

LITURGICAL MUSIC IN THE 21ST CENTURY
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"...based on an historical perspective and the documents of Vatican II with attention to trends in World Music, focusing on the essentially vocal character of liturgical music."

Let's begin with the briefest of reviews: where did we come from? (I wasn't there, so I can only go on stories that have been told to me.) The official liturgy of the church was supported by Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony. If one understood Latin and could sing it, Gregorian chant, to use Francis Mannion's category, was ritual-functional music. And those who enjoyed the beauty of the chant and appreciated its profundity usually didn't mind sitting out once in a while, listening to the choir embellish the music with polyphony. Now, unless you have experienced Gregorian chant in a domestic setting, you will not understand the utter simple beauty of it. The chants for both the Office or Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharistic liturgy are almost exclusively scriptural. The chants for the Office are not that difficult except for the antiphons on feast days. For the ordinary of the Mass (that is, the basic acclamations), quite often the same settings were used regularly so that they became second nature. There were certain cultures, communities, where Gregorian chant was not an elite music, but functional, domestic, ritual music, mostly religious communities, convents, monasteries, and seminaries.

Every now and then one hears a story about a parish that had a tradition of singing this way as well, but it seems to have been rare. There were efforts in the first half of the 20th century to encourage folks to sing the chant ordinaries, and just prior to the Council there were many texts and materials being used to try to get folks involved in the chant itself. But at the parish level, the norm seems to have been that people sang popular hymns at the Mass, that may or may not have had anything to do with the liturgical action that was taking place. Devotions were popular because they allowed for participation, and much of the music from Marian and Eucharistic devotions became the most popular Catholic music. The problem, writ simply, was that the ritual music itself was not sung by the assembly. If I were there now in 1964, I would be scratching my chin asking myself, "How can we get the people to sing the propers and ordinaries of the Eucharistic liturgy with the kind of gusto that they put into 'On This Day O Beautiful Mother'?"

There is the famous saying of Annibale Bugnini, the great Italian liturgist, which we all love to quote, that dates from the earliest days of the liturgical reform: "Liturgical song involves not mere melody, but words, text, thought, and the sentiments that the poetry and music contain. Thus . . . *cantare la Messa, dunque, e non solo cantare durante la Messa*. Sing the Mass, therefore, and not merely sing during the Mass."¹ That's what Gregorian chant did. It sang the Mass, it sang the ritual, it sang the liturgy. So the calls for ritual music that we have rightly heard these past years are only hearkening to our own tradition.

A brief digression: The reason I find it so intriguing to look at other traditions is that I discover Christianity with fresh eyes. I start to better see the universal archetypes resonating. Let me give you an example. I just got back from a six week stay in India. I spent the last week at Sri Ramanashram in Tiruvanamalai. This is the ashram at the foot of the sacred mountain Arunachala that was built up around the remains of Ramana Maharshi, who has devotees all over the world, many here in America. In fact there were many Westerners there when I was there. It is a popular pilgrim site and there are ceremonies going on constantly for their sake. I was watching everything with a somewhat trained eye, first as a Catholic liturgist and musician, and then as a beginning student in Indian music. There were three types of music going on. First there were the Brahmin priests who were chanting mainly the Vedic scriptures, from memory, back and forth in alternating choirs. Then there was a group of singers called *oduvar* singers: they were three young men who had trained practically since birth to sing in temple. They sat down on the floor and turned on an electric device called a *shruti* box that emits a I-V drone, imitating what would normally be played on a *tambura*. They were highly trained, and the singing was very ornamented, and beautiful, I might add. And then nightly everyone else, or everyone else who could read the Tamil language, sat down on the floor in the *samadhi* hall in opposing choirs, men on one side and women on the other, and sang devotional hymns to Shiva, to Mount Arunachala or to Sri Ramana Maharshi himself, in very simple melodies, alternating choirs. Another part of the spiritual practice there is to make what is called a *pradakshina*, or a walk around the mountain, quite often singing a whole host of hymns by memory, some of them more like litanies, or else these beautiful short jewels called *bhajans*, which are a simple lined out chants that go back and forth between leader and everyone else. I was amazed at the amount of music I heard. But even more, here was the very image of the church before Vatican II: the clerical caste singing the rituals and the Scriptures themselves, a group of trained singers (a choir!) singing highly specialized, ornate pieces, and devotional hymns and litanies for the rest. So this is not just a Roman Catholic issue; it's kind of a universal phenomenon that it's easy to slip into.

So came our revolution with Vatican II. It's interesting to read this paragraph from *Musicam Sacram* of 1967 now in the light of all this.

The following come under the title of sacred music here: Gregorian chant, sacred polyphony in its various forms ancient and modern, sacred music for the organ and other approved instruments, and sacred popular music, be it liturgical or simply religious.²

Like many elements of the Vatican II reform, I do not think the Council fathers (and they were emphatically all "fathers") had any idea the kind of musical revolution that was about to take place. Just as not all expected Latin to be completely replaced by the vernacular, so the documents rather assume that Gregorian chant is not going to be completely replaced, especially not in the way it was.

And what came out of it? First came the music of the likes of Lucien Diess and Gelineau, that seems to me to have grown out of the old tradition without missing a beat: chant based, scripturally based, very vocal; then there were hymns, many borrowed from other communions; then there was the folk style, especially here in the States, starting with the F.E.L. era of Ray Repp and Joe Wise et al. Since then we've gone places that no-one ever dreamed of, and I think every kind of music that could have been tried has been tried. (I've tried much of it personally, and, yes, I even played bass at a Polka Mass.)

Any working liturgical musician knows that there is a mountain of music available now. (I get a headache every time I see a catalogue come in!) But still, this is as it should be. We are still in the stage of experimentation; we're still learning how to sing this new rite, learning how to sing it in our own language, and then, on top of that, learning how to sing it in our own *musical* language—and we haven't necessarily even discovered our musical language yet or, shall I say, I fear we have already grown comfortable with a mediocre language, a limited palette. That's what I want to really focus on now: musical language, and expanding our musical vocabulary, our sonic palette. How do we do that?

I see our task as (at least) three fold: first, to go back to the basics of what the church challenged us to from the beginning; second, to sift through what is there and find out what is emerging that is sound liturgical-musically; and third, to find the soft spots. Let's take those one at a time.

First: go back to the basics of what the church challenged of us from the beginning. Let me tell you why I think this is important. I am merely echoing the words of Bishop Trautman here, who confirmed what I had been afraid of: we're in danger of backsliding now. The euphoria of Vatican II has ended and as it fades in time, one wonders if it is also fading in influence. In the current talk about "reforming the reform" there seems to be a pullback from liturgical principles, a lessening of collaboration, a return to devotionism rather than worship. Even in recent official liturgical documents there are signs that seem to call us back to a liturgical piety and theology prior to Vatican II. And yet liturgical renewal hasn't even happened yet in many parishes!³

I recently read a book that was handed on to me by a priest friend of mine who is very involved in youth ministry on a national level. It's called "The New Faithful", and the subtitle tells you exactly what it is about: "Why Young Adults Are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy".⁴ The author reports about a whole new generation of young people returning to orthodoxy, with its accompanying conservatism and traditionalism. She writes that these new faithful tend to embrace Eucharistic adoration and Marian devotions, for example. The interesting thing to note also is that she makes the point that many of these young people are attracted to combining contemporary worship with traditional teachings, so rock and pop music, charismatic praise songs and contemporary Christian music. I see a danger here—note: I'm not accusing, I'm just saying there is a danger—that if we combine this trend with the textual and musical clichè that is often found in contemporary or "pop" music, that our music could become devotional again rather than liturgical, the 21st century version of "On

This Day O Beautiful Mother". So that's one warning shot I want to shoot across the bow. The other thing I kept noting was how odd it sounded for her to refer to the "Vatican II generation" as opposed to the "new orthodox." Vatican II is not a generation; it was an ecumenical council of the church. It *is* orthodoxy. I want to say about Vatican II what others have said about Christianity in general: it's not that it has been tried and found wanting; it hasn't been tried yet. Musically, I think that's because we are still collecting our working materials.

So let's keep in mind what the Council calls us to. What did the church ask of us musically? Here is a rather late quote in the history of these things, from 1974, that I think summarizes the challenge placed before musicians of the reformed liturgy at its best. It's from a "*Letter to Bishops on the Minimum Repertoire of Plain Chant*," issued by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship in April, 1974:

Where vernacular singing is concerned, the liturgical reform offers a 'challenge to the creativity and the pastoral zeal of every local church.' Poets and musicians are therefore encouraged to put their talents at the service of such a cause, **so that a popular chant may emerge** [emphasis mine] which is truly artistic, is worthy of the praise of God, of the liturgical action of which it forms part and of the faith which it expresses.⁵

Listen again to these few words: "Where vernacular singing is concerned" and "So that a popular chant may emerge." I want to pull two things from those short phrases.

First of all: it's all about the voice! What we're concerned with is vernacular *singing*. Everything else musical is at the service of the singing. I think that is why the phrase "chant" is used—so that a "popular chant" may emerge. Back to Annibale Bugnini scratching his chin in 1964 asking, how can we get the people themselves to sing the ritual, the liturgy? I think we can get distracted by all the talk about styles of music, the nine paradigms, folk versus classical versus Gregorian chant versus ethnic. It's about what will support our people singing the Mass, what will put the voice out front, what music will support the ritual and the singing of the word. This is why I have been fascinated by other traditions, especially any tradition where the music is essentially vocal. And the more you look around at other traditions, especially outside of Christianity, you find an essentially vocal music. What I envied about the Indians at Sri Ramanashram, as well as the Christian monks with whom I was staying in India, is that they have all this music that is not dependent on instrumentation. When it is thus, the text can shine! And we are a text-centered faith, a Word-centered ritual. This is my fear about focusing too much on contemporary worship: the more reliant we are on sound systems and electric instruments, the farther in the background can go the voice, and with it, the Word, as an adjunct to the accompaniment.

A second thing to draw from that one simple phrase: so that a chant may *emerge*. What a beautiful word: "emerge"—which means to me that it is meant to come forth organically. That's a beautiful pastoral image; not that a new chant may be

imposed, but that a new chant may *emerge*. This from *Sacrosanctum Concilium* itself says the same thing in another way:

In certain countries, especially in mission lands, there are people who have their own musical tradition, and this plays a great part in their religious and social life. For this reason, **their** music should be held in proper esteem and a suitable place is to be given to it, not only in forming their religious sense but also in adapting worship to **their native genius**...

“Native genius”: what does that mean. . . ? In a sense, at first glance, we don't have a native genius in America when it comes to a vocal music, because we don't have a native essentially vocal tradition. But don't we? Is not the music of the First Nation part of our native genius? Surely Dvorak thought so. And how many Irish folks passed through Ellis Island with the tunes of the Celtic tradition still fresh on their lips, from which many world music and pop artists are drawing even now? And, my favorite claim, are not the spirituals that grew out of the unfortunate marriage of the peoples of Africa with Christianity and its hymn forms at the root of all our popular music? What about the American Shaker tradition? In Alaska, for another example, what about the Yupic tradition of chants with the drum that surround the potlatch?

We're in the realm of my second point now: what criteria do we use to sift through what we have and find what is worthy that has emerged? There's another quote I want to share with you, from *Music in Catholic Worship*, concerning judgment in choosing music.

Is the music technically, aesthetically, and expressively good? ... Only artistically sound music will be effective in the long run. **To admit the cheap, the trite, the musical clichè** often found in popular songs for the purpose of “instant liturgy” is **to cheapen liturgy**, to expose it to ridicule, and to invite failure.⁷

Another brief digression: I was mentioning this book and phenomenon about the new orthodoxy among young people to a young friend of mine who comes from a background of punk rock and ecologically-sensitive commune living, and has now found his way back to the Catholic church through the monastic life, and he said to me emphatically, “Yes, and there are just as many young people running off to Zen monasteries and ashrams because they are not satisfied with the lack of concentration on the contemplative life in most parishes, nor the easy answers of typical Catholicism.” I want to speak for a moment of this group of people, often simply facilely lumped together in the New Age category.

There is something fascinating going on outside the church. People are finding spirituality, spiritual practices and ways of living that would put us to shame in terms of its integrity, dedication and transformation, and they are doing it outside the church, sometimes in spite of the church. They may be at times misdirected, they may be solipsistic, they may be looking for easy answers and a certain permissiveness in their own way; but they are not afraid of the sacred.

They are not afraid of asceticism, of sweat lodges, and sitting hours in meditation, in fasting, in reading sacred scriptures, and in building a way of life that reflects their spiritual values based on peace-making and love for the earth, and mental health and care for the body. Now this is fodder for a whole other talk—on how I don't want to convert them so much as learn from them and tap into *their* native genius—but lest we get too far off hand, let me make this relevant to our topic at hand.

I'm fascinated by the music that they are listening to—sacred music from around the world, music of the Native American tradition, roots music from Africa, Tibetan chanting, Sufi *qawali* singing, and a huge audience for Indian *bhajan* singing, the likes of Krishna Das for example and his album "A Pilgrim Heart." This is an audience that will not be satisfied with a music that is not technically, aesthetically, and expressively good, that is not artistically sound, that is cheap, trite, or a musical clichè as often found in popular styles. This is the audience that helped make such a success of the recent huge sales of albums of Gregorian chant and the music of Hildegarde of Bingen. As a matter of fact it's mostly what we would describe as chant, or at least as what I would describe as chant: essentially vocal music, that may be rhythmic, may be harmonized, but is not dependent on either. It's essentially vocal.

We are now in the area of the "soft spots" to which I was referring. By "soft spots" I mean the areas that have yet been unexplored.

Another example: There's a great CD collection and book put together by Robert Gass named simply *Chant*, in which he describes and presents chants from traditions such as I have described, from all around the world. It's very interesting.⁸ I peeked ahead in the book, to see what he picked to include (if he included it at all) as Christian chant, assuming he would put in something Gregorian. No: he picked the music of Taize, as the type of chant that fits in best with the other chants he was describing. What about Taize music is so appealing as to be that universally appealing?

What I'm suggesting is that we may still be looking in the wrong places, or at least that there are other places besides pop music, folk music, classical music, and Broadway shows that we are not completely exploring in our search for our own voice in liturgical music. Perhaps in this era liturgical composers and musicians should also be studying with Hindu *bhajan* singers and the Brahman priests who sing the ritual and have committed the *Vedas* (the Hindu sacred scriptures) to memory; and the Jewish *hazan* who is not only the cantor but the guide of the synagogue celebration⁹; the Islam *hafiz* who commits the entire Koran to memory¹⁰; perhaps listening to Buddhists chant a *sutra* or their dharma lineage together at the end of a period of meditation. Why? From a practical standpoint these are types of music that sit gently on a rite and give pride of place to the word (if not "the Word"). From a theoretical standpoint, somehow I get the feeling that these musicians are doing the same thing we are trying to do or are supposed to be trying to do, and that our music comes from the same root, this challenge of daring to give voice to the sacred.

I also hasten to add that I am not necessarily suggesting that we should be singing Indian *bhajans* or *qwali* music in Western liturgies, but that these musics can help us find our own voice. I don't sing Hindu *bhajans* so that I can be a Hindu, be an Indian, or sing like an Indian. But somehow Indian music helps me find my voice, teaches me how to sing worship with just my voice and how to proclaim a sacred text in song. Most European Americans, for example, are never going to be able to sing Gospel music or spirituals like African Americans can naturally. But I'm not trying to sing like an African American. What my week with Clarence Rivers and Grayson Brown did for me in 1977 was to help me find *my* voice through that music. I know, for another example, that Taize music comes under criticism, sometimes, as one composer loves to tell me, because he thinks it's not good music, and another liturgist wrote that we should not be imitating French monastic music. But again, the point is that Taize helped us find *our* voice, especially helped us discover a simple thing like the use of the *ostinato* in worship to sing Scripture in praise, and helped us rediscover the litanic form in a fresh new way. And it is a music that *emerged*. It worked! People love singing it, and therefore it has something to teach us. If we were to combine the soulfulness of gospel music and spirituals, with the devotion of Hindu *bhajans*, the contemplative presence of the music of Taize with the sturdiness of the Gregorian liturgical sensibility—oh my God! I think John Bell and Iona community's music is also an example of this. Their music, even their experiments with music from around the world, is not just a rip-off, and I don't think the word "hybrid" works either. It is music that has *emerged* out of a living and breathing worshipping community that is committed to the Word, to sound liturgical principles, and to unashamedly stepping into new musical territory.

Let me give you one more example of something going on in the world that interests me as a liturgical musician: perhaps you are familiar with the ECM recording label produced by Meinfred Eicher out of Munich? In my words, what they are doing is combining classical, jazz and world music and musicians; or, perhaps better put, they are not discriminating between classical, jazz and world music on their label, but producing a marvelous new synthesis. One example is the great jazz pianist Keith Jarrett playing the Shostakovich preludes. Another even better example is the beautiful and popular recording by the jazz saxophonist, Jan Gabarek, entitled "Officium," in which he improvises over the Hilliard Ensemble singing sumptuous Renaissance polyphony. Here are some of the liner notes from that recording:

When jazz began, at the beginning of this century, it had no name; nor did polyphony when it began a thousand years earlier. These two nameless historical moments were points of departure for two of the most fundamental ideas in Western music: improvisation and composition. . . What is this music? We don't have a name for it: it is simply what happened when a saxophonist, a vocal quartet and a record producer met to make music together.¹¹

On a similar note, I have for some years been interested in the common ground that can be found between jazz and chant, but this is not in the interest of having a jazz mass! This is in the interest of our voice emerging out of our native

genius. Along with all the other courses and books offered an aspiring liturgical musician in this century recommended reading or listening or viewing should be something like the first episode of Ken Burns jazz series, entitled "Gumbo," which explores the combination of elements that went into the birth of the music that came out of New Orleans in the late 19th and early 20th century: classical music, band music, African dances, spirituals. This is part of our native genius; it's the roots of our pop music, Gospel, blues and rock. Not to have a Gospel Mass, or a rock Mass or a blues Mass either, but that out of our native genius, out of our "gumbo" a popular chant may emerge.

So let me summarize by asking a question and dreaming a little. What would we get if our music and our church really reflected our native genius? It would not be neat and clean, but it may have the urgency of rock and roll with the soaring crispness of Gregorian chant, the rootedness in the earth of the rhythms of Africa, the jubilant freedom of jazz. What is this music? We don't have a name for it. . . but I believe it is emerging. I'll end with two more of my favorite quotes, the first from Music in Catholic Worship:

Musicians must search for and create music of quality for worship. . . They must also do the research needed to find new uses for the best of the old music. They must explore the repertory of good music used in other communions. . .

In the meantime, however, the words of St. Augustine should not be forgotten: "Do not allow yourselves to be offended by the imperfect while you strive for the perfect."¹²

And this one from Brian Eno:

... perhaps a more important reason [for the huge upsurge of interest in "World Music"] is the breakdown of a world view that says: "We and our values are the hub, the norm, the center, and everyone else is a kind of aberration from us." Of course, this view would lead one to regard other music as, at best, "curiously exotic and at worst, proof of all the nasty things people like to think about each other. And within this "us and them" distinction, there was another subdivision. Our version of it was called the Western classical tradition, and it maintained that these were High Music—the type that the people who wrote the history books liked—and there was all the rest, the stuff that everyone else liked. This picture maintained that innovation always worked from the top downwards—that the pure ideas of the great composers found their way, in degenerate form, into the popular music, and that, therefore, these popular musics were necessarily dilute and comparatively less "valuable" and "enduring." Occasionally there was an acknowledgement that this flow could be reversed—Kodaly and Bartok, for example borrowed from rustic folk dances—but then it was assumed that the raw material of folk culture would be enhanced and ennobled in the hands of a great composer.

Distinctions of this kind are interesting because they notify us about the limits of our empathy. If we really have no feeling whatsoever for the music that so deeply moves somebody else, surely this indicates that there is a part of their psyche that is closed to us. How important is that part? What does music represent in this sense?

...

What I want to see is the demise of fundamentalism in favor of pragmatism.

By fundamentalism I mean any philosophy that thinks it has the final and unique answer, that believes that there is one essential plan underlying the works in the universe, and that seeks to make sure everyone else gets persuaded to fall in line with it.

By pragmatism I mean improvisation: the belief that there are many approaches, that whatever works in the light of our present knowledge is a good course of action, and that what is the best course of action for us, here and now, might not be for someone else, there or then.

I want to see societies (and people) who know how to improvise, who can throw together a social mode (tuxedo and black Thai) just for the evening, who can move fluently and easily between different social and personal vocabularies as the situation changes, who don't feel lost without the religious reassurance of "thisism" and "thatism." I see these people as the hunter-gatherers in the great flux of the world's cultures, enjoying a rich diet of ideas and techniques and styles, creating their own special mixes. There is no snobbism in this picture—no material too common or too exotic to be used, no simple distinction between real and make-believe. This kind of improvisational flexibility entails a continuous questioning of boundaries and categories, a refusal to accept that names necessarily fit accurately into what is being named.ⁱ

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¹Notitiae 5 (1969) 406. Documents on the Liturgy 1963-1975: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), edited and translated by Thomas C. O' Brien of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy.

²Musican Sacram, 4.b

³Bishop Donald Trautman, "Voices of Hope for a Renewed Liturgy", Pastoral Mosaic, October-November, 2002, p. 33.

ⁱ Brian Eno, "Why World Music," in Creators on Creating: Awakening and Cultivating the Imaginative Mind, Frank Barron, Alfonso Montuori, Anthea Brown, eds. New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1997; pp. 166-167

⁴Colleen Carrol, *The New Faithful* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002).

⁵From a "Letter to Bishops on the Minimum Repertoire of Plain Chant", SCDW, April, 1974.

⁶*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, #119

⁷Music in Catholic Worship, para. 26, 1972

⁸The book is *Chanting: Discovering Spirit in Sound* (Boulder: Broadway Book, 1999); the CD is Robert Gass, *Spirit in Sound: Chant* (Boulder: Spring Hill Music, 1999). The book gives example of what I like to refer to as "popular chant", borrowing the phrase from the above cited Bishops' letter, whereas the CD contains more soloistic, virtuosic pieces, including from the Christian traditions various selections of Gregorian and Byzantine chant, and a piece from the delightful music of the Trappists in Keur Moussa, Senegal. As for the latter, talk about native genius (!): the weaving of African Wolof and Mandingo rhythms and instruments with Gregorian chant and scriptural-liturgical texts.

⁹The *hazan* is trained in Hebrew, vocal and musical mastery, and is considered to be the custodian of the liturgical tradition.

¹⁰In the orthodox Muslim world religious music is strictly solely vocal, and the *hafiz* learn a highly structured and refined art of chanting including specified pronunciation, pauses and phrasing.

¹¹John Potter, liner notes for CD *Officium*, Jan Gabrek and the Hilliard Ensemble (Munich: ECM Records, 1994).

¹²Music in Catholic Worship (1972), para. 26