

THE MUSIC OF THE CHURCH :

An Historical Lifeline Between the Old and the New

Honors Project  
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The Catholic Church is interested in music. She cherishes and promotes the culture of musical and phonetic harmonies for the greater glory of God. The very nature of the Catholic Church brings under her jurisdiction all creation and its expression in as much as created things must serve the creator.<sup>1</sup>

From the very beginning, music has been recognized as a viable means to beautify worship and inspire devotion. Man loves song and wishes to sing his praise to God through music, and since the earliest days, the Church has included music as a part of her worship.

Even though the first application of music as an art form was made in the Church, the Church does not look upon music as an unnecessary ornament of the liturgy. According to Pope St. Pius X, music is a functional part - parte integrante of divine worship, intended to serve both the greater glory of God and the edification of the faithful.<sup>2</sup> In every age, fluctuations have existed in the relationship between Church music and secular music, for Church music has always had a purpose and task that links it on the one hand with the liturgy, and on the other with the people of the time.<sup>3</sup> Hence, Church music in every era has been characterized by the cultivation of both new music and the old historical forms. Even today in the music of the Church, the old and new are found side by side.

It took six hundred years to produce the first fully developed piece of artistic worship music, the chant or plainsong.<sup>4</sup> Because of the strong tradition regarding the revisions undertaken by the reform pope, Gregory, it is impossible not to speak in terms of the "Gregorian Chant." The Gregorian chant is really verbal music, in that it has no existence apart from the words. The freest rhythm imaginable brings life to the tonal line, creating a musical form eminently spiritual.<sup>5</sup>

The music of the Chant does not have the feeling that the words have been put to music, but the music springs out of the words themselves. Anyone singing Gregorian music must treat the words as holy things, as highly concentrated media with expressive values, and must be able to appreciate the beauty of the Church's

Latin. The purpose of the music is to enhance the solemnity of the Church offices and help to sanctify souls; therefore this chant must differ from secular music in inspiration, general character, and method of execution. We find in the chant the following characteristics: it is sacred, grave, simple, expressive, and catholic, that is, accessible to all men, of all races in all countries, and in every age.

The plainsong was not purely homophonic, in that it was sung in octaves whenever men and boys joined in singing the same melody. The melody was therefore limited in range so that the lower voices could sing the higher notes and vice versa. The first part-singing, other than octaves, came when some of the singers sang the same melody beginning on the dominant, a fourth below the tonic. This duplication of the melody at a different pitch was known as organum.<sup>7</sup> The discovery of contrary motion soon followed, with one voice moving up as the other moved down. As the additional parts began to move more independently, they began possessing rhythms different from the original plainsong. This voice independence necessitated the development of mensurable rhythm, expressed by a mensurable notation.<sup>8</sup> The musical quality of parts advanced, evolving into the motet. The center of interest shifted from the Gregorian cantus firmus to the new composition itself. The cantus firmus was adapted to the new contrapuntal setting, which actually formed an independent composition by itself. Once the cantus firmus had lost its role as the melodic lead, it became an "alien element," and it was a small step to discontinue the cantus firmus altogether, inventing all the voices.<sup>9</sup> The process was a slow one, however, for "from the first feeble experiments in the tenth century, six hundred years were necessary to evolve the masterpieces of the second great school, the classical polyphony or many-voiced music."<sup>10</sup>

During the Reformation, the Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Anglicans all faced terrible losses and made glorious gains, but church music underwent amazing advance. In the 16th century, Palestrina became the "savior of church music" by

demonstrating before the religious Council of Trent that the polyphonic style was not irreverent in spirit, nor did it interfere with an understanding of the text.<sup>11</sup> Palestrina's compositions were polyphonic, yet his conservative, anti-secular style eliminated any elaborate contrapuntal devices which might distort or distract from the words. In his work, Palestrina resolved the conflict between text and music, and between counterpoint and harmony. In doing so, he created a new church-music ideal.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of the 16th century, church music came under the influence of the Baroque Era. The emotionalism of the period brought a new personal expression to music of the Church. The conservative style of Palestrina contrasted against a newer progressive style, which featured a figured bass line. Thus a "stile antico" and "stile moderno" developed side by side.<sup>13</sup> The Baroque period also saw the development of instrumental music in church worship. By the 17th century, the decline in the sense of what was fitting for Church worship made possible the use of instrumental compositions in place of settings of the Proper.<sup>14</sup> The church sonata and the development of independent organ music were the means by which instrumental music gained acceptance in the church. J.S. Bach emerged as the main composer of baroque church music. He, himself, claimed no difference in principle between his sacred and secular works, having composed both for "the glory of God." Bach sometimes even used the same music for either sacred or secular words, or for an instrumental work.<sup>15</sup>

From the 16th century on, the organ gained importance in the performance of liturgical song. By the 17th century, church organ music had grown independent of liturgical melodies and vocal music. General forms of instrumental music gave organ music new possibilities for development. The chief function of the Catholic organist was that of improvisation. Improvised passages were used to fill pauses in the Church

service and to introduce the singing. Organ improvisation eventually paved the way for uninterrupted music throughout the entire Mass.<sup>16</sup>

The emphasis on personal piety throughout the baroque era contrasted with the official liturgical prayer of the Church. Musical composition was broadened to reflect this new attitude and the popular trends of the time. In 1749, Pope Benedict XIV recognized the new contemporary style, with its instrumental accompaniment and solo pieces, as long as it avoided a theatrical expression. He instructed musicians that voices and instruments should work together "to arouse the sentiments of the faithful, so that they may be more joyfully excited to piety and devotion."<sup>17</sup> Thus even ecclesiastical authority reflected contemporary views on Church music, abandoning the inflexibility that had characterized the medieval Church. Expressive of the new personal attitude of the Church was the emergence of hymns in the vernacular.

The Classical period of the 18th century gave birth to composers whose merits were to be found in secular music. Although a few composers in Catholic countries carried on the ancient traditions, most classical composers brought sacred music into conformity with the style of secular music. Some composers, however, did manage to effect a compromise between the conservative and modern elements. This mixed style, influenced by the symphonic instrumental forms, became the basis for the sacred compositions of Haydn and Mozart. Although not counted among the major works of the classical composer, sacred vocal music was equally profound, though stated in a brief, simple, homophonic style.<sup>18</sup>

Classical instrumental music also evolved from the baroque church sonata of the previous century. The flowing melodic line was replaced by the development of dynamic themes. Reflective of the classical period was music technical in style, and multi-dimensional within a complex, yet unified structure.<sup>19</sup>

The 19th century was not one of the great ages of church music. Toward the middle of the century, the Cecilian Movement, named for the patron saint of music, arose within the Catholic Church, seeking musical reform.<sup>20</sup> The movement was stimulated in part by Romantic interest in music of the past, reviving the 16th century a cappella style. In the words of a Romantic composer, 19th century church music could best be termed Humanitarian.

It must be devotional, strong, and drastic, uniting on a colossal scale the theatre and the church, at once dramatic and sacred, splendid and simple, ceremonial and serious,<sup>21</sup> fiery and free, stormy and calm, translucent and emotional.

At the turn of the century, music experienced the influence of nationalism. Expressive of this new nationalism was the 20th century English composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams. The trend of 20th century church music has been to absorb the new musical discoveries without losing touch with tradition. In this sense, much of 20th century church music is "neo-classic" in nature. Such was the overriding theme of Vatican II, in which the Fathers of the Council stated, "The liturgical year is to be revised so that the traditional customs and discipline of the sacred seasons can be preserved or restored to meet the conditions of modern times."<sup>22</sup> One of the greatest musical implications of Vatican II was the change from Latin to the vernacular, bringing Church music even closer to the "common man."

One often hears of the decadence of church music today, as Palestrina and Bach composed so well, centuries ago. 20th century church music resembles the baroque or classical styles no more than modern art could possibly resemble the Gothic ... but why should it? The music of the Church continues to be the lifeline of the people, linking them to both the traditions of the Church and the trends of the modern world.

FOOTNOTES

1. Hirner, Sister M. Rose. The Catholic Church in Music, Sisters of Loretto:Kentucky, 1932; p. 5.
2. Fellerer, Karl-Gustav, The History of Catholic Church Music, Helicon Press: Baltimore, 1961; p. i.
3. Feller, p. 4.
4. Douglas, Winfred. Church Music in History and Practice, Faber and Faber: London, 1962; p. 55.
5. Hirner, p. 8.
6. Hirner, p. 17.
7. Douglas, p. 55.
8. Douglas, p. 57.
9. Fellerer, p. 49
10. Douglas, p. 55.
11. Grout, Donald J. A History of Western Music, W.W.Norton & Co.:New York, 1973; p. 263.
12. Douglas, p. 63.
13. Grout, p. 321.
14. Douglas, p. 63.
15. Grout, p. 422.
16. Grout, p. 376.
17. Hirner, p. 23.
18. Grout, p. 503.
19. Grout, p. 487.
20. Grout, p. 554.
21. Grout, p. 556.
22. Paluch, J.S. Company, Inc. Pamphlet, Chicago, Ill.