

## FOREWORD

Kevin Allen, *Cantiones Sacrae Simples*

Many have been enchanted by the performance of Kevin Allen's *Tantum Ergo*, which introduced the video of the Sacred Music Colloquium, *Sacred, Beautiful, and Universal*, produced by Corpus Christi Watershed. This is sacred music in continuity with the tradition and yet in a beautiful modern idiom.

The Second Vatican Council encouraged composers to produce new music for the liturgy, music that is genuinely sacred, with texts drawn from liturgical and scriptural sources, including some music suitable for small choirs:

Composers, filled with the Christian spirit, should feel that their vocation is to cultivate sacred music and increase its store of treasures.

Let them produce compositions which have the qualities proper to genuine sacred music, not confining themselves to works which can be sung only by large choirs, but providing also for the needs of small choirs and for the active participation of the entire assembly of the faithful.

The texts intended to be sung must always be in conformity with Catholic doctrine; indeed they should be drawn chiefly from holy scripture and from liturgical sources. (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* ¶121)

After the Vatican Council, the liturgy, and especially its music, experienced considerable instability. Indeed, choirs were disbanded and Gregorian chant was replaced with music that can only charitably be called ephemeral. In retrospect Pope John Paul II and after him Pope Benedict XVI attributed this to a "hermeneutic of discontinuity," a sense that everything from before the Council was obsolete and must be replaced with something new. In contrast, they asserted that the proper interpretation of the Council must be a "hermeneutic of continuity," following the prescription of the Council itself, which maintained that "there must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them, and care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing." (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* ¶23)

Music for the liturgy is a matter of culture, and music after the Council had perforce to interact with several cultural factors. The first is the musical culture of the secular world, which finds itself with a great split between what is deemed popular and what classical. "Popular" music is dominated by com-

mercial interests, and most often seeks the lowest common denominator; this does not always promote any kind of excellence. Moreover, what passes for “folk” music is subject to the same commercial interests, and rarely achieves the sense of commonality that genuine folk music should have. On the other hand, “classical” music tends toward academic and esoteric interests, which have become detached from the patronage of intelligent connoisseurs of music; its compositions are excellent, but often only other composers are their most appropriate listeners. The respite seems to have been to maintain traditional concert repertoires more extensively than has ever been done in the past. New music which attempts to bridge this gap rarely succeeds in attaining excellence and avoiding sentimentality.

There is, in addition, the musical culture of the Church itself. Here, traditional music has been almost totally eclipsed by Protestant hymnody and music in popular styles, promoted by commercial interests. A few major publishers have dictated what music is performed throughout the Church, with little supervision by ecclesiastical authorities. When church musicians attempt to imitate popular styles, best known in recordings produced at great expense through the use of complex and sophisticated technology, they cannot compete, and their music appears amateurish. Yet, attempts at composing for the liturgy in serious styles run the risk of being out of reach of most choirs, or being trivial because the canons of composing in a simple style have been forgotten.

Kevin Allen’s *Cantiones Sacrae Simples* provide one model for the solution of the present dilemma. They are in continuity with the tradition of sacred polyphony: they follow classical polyphony in being in an essentially imitative style; their texts are all Latin texts from the liturgy—Mass propers, four offertories and eight communions; they make a link with Gregorian chant by providing chant verses, both in Latin and English, which can be alternated with the polyphony. They are simple enough to be accomplished by a moderately good choir. Yet they are also in a modern idiom: their polyphony shows colorful dissonances which yet are justified by good voice-leading, and their sonorities, while basically triadic, are rich and original. And so they fulfill the Council’s recommendations for the composition of new liturgical music. May the publication of these *Cantiones* be an inspiration for other composers to make similar contributions; may your singing of these motets contribute to the enjoyment of your choirs and enhance the beauty of your liturgy.

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