

SINGING THE NEW SONGS

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A few years ago you might have been surprised (shocked?) to hear that Guy Lombardo had written a mass. Or Spike Jones. Today people in that category are writing masses but without the talent or musicianship of anybody leading a name-band or even a local combo. I wonder what the Rolling Stones, the Four Lads, (going back again) Jackie Gleason or the Dave Clark Five could work up for a church wedding or a modern Requiem? The Beatles might attract a crowd with some special music for Holy Week. Lloyd Thaxton could probably take over some afternoon Mass in California and direct the crowd through a *Gloria* in the best Frug rhythms, or Peter, Paul and Mary might be invited to some cathedral to work out a few numbers for Christmas. But get everybody into it. Just so they all participate!

A few musicologists and a great number of non-musicologists have decided lately that there is really no difference between secular and church music. The problem isn't half so much whether there *is* a difference as whether they *want* a difference. We must attract teenagers, relate to the existential world, accept a realistic culture — and all that. Then why not retranslate the Hail Mary into jive-talk or into ancient rock n' roll: "like man, Mary, you are *in*, really cool among women...." I'd better stop. As someone said, "It's all right for me to make these cracks because I'm deeply religious!" If you use the music, why not use the words that go with it? Under what auspices are we trying to achieve participation? Togetherness. With the latest hankering for store-front churches and family masses, much could be done to "come alive" with the music. Or are all these sentiments the final groanings of a bitter conservative? I think not. Not as long as God is worthy of the best we have in talent and art and appropriate expression; not as long as we can distinguish between the Eucharist and a continental breakfast!

It seems more and more evident, as hootenanny masses are being promoted here and there, that we had better line up our notions of participation with the *purpose* we have in participation; otherwise, see if you can program a little Gregorian Chant for the New Year's party in the Blue Room of New Orleans's Roosevelt Hotel. There *must* be a difference between secular and sacred music! The Church has been trying to impress this doctrine on people since the days of Palestrina. The vestments of a priest (how long will they last?) indicate the vast difference between worshipping God and driving a taxicab. The windows in a church are supposed to add something sacred to the mere function of ventilation. So with the language we address to God. So, then, with the music we use in His presence.

Serious-minded church musicians are alarmed by the great number of inept composers who contribute to the current mediocrity in music destined for worship. The rediscovery of private judgment and freedom of untrained opinion has silenced many proficient musicians and stimulated people to compose who hardly understand the elements of the modern major scale. When I was a child I begged and begged to be allowed to sit at the piano. Finally the day came when the concession was granted for a period of two minutes. I was dismayed that I couldn't make effective music simply by hitting the piano with my hands and fists. The only difference between some of these composers and me is that they seem undismayed by the results of their efforts.

These jeremiads have been repeated over and over, but the stockpile of church-music "bombs" increases hourly. Some liturgical people have developed a keen discriminatory sense regarding metrical English hymns; they anathematize — rightly — the old sugar-tunes and ballads and commend heartily the vast importation of heterodox tunes and amended texts — rightly; but they seem to look with unruffled spirit upon every kind of musical tripe which is set to the proper and the ordinary of High Masses: "It's good; everybody will participate." Is it artistic, well adapted to reverent worship, competently composed by people with true musical instinct? "Oh, that's not important: the thing is to get the people singing!" This is not a complaint against modern or contemporary concepts or true progressivism in church music; it's a complaint against the tawdry and secularistic substitutes. Too often if a piece of music is sufficiently discordant it is considered "aggiornamented," — "hodiernistic," I like to call it. Discord and dissonance mean the same thing to an untrained musician. If the music follows the fundamental rules of acoustics (harmony and counterpoint) it's "romantic" — Ugh! that ugly word! But a musician should know the rules of harmony well enough to break them skillfully and for a good musical reason. Bad grammar may be respectable at times if it is used deliberately. Otherwise it is just stupidity. Not so in hodiernistic church music! Anything goes, just so the crowd can be made to sing it. To impose the free expression of an ignorant composer on a congregation is to make slaves of the many! The people will accept the compositions of a well-prepared and knowledgeable musician even if some elements were foreign to their tastes. They could assume, at least, that they were being asked to sing good music, music worthy of the worship of God.

The whole problem is reducible to an appropriate system of weights and measures: standards. That problem cannot be handled well except by trained musicians any more than a simple appendectomy can be performed by a whittler. The Church Music Association of America will shortly be calling

upon definitely proficient musicians to put out a list of recommended music as a service to choirmasters and organists. There will likely be no direct condemnations of any music proposed for church use, but on a positive level the Association will name the items which it feels will preserve the proper elements for truly artistic and worship-engendering music. This list will supplant the former “White List of the St. Gregory Society” which attempted the same thing at a level based on church legislation. At any rate, the judgment of competent church musicians will afford greater reliability in deciding what is appropriate and spiritual.

The problems connected with the adaptation of chant to the vernacular have been gone over in the previous issue of SACRED MUSIC as well as in other trade papers; but there is no question that St. Pius X’s principle about judging music for church on the objective standards of the movement, inspiration and savor of the Gregorian Chant is entirely valid today; all subsequent direction from the Holy See has backed up the same principle because it produces a music which is innately holy, artistic and universally acceptable. That does not mean that we must compose chant, or distort the chant melodies by weaving them into modern music. But all church music, however up-to-date, will have the qualities proper to worship when it reflects the spirit which the chant evinces.

Presently being prepared is a type of music known as *Verna Canto* which will undoubtedly come into very wide use. The composer intends to remain anonymous. The experimental stages have revealed that the music has a high spiritual content, is ideally suited to the vernacular and, though it preserves the modality and the rhythm of the ancient chant, it makes no attempt to reflect the actual melodies or musical formulae. Others have also experimented with adaptations of polyphony, but these efforts may not fare so well. In spite of that, the original literature is often so noble that it may furnish a legitimate excuse for some arbitrary use of Latin in our future liturgy.

Modern and contemporary church music is impossible for the hack, the amateur composer. Only a skilled musician can keep it from all sorts of absurd affectations and eccentricities. The banalities produced under this category are indistinguishable from the abominations about which we have been complaining. The liturgy is still to undergo many changes in text and format. Experiments are soon to be conducted in this country, but the strain of waiting for a truly spiritual music based on a final form for the English should not drive us into accepting the worse-than-mediocre materials which are produced these days in so great an abundance. What we might consider a temporary expedient could dissipate good taste and propriety for generations. Caution is then the interim corollary.