

## RAISING THE PITCH

## MUSICAL RESSOURCEMENT AND VATICAN II

*Vincent Ferrer Bagan, O.P.*

Thank God, some may say, that the Second Vatican Council unchained us from our slavery to antiquated forms of music and opened the windows to the influence of contemporary culture on the song of divine worship.

But is this really what the Council hoped for regarding church music?

Reading what the Council actually says about sacred music, it becomes obvious that there is a real disconnect. In contrast to the lack of “traditional” music in many Catholic churches today, the first thing the Council has to say about sacred music is this: “The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 112).

Rather than throwing aside antiquated forms of music, the Council, in its desire to return to the sources, extols them as a treasure of inestimable value. This treasure “is to be preserved and fostered with great care” (SC 114).

The Council goes on to give at least some measure of specification to what treasures are part of the musical tradition it extols:

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 services. But other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations (SC 116).

## GREGORIAN CHANT

Gregorian chant (also called “plainchant” or just “chant”) is, in some sense, the model. It is the music that comes from the liturgy itself. For this reason, it is the music that is in the *Graduale Romanum*, the Church’s official musical book for the Mass. (Yes, there really is an official book, published by the Benedictine monks of Solesmes in France.)

The music of the Mass that is traditionally sung by the choir (or, in some cases, choir and congregation) divides into what is Ordinary and what is Proper. The Ordinary comprises texts that are constant in each liturgical celebration (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei), while the Proper includes texts that are appointed but change with the liturgical day (Introit [entrance], Gradual [psalm], Alleluia or Tract, Offertory, Communion). Because, during some of these parts of a typical Sunday Mass (especially the Introit, Offertory, and Communion), you often hear a hymn or a song selected by the music director, the fact that there is an appointed text, usually drawn from the psalms and connected to the liturgical readings, may surprise you. In the present form of the liturgy, substituting other texts is permitted, but first priority goes to the appointed text.

Gregorian chant is liturgical music *par excellence* because it grew out of the liturgy. In fact, the texts for the Proper of the Mass developed simultaneously with the chant music. The Church did not *first* pick the texts and *then* decide that Gregorian chant, among other styles of the time, would be the official music. Rather, the texts were chosen in order to be chanted.

The Council highlights the importance of this connection: “Sacred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action” (SC 112). The Church’s treasure of sacred music is preeminent among the arts precisely because, “as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy” (SC 112). The place

of Gregorian chant as the model, then, is not an imposition on the liturgy but a recognition of its organic historical development.

As an example of this connection between music and text, we offer the Offertory text for the Easter Vigil and the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (formerly for Holy Thursday and Epiphany III). The text comes from Psalm 118, verses 16 and 17, “The right hand of the Lord hath wrought strength: the right hand of the Lord hath exalted me. I shall not die, but live: and shall declare the works of the Lord. Alleluia.” This is how it appears in the *Graduale Romanum*:

II

**D** Exte- ra Dómi- ni \* fe- cit vir- tú- tem, déx-te- ra Dó- mi-ni ex-altá- vit me : non mó-ri- ar, sed vi- vam, et narrábo ó- pe- ra Dómi-ni, alle- lú- ia.

We see in this example that, in chant, there is only one musical line without the added harmony of other parts. For this reason, the musical texture of chant is called monophony, i.e., one sound. Unlike most music we are familiar with, the rhythm of chant does not have a beat. While there is a pulse to the music, the pulses form groups of twos and threes that do not occur in a set pattern, as they usually would in modern music. The modes, or groups of notes, used in chant, are also different from the major and minor modes present in familiar music today. Both the modal quality of the melody and the undulating freedom of the rhythm give chant the ethereal quality that we intuitively ascribe to it.

## OTHER KINDS OF SACRED MUSIC

The Council adds that “other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded” (SC 116). In addition to the musical texture of chant, which is monophony, there are two types of harmonic musical texture. The first of these types is polyphony, in which the different vocal lines move independently. While each vocal part sings the same text, the lines of text start at different times, creating a complex but beautiful effect as the parts weave in and out of one another. Take, for example, an excerpt from Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina’s (1525 – 1594) setting of the same Offertory text:

Dex - te - ra Do - mi - ni fe - cit vir - tu - - -

Dex - te - ra Do - mi - ni fe -

Dex - te - ra Do - mi - ni fe - cit vir - tu - tem, fe - - - cit vir -

tem, fe - - - - cit vir - tu - tem, fe - cit

cit vir - tu - tem, dex - te - ra Do - mi - ni fe - cit vir - tu - -

Dex - te - ra Do - mi - ni fe - cit vir - tu - tem, fe - cit vir - tu -

tu - - - tem, fe - cit vir - -

Dex - te - ra Do - mi - ni fe -

The second type of harmonic musical texture is homophony. In homophony, there is also harmony, but one vocal line is the melody, while the other lines move with it, rhythmically and textually, to provide harmonic accompaniment. We can see this texture in the following excerpt from Ferenc Kersch's (1853 – 1910) setting of the same text:

The musical score is for a four-part setting of the text "Dex - te - ra Do - mi - ni fe - cit vir - tu - tem.,". It consists of two systems of four staves each. The first system has four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a piano accompaniment. The second system continues the text. The texture is homophonic, with all parts moving in the same rhythm and harmony. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the time signature is 4/4. The piano part provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines.

While composers in all periods of music have used both types of harmonic textures, even mixing them within the same piece, there have been periods in which one texture is more common than the other. During the late Middle Ages, composers, using either the chant melodies or melodies of their own composition, added the harmony of other voices, at first with a more homophonic texture, and also gave the music a more regular pulse.

In the realm of harmony, the movement of parallel fourths or fifths, which created that stark “medieval” sound, gradually gave way in the Renaissance to the sweetness of parallel thirds

and sixths and contrary motion. A corresponding movement in musical texture rendered the music more polyphonic. Because of the polyphonic texture, the rhythm of each part was different, but, coupled with a constant underlying pulse, the overall effect of the rhythm was a certain smoothness.

For these reasons, many acknowledge the polyphony of the late or high Renaissance to have reached a particular degree of perfection. (Palestrina's music, for example, came to be known as the *ars perfecta*.) This is the perspective that Pope St. Pius X gives in his 1903 *motu proprio* on sacred music, commonly known by the Italian title of *Tra le sollecitudini* (no. 4). Because the Council explicitly sees its own work in the context of the restoration of sacred music begun by St. Pius X (SC 112), it is reasonable to infer that the Council's highlighting of polyphony refers especially to that of the high Renaissance, of which the piece by Palestrina is a fine example.

Sacred music from the baroque, classical, and romantic periods tends not to be as directly related to the music of chant, but a large body of beautiful music from these periods certainly falls under the heading of "other kinds of sacred music," and we offer the piece by Kersch as a good example. These composers are conscious of the tradition, and the works they have contributed to the treasure of sacred music are stylistically different from secular works of their time.

In the twentieth century and in our own time, some composers have made a conscious effort to return to the modal harmony of chant and medieval and Renaissance polyphony. Some, like Maurice Duruflé (1902 – 1986), even use the chant melodies within the context of their own distinctively modern styles. Where the Council's call for new compositions that take into account both the tradition and contemporary needs has been heeded, new works of sacred music, in both Latin and the vernacular, have been and continue to be added to the Church's treasure of sacred music.

I offer my own attempt to heed this call in the following example, an excerpt from a piece composed for the Dominican

House of Studies schola for the 2013 Easter Vigil, using the English translation of the same Offertory text as the previous examples:

The right hand of the Lord hath wrought strength: the

The right hand of the Lord — hath wrought strength: the

The right hand of the Lord hath wrought strength: the

The right hand of the Lord hath wrought strength: the

right hand of the Lord hath ex - al - ted me.

right hand of the Lord hath ex - al - ted me.

right hand of the Lord hath ex - al - ted me.

right hand of the Lord — hath ex - al - ted me.

### A TREASURE FOSTERED?

Both Gregorian chant and the large body of sacred music composed over the last millennium, then, constitute the musical tradition that the Council calls a “treasure of inestimable value” (SC 112), but has this treasure been “preserved and fostered with great care” (SC 114)?

In some places, fortunately, it has been preserved, but many who have heeded the Council’s call, whether consciously or not, are not associated with the Catholic Church or are not even explicitly Christian. Especially with sacred polyphony, Anglican

and Protestant churches, university music groups, and many independent choirs have preserved and fostered our treasures more than we have.

Though there have been Catholic enclaves that have also done this, and though the movement is growing, the vision and spirit of the Second Vatican Council regarding the Church's treasure of sacred music is still far from widespread realization. The Council indeed called for a renewal of the Church's sacred music but clearly desired that renewal to be grounded in a return to the sources, the treasures of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony.

Why has this desired *ressourcement* not yet occurred? What would such a *ressourcement* look like?

#### DROPPING THE PITCH

The Council certainly wanted to renew the Church's liturgy, but many misinterpreted how. In looking at the larger context, we notice that the Council twice references the restoration of sacred music begun by Pope St. Pius X in *Tra le sollecitudini*. These explicit references make it reasonable to infer that the Council fathers were attempting to continue and reinvigorate this restoration.

Both St. Pius X's *Tra le sollecitudini* and the Council's *Sacrosanctum Concilium* base this restoration on a distinction between music that is sacred and music that is not. The Council makes reference to this in two places. First, speaking of the possibility of using instruments other than the organ, the fathers say, "This may be done, however, only on condition that the instruments are suitable, or can be made suitable, for sacred use, accord with the dignity of the temple, and truly contribute to the edification of the faithful" (SC 120). Second, speaking to composers of new sacred music, they say: "Let them produce compositions which have the qualities proper to genuine sacred music" (SC 121).

St. Pius X identifies these qualities as "sanctity and goodness of form, which will spontaneously produce the final quality



of universality” (TLS 2). He clarifies the first by lamenting the influence of theatrical and other profane forms of music on liturgical music (TLS Intro., 2, 6).

Perhaps the desired *ressourcement* did not occur because of a failure to understand this distinction. Instead of distinguishing between sacred and profane, our dominant dichotomy was that between old and new. “Profane” often has negative connotations associated with it, but the broad sense in which we use it here comes from its etymology: *pro* (before, or outside of) + *fanum* (the temple). The distinction, then, is not between good music and bad or sinful music but rather between music that is especially suited for performance in the temple and music that is more suited for performance outside of the temple.

Eating provides a helpful analogy: it is perfectly fitting to eat popcorn and drink beer at a baseball game; it is unfitting to do so at the opera. When St. Pius X laments the influence of theatrical and other profane forms of music on liturgical music, he is not saying that theatrical music is bad in itself. He is saying that it is bad *in church*.

Even though we generally recognize the fittingness of different types of music for different occasions, we are often reluctant to make these distinctions for the sacred liturgy. In a penetratingly insightful statement concerning “the abuse affecting sacred chant and music” in his own time (but which is just as relevant for our time), St. Pius X says,

And indeed, whether it is owing to the very nature of this art, fluctuating and variable as it is in itself, or to the succeeding changes in tastes and habits with the course of time, or to the fatal influence exercised on sacred art by profane and theatrical art, or to the pleasure that music directly produces, and that is not always easily contained within the right limits, or finally to the many prejudices on the matter, so lightly introduced and so tenaciously maintained even among responsible and pious persons, the fact remains

that there is a general tendency to deviate from the right rule, prescribed by the end for which art is admitted to the service of public worship. (*TLS* Intro.)

Because church musicians have used music of varying degrees of fittingness in the sacred liturgy in recent years, even “responsible and pious persons” have developed various prejudices on the matter, and so we must exercise prudence in treating these questions. That should not prevent us, however, from taking St. Pius X seriously.

Looking to the origins of the musical styles often heard today at Sunday Mass sheds light on the question. Two common styles employed are theatrical music on the one hand and rock and other forms of popular music on the other. The St. Louis Jesuits, whose style pervades much of what is found in *Breaking Bread* and *Gather*, claim both as influences. The modern style called “praise and worship,” to take another example, is quite clearly rock/popular music in style with Christian text.

While these styles of music are fitting for the theater or popular concerts, and while they could be used religiously by being transferred to the campfire or the prayer meeting, what makes us think that they ought to be imported without alteration into the Mass? In addition to folk Masses, there are jazz Masses, rock Masses, gospel Masses, and polka Masses. Is the Mass the only setting in which, musically speaking, anything goes?

#### A TREASURE RECLAIMED

The Council seems to be saying something different: “Therefore sacred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action, whether it adds delight to prayer, fosters unity of minds, or confers greater solemnity upon the sacred rites” (SC 112). Notice that sacred music can be simultaneously solemn and delightful: “solemn” does



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not have to equal “boring.” While we may be tempted to think it evangelically necessary to lure people to Mass by using catchier music, we ought to give St. Pius X and the Second Vatican Council a chance. If we do, we may well find that the people are hungry for the solid food of the Church’s treasure of sacred music, music that, by its very nature, opens them to the transcendent and fulfills “the purpose of sacred music, which is the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful” (SC 112).

In light of all these things, we propose three broad steps to be taken toward the true musical *ressourcement* called for by the Second Vatican Council:

First, we must acknowledge and study the distinction between sacred and profane music so as to more clearly articulate it. This will likely be the most difficult of the three steps, for the reasons described by Pope St. Pius X.

Second, we must rediscover the treasure: the types of music discussed in the first part of this article must be a real option for those selecting music for liturgical use. Many of the groups that have fostered the treasure, which we mentioned above, perform this music beautifully. Their level of performance ought to be imitated so that the beauty of the music can manifest the glory of God and assist the sanctification of the faithful. God is infinitely beautiful, and this should be clear in the response of worship that we offer him.

Third, “composers, filled with the Christian spirit, should feel that their vocation is to cultivate sacred music and increase its store of treasures” (SC 121). There is often a misconception that sacred music must be old and outdated. While it is more necessary for the style of sacred music to have a greater timelessness than profane music, “genuine sacred music” (SC 121) composed in our own day must be embraced. After all, when Palestrina was writing music for the chapel of Pope Julius III, no one insisted that there be a 50- or 100-year trial period before it was sung for divine worship. Every piece of the Church’s treasure of sacred music was at one time “contemporary music,” and there is no reason to think that the music of today could not become part of that treasure.

Having seen the high calling the Second Vatican Council gives to sacred music, we recognize the great dignity of singing to the Lord in divine worship. Acknowledging the treasure of sacred music we already possess, we sing to the Lord an old song, renewing it by performing it beautifully in our own time. Accepting our vocation to increase the Church’s store of treasures, we continue to compose music of the highest quality, singing to the Lord a new song, declaring his glory among the nations and his marvelous works among all the peoples (Ps. 96). In this way, we prepare ourselves to join the ranks of the choirs of angels to praise the Lord in eternity.

*Vincent Ferrer Bagan entered the Order of Preachers in 2009.*