

## **Sung Worship and Music Education: A Christological Perspective**

By John H. Miller, CSC

Rightly it has been said that "song, issuing as it does from the very breath and cry of life itself, has a mysterious power to condense and to release something of the totality of a people's experience." Centuries ago St. Augustine gave us an insight into music's mysterious power when he wrote: "The many different sentiments of the soul find in song and voice their own echo and are stirred by I know not what hidden power" ("Confessions" 10, 33).

In religious music we witness the outpouring of the nearly indescribable "vibration" of the human spirit in response to the presence of the Creator. In the Hebrew Bible God's creative spirit is called the *ruah* YHWH (the breath of the Lord), and our spirits respond even if faintly but often much more strongly to that presence like the strings of a harp vibrating in response to the movement of the "wind" that is the Spirit.<sup>(1)</sup> It is our belief that the Creator who personally sums up the totality of human experience is the supreme "joy of our desiring." Little wonder, then, that the human encounter with this Creator expresses itself in some of the most magnificent artistic compositions in our history. And as Ralph Martin has written: "the Christian Church was born in song."<sup>(2)</sup>

In the liturgy we engage not merely in a human experience but in a divine experience, in the marvelous exchange between God and humanity "in Christ" which, because it takes place for us in the very person of Jesus Christ, to whom we are joined in baptism, is nothing short of the eternal conversation of love taking place among the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. This theological point makes it necessary--I do not say merely proper, but necessary--to employ the highest form of human expression--music--to attempt to speak the unspeakable beauty, truth, and love of this conversation to which we are united. If it is true that any composer seeks passionately to give shape and form through music to the composer's own inner experience, what can we say about the urge of the soul to give voice to its inner ecstasy when it realizes that it is caught up in the eternal canticle which the Father sings to himself, that is, as he sings the divine Logos, who is the infinitely perfect expression of the Father?

### **THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS**

This is precisely what happens to us in the liturgy. Through the gift of baptism and the power of the Spirit we are made the voice of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Logos of God, as he sings his eternal hymn of love for his Father.<sup>(3)</sup> We struggle to capture in human terms and modes the sense of this divine "love affair" into which we have been assumed by being grafted onto Jesus Christ by baptism, born again as children of God, members of the divine communion. In the liturgy all the baptized are called to continue on earth the divine canticle which is the Holy Trinity, which is the Logos incarnate, the second person of that Trinity who finds in the humanity of Jesus Christ its most perfect sacrament.

Acknowledging this great gift of incorporation in Christ, the divine canticle, St. Teresa of Avila exclaimed, "Ah! Would that I were transformed into a thousand tongues to praise you, O my God!" Of course, most people who recognize the immense gift and incredible mystery of being allowed to participate in and continue the divine canticle that is Jesus Christ do not have the confidence or the poetic flare of Teresa. We are more likely to imitate the prophet Jeremiah, who responded to God's call by saying, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a child." We need to hear God tell us, "Do not say, 'I am only a child,' . . . I have put my words in your mouth" (Jer 1:6-7, 9).

Our participation in Christ means that the liturgy is not a dialogue as some people have understood it--as though we and God were on an equal footing. It is a dialogue into which we are incorporated as "adopted" participants:

The liturgy is our participation in the dialogue that goes on within the triune God, so that God in Christ brings forth from us his own divine response.

## WHAT A RESPONSIBILITY

In light of this theological truth, music must be central to our liturgy, as the Second Vatican Council said: "As sacred song closely bound to the text [that is, for the most part, bound to the word of God], it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy."<sup>(4)</sup> What a responsibility music incurs to express this divine dialogue! And what a responsibility music directors and music educators likewise incur! Not that we have to be convinced of the need for music in worship, I hope, since this need should be a passion that drives us, but we do need to convince those we teach and with whom we work. We must endeavor to set aflame that same passion in their souls and to educate them, setting them free from the inhibitions that prevent God from drawing forth this divine response from within them.

What we need most of all, perhaps, is encouragement, for it is an uphill struggle to convince others of the reason for our passionate support of musical worship. So many people misunderstand us and the theology we are trying to express--and among those who misunderstand we still must count pastors, school administrators, and religious superiors. Let us not be stifled by the apparent hopelessness of it all. This is not the first century in which the Christian theology of worship has run into problems, nor is it the first time that the central importance of musical worship has been challenged by church leaders. Not to put too fine a point on it, the issue in which we are engaged is the proclamation and preservation of the church's teaching about the incarnation and its related ecclesiology, the church's own belief that we share in the life and mission of the One who lived by every word that comes from the mouth of God, who conceived of his whole purpose in life as adoration and service of God.

## CATHOLIC MUSIC EDUCATORS ARE . . .

Catholic Music Educators are first of all -educators-, those who bring students to recognize their own gifts and then lift them out of themselves by challenging them to assume wider and richer perspectives. They are -music-educators, who bring students to an appreciation of and some competence in matters musical. They are -Catholic- music educators, and here there is a problem of interpretation. Does the adjective modify "educator" or "music"?

Although we would agree that the "musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art,"<sup>(5)</sup> I surely think that we would be the last to consider ourselves so narrow as to be interested solely in "Catholic music" in the religious sense. Rather, I would suppose that the adjective modifies educator, one who is heart and soul involved in a passion for totality, for universality, for the Catholic (and "catholic") spirit in music.

In other words, Catholic music educators do not secularize their understanding of music, nor do they spiritualize it, but they appreciate music in its proper perspective. All music truly worthy of the name is for us a sacrament of the divine canticle; all music leads to God because all beauty, of which music is a scintillating fragment, has come from God. Thus music, an art in its own right, finds its fullest achievement when offered back to God in worship, for we believe that Christ is restoring all things to the Father through himself.

With such a Christocentric frame of mind, Catholic music educators discern the Christ-canticle, and therefore the Church's own song, being sung in and through all music. Therefore we cannot isolate religious music or liturgical music from "non-religious" music. Nor can we, to put it bluntly, call something "music" just because it happens to be associated with religious themes or used in a liturgical setting. To sum up, Catholic music educators must see all of their art of music as a sign, symbol, and sacrament of Jesus Christ and their life's work in every type of music as consecrated to this ultimate Christocentric goal: to lead everyone through music back to Christ and, through participation in his sung prayer, back to the Father.

## A WORTHY SIGN

By reason of the talents that God has given us, though, we are also forced to insist with all our might that this music be a sign worthy enough of the tremendous reality it is supposed to contain, and for this it must be genuine art. As the U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy reminds us, the music that we use and teach should be "technically, aesthetically, and expressively good." (6) Popes and councils have been telling us this for a century now: Church music must be a fine art as well as a functional art or, to put it another way, church music is not automatically freed of the laws of the art of music, nor is the art of music an aimless wanderer in the church building. To quote "Music in Catholic Worship" once more: "Only artistically sound music will be effective in the long run. To admit the cheap, the trite, and the musical cliché often found in popular songs for the purpose of 'instant liturgy' is to cheapen the liturgy, to expose it to ridicule, and to invite failure." (7)

All of this might be obvious to music educators working in a Catholic environment, but it is not at all evident to many pious souls and talented artists. We cannot afford to play off popular participation against genuinely artistic music. Thirty years after the Council's call for full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy, one still hears the plaintiff on one side saying: "With this emphasis on popular participation good church music in impossibility." Such an accusation comes from those who think that the call for full participation in worship means that people have got to sing, no matter how or what. Those accused respond that popular participation has a papal and conciliar mandate, so that the expectation that people should sing properly and with good taste is just too much to expect.

In fact, the same authority that has highlighted music's "ministerial function" has also noted that it should be "genuine art." (8) We cannot agree with some musicians who claim that the reformed liturgy necessarily brings the end of good church music, nor can we give in to the desire to make liturgical music independent of worship's requirements, sacrificing congregational participation to the demands of good art. Though it is a fine art, as the Council said, music is also a functional art, an art serving the liturgy. Thus music in worship must secure the purpose of the liturgy. This means that choirs, for example, are not instruments to reveal the musical talents of their members or their directors: They are primarily an instrument of the church to lead all the faithful to vocal musical participation in the sacred mystery of Christ's redeeming action. To the extent that music does this, it belongs in church. It must accomplish this in accord with its own nature as an art, of course, but it must finally serve the church's worship.

Any attempt by musicians to execute during the liturgy music which doesn't truly lead the assembly to a more intimate and fruitful participation in the liturgy is simply out of place. Such music includes compositions which are too difficult for the people used at those parts of the Mass which are intended for communal participation; this usage reflects an excessive zeal for music, out of all proportion to music's proper role in the liturgy. Does this mean that more elaborate music no longer has a place in worship or that great treasures of polyphony, for example, may no longer be used? Certainly not. There are places in the liturgy for polyphony and four-part choral music, but the rights of the whole assembly may not be infringed upon, either by excessive zeal for "good" music or by an over-valuation of a choir's musical skill. (9)

## TRUE . . . FOR NOW

Some musicians feel that congregational participation sounds the death knell of good church music because, they say, the people "in the pews" cannot sing correctly or understand the value of our musical heritage. These claims may be true. . . right now. But isn't it the precise task of Catholic music educators to furnish the greatest possible number of people with the ability to render the basic chants of the Order of Mass in the proper manner?

In fact, the Council mandated such broad musical education. It ordered bishops "and other pastors of souls" to "be at pains to ensure that whenever a liturgical service is to be celebrated with song, the whole assembly of the faithful is enabled . . . to contribute the active participation that rightly belongs to it." Further, the Council

ordered that music be taught and practiced in seminaries, novitiates, and religious houses of study, "and also in other Catholic institutions and schools." And to guarantee effective instruction, it noted that "those in charge of teaching sacred music are to receive thorough training."(10)

This task may seem massive, and its extent is so staggering that these requirements of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (which, in fact, echo similar demands by the popes of this century) have pretty much been set aside in practice, but it would be defeatism in a person who is supposed to be an educator to give up educating and become concerned only with a small group of proficient, such as a choir or other trained group. The task is enormous, but it is not really impossible. Science has been showing us in recent years that the so-called "tin ear" problem is grossly exaggerated. Yes, it is impossible to teach someone to sing properly who refuses to learn or who has developed ingrained bad habits. Yes, it is true that our work with a whole congregation may not get them to acquire the absolutely perfect art, but must we refuse to see in their performance any artistic quality? Isn't the quest after the art of music a lifelong striving for an ideal? If so, then are we to wait until heaven before we get to use this beautiful art? Music, pre-heaven, is a matter of relative perfection, and our mission must be to help people grow in ever greater perfection of music.

With this said, what are we going to do about a parish in which many lay people are still mute spectators during our participation in the great Christ-canticle that expresses the divine love affair? What can we do when they do not realize that they are so intimately involved that their hearts should burst forth in song? Teach them!

How do we teach them good music? How did you learn it? First, they need to hear good music. I am thoroughly irritated by parishes that have abolished or reduced parish choirs because, the argument goes, the people should be able to sing. People can learn good music by hearing it sung properly by the choir. This, in fact, may be a realistic first step in getting a parish to sing as a community, as a family, to have the choir "model" and support the appropriate communal responses with artistic quality, loving expression, and prayerfulness. Such a rendition imprints an impression on the memory, mind, and heart of the listener, and people are likely to leave church humming the melodies to themselves.

People may begin to sing along with the choir, but they may also need some correction. An occasional, formal, brief practice in church before Mass is in order to assist the congregation to learn how to sing.

We should expect more, of course, from educators' dealings with children, especially with children in Catholic schools, to whom we should impart such a love of and desire for good music, including hymns and chants, that they will, as if by second nature, hum them, sing them at home, and thus help adults in the home learn them unconsciously. With a progressively more intense musical training of children in our schools, the music in our churches will achieve greater perfection.

Music educators in this century have been given papal and conciliar mandates to employ their talents and energies toward the more fruitful participation of all Christians in the liturgy. It is our vocation as Catholic music educators to inspire people with our own love of God in music and to share with them the ability to participate in sung worship. This means that our highest aim as educators should be to beget in as many people as possible a deep love of and appreciation for liturgical music, but not exclusively for the music of our worship, since all true music leads to God, because as the gift of God it bears in it a trace of the divine transcendence.

## Notes

1. Such an image recurs regularly in early Christian writings. In fact, some teachers described the body as well as the spirit as an instrument "played" by God. For example, St. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150- c. 215) offered an allegory on Psalm 150 in which he described the body as "an instrument and its sinews as strings from which it derives its armonious tension, and when strummed [by God] gives off human notes" (Paedagogus II, iv; PG VIII, 441-442). Later, at the dawn of the fifth century, St. John Chrysostom, spoke of the grace of the Spirit

working in believers to produce sound "using, instead of flute or lyre or pipes, the lips of the saints" (Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew LXVI-II, 4; Patrologiae Graece [PG] LVIII, 644-645.

2. Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1964) 39.

3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1213; also 1136, 1140, 1141, 1153.

4. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #112. The text of the liturgy is taken directly from the Scriptures (e.g., the psalms and biblical canticles), woven of scriptural quotations (e.g., the Sanctus), or based on images and phrases derived from the Bible.

5. *Ibid.*

6. National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, *Music in Catholic Worship*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: USCC Office of Publishing Services, 1983) #26.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #112.

9. We should note a tendency among some choirs to outstrip their musical abilities in order to perform great works of musical art. The result is often anything but the genuine art of music. Back in 1955, Pope Pius XII noted that it "should hardly be necessary to add the warning that, when the means and talent available are unequal to the task, it is better to forego such attempts than to do something which would be unworthy of divine worship and sacred gatherings" (*Encyclical Musicae sacrae disciplinae*, December 25, 1955, #61).

10. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #114-115.

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