

# THE CATHOLIC HERALD

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## Why Catholics won't sing - Hitting the right note

by **Jeremy de Satgé**

It is often said that it is impossible to get Catholics (particularly in Britain) to sing! Although there may be some shining exceptions, to whom I apologise profusely, I think it is fair to say that this statement is truer than it is false. Certainly, if as Catholics we compare ourselves with Anglicans, Methodists and other Protestant churches, our congregational singing lags far behind, as do our choirs. It is worth taking a look at some of the reasons why this is the case and to offer some thoughts as how best to improve the musical output of our liturgical celebrations.

In the first instance it could be said that in Britain at least there has not been enough of a tradition of quality music making for the liturgy. With the break in authorised worship between the Reformation and the Restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850, the development of English Catholic music suffered a severe blow. When it comes to music the Roman Catholic Church in Britain is at a considerable disadvantage compared with the Church of England. Most Anglican cathedrals and abbeys have royal charters, schools and sums of money to invest in choirs to produce daily liturgy. Over the centuries composers (frequently cathedral organists) have added to the repertoire of church music, much of which has lasted the test of time; and cathedral worship has been a source of inspiration and encouragement to parish choirs. Westminster Cathedral can be said to be the only Catholic cathedral able to match the splendour of Anglican church music. The archives of St. George's Cathedral, Southwark, for example, give constant reference to the indifference of singing throughout the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Secondly, it can be argued that since Vatican II, there has not been a sufficient amount of time for church music to develop its identity in settling into the new liturgy. It is worth examining the document concerned with the sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* for guidance. Of course this document, as with other documents of the Council, is open to interpretation, which arguably can be said to be part of the problem. My own view is that the document is remarkably specific in the area of sacred music and I would recommend all church musicians to read Articles 112-121 in full (for ease, this can be found on the Internet at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/v2litur.htm>). To give you an example, the document states that although the vernacular may be allowed, the heritage of the Latin liturgy and music was not to be forgotten and "pride of place" should still be given to the Gregorian heritage - in other words music which arises from the spirituality of plainsong. It could be argued that in many places the baby has gone out with the bathwater in an over-speedy desire to modernise. The document also invites composers to write quality new music suitable for parish choirs and challenges cathedral churches to take the lead in producing good music, thereby encouraging parishes to follow suit.

What therefore are the qualities required for new liturgical music? Here are some ideas. First, the music should be both inspired and aspirational. The music should have some originality and should help us to raise our hearts and minds to Almighty God. This is particularly appropriate for the great prayers of the Church, such as the Kyrie and Gloria.

Do not be put off by the old traditional favourites. It is surprising how congregations will still sing the Missa de Angelis and Credo III with conviction.

Secondly, the music should properly reflect and encourage meditation on the text, whether this is in Latin or the vernacular. It follows, therefore, that the music should be appropriate to the liturgical season. This is particularly the case during the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent but is also the case throughout the year. A good example of this are the Introit verses set throughout the liturgical calendar, which set the tone for the day. Finally, parish choirs should be greatly promoted and should be encouraged to perform music that is not beyond their capability. There is little worse than choirs over-stretching themselves and one can imagine Almighty God putting his fingers in His ears and saying "Thanks, but no thanks!"

As for congregational singing, first and foremost hymn singing should be encouraged. Once again, the tradition of Catholic hymn singing is not as entrenched as in the Anglican and Methodist churches. Apart from some rather sentimental hymns to Our Lady, various Victorian hymns and some modern more syncopated tunes, it is often difficult to get Catholic congregations to sing with very much enthusiasm. The recently produced *The Catholic Hymnbook* produced under the auspices of the London Oratory is a very welcome addition as a source of quality hymns and is remarkably ecumenical in tone. There are also a number of Mass settings for choir and congregation available, many of which are surprisingly good. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* even goes on to suggest that higher institutes of sacred music be formed to help train church musicians and much could be done on a diocesan level to train music directors in how to get the best out of a congregation.

I would not wish to dismiss the use of folk groups out of hand - there is indeed a place for such music. The only comment I would wish to make is that often the music is not very subtle, rather monochromatic as well as being harmonically pedestrian. It does not do much to aspire. I would also suggest that the music folk groups produce is not particularly suitable for the penitential seasons. The music of Taizé also has its place, although frequently the chants are unnecessarily repetitive - a little goes a long way.

Of course, quality new music has been and continues to be produced - and often the simpler the better. I remember for example the haunting chant Christopher Walker wrote for the Pope's visit in 1981 *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, performed at the Mass in Coventry Airport at which I had the honour to sing. Clifton Cathedral, where Christopher was Director of Music, very much led the way in developing music for the new liturgy and continues to publish music.

The Internet is also a good source of music and there is an excellent brand new web site that I can highly recommend. This is <http://www.scorchmusic.com>. Developed by the music notation software company, Sibelius, the site contains a large section devoted to church music; and composers from around the world have submitted scores to this site. The advantage is that one can view the scores, listen to them (albeit in a computer-generated sound, not especially appropriate to vocal music) and even purchase the scores on-line and then print them out directly. Many of the scores are offered free of charge. This facility has only been available for the past few weeks, so it is very new indeed. There is much to suit all tastes and scores are also graded as to performance difficulty.

Happy music making!

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