

# Music at Mass

Back in my college days we occasionally had a night on the town at a German beer hall called the Dakota Inn. From 7:00 on a line formed at the front door because that's when the piano player was there. Once he started playing one could sing one's heart out nonstop until 2 a.m. the beer flowed, the place shook and everyone loved it.

People really do enjoy singing. It is one of the most natural things human beings do.

Except at Sunday Mass. There we usually sing with the same enthusiasm we have for going to the dentist. People make an effort because it is expected of them, but the spirit isn't there.

Compare the difference at a birthday gathering. We really want to sing, "Happy Birthday." The same is true at Christmas: We enjoy singing Christmas carols.

The true test of successful congregational singing is not how many people sing or how loudly they sing, but whether they *want* to sing. Church musicians have to find a way to achieve this goal. There is no other justification for congregational singing.

Of course, parish musicians are working against difficult odds. We don't have a very strong tradition of congregational singing. In addition to that, the change from Latin to English made it necessary to write new hymns, and musical success stories don't happen overnight.

My concern is that Church musicians will refuse to accept the true criterion for successful music: an enjoyable response on the part of the congregation. Some might say it just can't be done and insist that the only realistic criterion is the *fact* that people sing. I disagree. If we can't achieve enjoyable congregational singing, then we shouldn't have it. The object, after all, is not to "get in" a certain number of hymns or to "get" the people to sing. The object is to provide an uplifting religious experience.

I would offer the following comments on the current state of Church music in parishes.

## Musicians Are Ministers

Don Shula, one of the most successful coaches in professional football, once said that the hardest part of his job was telling players that they will have to be cut from the squad. Someone has to be willing to accept the same difficult responsibility in dealing with those involved in parish music. This is another example of the principle stated earlier: Goodwill cannot substitute for skill.

If ministry is really for the sake of others, then the ability to provide good music has to be the ultimate determining factor in choosing directors of music and other music ministers.

Another implication of seeing musicians as ministers comes from the word *ministry* itself. The root meaning of the New Testament word for ministry is “to wait on table.” Waiters are there to serve, not to dominate or take over. They try to respond to the tastes of the people served, not to impose their own. Think about all the things you want in a good waiter and I’ll venture to say they will be the same things you want in a minister of music. All ministers – but especially musicians—need to keep reminding themselves of this.

## Leading Song: A Special Skill

Skill in playing a musical instrument is not the same as skill in leading congregational singing. Too often, we begin at the wrong end. We look for someone who [plays an instrument (organ or guitar) and assume that person has the ability to lead people in music. That doesn’t follow. Ty Cobb was a great baseball player but a lousy manager. Sometimes the *last* person you want as a music leader is the one who plays the instrument: he or she may be the one who needs (firm) direction more than anyone else.

The fellow who played the piano at the German beer hall knew a lot more than how to play the piano. He knew how to get people to sing, what songs to select, what key to play them in, and at what tempo. We need musical leaders with these gifts.

## Quality Music: A Special Gift

It is not surprising that much of our music is of poor quality. We are relatively new at congregational singing, and it takes generations of hard work plus much talent to produce good music. Very few people can write music of enduring quality.

We need to remind ourselves of that. Anyone, of course, is free to try, but we should expect to have to reject 99.9 percent of the creations offered. That’s the way it is with commercial music. We should not expect it to be different with Church music.

Commercial music is subject to a natural selection process—sales charts, critics, or simply the test of time. The trouble is we don’t have such a careful selection process in the church. We accept a lot of music simply because it is given to us by sincere people.

Actually, church music has to be even better than most other music because it has to *endure*. Popular songs can enjoy public favor for a few months and then lose their luster and be gone. But once a hymn has been put into a hymnal, we’re stuck with it for years. It will have to be very, very good to stand the test of time. Many hymns are fine for a while, but insufferable after a year.

Sometimes the people in the congregation feel treated like teenagers. It just seems out of character to picture my father and mother (or even my brothers and sisters) singing, "The Spirit is a-movin' all o-o-ver this land.... The Spirit is blowin' on a world re-born." Yet, I'll bet many congregations are expected to sing that song on Pentecost Sunday.

Many of our contemporary songs have melodies and/or words that simply are not what I would call an adult style. It's fine to have some music at some Masses that is especially designed for younger people. But we should acknowledge this before Mass and not put such songs out as though they were normal fare for everyone. Fewer and fewer people feel awkward about singing in church. What they feel awkward about is singing the songs they're given. Our basic repertoire should be music with a universal appeal.

## Give Us Simple Music

Quality music is not necessarily synonymous with music that is difficult to sing. The people want quality, but they also want simplicity. This is not an impossible combination, as many of our traditional Christmas carols attest. Too often, in our quest to simplicity, we give up quality. Then some musicians react and try for quality, but they end up with highly complex hymns written and played in a key so high we can scarcely hit the notes. We need a combination of both: simplicity and quality.

## Can We Improve on Silence?

There is a great difference between the following two questions: 1) What four hymns should we sing at Mass? 2) When, at this Mass, should would singing help our celebration?

Sometimes when I am planning a liturgy and someone suggests a particular hymn, I simply say, "Why?" He or she usually looks at me I didn't even know that "This is where you're supposed to sing a hymn."

There is no requirement to get a certain number of hymns at Mass. Neither is there a requirement to sing a hymn at certain times. Singing is meant to be an improvement, not a requirement. Musical leaders should treat it as a possibility, not a necessity.

I continue to be baffled, for example, by congregational singing during the Preparation of Gifts (formerly called the Offertory).

It actually takes about 40 seconds to perform this minor rite in the Mass. If there is a procession with the gifts, it adds perhaps 30 more seconds. If there is a collection, of course, more time is added. But even then, it would seem that simple instrumental music or choir singing would be far better than asking people to sing.

They have just had a half hour or more of nearly uninterrupted words. A few moments of quiet reflection would be a welcome break and a peaceful preparation for the Eucharistic Prayer.

Inevitably, however, even at Masses when there is no collection (e.g., special liturgies) a hymn—often a lengthy one—is slated for this time. It baffles me.

## Commending Choir Members

Before closing, I think a word of commendation is due for those who serve in choirs. They don't get a lot of appreciation in the Catholic Church, and it's about time we start expressing it. We shouldn't expect them to sound like professionals. After all, it is a family celebration. All we ask is that they give us music of good taste and quality. To achieve this they have to work hard and we're all indebted to them. They help to provide needed space in the liturgy: timers when we don't have to get out of our books and sing, times when we can simply reflect and pray, assisted by their music in the background.

## Participants Not Performers

One last comment about Church musicians. They occasionally need to be reminded that they are *participants* in the Mass, not performers who have a break between songs. When not singing or playing an instrument, they should show much attention, reverence, decorum—rather than shuffling through music books, talking among themselves, or just plain lounging around.

I realize that this can be a problem for those who sing at more than one Mass each Sunday. In the past, the organist used to face this problem every weekday, when he or she started at early Mass and went right through for three or four Masses in a row, plus sometimes a funeral. I would sometimes turn around for the *Orate Fratres* at a weekday Mass and see the organist in the balcony reading the morning paper.

I have no easy solution to this problem. However, now that the musicians are out in the open (rather than hidden in the choir loft), they simply have to participate fully in each Mass. Priests who preside in two or three Masses each Sunday face somewhat the same problem, and we certainly expect them to show interest and reverence. If music is a ministry rather than simply a function, then musicians will have to look and act like ministers during the whole Mass.

Those are some of my thoughts about Church music. There is no need to be discouraged. It will take time to develop congregational singing that we all enjoy. My only concern is that musicians will, in the meantime, simply blame the people. This is unfair—something like priests blaming the people for not liking their homilies.

The homily and/or the music are the elements that can most easily make or break our weekly experience of Sunday Mass. That is why we must have good music – as well as good homilies.