

What is Liturgical Music?



The United States' Conference of Catholic Bishops' document *Music in Catholic Worship* (1983 revised) provides a forward looking guide for establishing criteria for, and the evaluation of, appropriate music in a ritual context.

Whilst the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference has yet to publish official guidelines that relate to Liturgical Music for the Dioceses of Australia, *Music in Catholic Worship* is regarded as a guide for the Church in the English speaking countries of the world.

The document calls for music that is participatory. The principal minister of music is the assembly of the people; not the choir, not the cantors or soloists, and not the instrumentalists. The sung participation of the worshipping community should be the primary focus; liturgical music keeps the assembly as its focus.

A liturgical service takes on a nobler form when the rites are celebrated with singing, the sacred ministers take their part in them, and the faithful actively participate.¹

Music as Service

. . . the function of music is ministerial; it must serve and never dominate.²

The ministry of music, like all ministry, is one of service; service to the Word and service to the People of God. It is necessary for us to review how music can serve the rite and enable the assembly to participate in the Paschal Mystery.

The Threefold Judgements:

At the very heart of *Music in Catholic Worship* are three "judgements" that assist in the establishment of values overseeing liturgical music and what makes music 'sung prayer'

• The Musical Judgement

This first judgement seeks out the heart of the musical craft. 'Good' music has some basic elements that make it so; a sense of form, rhythmic vitality and strong melodic development. The assembly deserves the best music available. The basic elements of good musical composition do more than simply provide an outline for our musical choices. They challenge us to continually improve our level of musical skill as singers and/or instrumentalists.

• The Liturgical Judgement

Does the music support the ritual action? There is much music that may express a Christian message, but this same music does not necessarily provide the appropriate partnership for the ritual actions found in the liturgy.

¹ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy #113

² *Music in Catholic Worship*, (Washington, DC: USCC, 1983 revised), #23

This judgement demands that the music be participatory.

- Who is to sing the music?
- When is it to be sung?
- Is it appropriate to the rite, or will it overwhelm the ritual action?

Music Ministers are required to know the ritual moments within the liturgy and to become better acquainted with the relationships they share with one another.

Musical settings of liturgical texts also fall under the influence of this judgement.

- Does the music respect the text and its demands and requirements?
- Does the music cater for all members of the assembly?
- Does the text link with the scripture readings?
- Do the images created through the text build a communal sense of worship?
- Is the text theologically correct and grounded in Scripture and tradition?

• **The Pastoral Judgement**

This is by far the most difficult and complex of the three judgements but, according to David Haas³, also the most important. It reveals what makes music liturgical music; music that is people-centred and faith-centred.

The purpose of music in the liturgy is not to satisfy our own personal tastes or desires, but to deepen our faith and call us to mission as a result of what we do.

Does music in the celebration enable the people to express their faith, in this place, in this age, in this culture?⁴

Liturgical music must be centred in the lives – joys, concerns and tears – of the people whom we serve as ministers of music, both in our parish communities, and in solidarity with the global church.

Musica Sacra

Writing on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) Pope John Paul affirms the principles of Liturgical Reform that were instigated by the Council:

. . . sacred music is a privileged means to facilitate an active participation of the faithful in the sacred action.

. . . music must conserve and increase its role in liturgical celebrations, taking account of the character itself of the Liturgy as well as of the sensibility of our time and of the musical traditions of the different regions of the world.⁵

2004

³ Haas, David. "Sung Prayer" *Ministry and Liturgy*, Vol. 30, No. 5, San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, 2003.

⁴ *Music in Catholic Worship*, (Washington, DC: USCC, 1983 revised), #39

⁵ Apostolic Letter on the 40th Anniversary of the Constitution "*Sacrosanctum Concilium*" on the *Sacred Liturgy*, (Rome: December 12, 2003). #4.