

THE CHRISTIAN FATHERS AND CHRISTIAN MUSIC

Moreover, they assert that the people have been beguiled by the strains of my hymns. I deny not this either. It is a lofty strain than which nothing is more powerful. For what is more powerful than the confession of the Trinity, which is daily celebrated by the mouth of the entire people?

—ST. AMBROSE

In the continuous series of renaissances of the human spirit, whether in art, literature, or philosophy, the past has been sought out and analyzed as a purer expression of all that is permanent and of enduring value. This analysis leads to an attempted imitation; the "originality" of this imitation can be a barometer of the fecundity of the movement—if such an idea is not paradoxical. A few examples, not in any order of importance, come to mind readily: St. Augustine's adaptation of Plato, the Thomistic synthesis of Aristotle, the humanistic ideals of the European Renaissance including the birth of opera as a misguided resurrection of Greek drama, the belated influence of Shakespeare on continental theater, the idealization of the Christianity of the Middle Ages by nineteenth century romanticists and, as an accompanying development, renewed interest in the liturgy. One could safely say that there is almost no liturgy without music; such does not exist except in a few circumstances. By force of circumstance the Western Church was compelled to substitute a recited Eucharistic Liturgy or "Low Mass" for the proper celebration of the sacred mysteries with full choral participation. This latter can never be considered the norm of worship. In recent years, action has been taken most successfully to restore the singing Church of early Christianity inspired by Augustine's oft-quoted dictum, "He who sings prays twice." Revival of interest in liturgical chant is inseparable from the whole liturgical movement; it alone ideally expresses all the aspects of the virtue of religion. I do not believe that we are so remote, spiritually or aesthetically, from the period which saw the rise of Christian liturgy and song that we cannot appreciate their ideals and incorporate them in a comprehensive view of sacred music valid for the present period of transition and beyond.

It is with this in mind that we shall examine the writings of the Fathers on music, consider the various historical contexts, and infer some principles to guide sacred music in the Church today. One might object that we really have no exact knowledge of the music which the Fathers heard and, consequently, must refrain from applying their value judgments to the current situation. In this respect the following facts should be recalled: first, much as it may vex the musicologist (for whom the Fathers are about the only source of contemporary musical information) their discussions do not concern themselves with technical, formal, or aesthetic elements but rather with music's ethical effects, whether good or ill. Second, music in the Church has an unbroken history in which the broad outlines of its evolution can be traced and the accretions of various periods stratified, thereby defining primitive practice. Moreover, the restoration of chant now in the process of completion puts us in a fortunate position to hear the melodies in more or less early versions, some of which may be close to practice in the patristic age.

Early Christian music stands at the confluence of two great streams of musical culture: the one, Judaic; the other, Graeco-Roman. From the Jews the infant Church borrowed psalmody and the methods of its performance, e.g., a dialogue between two choirs or between soloist (cantor) and choir. Not a few of the simpler melodic formulae are thought to reach back to the Synagogue. The contribution of the Hellenic world was two-fold: theoretical and aesthetic writings of great prestige and a decadent and perverted musical practice recognized as such by both cultured pagans and Christians. Gone forever were the glories described by Plato and exemplified in the great dramas (whose musical portions had already been lost). The music of pagan rites was crude and orgiastic; that which accompanied the immoral spectacles was worse still:

Yea, and in that place, the theater, there are foul words and fouler gestures, and the dressing of the hair has the same purpose, and the gait, and the costume, and the voice, and the languishing movement of the limbs, and the rollings of the eyes, and the flutes, and the pipes, and the action, and the plots and everything, in short, is full of the utmost licentiousness.

Thus spoke their most vigorous opponent, St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople. A fuller description of the musical milieu during those

first centuries is not possible here. Rather, we turn to an examination of the positive precepts of the Fathers on sacred music.

The Purpose of Christian Music

Just to clear the ground, we cite an objection of the Egyptian abbot, Pambo:

Woe is upon us, O son, for the days are come in which monks shall relinquish the wholesome food given by the Holy Ghost, and seek after words and tunes. What repentance, what tears proceed from hymns? What repentance can there be in a monk who, whether situated in the church or in his cell, lifts up his voice like a bull?

In other words, why not avoid a great many difficulties and inconveniences and do without music altogether—a not infrequent suggestion today. It seems that a silent rosary in a silent church, accompanied by the celebration of Low Mass by an almost silent priest is more attractive to the American Catholic than the proper performance of liturgical functions with everyone taking his musical part. Even the dialogue Mass is less than ideal, but once this stage has been mastered there is no reason why the Mass cannot be sung to the most simple chants whenever it is celebrated. The melodies for the Ordinary of the Mass recommended by the Sacred Congregation of Rites (Sept. 3, 1958) are much simpler than current show tunes of which the average American has a considerable repertoire. It is most revealing that the Fathers did not consider an *apologia* for music in divine worship to be necessary; in view of St. Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians, ". . . be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord," such an explanation would be superfluous. St. Augustine says only that, "In many places in Sacred Scripture we find both number and music mentioned with honor." Evidence of a more positive attitude is Chrysostom's statement:

God, having seen that most men were tepid and little disposed to read spiritual things, unwilling to bear pain, wished to make their work more pleasant; he added melody to the prophetic words so that, attracted by the rhythm of the chant, all would sing fervently the holy hymns (Commentary on Ps. 41).

Plato, in legislating for the ideal state, established some rigorous constitutions on music. Only virile harmonies suitable for the formation of warriors could be permitted. He justifies his course:

'And is it not for this reason, Glaucon,' said I, 'that education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained, and otherwise the contrary?'

Aristotle adopted a more moderate position, allowing even vulgar music to auditors whom it suited. Sceptics minimized the educational value of music, seeing in it only a diversion, a recreation. The Fathers could not share this point of view. The dangers of brutalizing pagan music were too great, its inroads in the Christian community too evident, and the powerful effect of true Christian song too real to be disregarded. Since we are attempting to draw practical conclusions this latter is worthy of consideration. The statements of Ambrose and Chrysostom already quoted bear witness to the high value which they both gave to music. St. Basil believed that the Holy Spirit, gently deceiving men, had instituted religious music for them so that "in reality, they might instruct their souls while they believe they are only singing melodies." The importance of hymns as bearers of doctrine has long been recognized and this principle underlies the reform of hymnody which is being carried forward in many Christian communions. The death knell has been rung for the sentimental, supersaccharine tunes and banal verses which not only impart no solid doctrine, but also ruin the musical judgment of those who sing them.

"Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs"

While traces of hymns can be found in the text of the New Testament, orthodox Christian hymnody can truly be said to begin with St. Ephraem the Syrian (308-373). The hymn was a form of popular devotion and the Gnostics had used it with telling results. The clever deacon saw his opportunity and turned their own weapons against them. If the heretics used popular melodies, so would he; if their hymns were sung by women's choruses, his would be, too. After Hilary of Poitiers failed, St. Ambrose succeeded in setting a standard pattern for the hymn and community religious singing in the West. So well did his rhythms suit Western ears that he found a host of imitators, so much so that the usual

name for a hymn was an *Ambrosianum*. Although not an official part of the Roman Liturgy, the hymn flourished throughout the early Middle Ages until a decline in the thirteenth century. Vernacular hymnody did not take on life until the Reformation, some of whose adherents had a veritable genius for excellent melody and religious poetry. The trend in modern Catholic hymnals is eclectic, incorporating good material wherever it can be found. St. Ephraem's technique was much the same, to "baptize" any text or melody he thought useful with words of orthodox faith. For some reason the hymn was considered in some respects superior to even the psalms: "Indeed, the powers on high sing hymns, not psalms." In commenting on the text, "a hymn for all his saints" (Ps. 148), he proposes his famous definition:

Do you know what a hymn is? It is song with praise of God. If you praise God and do not sing, you do not speak a hymn; if you praise anything not related to the praise of God, you do not speak a hymn even if you should praise by singing. A hymn therefore has these three things: song, praise, and God.

St. Paul's instruction to the Church at Ephesus included the singing of spiritual songs. What, exactly, were these? The general opinion is that this is a reference to long, rhapsodic vocalizations on a single vowel much like that of the *Alleluia* in the Roman Mass, but more extended and improvised by the singer as he went along, "so that it seems that he, filled with excessive joy, cannot express in words the subject of that joy" (St. Augustine on Ps. 99). The admittance of such a form to Christian worship could not be without reservation. The Oriental color inherent in the decorative and sensuous arabesques of wordless melody could carry a hint of pagan orgies. Nevertheless, certain types of ornamented chant were traditional in the Synagogue, especially in solo psalmody—at least this much was approved. Imitation of pagans, on the other hand was to be scrupulously avoided: "we rejoice in confession [of the faith]; they, in confusion." The *jubilus* was sanctioned, therefore, but only in a spiritual sense as the pure expression of a contemplative spirit to whom conventional modes of communication are inadequate.

Preeminence of Psalmody

The reader will recall that St. Paul gives first place to the singing of psalms; "David is first, middle, and last" with all of the Fathers. The bene-

ficial effects which they attribute to the psalms pertain to them most properly when they are sung. Without doubt the words of the Holy Spirit are the essence but the sacred melodies are a powerful aid to their propagation and comprehension; "I feel that the flame of piety is kindled in a more holy and fervent way by these sacred words when they are sung than if they were not sung" (Confessions of St. Augustine: X, 33). The texts carried with them the methods of performance in use among contemporary Jews. These inherited techniques are at the root of everything sung at Mass and in the Divine Office, parts of which are incomprehensible without some knowledge of the musical forms from which they stem. The most simple style of the period probably differed little from the psalm tones, the melodic formulae used in the singing of entire psalms, in use today.

If simplicity of execution was desirable, so was continuance of ancient tradition, humble communal prayer, and a weapon against pagan instrumental music. All of these were found in the psalms to a superior degree. Let St. Basil represent the Fathers' *elogia* of the Book of Psalms:

A psalm chases demons and attracts the aid of angels. It is a weapon against the fears of night and a respite from the fatigues of the day; it is a help for those who are still weak in spirit, an adornment for those who are still in the flower of youth, a consolation for the aged, finery most becoming women. Psalmody populates deserts, gives to market-days a serious character. For beginners it is a beginning, for those who are more advanced a means of progress, for those who are already confirmed a bulwark. It is the voice of the Church. A psalm makes feasts joyful; it gives to grief the quality most fitting before God. A psalm can even cause tears to flow from a heart of stone. It is the work of angels, heavenly intercourse, spiritual incense . . . (First Homily on the Psalms).

Although we might not choose the same expressions as the venerable bishop of Caesarea, we, together with all Christians, accord the psalms a preeminent place in worship, a place which they have always held. If they are not appreciated as much as they ought it is not because they have no appeal to our civilization; the opportunity to make that appeal has been denied them. Inertia and a proliferation of congregational music have stalled efforts until recently but congregational hymns and psalmody are making heartening progress in the United States. Success in France has

been astounding. The psalms sometimes replace popular music as an accompaniment to everyday tasks in a way which recalls Chrysostom's description of their use in his time. No one will deny that the Gregorian psalm tones are models of simplicity and directness but it is generally conceded that they do not suit the accentual nature of modern languages. *A fortiori* this is true of chant pieces more elaborate than the psalm tones are. Attempts to cast vernacular psalmody in a suitable musical framework have been made but not successfully in the case of, for example, English words added to a melody which grew organically from the original Latin words and respects its accent system. In the sixteenth century the interest of the reformers was centered on a vernacular liturgy. Two methods of psalmody were evolved. One, Calvinist, consisted in versifying the text and setting the resulting poem to a hymn tune; the other, Anglican, in harmonizing traditional psalm formulae and establishing metrical rhythm at the ends of lines. In the first method the words of Sacred Scripture are not respected; in the second, the text is forced into a rigid framework which does not entirely suit its structure as prose. Father Joseph Gelineau, in his skillful translation of the *Book of Psalms* for the "Bible de Jérusalem," carefully preserved the basic rhythms of Hebrew poetry, e.g., each half verse has an equal number of accents but not necessarily of syllables. This authentic translation, joined to folk-like melodies, has given birth to a new concept in religious music. Not at all difficult, these psalms can be sung by any congregation willing to verify the happy experience of St. Ambrose that, in the psalms, "doctrine and grace vie to outdo each other."

Musical Instruments

The Fathers commented most profusely regarding musical instruments, particularly those mentioned in the Old Testament. Their use in the Temple was an indication of divine approval but these same instruments had become so closely identified with pagan deities that their use by early Christians would be ill-advised. The Fathers found themselves in an embarrassing position; after all, was there not the command to "blow the trumpet at the new moon . . . an ordinance of the God of Jacob"? It must be understood that by itself there is no essentially secular instrument; it becomes so by association. All of the popular instruments of patristic times were in one way or another connected with pagan ritual, funeral ceremonies, and licentious theatrical presentations. The aulos or reed-pipe was universally abhorred because of its identification with the orgies celebrated in honor of Dionysius and Cybele and its function as the principal instrument of the

theater. Ranked with the *pompa diaboli*, it was condemned as an instrument which "contemners of the fear of God were wont to use in the choruses at their festive assemblies" and likened to the serpent which tempted Eve. Since it was a non-biblical instrument such attacks, justified as they were, could not be refuted. Those instruments actually mentioned in the Old Testament as forming part of the Temple orchestra were considered symbolical of Christian verities. In time the precise signification of each became stereotyped. Another explanation was that God had allowed the Jews the use of this music because of their weakness. This may not be far from the truth, for did not the Israelites in the desert wish to worship God in the form of a calf and with the rattles, singing, and dancing of the Egyptian cult of Isis with which they were familiar? But still, the instruments were there and God had allowed their use; that all were not considered dangerous is evidenced by the presence of the kithara, a lyra-shaped instrument with two large, upright arms, in the heavenly liturgy of the *Apocalypse* and its depiction on Christian sarcophagi in the hands of the departed. The psaltery, a string instrument shaped like an inverted Greek *delta* with the sound box in the upper part, lent itself to this symbol:

Although there are many musical instruments, the prophet made this Book of Psalms suited to the psaltery, as it is called, revealing, it seems to me, the grace from on high which sounded in him through the Holy Spirit, since this alone, of all musical instruments has the source of its sound above (St. Basil: Homily on the First Psalm).

St. Augustine, in commenting on the orchestral *Psalms 150*, unites the functions of the two instruments:

The psaltery praises God with its upper part; the kithara, with its lower part—a symbol of the glorification by heavenly and earthly creatures of Him who made both heaven and earth.

Suitable interpretations were attached to all the instruments mentioned in the Old Testament. The taut skin of the tympanum could represent the annihilation of concupiscence, the destruction of the body, or its resurrection; the cymbal, a pure soul vivified by the salvation of Christ; the trumpet, the omnipotent word of God or the preaching of the apostles.

Without a doubt the human voice far surpasses any soulless instrument in its expressive capabilities:

We sing God's praise with living psaltery for more pleasant and dear to God than any instrument is the harmony of the whole Christian people. Our kithara is the whole body, by whose movement and action the soul sings a fitting hymn to God, and our tenstringed psaltery is the veneration of the Holy Spirit by the five senses of the body and the five virtues of the soul (Eusebius).

Patristic Aesthetics

A subject which has aroused great interest is that of musical aesthetics. Since the Fathers' interest in music was based on its usefulness to Christianity's missionary effort or the effect it could have on individuals they do not consider it from the point of view of an art cultivated for its own values. The contemporary music which they heard was in a depraved condition and gave little intimation of greatness. We will, however, attempt to derive an aesthetic of Catholic music from both literary and historical documents. Let us divide the area of musical criticism into three parts based on the objects to which attention is directed, either to the formal element, the expressionistic element, or the subjective element. We have already mentioned the dearth of formal analysis in antiquity. St. Augustine is somewhat of an exception but we will be disappointed if we look to his treatise *De Musica* for detailed information. It is really a tract on classical versification, the first five books of which were written before his conversion and, hence, before his acquaintance with Christian music. Aristoxenus (fl. 330 B.C.) began an investigation such as would interest us here but he had little influence on the Greek authors from whom the Fathers received their musical knowledge. Théodore Gérold, in *Les pères de l'église et la musique*, can say only that "for Augustine, symmetrical and well proportioned development are essential in a musical composition" (p. 136). In the relationship between words and music the former are considered more important. Augustine says: "This verse which we have cited: *Deus creator omnium* [a hymn by St. Ambrose] will not only be agreeable to the ear by its sound but event more so to the soul by the wholesome truth which it expresses." Periods of transition are apt to be awkward and the structure of a composition was not so important as its suitability for a desired effect.

Conscious realization of the expressive value of religious music did not arise until words and music came to be regarded as separate entities,

the latter pursuing an independent, extra-liturgical development. A complete break was achieved by the time the Renaissance came to a close. Music was now conceived as the logical unfolding of melodic and harmonic elements independent of any text. The *Kyrie* could be set as an Italian overture and any section of the Mass was suitable for a richly developed aria. This situation could not endure forever. Ecclesiastical pressures and an enlightened consciousness on the part of musicians themselves led to a search for a correct and proper interpretive setting of the sacred texts—a problem unknown during the formative stages of chant when words and music were one. Idiomatic musical devices are necessary for the unification of an extended composition but the work ought not to be based entirely on their exploitation. An "official" sacred style just cannot exist; modal harmonies, archaic effects, snatches of chant melodies do not sanctify a musical expression devoid of artistic merit. The style of Palestrina has frequently been cited, even in official documents, as the polyphonic ideal of the liturgical spirit. Even though his Masses are consummate masterworks of their type, many believe that he reaches greater heights of eloquence in the motets and the settings from the *Canticle of Canticles*. Yet these latter are not notable for any idiomatic use of chant melodies or strict modality. Palestrina is at his best when he is most personal.

The Masses of Haydn, Mozart, and other classical masters have often been denounced as operatic and unfit for Catholic worship. Such a view is understandable as a reaction to the excesses of two generations ago. However, may I submit that an age as eclectic as our own may be able to reconcile enthusiasm for an austere liturgy with the colorful, but oftentimes profound religiosity of these works. Many are manifestly unsuitable but the situation deserves to be scrutinized more thoroughly. More pertinent to our discussion is an appraisal of the expressiveness of Gregorian Chant. Some elaborate analyses would give the impression that this placid *cantilena* is a seething cauldron of emotion erupting at every phrase. Certainly this is a misapplication of current theories of musical analysis and criticism. Chants, especially the more ancient ones and therefore those most similar to the ones the Fathers heard, are not "expressive" in the commonly accepted sense of a personal, emotionally colored setting of a text—such a practice would be inimical to that certain universality of the liturgy. The tracts, a very ancient form of Mass chant, consist almost entirely of small melodic fragments distributed in patterns according to the length of the text. Texts of the most dissimilar meanings, then, receive almost identical melodies. As is well known, the tracts of the Easter Vigil and that of the

Requiem Mass have substantially the same melody; most of the Office antiphons are reducible to less than fifty type-melodies and other examples are not lacking.

The Aesthetic of Sacred Chant

From the foregoing it ought not to be inferred that a sympathetic portrayal of the words is deliberately avoided. Many pieces are richly expressive. Otherwise the chant would not be the sublime human interpretation of divine realities which it is. The Gradual for the feast of the Epiphany contains an ecstatic outburst at the words, "Up, and shine, Jerusalem;" the melody of the Good Friday Response, *Tenebrae*, slowly lifts itself by stages to that acute cry, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" There is scarcely anything more sombre than the dark stirring which begins the Offertory, *De profundis*. To the impassive psalmody, however, every emotion is the same. The absence or presence of expression is clarified by a passage from Dionysius the Areopagite: ". . . the heavenly hymns, being inaudible to human ears, are revealed to the prophets and saints by the lower echelons of the celestial hierarchy as psalms and hymns." The hymnodist was merely a transcriber whose duty it was to deviate as little as possible from the heavenly archetypes presented to him through tradition. Slight amplifications and embellishments were permitted but never to the degree that a personal work of art was created. A mere mortal could not hope to excel the heavenly hosts in the sung praise of God but that did not excuse him from making every effort to excute his chants as perfectly as possible. A virtuous life is far more important than a beautiful voice and Chrysostom, for one, is prepared to excuse many faults in a modest soul. Augustine will not allow us to forget that bad singing is pleasing to neither God nor man, that if we tremble at the thought of performing before a skilled musician how much more so before God to whose perfect ears the most perfect human achievement is riddled with defects. In a society such as ours which demands excellence, good intentions are definitely not an explanation for a shoddy performance of cheap music. Compositions which would be laughed out of a concert hall are shameful offerings to the King of kings. Such works, heard all too frequently, edify no one. Far from having any proselytizing value, a value which St. Basil thought important in music, they actually drive away prospective converts. We do no more than follow the spirit of the Fathers in demanding better things from composers and musicians.

Appreciation for the subjective factors in music are not absent from

the Fathers' writings. The effect, good or bad, of music on performers and audience were too patent to be ignored. Christian music ought to awake in those who hear it a response which will lead them to the practice of a life of virtue. Zeal for music to nurture Christian ideals and, before all else, to give fitting glory to God. St. Augustine is the most famous witness to the powerful effect of music on souls. Speaking of St. Ambrose's church in Milan he says,

How greatly did I weep in thy hymns and canticles, deeply moved by the voices of thy sweet-speaking church! The voices flowed into mine ears, and the truth was poured forth into my heart, whence the agitation of my piety overflowed, and my tears ran over, and blessed was I therein.

This attitude is reminiscent of Chrysostom's words on the value of sacred music.

Such is a very cursory survey on a period which profoundly influenced the subsequent course of western music. Folk and popular elements existed but they could not enter into the main stream of musical culture except through incorporation in the only body of music which led a conscious, independent life of its own—Christian Chant. The Church Fathers were the most influential thinkers and administrators of the age. Their attitudes shaped the course of music in their own time and far into the future. It is from the foundation they helped to erect that the glorious tonal edifices of Palestrina and Bach spring. Indeed, all music has its roots in their foundation. To them we pay our debt of gratitude and hope that their influence will be a living one in the revival of sacred music and the sacred liturgy.

—Antoninus Dyer, O.P.