

Frequently Asked Questions on Sacred Music

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Q: What is sacred music?

A: Sacred music is “that which, being created for the celebration of divine worship, is endowed with a certain holy sincerity of form,” according to the Sacred Congregation of Rites in its Instruction on Music and the Liturgy, *Musicam Sacram* (1967, §4). As defined by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), sacred music surpasses merely religious music when it is joined to the liturgical rite to become “a necessary and integral part of the solemn liturgy,” whose purpose is “the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful” (§112).

“As a manifestation of the human spirit,” said John Paul II in 1989, “music performs a function which is noble, unique, and irreplaceable. When it is truly beautiful and inspired, it speaks to us more than all the other arts of goodness, virtue, peace, of matters holy and divine. Not for nothing has it always been, and will it always be, an essential part of the liturgy.”

Q: What are the characteristics of sacred music?

A: On the centenary of its promulgation, John Paul II urged us to revisit and learn from St. Pius X’s Motu Proprio on Sacred Music, *Quia le sollecitudini* (1903). Pope Pius distinguished three characteristics of sacred music: “it must possess holiness and beauty of form: from these two qualities a third will spontaneously arise — universality” (§2).

Concerning **holiness**, for music to be sacred means it is not the ordinary, not the every-day. It is set aside for the purpose of glorifying God and edifying and sanctifying the faithful. It must therefore exclude all that is not suitable for the temple — all that is ordinary, every-day or profane, not only in itself, but also in the manner in which it is performed. The sacred words of the Liturgy call for a sonic vesture that is equally sacred. Sacredness, then, is more than individual piety; it is an objective reality.

Concerning **beauty**, the Latin speaks more precisely of *bonitate formarum* or “excellence of forms.” This refers to the tendency of sacred music to synthesize diverse ritual elements into a unity, to draw together a succession of liturgical actions into a coherent whole, and to serve a range of sacred expressions. Excellence of forms also serves to differentiate those elements, to distinguish the various

functions of liturgical chants by revealing their unique character. Each chant of the various Gregorian genres presents a masterly adaptation of the text to its specific liturgical purpose. No wonder the Church has consistently proposed chant as the paradigm of sacred music.

Sacred music must be **true art**, says Pope Pius, “otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds.” Beauty is what holds truth and goodness to their task. To paraphrase Hans Urs von Balthasar, without beauty, the truth does not persuade, goodness does not compel (*The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, I: 19). Beauty, as expressed in the Church’s liturgy, synthesizes diverse elements into a unified whole: truth, goodness, and the human impulse to worship.

Concerning **universality**, sacred music is supra-national, equally accessible to people of diverse cultures. The Church does admit local indigenous forms into her worship, but these must be subordinated to the general characteristics of the received tradition. By insisting on the continuous use of her musical treasures, especially chant, the Church ensures her members grow up hearing this sacred musical language and receive it naturally as a part of the liturgy.

Q: Why should we care?

A: Celebrating the liturgy involves the whole person: intellect and will, emotions and senses, imagination, aesthetic sensibilities, memory, physical gestures, and powers of expression. Appropriate feeling is necessary for the communication and assimilation of religious truth. The Church’s insistence on music of a unique sort is intended not merely to stimulate feelings in a general way, but to exemplify Christian truth and convey transcendent mysteries using an appropriate form of expression. As Cardinal Ratzinger has written, sacred music “elevates the spirit precisely by wedding it to the senses, and it elevates the senses by uniting them with the spirit” (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 150).

Q: Isn’t this really just a matter of taste?

A: Nothing prevents us from preferring one form of music to another. What’s more, nothing prevents us from preferring one form of popular religious song to another. But music that is suitable for sacred liturgy must be of a special sort. No longer can personal preference be the sole criterion. “Not all musical forms can be considered suitable for liturgical celebrations,” says Pope John Paul II in his *Chirograph on sacred music* (2003). He quotes Pope Paul VI: “If music — instrumental and vocal —

does not possess at the same time the sense of prayer, dignity, and beauty, entry into the sphere of the sacred and the religious is [thereby] precluded.”

In his general audience of February 26, 2003, Pope John Paul called on musicians to “make an examination of conscience so that the beauty of music and hymnody will return once again to the liturgy. It is necessary to purify worship of ugliness of style, careless forms of expression, ill-prepared music and texts, which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated.”

Q: Why should we regard Gregorian chant as the ideal?

A: From her earliest days, the Roman Church has clothed her worship with Gregorian chant. Through the centuries she has safeguarded the chant as her own unique form of music, and through those same strains she continues to teach and pray, mourn and rejoice in her liturgy. For these reasons, Gregorian chant is the “supreme model for sacred music” (Pope Pius X) and the music proper to the Roman Church.

Throughout the 20th century, this fact was reiterated in official Church teaching on sacred music. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirms it, as does the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*. As Pope John Paul II said, quoting Pope Pius X, “The more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savor the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple.” Pope Benedict XVI agrees: “An authentic updating of sacred music can take place only in the lineage of the great tradition of the past, of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony.”

Chant is the one music that we inherit from the ancient Church fathers. It is not a “style” but the music of the Mass itself. It is sung in unison, which makes it a perfect expression of unity. It illuminates and gives expressiveness to the sacred texts, but it does not alter them. It musically expresses the heart of the Church and thus exists across and outside time.

Q: Didn’t Vatican II do away with chant?

A: Contrary to widespread belief, the Second Vatican Council did not seek to diminish the role of chant but rather to increase it. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states: “The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given

pride of place in liturgical services” (§116). This pride of place was not intended to exclude other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, “so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action.” The Council’s directive culminated a long process of reflection and legislation regarding sacred music that began with *Tra le sollecitudini*. Pope Pius X sought to diminish the role of the secular theatrical style that had come to typify sacred music in the 19th century, which tended to “correspond badly to the requirements of true liturgical music” (§6). He instead called for an increased use of chant, which much better expresses the meaning and form which tradition has given individual parts of the liturgy (§10). [...]

Q: What about “full, conscious, and active participation?”

A: The participation of the faithful in the liturgy was a primary concern of the Council (SC §14). We need to distinguish two forms of participation: internal and external. Both are necessary for the full *actuosa participatio* of the human person because human beings are made up of both body and soul. The interior element is the “heart” of the matter, which finds expression in exterior action. One kind of external participation is singing.

In his *Ad Limina* Address (October 1998), Pope John Paul II reminded U.S. bishops that “active participation does not preclude the active passivity of silence, stillness and listening; indeed, it demands it. Worshippers are not passive, for instance, when listening to the readings or the homily, or following the prayers of the celebrant, and the chants and music of the liturgy. These are experiences of silence and stillness, but they are in their own way profoundly active.”

The call for active participation in singing long predates the Council. In *Tra le sollecitudini*, Pope Pius X commends the active participation of the people in the public and solemn prayer of the Church. In his Encyclical on Sacred Liturgy, *Mediator Dei* (1947), Pope Pius XII praises congregational singing of liturgical chant as a means to “foster and promote the people’s piety and intimate union with Christ” (§106).

Some have read the Church’s teaching on participation to mean: the people sing as much as possible. Any music that the congregation does not or cannot sing is thereby excluded from liturgical use. This interpretation has been specifically rejected by all Popes for a century. Indeed, the post-conciliar *Musicam Sacram* legislates in favor of permitting a full choral Ordinary, while the current *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* specifically names parts of the Mass that may be sung by the choir

alone. Conscientious and diligent church musicians must not allow themselves to be misled by a one-sided misinterpretation of the conciliar texts.

Q: What's so great about the organ?

A: Since gaining acceptance for liturgical use in the Middle Ages, the organ has been esteemed for its contribution to sacred music. Its method of producing sound recalls the human voice itself, which the Church has given primacy in her worship. Its use over the centuries in a solo and supportive role has given the organ a unique status above all other instruments.

In 2006, when he blessed the new instrument at the Alte Kapelle in Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI remarked, "The organ has always been considered, and rightly so, the king of musical instruments, because it takes up all the sounds of creation... and gives resonance to the fullness of human sentiments, from joy to sadness, from praise to lamentation. By transcending the merely human sphere, as all music of quality does, it evokes the divine. The organ's great range of timbre, from piano through to a thundering fortissimo, makes it an instrument superior to all others. It is capable of echoing and expressing all the experiences of human life. The manifold possibilities of the organ in some way remind us of the immensity and the magnificence of God."