

# Composers and Music for Worship

We don't know who wrote a lot of the music used in the early Church, and we have no idea who thought up most of the body of music called "Gregorian chant." But we do know this: From its earliest days, the Church has needed composers because, from its earliest days, the Church has sung its worship.

When you write music for the Church, especially music that sets the liturgical texts, you face a challenging—even daunting—task. Certainly the music has to be good, but it has to do more. It has to express the text in a way that allows and even encourages people to sing these words as prayer—and that's a mighty challenge because people have different ideas about what prayer is and what it sounds like, and so they have different ideas about what music best expresses prayer.

## What Does Prayer Sound Like?

Sometimes prayer sounds like a love song, and "the Church never ceases to find new ways to sing her love for God each day" (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* [STL], 83). Sometimes prayer sounds like the truth, an authentic "expression of the Catholic faith" (STL, 83). Some prayers sound like petition: asking God to hear us, pleading with God to take away pain or sorrow, calling on God to forgive. Sometimes prayer is praise: profound joy at what God has done that bursts out in acclamation and thanksgiving.

Communities and individuals express love or truth or petition or praise in different ways. So composers are challenged to find ways to express those various kinds of prayer with the sounds that different people use. That's why the Church incorporates—and has usually incorporated—different musical genres in its worship.

## Changing Genres

Different styles and genres of music will sound "right" or "appropriate" at worship to different people. When Gregorian chant became the standard repertoire for the Roman Church, Pope Leo IV (847–855) had to write to Abbot Honoratus of the monastery of Farfa, near Rome, because Honoratus found Gregorian chant "distasteful" and refused to use it in the monastic liturgy. In the fourteenth century, Jacob of Liege complained about musicians using a newly developed polyphonic style called *ars nova*: "They have no regard for quality . . . in the most inopportune places they dance, whirl, and jump about on

notes, howling like dogs." Bishops at the Council of Trent worried about any music sung in parts, saying that "it delights the ear more than the mind . . ." Of course, they also worried about cantors and choir members singing monophonic music who "do not even know one note from another . . . and are in fact unskilled in any phase of music."

New times and new musical styles have always brought change in Church music and challenges to the status quo. When missionaries reached the Americas and the Far East in the sixteenth century, they affirmed the sung nature of Catholic liturgy by adapting its music to fit the new situation. Pope Clement XII (1730–1740) permitted a new form of chant in "the Hispanias and India," and Pope Benedict XIV (1740–1758) had to come to terms with the widespread use of "figured music" and instruments other than the organ—"now so largely spread that it has also reached Paraguay."

## Keep on Singing

Three threads emerge from our musical history. The first is that Gregorian chant holds "pride of place" (as the Second Vatican Council said) "as distinctive of the Roman liturgy," able to communicate the text of the rite in a way that can be understood by people and lead them deeper into prayer. The second is that past composers have done a good job of creating music for worship, and much of this "treasury of sacred music" needs to be preserved and used today. And the third thread, acknowledged by Pope Pius X in 1903, is this: "The Church has always recognized and encouraged all progress in the arts and has always admitted to the service of her functions whatever is good and beautiful in their development . . . Hence more modern music may also be allowed in churches, since it has produced compositions good and serious and dignified enough to be worthy of liturgical use."

Finding appropriate music for worship has been part of the inspiration of composers from the Church's beginning, and changing times have always brought challenges to the tried-and-true. Composers are called, in our time as in the past, to create good music that sets the liturgical texts and to craft new texts, drawn from liturgical and scriptural sources, that serve prayer. There are many ways of prayer; there are many ways of singing. The music of any era that best promotes participation in the Paschal Mystery will become part of the Church's "treasury of sacred music" to be used and to serve as models for future composers.

All quotations other than those from *Sing to the Lord* are taken from Robert F. Hayburn, *Papal Legislation on Sacred Music 95 AD to 1977 AD* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1979).

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