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How to improve music in the liturgy

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 Reformed 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.

Many Anglican cathedrals and abbeys have royal charters, schools and sums of money to invest in choirs to produce daily sung 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 19th Century and early 20th 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. The Bishops of England and Wales have followed this with their own Guide for Composers, which is still in draft form, awaiting the publication in English of the new Roman Missal.

For the past two years I have had the privilege of working as Music Director of a large (and indeed expanding!) parish in South London - Holy Ghost Church, Balham - where I have an enthusiastic choir of amateur singers to train, most of whom cannot read music. I have been lucky to have received tremendous support from the two priests of the parish and from members of the choir and congregation, eager to sing better. As someone who writes choral music particularly with the amateur choir in mind, this hands-on experience has been invaluable for me as my ideas concerning liturgical music develop. With this experience behind me, I feel it is a good moment to share some reflections in making some detailed suggestions as how to improve parish music. I hope the following proves useful - please excuse me if much of it sounds obvious!

Hands on Experience

In the first instance, it should be stressed that music should be appropriate, reflecting the liturgical season and helping to amplify the “theme” of the Sunday in question. This requires consulting the readings and antiphons for the Sunday in question, before selecting which music to perform. The music should both inspire and aspire rather than be mundane. Music should help worshippers raise their hearts and minds to Almighty God.

The Introit - In most parishes a hymn suffices at the beginning of Mass. It is, however, worth looking at the Introit verse set for each Sunday. The introit sets the theme or “flavour” for the Sunday in question and can be very effectively sung on a monotone or simple 3-note chant, making a dignified entrance to the Mass and also giving pause to the faithful as they meditate and consider the words of the Introit. It is particularly effective if the Introit is first sung in Latin and then in English - as this makes an obvious connection with our Latin heritage and emphasises the “Catholic” (world-wide) nature of the Church. I would recommend this particularly during the penitential seasons (Lent & Advent) but also during Ordinary Time, although perhaps not each week.

Hymns

I have to admit to not being particularly keen on hymns and I suspect that this is partly because they are so often tediously and badly sung and played! Over the last two years, I have been pleasantly surprised at our hymn singing and I think that the secret is mainly a question of getting the right speed. There is a “natural speed” for most hymns, which is largely based on speech rhythm. In general, slow hymns should be played faster than one might suppose (Soul of my Saviour is a good example, which is often played excruciatingly slow!); and faster, particularly syncopated hymns (at best avoided) should usually be played slower, especially if there is to be any chance of the congregation singing at the same time as the organist and choir. It is also important to use the punctuation correctly, the effect of which is to make greater sense of the words. The other difficulty arises in the vocal range of hymn tunes. Tunes which go lower than Middle C and higher than D of the octave above are not that easy for most congregations to sing and can sound quite strangled as a result! Do not be afraid to transpose hymns if it makes singing easier.

Psalms

I have always had a problem with Responsorial Psalms, finding them not particularly effective. Part of the problem lies with the modern translation, which is less than poetic and, frequently, difficult to set to music. Psalms are most effective when sung by a choir as a whole (better still with the congregation). Anglicans have centuries' experience of singing psalms in the vernacular; and I soon started experimenting with adapting Anglican chant to fit the Catholic translation. On the whole, this works well - you need to take care when pointing the psalm verses (setting syllables to notes) but the result is generally worthwhile. The second half or last quarter of the chant may be used as the response, depending on the length of the response. The advantage of using this method is that the response is easy to sing by the congregation and the verses may be sung by a cantor or by a choir in unison or full harmony, depending on the resources available.

M a s s S e t t i n g s

Finding appropriate Mass settings is more difficult than one might suppose. Many modern English settings designed for congregational singing are rather trite and monotonous, particularly when sung week after week. I find this particularly the case with the Gloria, that great song of praise and jubilation, which is also a surprisingly difficult text to set to music. I was saddened to learn that in France this has frequently been reduced to being sung as a strophic hymn, which does nothing to enhance the words - rather the opposite. There is, of course, a rich resource of Mass settings within the reach of most choirs, namely the Plainsong or Gregorian Chant settings and, with the risk of being accused of being reactionary, I would recommend these highly, perhaps alternating plainsong settings with English settings of the Mass.

It is perhaps surprising but nevertheless gratifying that most congregations will remember and sing the Missa de Angelis (Mass XIII) with confidence, especially when given a copy to follow. There are other Mass settings as well, so why not alternate? Orbis Factor (Mass XI) is appropriate for Sundays of Ordinary Time as well; and Lent and Advent have their own Mass setting (Mass XVII). Then there is the debate as to whether or not the Plainsong setting should be accompanied by an organ. As a purist, my own inclination is that the settings should be unaccompanied, but I have to confess that realistically an organ accompaniment can be very effective, particularly if there are no strong voices to lead the choir and congregation. As a choir's confidence increases you could try other polyphonic settings for Feast Days and gradually increase the choir's repertoire of Mass settings.

Motets

A Communion motet or something sung at the Offertory is highly appropriate and gives the choir a chance to perform on its own. It is good to keep introducing new pieces in order to increase a choir's repertoire - pieces can then be performed in rotation. Unaccompanied motets are best avoided (sadly), especially if there is not a strong voice per part to lead. Organists may choose to play a quiet accompaniment if appropriate. However, there is still a great deal to choose from. Please remember that something simple sung well is infinitely better than something difficult sung badly!

Happy music making and remember the words of St. Augustine: "He who sings, prays twice".