Music at St. Alphonsus



What's with the long Kyries at Mass?!

You may have noticed on Christ the King Sunday (three weeks ago) and the First Sunday of Advent (two weeks ago) that the choir "riffed" into an extended setting of the Penitential Act at the beginning of Mass. I thought I would explain why this is, and how you can get the most out of it to enhance your experience of the liturgy.

From very early in its history, the Mass developed an "ordinary" portion and a "proper" portion. The ordinary of the Mass occurred every week outside of Advent and Lent: Kyrie (Lord Have Mercy), Gloria (Glory to God), Credo (I Believe), Sanctus (Holy, Holy), and Agnus Dei (Lamb of God). The proper portions changed each week: antiphons, psalms, and collects; that is to say, they were "proper" to that particular Sunday.

A rich history of chant developed to encompass every part of the Mass, and eventually, composers began to set Mass ordinaries as more elaborate and deeply devotional works of sacred art. As cathedral spaces developed, as cities and languages developed, so too a harmonic "language" developed. From the late 1400's through the late 19th century, unaccompanied and polyphonic (multi-voice) settings of the Mass were composed by Dufay, Palestrina, Victoria, Byrd, and di Lasso; the tradition continued with Hadyn, Mozart, and Schubert's elaborately orchestrated settings. Composers continue to set the Mass in a variety of instruments, or for unaccompanied voices.

So, why are we still singing these settings today at church, when we have much simpler settings that seem to get to the point quicker? The truth is that, though the Second Vatican Council gave us many more options for participation of the assembled worshippers at Mass, it also called for the preservation of historical music. In the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, it says, "The Treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care. Choirs must be diligently promoted…"

So, we have options! At some times and in some seasons, we all sing the simple formula together: *Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison*. (Lord Have Mercy, Christ Have Mercy, Lord Have Mercy). In this way, we use our own vocal mechanism to utter and pray the words. At other times and in other seasons, we listen prayerfully to a composer's meditation on that very same text, and gain new insights into the meaning of these ancient Greek words (The Kyrie is traditionally retained in its original Greek, and is not translated into Latin or English.

These great pieces of "sonic architecture" often mirror in sound the visual grandeur of holy spaces that are dedicated to the praise and honor of God. So, the next time a lengthy setting of the Kyrie begins, let your mind and heart turn heavenward in contemplation, penitence, and an openness to God's merciful love.

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