

Creating an Ensemble Sound that Supports the Singing Assembly

By KEVIN KEIL

The American Catholic bishops' new document *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (STL) reminds us that there are two kinds of participation in the sacred liturgy: internal and external. Internal participation involves the faithful uniting themselves interiorly to what they hear proclaimed or sung by the ministers or the choir, so that by listening they may raise their minds to God (STL, 12). External participation is the expression and reinforcement of this internal disposition through actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes and by acclamation, responses, and singing (STL, 13).

All music at worship that is well prepared and skillfully performed can involve the assembly in internal participation. Indeed, this was the primary model for musical worship that the preconciliar church employed: music performed by someone else to which the congregation listened while raising their minds and hearts to God. However, the postconciliar liturgy calls for an external participation by the whole assembly that mirrors and expresses this internal participation, and such external participation can be quite challenging. Most members of the assembly are self-conscious about their voices and will hold back if they feel that others are listening to them. Sometimes their voices do not correspond to the convictions of their hearts. At other times, they are distracted or preoccupied by the cares of the world. But Christ always invites us to enter into song, to rise above our own preoccupations, and to give our entire selves in a communion of mind, heart, and voice to the hymn of his paschal sacrifice for the honor and glory of the most blessed Trinity (STL, 14).

The Primary Role

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Mr. Kevin Keil is the director of music ministries at Incarnation Catholic Church in Tampa, Florida. His compositions have been published by GIA, OCP, and World Library Publications. Copyright © 2008 NPM. For reprint permission e-mail npmmedit@npm.org.

music at liturgy must be considered secondary. The kind of sound made by a group of liturgical musicians (better known as an ensemble) directly affects the external participation of the rest of the assembly. How an ensemble sees its relationship with the whole assembly directly affects the style of musical leadership the ensemble uses.

If the ensemble sees its role as inspirational entertainment, it will strive to create a beautiful, "CD-quality" sound that is meant to lift hearts and minds but not to foster external participation. Such a group looks inward only and seeks only to create a perfect sound and then blanket the assembly in that sound so that they may listen and be moved. It is a "them-and-us" attitude that evokes responses such as these: "You guys sounded great today!" "You sound just like the CD." "I love to hear you folks sing."

If, on the other hand, the ensemble sees itself as the leader of sung prayer, then it sings with the rest of the assembly, blending its sound in such a way that the congregation is supported in singing. It gives the assembly confidence to sing with full voice because the ensemble is there to fall back on when there is insecurity with the song. The ensemble helps the assembly to hear its own voice and to enhance that shared prayer with creative and beautiful accompaniment. It is a "we" attitude. It evokes responses such as these: "When I hear your music, I can't help but sing along." "The way you sounded today made that hymn come alive for me." "Are your microphones on? All I can hear is everyone else singing!"

So the question becomes: "How does one create an ensemble sound that supports the singing assembly?"

Creating the Sound

There is no unique combination of instruments and voices that make up the average church ensemble. Instrumentalists and singers tend to come and go throughout the year. However, a common arrangement usually includes an acoustic or digital piano, from two to two hundred guitars, an electric or acoustic bass, a few singers (mostly women), a flute or two, and some sort of percussion instruments that vary from a solo tambourine to a full drum set.



Photo courtesy of George P. Miller, Loyola College in Maryland

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If the ensemble's goal is to provide solid musical leadership, one needs to consider the ensemble as a *single instrument* made up of many parts that serve different purposes. To misquote a familiar song: "We are many parts; we are one ensemble. And the song we have comes from all, not one!"

Let's imagine an ensemble looking like a pyramid. We will use that image to help us understand the purpose of different sections of the group.

At the bottom of the pyramid, every ensemble has a principal instrument or instruments as the foundation on which the rest of the sound is built. In the 1960s and '70s that instrument used to be a strong guitarist, but now most ensembles use a keyboard-bass-percussion foundation that firmly anchors the ensemble's sound. The *principal instrument(s)* provide(s) a clear presentation of the tune, the tempo, and the style and indicate(s) when the assembly is to sing. The principle instrument may be a guitar,

but that choice requires a very developed technique that most strummers don't have. In fact, many who claim to use their guitar to lead singing are actually using their voice to lead and the guitar to accompany their voice.

Voices provide part of the middle of our musical pyramid. They are the only instruments handcrafted by God, and they have been present at each and every celebration of the Eucharist since the very first one in that Upper Room. Voices lead the assembly by joining in the melody. They may also thicken the sound with harmonies and decorate it with descants and counter-melodies.

Guitars provide another part of the middle of our ensemble pyramid. When they are picked (either finger style or flat pick style), they are like six- or twelve-string harps adding to the foundation of the sound. When they are strummed, they join the percussion section and impart rhythmic energy to the music. When lead lines are played on them, they serve the same function as the next (and smallest) part of the pyramid.

Solo instruments can be used to accomplish several different things. They can reinforce the assembly's melody, they can add to the color of the foundational sound of the group, or they can enhance and add freshness to the sound by the introduction of ornaments and obbligato lines that decorate the top of the pyramid.

To achieve a good balanced sound, just keep in mind

the shape of the pyramid. What is on the bottom is more important to assembly leadership and is therefore a more prominent element of the ensemble's sound.

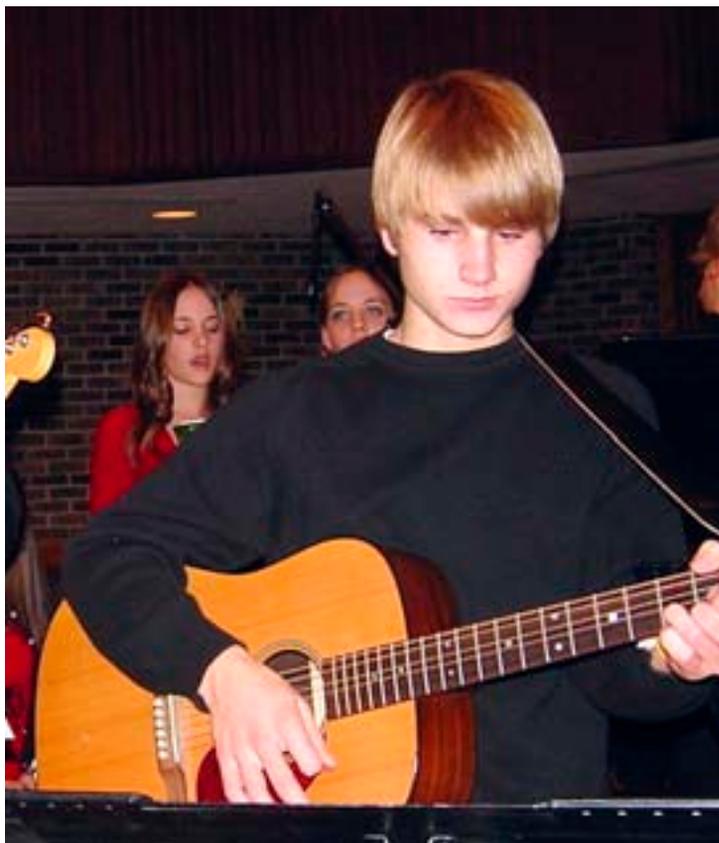
Suggestions for Balance

Good ensemble balance is impossible without good balance in the different sections of our ensemble. Here are some practical suggestions.

Use your ear. Piano and organ or piano and synthesizer are good combinations as long as they are balanced. A full organ sound will dwarf a piano as well as the singing assembly. Use your ear and direct the players to adjust their sound.

Listen to one another. Choirs are only as strong as the weakest voice and only as beautiful as the harshest voice, so everyone must learn to listen to each other. The shy singers need to be lifted up and encouraged to sing out more without sacrificing their vocal quality. Practicing in a circle—either in sections or as an entire choir—helps to achieve this blend. Have the singers

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listen to each other and make sure that they hear others no louder than themselves. Uniform tone is achieved by uniform vowel production and placement. The shape of the singers' mouths should be the same. Singers must avoid a tone that is overly bright (forward placed tone) and a dark or affected tone (throaty). The best sound to lead the assembly is a natural sound placed mid-mouth, keeping the sinuses open. The worst ensembles sound like a group of soloists fighting it out, kind of like an opera chorus in a battle scene—great for an opera but not so great for an ensemble sound.

Strum pattern. Guitars should use the same strum pattern or close variations, stopping and starting together as the music calls for. Adding a twelve-string guitar adds a richer sound. If possible, use the capo to have different guitars play different chords. Mix picking and strumming, and don't feel that every guitar has to play through the entire song or on every song.

Enhance, don't dominate. Solo instruments should enhance the sound not dominate it. They don't need to play on every song or on every verse of the song. Multiple instruments should take turns playing, especially if there is only one part for them. Use trumpets carefully. They are grand with full organ or with everyone singing at their fullest but should be muted if used in place of a flute as an obbligato instrument.

The trusted ear of the leader. To make this balance happen, every ensemble must have a leader whose ear is trusted by everyone else in the group. He or she must not be afraid to let people know when they are out of balance with each other and with the assembly. The ensemble should be heard above the assembly but not so far above it that they drown out or intimidate the congregation. The director needs to decide which instruments are playing when and which are not playing at all. The director must also decide what the intro will be. Intros should be a clear quote from the song that leads naturally into the refrain or verse that the assembly will sing first, not just a pretty chord pattern. Such pretty patterns may work on the recording, but in the real world the faithful need more. Remember that an intro must breathe with the assembly, so insert a musical lift where the breath should be. It might not sound great on a recording, but it really helps to signal the beginning of the singing.

Step away from the mike. Lastly, the ensemble must not be over-miked. Using a few carefully placed mikes to reinforce the overall sound of the ensemble is often necessary and prudent. Close miking of every singer and instrument leaves the balance of the group in the hands of the mixing board operator and will create an over-produced sound (like that often heard at conventions). Remember; to create the best leadership the ensemble should sound like a confident part of the assembly, not the Sunday entertainment.