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### **How to rescue the music of the Mass**

For a number of years I have been interested in finding ways to help improve the state of music in Catholic churches. It has often been said that it is an uphill struggle to get Catholics to sing at all; and there are historical and liturgical reasons why this should be the case. Despite the Church's ancient tradition of singing Divine Office and Holy Mass, in Great Britain at least, Catholics are generally less at ease with singing than Anglicans and Methodists.

For the past two years I have had the privilege of running the music in a busy south London parish where I direct an enthusiastic choir of amateur singers, many of whom cannot read music. I have also been keen to encourage the congregation to sing not only the hymns, but Mass settings and other responses as well. For this to be successful, it is imperative to find music that is both appropriate and approachable.

One of the most important reasons for reforming the Rite of Mass following the Second Vatican Council was the desire to encourage congregational participation in the Mass in a more proactive way; so that attending Mass was not simply a "spectator sport" of congregations silently giving witness to the priest at the altar.

The Second Vatican Council's document on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, was particularly clear on the subject of music. "The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy." Later the document states "... 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 finding suitable music Mass settings, one can do no better than by starting at what the Church already has to offer: settings of the Mass which not only continue an ancient tradition but which work well for both choir and congregational singing. There are at least 13 Plainsong settings of the Mass readily available. The most popular and well known of these must be Mass VIII or *de Angelis* as it is usually known; but others such as Mass XI, *Orbis factor*, may be added and performed in rotation, so that in time a varied repertoire is built up.

At my parish of Holy Ghost Balham, the congregation is given copies of the Mass setting printed on A4 card in modern notation. Although the purist might insist that using plainsong notation is more appropriate in that it allows greater flexibility of rhythm (*rubato*) and that it does not restrict one to a particular pitch, the advantage is that more people are likely to be able to follow the music. I have been delighted with how the congregation now readily joins in with sing the Mass settings, as they have become more familiar. The other great advantage of using these Mass settings is that, once learned, they offer great scope for meditation while being sung. Both the *Missa de Angelis* and *Missa Orbis factor* have an extended *Kyrie* and *Agnus Dei*, which are of spiritual benefit at these intimate and reflective moments in the Mass.

Should the Mass setting be accompanied on the organ? At first, I insisted that we should sing unaccompanied as this seemed more authentic; later I found that, despite the choir

giving a strong lead, the congregation still felt hesitant about joining in. Once we started accompanying the Mass the congregational singing improved instantly. But it is necessary for two or three strong singers to lead the singing; the singers should lead the organ and not vice versa. Organ accompaniments to Masses VIII and XI are readily available – we use the excellent accompaniment found in the *Catholic Hymn Book*. In addition to these two Mass settings, we also sing Mass XVII during Advent and Lent, which I still insist we perform unaccompanied, as befits the liturgical seasons. During the coming year, I intend adding Mass IX, *Cum Jubilo*, to our repertoire, which is suitable for Solemnities and Feasts of Our Lady.

Choirs and organists should recognise their own limitations when selecting music for other Mass settings. Simple music well performed is better than complicated music badly sung. Much as I should love to perform intricate polyphonic settings of the Mass, I have to work within the resources available and frequently the absence of tenors renders such music impossible to perform in any case.

The composer R.R. Terry, who was Musical Director of Westminster Cathedral 100 years ago, produced music suitable for parishes with limited musical resources: his *Short Mass in C* for unison voices is particularly useful. If the harmonic language is a bit on the mundane side, the music is nevertheless spiritually uplifting and appropriate. This setting of the Mass can easily be arranged to suit the particular requirements. For my choir in Balham, I adapted this for two voices, and with a few minor other alterations, this works extremely well and has been well received by members of the congregation.

The sung setting of the Mass is most appropriate in Latin. This is also the recommendation made by Vatican II (*Sacrosanctum Concilium, paragraph 54*). Apart from the unifying nature of Latin, my main concern with settings of Mass in English is the translation used, particularly in the *Gloria*. This wonderful prayer of praise that is so much part of the Sunday liturgy (except Advent and Lent) is also a prayer of contrast and subtlety. One only has to think of Vivaldi's famous setting to appreciate the musical dynamic possibilities of this: the euphoric opening *Gloria in excelsis Deo* is then followed by the serene *et in terra pax...* There is the natural crescendo of excitement at the words *Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te* that have been so clumsily paraphrased in the English. The *qui tollis* section leading up to the exuberant *Quoniam tu solus sanctus* is also reflective and beseeching, albeit within the joyful framework of the prayer as a whole. Singing the *Gloria* as a strophic hymn, as is often done in France, or simply as a jolly hand-clapping piece does little justice to its immense subtlety.

Composers may want to know that, in anticipation of the new English translation, the Bishops of England and Wales are preparing a *Guide for Composers*. Awaiting the final version of the new translation and therefore still in draft form itself, this document may be found on the Internet at <http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/liturgyframe.htm>. It is worth reading.

Lastly, those looking for ideas for Mass settings and other liturgical works but who have a minimal purchasing budget might like to know about the choral public domain website at [www.cpd.org](http://www.cpd.org). This site contains a huge amount of choral music out of copyright and which may therefore be downloaded free of charge. For those interested in new compositions, I would strongly recommend visiting the American CanticaNOVA Publications at [www.caticanova.com](http://www.caticanova.com). An American publisher, the site also contains very useful section recommending particular pieces of music for Sundays and Feasts throughout the year. The Royal School of Church Music's publication *Sunday by Sunday*, available on subscription, also makes recommendations and now caters for the Roman Catholic liturgy.