

THE RELATION OF MUSIC TO THE LITURGY

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FROM the beginning of time man has offered sacrifice to the Supreme Being as an avowal of his obligation to a bountiful Creator, Preserver and Benefactor, and to acknowledge His supreme dominion over all the universe. Even among the most ignorant savages sacrifice was offered to appease the deity, and although these rites were distorted and degraded by idolatry, the fundamental principle that the superior power which rules man's destiny must be worshiped and propitiated may be clearly seen. Urged on by this natural instinct, man devoted all his ingenuity in building an external cult. To the attainment of this end, he used natural and artificial means given to him by the Creator. The crude altars upon which Cain and Abel offered their sacrifices, the classic and sculptured temples of pagan Greece and Rome, the magnificent churches of the present day bear witness to the fact that man has ever sought to use his greatest talents in honoring the Deity. The arts have always been an endless source from which man has drawn to beautify and enhance both temple and ceremony.

Among the natural gifts bestowed upon man by his Creator the power of speech stands out as one of the greatest prerogatives. Through it man is enabled to give to his thoughts the most accurate expression; his emotions the truest and most accurate interpretation. Moreover, God has given man another excellent mode of expression—the language of music—which, added to the spoken word, achieves an effect that the word alone cannot produce; for “although music is inferior to speech in the realm of intelligence, it reigns supreme in the world of sense, possessing, as it does, accents of matchless strength and sweetness to touch the heart, to stir the will, and to give utterance to prayer.”¹ It is only fitting that these two gifts should be united, becoming intimately together to form one harmonious whole. The word throws the light of intelligence upon the shadow world of sound, while the melody imbues the words with

¹ Dom Mocquereau O.S.B. *The Art of Gregorian Music.*

an intense inward feeling. Thus mingled, music and the spoken word become a medium by which man's whole being is lifted up in grateful acknowledgement of the Creator.

The Church, ever the guardian and preserver of all that is good and beautiful in art, has given music an important and prominent role in the fulfillment of her liturgy. The service of God consists in exterior cult as well as interior conviction, and religious feeling and devotion are heightened and intensified by means of song. This significance has never been neglected by the Church in connection with divine worship. Even as David beautified the religious ceremonies of the Mosaic Law by means of hymns and the use of instruments, so too, does the Church use the same means in advancing devotion. The object of divine worship is to absorb man, body and soul, and to bring him into the presence of God. It is the centre around which the entire Christian life revolves, unfolding the highest and greatest truths of religion in a manner that is intelligible to the educated and unlettered alike. It is only proper then, that the music of the liturgy should be of a dignity that is congruous with the dignity of the ceremonies, to which it is a complementary part.

The interest taken by the Church in music has been shown by her numerous enactments and regulations, promulgated to develop a type of music worthy of the divine service. It is but natural that the music should be in conformity with the time, place and purpose of divine worship. The place is the house of God, the time the most solemn moments of man's religious experience, the purpose to draw man closer to God. Theatrical and concert music is as much out of place in church as the performance of a secular drama would be. Such music directs the attention not to the altar but to the choir loft. Music adds beauty and solemnity to the official prayer of the Church and anything that savours of the theatre or concert hall becomes a distraction to those who wish to pray. "The Church," in the words of Pius X, "has always recognized and favored the progress of the arts, admitting to the service of the cult everything good and beautiful discovered by genius in the course of ages—always, however, with due regard to the liturgical laws. Consequently modern music is also admitted to the Church since it, too, furnishes compositions of such excellence, sobriety and gravity, that they are in no way unworthy of the liturgical functions. Still, since modern music has risen mainly to serve profane uses, greatest care must be taken with regard to it, in order that the musical compositions of modern style which are admitted in the Church may contain noth-

ing profane.”² Thus is expressed the first condition that the Church lays down in regard to her music.

The music used in the Church does not aim primarily at the edification of the hearers, much less at entertaining them. As an art, church music has a much deeper function than just to please and entertain. It is essentially prayer, the most excellent kind of vocal prayer. The melodies are but the interpreters of the texts, and this is true not only of church music but also of secular music. That the melodies are subservient to the text was recognized by one of the greatest composers of the opera. The dominating principle of Gluck in all his operatic works was “to restrict the art of music to its true object, that of aiding the effect of poetry by giving greater expression to the words, without interrupting the action.” Now, if Gluck adhered to this principle as a means of lifting the opera out of the degeneracy into which it had fallen, how much more tenaciously should the same principle be clung to when applied to the texts and actions of the liturgy. It is because of this lack of subordination of the melody to the words that the works of many composers—compositions which in themselves are masterpieces and unequalled in musical construction—are entirely out of place in church. Church music in name only, these compositions have failed, in spite of their universally acknowledged beauty, to find a lasting abode in the Church. No one will deny the beauty of form and melody of Bach’s B minor Mass; but a Mass that takes several hours for its performance certainly is not suitable for the liturgy of the Church. The same may be said of the Masses of Beethoven, Mozart and others. They have failed in their purpose and the reason is not hard to find. The sense of the text has been arbitrarily superseded by the personal feelings of the composer, while the dramatic form of expression has completely engulfed the devotional. They have cast aside all ecclesiastical tradition, and submitted for it the changeable and transient sentiments of the individual mind. They have presented none of the lasting qualities of church music, which like that of the Sixteenth Century has proved its excellency and worth by its stability. What truly great and devotional works might have been added to the liturgy had these composers clung to the traditional forms we cannot say, but because of the distortion and unnecessary repetition of the text we find this norm laid down in the *Motu Proprio*: “The liturgical text must be sung as it is in the books, without alteration or inversion of the words, without undue repeti-

² Pius X, *Motu Proprio*.

tion, without breaking the syllables, and always in a manner intelligible to the faithful who listen." It is only by diligent adherence to this principle that the simplicity and sacredness of the text may be preserved.

The words of the text are the expression either of trust in God, of faith, of sorrow, or of a cry for forgiveness; and when the words are clothed with a suitable melody a richer and deeper power touches the soul of the listener. It is not necessary that the melodies should be put in a form that produces only dry, grave, sombre music. It is true that a vein of seriousness manifests itself throughout the entire chant, for it has as its fundamental basis the sacrificial idea, which is the centre of the whole liturgy and which draws everything into relation with the sacrifice of Calvary. When the music is subordinated to the words, it neither ministers entirely to our senses nor does it afford what is ordinarily understood by entertainment and pleasure. Rather does it serve to elevate our souls, and as far as an art can be a means to an end, to strengthen our faith and devotion towards God. In one of the Oxford Sermons Cardinal Newman said: "Can it be that those mysterious stirrings of heart, and keen emotions, and strange yearnings after we know not what, and awful impressions from we know not whence, should be wrought in us by what is unsubstantial and comes and goes, and begins and ends in itself? It cannot be. No; they have escaped from some higher sphere; they are the outpouring of eternal harmony in the medium of created sound; they are echoes from our Home; they are the voice of Angels."