestral concerts by the BBC Symphony Orchestra opened with a performance of William Byrd's *Five Part Mass*.

A lot of polyphony is deeply moving. Few have heard a good performance of Victoria's *Jesu dulcis memoria* or Palestrina's *Reproaches* without a real sense of beauty and eternity. Music which displays the quality of plainsong and

polyphony can never really be out of date; it exists unaffected by the passage of time. The heritage of Catholic music is undoubtedly one of the noblest collections of art known to man.

The other element in our tradition which is of perennial value is the use of hieratic language — English or Latin. For centuries man has felt the need to address God in a special language, both as a mark of respect and as an acknowledgement of the mystery of creation. Man also has an innate sense of ritual which helps him to express religious belief. Hieratic language complements ritual and adds considerable awe and dignity to worship. It is interesting to recall the reason which Stravinsky gave to Robert Craft for choosing Latin for *Oedipus Rex*: Latin is “a medium not dead, but turned to stone, and so monumentalized as to be immune from all risk of vulgarization.” This comment is particularly apt at the present time when there is so much talk of desacralization.

Latin and the music which goes with it are a basic part of Catholic tradition and it is wrong for any organization to divorce itself from its cultural roots. Sections of the Church have attempted this and one of the effects has been a rapid growth in “sacred pop music” and third rate vernacular settings. The overthrow of most traditional music has left a vacuum which is rapidly being filled by cheap expendable music. The theory that “folk” attracts young people to church may well be valid in some cases. Its attraction lies in the fact that “folk” is thought to be the natural cultural expression of some young people. This attitude tends to be somewhat patronizing with its implication that modern youth is incapable of understanding adult culture. It has strong overtones of older people expressing what *they think* younger people should like and has probably been encouraged by music publishers looking for maximum profits. It is the duty of adults to educate children; previous generations were taught to accept the traditional culture of Catholicism and if we fail to pass on our appreciation to the young, we are gravely at fault.

Sometimes it is helpful to have a folk Mass, but this form of music is very limited in expression and of doubtful long term value in dealing with people who are reaching maturity. Those people who search for God outside, or on the fringes of society, do so because their environment offers them little genuine spirituality. The Church will not attract them by offering a cultural expression of the society from which they wish to escape. Basically, pop is as much out of place in church as a Mass by Palestrina would be in a dance hall or discothèque.

The future of church music sets a great challenge to the contemporary musician. He must use the traditional music as a springboard for future development. He must emulate standards of the past and develop music of quality and appeal. There can be no question that with the aids of modern communication — radio, television and recording — the opportunities are large. Church music must set out to express the beauty and repose which the world so desperately needs but so sadly lacks. Without great contemporary music the liturgy will be deprived of one of its greatest adornments. It is vital for everyone concerned with church music to get together and restore it to its former greatness.

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