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VIENNESE CLASSICAL MASSES: SACRED OR SECULAR?

It is almost a commonplace in some musical circles to hear that the classical Masses of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven are "alien to true devotion" and "inappropriate to modern purposes." This "inappropriateness" is frequently ascribed to so-called operatic forms and devices said to be employed in these works or to the use of instrumentalists and soloists.¹ Sometimes these Masses are labeled sacred concerts or oratorios which the composers intended only for use outside the liturgy.² Often when one is broadcast over a classical radio station a comment such as this appears: "Well, of course, this work is not used in church. It is far too long, too operatic and does not convey the proper religious spirit." Almost anyone who has heard these Masses has probably also heard similar criticisms of them.

This attitude concerning the sacred works of the late eighteenth century may be a reflection of the nineteenth century reaction towards the music of the classical period. Almost every period has taken a harsh view of the art of the age immediately preceding it. The men of the renaissance condemned medieval art as "gothic," a term referring to the Goths who invaded the Roman empire in the fifth and sixth centuries, and thus synonymous with "barbaric." A later era labeled the art of the seventeenth century "baroque," which means contorted or twisted. Similarly, many people in the nineteenth century did not hold the music of the eighteenth century in high esteem.

The Caecilian movement of the late nineteenth century had an important influence on many church musicians. However, it reflected the basic attitude of the romantic era towards the music of the classical period and refused to acknowledge the Masses of Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart as fitting for liturgical



use. The *Motu Proprio* of Saint Pius X at least in part was stimulated by the Caecilians. While this document never condemned the Masses of the classical composers, it was misinterpreted in many quarters. Many musicians came to believe that the classical liturgical compositions could no longer be legitimately sung at church services. The *White List* of the Society of St. Gregory of America and other publications of the 1920's and 1930's in the United States certainly have many examples of the misinterpretation to which Pope Pius' document was subjected.³ Unfortunately, this view is still found today as evidenced by the criticisms quoted above. It should be countered and put to rest just as was the renaissance view of medieval art.



When the words "inappropriate" and "unfitting" appear in these criticisms, the objections are particularly difficult to meet because the key words are used ambiguously. One is not sure what is meant when a liturgical work is called unfitting or inappropriate. Is it simply too long for the usual Sunday high Mass, or is it inherently ill-suited to the liturgy? The former interpretation implies a practical problem and does not reflect on the appropriateness of the work itself, but the second is the more serious objection and merits some attention.

If the classical Masses are in themselves inherently ill-suited for church, it is either because the composers failed in their attempts to write truly sacred works or because they never intended them to be sacred. The latter alternative may be dismissed, since we know that many of these Masses were commissioned and written for specific liturgical functions. The composers must have intended them to be sung within the liturgy. Furthermore, it seems unusual for a composer to choose a liturgical text if he intends to write a secular work. But the critics may still urge the former alternative that in spite of their intentions, the composers of the classical Masses failed to meet the sacred requirements of the liturgy. It is difficult to respond to this criticism because the characteristics of sacred music as opposed to secular music are seldom outlined. However, before any sound judgement on the suitability of the Masses of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven can be made, those qualities peculiar to church music must be clearly delineated.

A musical composition is unfitting for use in the liturgy when it does not conform to the purpose of the liturgy. The primary purpose of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is to give glory to God. The music used in the Mass must therefore be reserved for God; it must be sacred or set apart for God. The text is one means of determining whether a work is sacred.

It is not, of course, necessary that a sacred composition have a text, since instrumental music can be sacred. Music of itself is neither sacred nor profane, although the connotation attached to it may make it one or the other. When a text is joined to notes, then two forms of communication are welded into a single medium, and the two forms must correspond in their message. The words should reflect the music and the music the words. This combination produces a third mode, and the words and music cannot be divorced from one another. If a piece has a text and is intended for use in church, then the text itself should be a sacred one.⁴

Further, in a composition with a text intended for church use, the composer has the obligation of setting the words sincerely. No musician can write music for a text if he does not accept the message conveyed by the words. If he were to try to compose music for a text he did not accept, his music and the words would not combine to form an integral whole conveying a single meaning which is a

sine qua non for any textual composition. It is especially important in church music. Otherwise, the musical element would struggle against the textual element and *vice-versa*. For example, since it is impossible for a non-Christian to accept the words: *Et incarnatus est de Spiritu sancto ex Maria virgine et homo factus est*, he cannot set these words to music sincerely. If he were to accept the doctrine of the Incarnation, he could write a *Credo*, but then he would have become a Christian.

In the case of a non-textual composition it may be more difficult to decide if it was written as church music. The intention of the composer must be determined. Today there is a great emphasis placed upon the composer's original performance directions. Artists want to recreate works in accordance with the composer's exact wishes. This modern (perhaps sometimes even faddish) preoccupation with duplicating the performing practices of the composer's period points out the importance of the composer's original wishes. His intentions are even more important in regard to the purpose of his compositions. The musician must intend to compose a liturgical work and have its sacred function in mind. Either a work is originally dedicated to God and thus is sacred or it is not and is not appropriate church music. Therefore, the original intentions of the composer constitute one factor in determining whether or not a particular piece may be used in church.

There can be no doubt that the classical composers had the proper intention in writing their Masses. Sometimes one reads that Beethoven, Mozart and even Haydn did not practice their religion or that they were Freemasons and therefore could not have been good Catholics. The inference is that only a good, practicing Catholic is able to compose sacred music. However, the actual practice of Catholicism is not required for setting a sacred text, but the composer must accept as true the text which he wishes to set to music. While there may be some doubts (for example, in Beethoven's case) that these classicists did practice their religion, there are no grounds for doubting their intellectual adherence to the truths of the Catholic faith. The classical Masses possess a sacred text sincerely set to music and they were intended by the composer to be sacred. They are sacred in that they were originally set apart for God. They do conform to the primary purpose of the liturgy: to give glory to God.

The liturgy also has a secondary purpose to which sacred music must conform. Liturgy exists indeed to give glory to God, but also to aid the faithful in lifting their hearts and minds to Him in prayer. Sacred music has a significant role to play in accomplishing this secondary liturgical goal.⁵ Music has always been the language of love, and prayer through music is an expression of our love for God and may stimulate others to prayer.

Some critics object that various devices, *e.g.*, the use of orchestra and soloists in the classical Masses, prevents them from fulfilling the secondary liturgical goal.⁶ They claim that rather than being prayer they are merely reminiscent of the opera. However, instruments or a specific musical form, *e.g.*, the *da capo* aria, are in themselves neither sacred nor profane, but they may sometimes through frequent use in secular music connote to the congregation the stage or the concert hall rather than the altar. If sacred music only serves to remind the people of secular entertainments rather than encouraging them to raise their hearts and minds to God, it fails to fulfill its purpose. The critics claim that if Mozart's Masses make one think of his operas, then the Masses are as unfitting



for church as are his operas. Here the critics seem to have their strongest argument against the sacred literature of the classical period.

Mozart has twenty Masses and thirteen operas.⁷ If compared, the same instruments and musical techniques are used in both forms except the trombone which is found in his sacred works. The same musical language is applied to compositions with differing purposes. The same musical devices are used in both sacred and secular works. The text indicates whether or not the composer intended the work to be set apart for God.

The criticism that Mozart's Masses sound like his operas implies a chronological error. He wrote many of his Masses while in the service of Archbishop Collaredo of Salzburg. They are earlier than his well-known operas which appeared only after he had left his birthplace and moved to Vienna in 1781.⁸ To Mozart's contemporaries the later operas could have sounded like the earlier Masses! Mozart did not borrow a secular form for use in the liturgy; if anything, he used a sacred form for his operas. But this is as patently ridiculous as what the critics claim. If people wish to maintain that there has been an improper mixing of the sacred and the secular, then one must conclude that Mozart was using a sacred form in his secular music, not that he borrowed a secular form for his liturgical compositions.

A good example of such a chronological error is the frequently heard accusation that the soprano solo in the *Agnus Dei* of the *Coronation Mass* is taken from the countess' aria *Dove sono* in the *Marriage of Figaro* (Act 3, Scene 9). But *Figaro* was not written until 1786, while the *Coronation Mass* appeared in 1779. Clearly, the countess' aria sounds like the *Agnus Dei* of the Mass.⁹

It might still be plausibly urged that the almost unknown Masses will connote the operatic stage for the average American Catholic who may have heard one or two of the more famous operas. He will have associated the forms and instruments in the operas with secular entertainment. Since he may not even know that the Masses exist, he will fail to realize the essential point that for Mozart and his contemporaries such secular or sacred connotations were not attached to these musical instruments and devices. Our fictitious average Catholic will also probably not appreciate the connotation which the trombones have, especially since they are not used in some performances. (Often the trombones double the voice parts and are unnecessary.) Not knowing that the Masses preceded most of the operas, he will not know that it was historically impossible for Mozart to borrow directly from his operas for his church music. The end effect is that *for him* the Masses will sound like the operas and *for him* they will connote the operatic stage. It should be noted that in this case the Masses will connote secular entertainment only because someone may know some operas, but will not have heard the liturgical works. If he did know them, he could appreciate them as church music. The critics argue that any attempt to make these sacred compositions known risks destroying the sanctity of the liturgy in the eyes of many people.

Obviously, it is impossible to appreciate anything if its existence is unknown. It would seem much more logical to cultivate the great classical Masses and allow people slowly to recognize their value as church music, than to ignore them because people at first might not appreciate them properly, *i.e.*, as sacred music. Associated with the proper sacred atmosphere — the church, the vestments, and the consecrated vessels and arts which surround our liturgy — this music



cannot be taken as secular. As more and more Masses are heard, our fictitious Catholic will come to understand that they do not connote the operas any more than the operas connote the Masses. Since our average American Catholic who is acquainted with the classical operatic literature is far from average, the problem will occur very rarely. In most parishes, probably only a few people would know the operatic literature well enough to associate the classical Masses closely with the operas. It would seem worth whatever small risk there might be to make the treasure hidden in the sacred music of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries better known.

There is one other requirement if a work is to fulfill the secondary purpose of the liturgy: it must be beautiful and should be immediately appealing to most people. The liturgy exists, at least secondarily, to bring people to prayer. Thus, liturgical music must encourage the individual to contemplate the incomprehensible beauty of God through its own comprehensible beauty. Masses set in a very modern idiom may not fulfill this criterion. Even some of the late romantic Masses may be too advanced for some parishes. The liturgical compositions of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven are easily grasped and appreciated by all, even the musically untrained.

There remains the practical objection that some classical Masses are too long for the confines of most modern liturgies.¹⁰ Some musicologists have used the phrase "oratorio-Mass" to emphasize their length. Many would argue that the composers never intended their Masses to be sung within a liturgical setting and that they actually wanted to write an oratorio using the text of the Mass.

The label "oratorio-Mass" is a strange term. The oratorio has a non-liturgical sacred text and the Mass a liturgical one. If a composer writes a Mass, it is not an oratorio. Sacred liturgical works may be done in concert as oratorios are, but then they are not performed in the setting intended by the composer. The term "oratorio-Mass" was probably originally applied to certain liturgical compositions because of their infrequent use within the liturgy. They were almost always performed in concert and were named after sacred works written as concert pieces: oratorios. Nevertheless, the term seems to be a misnomer.

Liturgical works ought to be performed within the setting for which they were written. However, there are obvious practical limitations to the use of some Masses within the liturgy. It may be unwise to attempt the Beethoven *Missa Solemnis in D* because of time considerations or simply because the musical forces are not available. The fact remains that it could be sung within a liturgy provided it was always subservient to the mystery unfolding at the altar. If one were to perform the *Missa Solemnis in D*, the ceremonies at the altar, the vestments and the other ritual observances should necessarily be as solemn and glorious as Beethoven's music. If this were not the case, then the music would become the dominant factor and the Mass would become a concert. The music must always remain the handmaid of the liturgy. Therefore, the ceremonies and the music must balance one another. With the wealth of ceremonies which the Catholic Church has, there exist the forms to balance any of the classical Masses, even Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis in D*.

Not only must the ceremonies and music balance, they must form an integral whole. There should be a unity of language between altar and choirloft.¹¹ If this unity be lacking, the music will not be an integral part of the liturgy. When either



of these practical requirements is missing, the music becomes the dominant partner and fails in its function. Then, the music exists for its own sake as in a concert.

There is nothing inherently unfitting in the classical liturgical compositions either from the standpoint of the primary function of the liturgy or its secondary function. However, the critics are correct in pointing out that these Masses are unsuited to simplified and inartistic liturgies. The solution is not to abandon the music, but to upgrade the ceremonies so that they are again the fitting counterpart to Viennese classical Masses.

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NOTES

1. L'Oiseau-Lyre, OIS 119. Recording of Mozart's *Litaniae Lauretanae in D Major* (K. 195) and his *Litaniae de Venerabili Altaris* (K. 243). The quotations are taken from the comments on the jacket.

2. Angel, S-36775. Recording of Beethoven's *Mass in C* (op. 86). Vanguard (Everyman Classics), SRV-258/9 SD. Recording of Mozart's *Great Mass in C Minor* (K. 427). Haydn Society, HSLP 2028. Recording of Haydn's *Missa Sanctae Caeciliae*.

The comments on the record jackets of these recordings all indicate that at least some of the classical Masses were written as oratorios, *i.e.*, sacred concerts to be used outside the liturgy.

3. See *White List*, Society of St. Gregory of America. 1951. p. 87. For similar views, see George Predmore, *Sacred Music and the Catholic Church*, pp. 37-38. I quote from p. 38: "Why are the Masses of Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert and the *Stabat Mater* of Rossini rejected for use in the Catholic Church? Are not these works gems of musical art? These works and many others of similar character are rejected for use in the Catholic Church, not because they are gems of musical art, but because they are unliturgical in form and style and are generally written in the same style as operatic works. The similarity of these Masses to the operatic and secular compositions of these great composers is admitted . . . by all competent musical critics . . . their (the classical composers) religious music does not meet with the liturgical demands of the Catholic Church." This is a very concise and accurate summary of the common misinterpretation of the *Motu Proprio* of Pope Pius X concerning the sacred music of the classical period. This erroneous and almost puritanical viewpoint ought to be forever laid to rest.

4. See *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council, art. 121.

5. *ibid.* art. 112. Sacred music should "add delight to prayer."

6. The use of solo voices in sacred liturgical works cannot be condemned as secular. Certain sections of Gregorian chant have always been sung by a single voice and it is undoubtedly sacred.

7. See Alfred Einstein, *Mozart: His Character and His Work*. Oxford Univ. Pr. 1945. pp. 473-483. The *Singspiele* were counted as operas. Fragments of both operas and Masses were not included in the total number of each.

8. *ibid.* p. 56.

9. *ibid.* p. 57 and p. 344.

10. See note no. 2.

11. There must be a unity of language established between the choirloft and the altar. As a minimum, everything which is sung by the priest must be sung in the same language that the choir is using. However, it would be preferable if most spoken prayers could be said in the same language as the choir uses. If the ministers of the Mass use the vernacular and the choir uses Latin, the music is divorced from the liturgy. It is music *at* Mass and is not an "integral part" of the liturgy. (See *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, art. 112.) I frequently experienced the effects of a Mass in the vernacular with a Latin, sung ordinary as a student at the Ludwigs-Maximilian Universität in Munich. St. Michael's in the center of Munich has an excellent choir which sings many classical Masses in their original language. Unfortunately, the Mass is said in German. Even the parts which the priest sings are in German. While the music is very beautiful, it never achieves its full, spiritual effect, since it is perceived as an interlude between the liturgical acts, rather than as *the* liturgy. In this case, the classical Masses are used in much the same way as they are used when done in concert. Even a smaller, less pretentious work, such as the Schubert *G Major Mass*, does not lend itself to use in a vernacular liturgy.

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