



Frequently Asked Questions On Sacred Music

Church Music Association of America

Q: What is sacred music?

A: Sacred music is “that which, being created for the celebration of divine worship, is endowed with a certain holy sincerity of form,” according to the Sacred Congregation of Rites in its Instruction on Music and the Liturgy, *Musicam Sacram* (1967, ¶4). As defined by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), sacred music surpasses merely religious music when it is joined to the liturgical rite to become “a necessary and integral part of the solemn liturgy,” whose purpose is “the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful” (¶112).

“As a manifestation of the human spirit,” said John Paul II in 1989, “music performs a function which is noble, unique, and irreplaceable. When it is truly beautiful and inspired, it speaks to us *more than all the other arts* of goodness, virtue, peace, of matters holy and divine. Not for nothing has it always been, and will it always be, an essential part of the liturgy.”

Q: What are the characteristics of sacred music?

A: On the centenary of its promulgation, John Paul II urged us to revisit and learn from St. Pius X’s *Motu Proprio* on Sacred Music, *Tra le sollecitudini* (1903). Pope Pius distinguished three characteristics of sacred music: “it must possess holiness and beauty of form: from these two qualities a third will spontaneously arise—universality” (§2).

Concerning *holiness*, for music to be sacred means it is not the ordinary, not the every-day. It is set aside for the purpose of glorifying God and edifying and sanctifying the faithful. It must therefore exclude all that is not suitable for the temple—all that is ordinary, every-day or profane, not only in itself, but also in the manner in which it is performed. The sacred words of the Liturgy call for a sonic vesture that is equally sacred. Sacredness, then, is more than individual piety; it is an objective reality.

Concerning *beauty*, the Latin speaks more precisely of *bonitate formarum* or “excellence of forms.” This refers to the tendency of sacred music to synthesize diverse ritual elements into a unity, to draw together a succession of liturgical actions into a coherent whole, and to serve a range of sacred expressions. Excellence

of forms also serves to differentiate those elements, to distinguish the various functions of liturgical chants by revealing their unique character. Each chant of the various Gregorian genres presents a masterly adaptation of the text to its specific liturgical purpose. No wonder the Church has consistently proposed chant as the paradigm of sacred music.

Sacred music must be *true art*, says Pope Pius, “otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds.” Beauty is what holds truth and goodness to their task. To paraphrase Hans Urs von Balthasar, without beauty, the truth does not persuade, goodness does not compel (*The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, I: 19). Beauty, as expressed in the Church’s liturgy, synthesizes diverse elements into a unified whole: truth, goodness, and the human impulse to worship.

Concerning *universality*, sacred music is supra national, equally accessible to people of diverse cultures. The Church does admit local indigenous forms into her worship, but these must be subordinated to the general characteristics of the received tradition. By insisting on the continuous use of her musical treasures, especially chant, the Church ensures her members grow up hearing this sacred musical language and receive it naturally as a part of the liturgy.

Q: Why should we care?

A: Celebrating the liturgy involves the whole person: intellect and will, emotions and senses, imagination,

aesthetic sensibilities, memory, physical gestures, and powers of expression. Appropriate feeling is necessary for the communication and assimilation of religious truth. The Church’s insistence on music of a unique sort is intended not merely to stimulate feelings in a general way, but to exemplify Christian truth and convey transcendent mysteries using an appropriate form of expression. As Cardinal Ratzinger has written, sacred music “elevates the spirit precisely by wedding it to the senses, and it elevates the senses by uniting them with the spirit” (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 150).

Q: Isn’t this really just a matter of taste?

A: Nothing prevents us from preferring one form of music to another. What’s more, nothing prevents us from preferring one form of popular *religious* song to another. But music that is suitable for sacred liturgy must be of a special sort. No longer can personal preference be the sole criterion. “Not all musical forms can be considered suitable for liturgical celebrations,” says Pope John Paul II in his Chirograph on sacred music (2003). He quotes Pope Paul VI: “If music—instrumental and vocal—does not possess at the same time the sense of prayer, dignity, and beauty, entry into the sphere of the sacred and the religious is [thereby] precluded.”

In his general audience of February 26, 2003, Pope John Paul called on musicians to “make an examination of conscience so that the beauty of music and hymnody will return once again to the liturgy. It is necessary to purify worship of ugliness of style, careless forms of expression, ill-prepared music and texts,

which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated.”

Q: Why should we regard Gregorian chant as the ideal?

A: From her earliest days, the Roman Church has clothed her worship with Gregorian chant. Through the centuries she has safeguarded the chant as her own unique form of music, and through those same strains she continues to teach and pray, mourn and rejoice in her liturgy. For these reasons, Gregorian chant is the “supreme model for sacred music” (Pope Pius X) and the music proper to the Roman Church.

Throughout the 20th century, this fact was reiterated in official Church teaching on sacred music. *Sacro-sanctum Concilium* affirms it, as does the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*. As Pope John Paul II said, quoting Pope Pius X, “The more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savor the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple.” Pope Benedict XVI agrees: “An authentic updating of sacred music can take place only in the lineage of the great tradition of the past, of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony.”

Chant is the one music that we inherit from the ancient Church fathers. It is not a “style” but the music of the Mass itself. It is sung in unison, which makes it a perfect expression of unity. It illuminates and gives expressiveness to the sacred texts, but it does not alter

them. It musically expresses the heart of the Church and thus exists across and outside time.

Q: What is the origin of Gregorian chant?

A: Singing has been a part of Christian worship since the earliest days of the Church. The chant, as it has been handed down to us and as it emerged from the rearrangements and reforms of the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries, has not entirely retained its primitive form. It unites within itself inherited elements that are much older and have been synthesized by either reforming or preserving them.

Five main streams of inherited material flow together into the chant, and within the melodic classifications of the chant they remain formally distinguishable from each other to this day. These include Jewish solo psalmody, whose basic model is preserved in the Invitatory, the Responsories, and the Tract; the monastic choir psalmody of the Divine Office; the ancient art of depicting faith in song; the ancient cantillation of the priests and lectors in the tones of orations and readings; and the popular elements of various kinds in the acclamations, doxologies, and simple hymns and antiphons.

The melodic material in Gregorian chant derived from such diverse sources has nonetheless acquired *one* spirit: it is the *Christian* spirit, with its new desire to express something which lends its living breath to these melodies. The result is the Roman chant, the *cantilena Romana*.

The term *Gregorian chant* comes from its early association with Pope St. Gregory the Great (6th cen-

ture). According to 8th century tradition, Pope Gregory was inspired by the Holy Ghost to codify the chant of the Roman Rite. The consensus today, based on extant documents, is that the Gregorian melodies developed in the 8th and 9th centuries form a synthesis of Roman chant and Gallican practice, as promoted by the Carolingian rulers in Francia. In making Roman techniques their own, the Frankish cantors “inaugurated a long period of musical creativity, the fruits of which may be found in the extant notated music of the late 9th, 10th and 11th centuries” (S. Rankin). By the 12th and 13th centuries, Gregorian chant had become the standard song of the Western Church.

Q: Didn’t Vatican II do away with chant?

A: Contrary to widespread belief, the Second Vatican Council did not seek to diminish the role of chant but rather to increase it. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 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 liturgical services” (§116). This pride of place was not intended to exclude other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, “so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action.”

The Council’s directive culminated a long process of reflection and legislation regarding sacred music that began with *Tra le sollecitudini*. Pope Pius X sought to diminish the role of the secular theatrical style that had come to typify sacred music in the 19th century, which tended to “correspond badly to the requirements of true liturgical music” (§6). He instead called

for an increased use of chant, which much better expresses the meaning and form which tradition has given individual parts of the liturgy (§10).

The Council drew on the teachings of Pope Pius, and sought to continue the restoration that he had begun by calling for the completion of a critical edition of chant. For these reasons, Church musicians greeted the reform of the liturgy with great enthusiasm.

But within three years of the Council, the 1965 “transitional Missal” appeared to deemphasize Latin in the Ordinary parts of the Mass. Some liturgical activists used the Council’s provision for more use of the vernacular to promote the virtual exclusion of Latin. The revised Missal (1969) was promulgated at a time of theological confusion and cultural upheaval that depreciated all things traditional. Conflicting visions of liturgical worship and undisciplined experimentation disrupted the implementation of the new Missal. All of this led to the near extinction of Latin chant in favor of vernacular hymnody.

The revised *Graduale Romanum*, the Church’s official book of chant for the Mass, was published in 1974. During the intervening period the rise of popular and pseudo-folk music at Mass drastically disrupted the restoration of sacred music begun by Pope Pius and endorsed by the Council. Whatever opportunity there might have been to increase the role of chant was lost.

But today, signs of restoration are all around us, as younger Catholics, led by a new generation of priests, are rediscovering the Church’s treasury of sacred music and reintroducing into parish worship.

Q: Does chant have to be in Latin?

A: When the Church speaks of *Gregorian* chant, she means *Latin* chant. Latin is especially preferred because it is the language of the Church. It is the language in which the chant was composed, and the chant melodies are constructed around the accentuation, phrasing, and articulation of the Latin text.

Other forms of plainsong do not have to be in Latin, and most vernacular languages can be used in chant-like styles. Indeed, it can be useful and feasible to chant some liturgical texts in the vernacular. But such a project has limits. Chant adaptation requires changing familiar words to fit the music, or modifying the music to fit vernacular texts. One might question the usefulness of such an exercise. The purpose of liturgy is not purely pedagogical, else the entire liturgy could be written in the style of a newspaper article.

The purpose of sacred liturgy is far deeper and more complex: it is to draw us out of time and place so that we might more clearly perceive eternal mysteries. The liturgy is not primarily a teaching session but rather “an encounter between Christ and the Church... The preparation of hearts is the joint work of the Holy Spirit and the assembly, especially of its ministers. The grace of the Holy Spirit seeks to awaken faith, conversion of heart, and adherence to the Father’s will” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1097–8). The relative remoteness and changelessness of the Latin language, especially when united to the chant with its purity of form, helps to realize this encounter by leading us away from the ordinary and toward the transcendent.

Q: What is polyphony and what makes it specially suited to liturgy?

A: *Polyphony* literally means *many voices*. Polyphonic music has two or more voice parts that move independently (or *contrapuntally*) to weave a musical fabric. The term generally applies to sacred vocal music from the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance. Polyphonic music occasionally sounds chordal (or *homophonic*), but the contrapuntal style is generally distinguished from the homophonic style in its approach to harmony. In homophony, chords are presupposed, and voice parts are written chiefly to fit into a chord. In counterpoint, voice parts are written more as individual melodies, with chords resulting from the simultaneous tones of the independent lines. This emphasis on the individual vocal lines shows the influence of chant, from which polyphony grew organically.

The “golden age” of sacred polyphony lasted from about 1400 until 1650, but composers of later eras continued to favor the contrapuntal style, especially when writing for the church.

Q: Who are some of the most important composers of polyphony?

A: The earliest known composers were Leonin (c. 1163–1201), Perotin (fl. c. 1200), and Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300–1377), but the most representative and well-known composers of sacred polyphony include Josquin Desprez (c. 1440–1521), Cristóbal de Morales (c. 1500–1553), Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594), Tomas Luis de Victoria (1548–1611), Thomas Tallis

(c. 1505–1585), William Byrd (1543–1623), Orlando di Lasso (1532–1594), Francisco Guerrero (1528–1599), Carlo Gesualdo (1561–1613), and Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). Many later composers were inspired by these Renaissance masters of polyphony.

Q: Aren't chant and polyphony too hard for regular parishes?

A: As with any art, sacred music ranges from very simple to very complex. From the earliest days of the Church, congregations have sung the simpler chant melodies. Collections like the *Liber Cantualis* (published by Abbey of Solesmes) and *Jubilate Deo* of Paul VI (1974) contain chants that everyone can sing. At the same time, the fullness of the Gregorian repertoire, consisting of several thousand chants for every purpose, requires experience, practice, and often a high level of mastery. The same is true of sacred polyphony. Many congregations can sing four-part hymns, but more complex contrapuntal pieces require a well-trained choir to sing on behalf of the praying community.

For hundreds of years, parishes around the world have fostered choirs and promoted choral singing. To ensure the preservation of the Church's treasury of sacred music, the Council insisted that choirs "must be diligently developed" (§114). While professionals can greatly enhance performances of sacred polyphony, nothing prevents amateurs from singing this music, and even directing it, if necessary. It can be hard work, and demands more of performers and listeners than popular styles. But only the best is good enough for the God we worship.

Q: What about "full, conscious, and active participation?"

A: The participation of the faithful in the liturgy was a primary concern of the Council (SC ¶14). We need to distinguish two forms of participation: internal and external. Both are necessary for the full "actuosa participatio" of the human person because human beings are made up of both body and soul. The interior element is the "heart" of the matter, which finds expression in exterior action. One kind of external participation is singing.

In his Ad Limina Address (October 1998), Pope John Paul II reminded U.S. bishops that "active participation does not preclude the active passivity of silence, stillness and listening: indeed, it demands it. Worshipers are not passive, for instance, when listening to the readings or the homily, or following the prayers of the celebrant, and the chants and music of the liturgy. These are experiences of silence and stillness, but they are in their own way profoundly active."

The call for active participation in singing long predates the Council. In *Tra le sollecitudini*, Pope Pius X commends the active participation of the people in the public and solemn prayer of the Church. In his Encyclical on Sacred Liturgy, *Mediator Dei* (1947), Pope Pius XII praises congregational singing of liturgical chant as a means to "foster and promote the people's piety and intimate union with Christ" (§106).

Some have read the Church's teaching on participation to mean: the people sing as much as possible. Any music that the congregation does not or cannot

sing is thereby excluded from liturgical use. This interpretation has been specifically rejected by all Popes for a century. Indeed, the post-conciliar *Musicam Sacram* legislates in favor of permitting a full choral Ordinary, while the current *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* specifically names parts of the Mass that may be sung by the choir alone. Conscientious and diligent church musicians must not allow themselves to be misled by a one-sided misinterpretation of the conciliar texts.

Q: What is the sung Ordinary?

A: The Ordinary refers to the parts of the Mass that are generally repeated in each liturgy. These include the introductory and penitential rites, the Preface dialogue, the communion rite, and the concluding rites. The sung Ordinary refers to the five principal Ordinary chants, which are identified by their opening word(s): *Kyrie* (Lord have mercy), *Gloria* (Glory to God), *Credo* (Creed), *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* (Holy, holy), and *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God). Traditional polyphonic Mass settings consist of these five movements. Modern vernacular Mass settings may include music for the Memorial Acclamation, Great Amen, and even the Our Father.

Q: Is a complete polyphonic setting of the Mass Ordinary really viable in our times?

A: Most certainly, and nothing in prescriptive Church law excludes it. Though the issue was debated at the time of the Council, *Musicam Sacram*, the most recent binding legislation from Rome concerning liturgical music, maintains the option of a full polyphonic

setting. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (¶216) seems to contain wording to the contrary, but we must remember that it speaks descriptively and not prescriptively when it says, “the *Sanctus* is sung or recited by all the concelebrants, together with the congregation and the choir.”

In fact, the full choral *Sanctus* is used in weekly celebrations of the modern Roman Rite in Rome and in parishes and cathedrals in the United States, England, and Canada. Seeking to clarify the issue, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: “Does it not do us good, before we set off into the center of the mystery, to encounter a short time of filled silence in which the choir calms us interiorly, leading each one of us into silent prayer and thus into a union that can occur only on the inside? ...The choral *Sanctus* has its justification even after the Second Vatican Council.”

Q: What are the sung Propers?

A: The Propers refer to the parts of the Mass that change from liturgy to liturgy. There are five sung Propers: Introit, Gradual, Alleluia (or Tract), Offertory, and Communion. These chants can be found in the *Graduale Romanum* and *Gregorian Missal*, both published by the Abbey Saint-Pierre de Solesmes, the center for chant restoration in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The *Introit* chant is the normative ideal for what is commonly known as the processional hymn (sometimes called the gathering song). The *Gradual*, which follows the first reading, is now almost always replaced by the Responsorial Psalm from the Lection-

ary. The *Alleluia*, with its verse, immediately precedes the Gospel reading; it is replaced by the *Tract* in the penitential season of Lent. The *Offertory* is not just the act of presenting and preparing the gifts, but is a chant prescribed for the Mass of the day, even though the text is not given in the Roman Missal. The *Communion* chant is likewise prescribed for the Mass of the day.

Ideally, all five Propers are sung in their Gregorian settings, but realistically this is not always possible. Latin and vernacular hymns may quite licitly replace the Introit, Offertory, and Communion chants, and simpler responsorial forms may replace the Gradual and Alleluia chants. Singing the full chant Propers requires careful planning and patient rehearsal over the course of many years.

Q: What about “Music in Catholic Worship” (1972, rev. 1983) and “Liturgical Music Today” (1982), two documents often cited in discussions of sacred music?

A: These two documents from the U.S. Bishops Committee on the Liturgy contain some insight, but they tend to offer commentary that is seemingly at odds with other official sources of Church instruction, not in the least because they rely on the opinions of their authors. MCW, for example, says that “the musical settings of the past are usually not helpful models for composing truly liturgical pieces today” (§151)—a position that finds no support in any official teaching. In contrast, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* teaches that “the treasury of sacred music is to be preserved and cultivated with great care” (§114).

Such discrepancies make it difficult to discern the Church’s authentic teaching. The authority of these documents remains a subject of debate, as neither was passed by or even voted on by the full body of the U.S. Bishops. In October 2006, the committee met to consider revisions to these documents in light of the Instruction from the Congregation for Divine Worship, *Liturgiam authenticam* (2001).

Q: What’s so great about the organ?

A: Since gaining acceptance for liturgical use in the Middle Ages, the organ has been esteemed for its contribution to sacred music. Its method of producing sound recalls the human voice itself, which the Church has given primacy in her worship. Its use over the centuries in a solo and supportive role has given the organ a unique status above all other instruments.

In 2006, when he blessed the new instrument at the Alte Kapelle in Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI remarked, “The organ has always been considered, and rightly so, the king of musical instruments, because it takes up all the sounds of creation... and gives resonance to the fullness of human sentiments, from joy to sadness, from praise to lamentation. By transcending the merely human sphere, as all music of quality does, it evokes the divine. The organ’s great range of timbre, from *piano* through to a thundering *fortissimo*, makes it an instrument superior to all others. It is capable of echoing and expressing all the experiences of human life. The manifold possibilities of the organ in some way remind us of the immensity and the magnificence of God.”

Q: What are the main liturgy books that I need?



A: At minimum, every Church musician needs the *Liber Cantualis* and the *Gregorian Missal* (both published by Solesmes). The *Liber Cantualis* contains chants for the prayers and responses of the Mass, including the most useful and beloved chants that the congregation sings, along with a selection of chants for the Ordinary. It also contains the four Sequences, seasonal Marian antiphons, and popular chants that have obtained highly valued status through frequent use at communion and as prelude and postlude.

The *Gregorian Missal* provides a full selection of Ordinary chants, and all the Latin Propers for Sundays and greater feasts. It includes English translations of the chants and prayers, as well as references for the three-year cycle of Scripture readings.

Musicians also might want to own the 1979 *Graduale Romanum*, which contains the Proper chants for the entire Church year. They will also need an authoritative guide to liturgical rubrics, such as one by Msgr. Peter Elliott. Those using the traditional Roman Rite (1962 Missal) will need an older edition of the *Graduale* or the *Liber usualis*. A reprint of the 1952 *Liber* is available from Neri Publications.

MusicaSacra.com has several chant resources for free download, including a complete set of communion antiphons with Psalm verses, and the 1961 *Graduale Romanum* along with an index of Proper chants for the modern Roman Rite.

Q: Do I have to learn to read medieval notation?

A: An understanding of the traditional square notes, or *neumes*, is essential for singing chant. Church musicians who read only modern notation have access to a limited chant repertoire, and are deprived of the stylistic nuances that neumes bring to the Gregorian melodies. If one already reads modern notation, the transition is not difficult. The C clef  marks *do*, the F clef  marks *fa*, and the whole- and half-steps up and down the scale follow accordingly. The staff has four lines instead of five, which reflects the vocal range of most chant. Various chant methods can help you with rhythm, pitch, and style. An excellent one is the *Gregorian Chant Master Class*, published by the Abbey of Regina Laudis.

Q: Which Church documents should I read?

A: Church musicians need to be thoroughly familiar with *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, *Musicam Sacram*, John Paul II's *Chirograph on Sacred Music*, and Pius X's *Tra le sollecitudini*. The entire history of Papal legislation on sacred music is a worthy study. Its unifying theme points to a distinct body of music that can be called *sacred* in contradistinction to *profane* music, which is utterly unsuitable for the church, or *religious* music, which is suitable for non-liturgical use only.

Q: Where can I get polyphonic music to sing?

A: There are many excellent publishers of Renaissance polyphony, as well as works by later composers in the contrapuntal style. A great online resource is the Cho-

ral Public Domain Library (cpdl.org), which provides scores for download free of charge. As a choir progresses further into the repertoire, singers can look to the many publishers of sacred music that produce quality editions of new and old work.

Q: My parish has dreadful music. How can I change it?

A: Self-education is the first step toward the restoration of beauty and holiness in the liturgical life of your parish. Catholic musicians should learn to read neumes, and should begin to commit Latin hymns and settings of the Ordinary to memory. Then they can gather with others to form a *schola*, the traditional name for a choir that sings chant. It can take many months of practice before a new schola is prepared to sing at Mass.

In the meantime, the schola can find other opportunities to perform chant, including Benediction services and visits to hospitals or homes for the aged. In all of this, prayer and charity toward others are essential. Sometimes the pastor is open to the idea and sometimes he is not, but he is far more likely to be welcoming to a schola that is already serving the parish community. Slow and systematic work, done cheerfully and with attention to quality, will accomplish far more in the long run than rash protests and demands.

Q: Won't a drastic change alienate people?

A: The liturgical upheaval of the late 1960s and onward confused and alienated many Catholics. Some people loved the new pop style and other people were

embittered by it. Attitudes toward sacred music remain a source of division among Catholics today. While the need to restore the sacred is urgent, pastoral sensitivity is necessary to avoid the disorienting approach of the post-conciliar period. It will take time for the liturgical aesthetic to recover from the errors of the recent past so that it may be deepened and matured. The restoration of sacred music is a long-term project that requires years of relentless progress.

Q: Who wrote these FAQs and what else should I read?

A: This Q&A was prepared by members of the Church Music Association of America in 2006, with the assistance from the CMAA board of directors. A bibliography of literature on sacred music would be too vast to include here. But the musician should read official documents related to Church music as listed at MusicaSacra.com, and join the CMAA to receive the quarterly journal *Sacred Music*: MusicaSacra.com. The CMAA is a non-profit organization (501c3) and very much welcomes your support.



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