

PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

What Is Sacred Music?



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IS SACRED MUSIC JUST MUSIC WITH religious lyrics? Is it music that pleases people and, in some way, moves them toward God? Is it totally subjective? Is it totally objective? Most people might say that sacred music is simply music used in the context of a religious service or for a religious purpose.

My answer to the question “What is sacred music?” must be understood within the framework of the Catholic Church’s official, magisterial teachings on sacred music, which have been repeated by popes stretching from Pope Pius X to Pope Francis. These teachings were solemnly stated at the Second Vatican Council in chapter six of the liturgy constitution, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Sadly, not only do the faithful in the pews know little about these teachings, but even worse, many Catholic choir directors and organists are unaware of them as well.

In a 1967 document issued shortly after Vatican II, a definition of sacred music is given: “By sacred music is understood that which, being created for the celebration of divine worship, is endowed with holiness and goodness of form.”¹ A 1903 document issued by Pope St. Pius X also posited these

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two qualities, holiness and goodness of form, as necessary qualities of sacred music. I consider these the two “pillars” of sacred music. (I should point out that at times a third quality, “universality,” is added in some church documents. However, to simplify things—and for other reasons that will be explained later—I will treat “universality” as a subset of “holiness.”)

Let us investigate what is meant by these two qualities: *holiness and goodness of form*. First, *holiness*. God is the source of all holiness because “God alone is holy,” as Sacred Scripture says.² However, people and things that draw close to God can have a share in His holiness and be called “holy.” This is a Catholic principle. An obvious example would be a saint. After all, the word “saint” is etymologically related to the Latin word *sanctus*, which means “holy.” Another example would be holy water. It is water that is blessed and, thus, set aside for religious use within a church. It is taken out of the realm of common use and is now used for the things of God. In fact, if someone were to drink holy water to quench his thirst or wash

her hair—not out of ignorance, but deliberately with full knowledge—this could be considered as more than inappropriate or weird. One might even call it a minor sacrilege—a profanation. In fact, the word “profane” comes from the Latin prefix *pro*, which means “forward,” or in this case, “forward from” the *fanum*, which is the Latin word for “temple.” Thus, the profane refers to that which is forward from (outside of) the temple—the church. To *profane* something means to take that which was set aside for holy use within a church and then “cast it out,” treating it—incorrectly—as something for common use.

Let us look at a very concrete example. Let us say that a priest celebrates Mass wearing his chasuble, as he should. (The chasuble is the name for the outer, sleeveless vestment which a priest wears when celebrating Mass.) Also, let us assume that he must participate in a charity softball tournament after Mass. Instead of changing, he decides to go to the softball field in his chasuble. He goes to bat wearing it, he gets a hit, he runs the bases in it, and, finally, he slides into



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home plate wearing it. I am sure that, at this point, many readers are thinking, “Stop! This is outrageous!” Of course it is. It is also a profanation of a sacred object.

This is obvious to most people, but how does this apply to sacred music? It applies in this simple way: the Church teaches that the music itself—not just the text—but the *music* must, in some way, have the quality of holiness. It should not seem at home in worldly settings. “Now how can music, which consists of notes and rhythms, be sacred?” one may ask. While it would be interesting to construct an argument about the actual qualities of such music that make it *sound* “holy,” this would be beyond the scope of this essay. Let us just say that, in the beginning, music that was *dignified* and had no inappropriate associations was created for the religious texts. After that, this music was used in prayer regularly for a long time and, thus, it became *set-aside* for religious use. Any resemblance that it might have had to non-religious music in the beginning faded away, as secular styles always change with time. This was the exact same path by which the chasuble went from being a dignified, Roman man’s garment to a “set-aside,” sacred vestment for priests.

So sacred music is always “hallowed by tradition”—that is, this music is *hallowed* (made holy) through continuous and constant specialized use in the liturgy throughout the Church for centuries. Sacred music in the Roman Rite would include “Gregorian chant, sacred polyphony in its various

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forms both ancient and modern, sacred music for the organ and other approved instruments and sacred hymnody, whether liturgical or simply religious.”³ It is the long-term cultural consensus of this continual use in church that makes such music “holy”—it is set aside for the things of God. This is especially evident in cultures in which there is a wide gap between the sacred and secular. That folk masses, rock masses, mariachi masses, polka masses, and so forth occur in some parishes does not make those sorts of music “sacred” any more than a priest wearing a softball uniform during Mass makes that sartorial choice “sacred.” The fact is that the overall, long-term cultural consensus of the West has not shifted to understanding folk, rock, mariachi, and polka music as “holy.” These types of music are firmly entrenched as “secular,” not “sacred” (and, incidentally, “secular” does not mean “evil,” it just means “of the world,” the *saeculum*). By incorporating these musics of the world, appropriate enough in their own realms, into the liturgy, all that has been accomplished is a reduction in the sense of the sacred within the liturgy.



IS UNHOLY MUSIC A MODERN PROBLEM?

But why is the temptation to desacralization greater with music, seemingly, than with other liturgical elements such as vestments? Personally, I think that it is because, of all the arts, music is the one that gives the most immediate pleasure. It reaches deeply into the non-rational part of our souls and can easily become a comfort item which people want to carry everywhere with them, like a little child with his teddy bear. Music, especially in the modern world, has become the comfort item for adults, one could argue. One sees people everywhere with ear buds or headphones listening to their favorite music. For decades, there have been car radios, cassette and CD players, and most places of business play some sort of Muzak in the background. Modern technology has made this indulgence economically feasible.

On the one hand, it could be said that problems with inappropriate music in church have been with us for a while. Pope Pius X voiced his concerns at the turn of the 20th century because of a spate of popular operatic arias and theatrical music being used as the basis for some church music. The fathers of the Council of Trent expressed similar concerns in the 16th century. The nature of music, which I alluded to earlier, is such that it tempts people

into asking the question “Do I like it, does it give me pleasure?” when the more apt questions *in church* should be “Is it redolent of the sacred? Is it appropriate for Mass?”

On the other hand, however, one could say that there has indeed been a particular rise in problems with inappropriate music in the liturgy since the mid-1960s. What is behind this? I think that the lack of a sense of the sacred in the celebration of the liturgy itself needs to be seen as the chief culprit for recent problems with liturgical music. And problems with the sacrality of the liturgy come out of a much deeper crisis in theology—that is, the modernist crisis and its theological offspring born before Vatican II. I am speaking about theologians who seemed to blur the distinction between nature and grace, running the natural and supernatural together. Thus, since *everything* was sacred, nothing was “secular.” So, there was no remaining barrier to the ultimate importation of worldly music into the liturgy. These theologians were condemned, but their ideas re-emerged immediately after Vatican II. Such statements as “Bob Dylan’s music has more of the Holy Spirit behind it than some dusty old hymn,” which one used to hear voiced frequently, were but popular expressions of the theology of a modernist like Fr. Teilhard de Chardin, in my opinion. However, I leave it to better trained theologians than me to explore this matter.

UNIVERSALITY OF THE SACRED AND INCULTURATION

Now, let me briefly deal with the quality of “universality,” which I myself treat as a subset of “holiness.” In 1903, Pope Pius X wrote that “while every nation is permitted to admit into its ecclesiastical compositions those special forms which may be said to constitute its native music, still these forms must be subordinate in such a manner to the general character of sacred music, that nobody of any nation may receive an impression other than good upon hearing them.”⁴ What he seems to be saying is that while the “form” of the music might be somewhat different from culture to culture, still, the music should not offend cultural outsiders’ sense of the sacred.

However, in later church documents this quality of “universality” is either redefined to mean, in a 1955 document for example, that all cultures should sing Gregorian chant,⁵ or else it is dropped entirely, as in the 1967 document *Musicam sacram*.⁶ To make matters even more confusing, Pope St. John Paul II reintroduced the quality of “universality” in 2003, quoting Pope St. Pius X exactly, but with this addition: “[T]he sacred context of the celebration must never become a laboratory for experimentation or permit forms of composition to be introduced without careful review.”⁷ What is behind these confusing changes? Should sacred music, despite formal differences, sound sacred to all cultures or not? My guess is that after World War II a very expansive conception of inculturation⁸ emerged based on an

implicit cultural relativism, whereby the expression of the sacred itself might not translate at all from one culture to another. Perhaps Pope St. John Paul II’s 2003 document will turn out to have been the beginning of a magisterial re-evaluation of this rather relativistic conception of culture used to justify some inculturated liturgical music? Time will tell.⁹

At any rate, the answer to this question is moot for those of us in the West. We have a long-established tradition of familiar sacred music. The fact that some Westerners may dislike it is irrelevant. That it is set aside as “sacred” music in Western culture is an objective fact.

GOODNESS OF FORM

Moving on, let us address the second quality in the Church’s definition of sacred music, which is usually translated as *goodness of form*—what I consider the “second pillar” of sacred music. This phrase may seem unfamiliar to us, so let us spend some time on it. The phrase reflects a Medieval view of the beautiful which is more objective than subjective. Most of us have heard the phrase “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”—a phrase that apparently was first used in an 1878 novel. Although he never used the phrase, the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant seems to have established the conditions for it. His “Copernican revolution in philosophy,” whereby reality is constructed out of our subjective responses to it, certainly set the stage for this.

To the Medieval mind, however, the beautiful was much more

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objective. It involved the harmony of individual parts put together into a coherent whole through which shone the beauty of the things so connected. These three elements were considered by the medieval philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas as essential for something to be beautiful. He called them “proportion” (the harmony of the individual parts), “integrity” (the coherent whole), and “brightness” (the shining forth of those relations). As to the last term, one could substitute the word “splendor,” and, indeed, St. Thomas Aquinas’s teacher, St. Albertus Magnus, called beauty the *splendor formae* (the splendor of form).

Now, proportion and integrity (or wholeness) can be found in mathematical relations, and this can be a kind of beauty, but it is abstract. The beauty of art involves a shining forth or, in the case of music, a *sounding* forth of these harmonious relations. And this gives a sweetness to these formal structures. In the Medieval university, the *quadrivium* consisted of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. To moderns this seems like a strange combination, but to Medievals it made perfect sense. Arithmetic and geometry were abstract disciplines dealing with number relations. Music made

present in an unseen yet audible way those number relations which were then to be found between the concrete and visible planets in the discipline of astronomy. So, music was the hinge that connected the totally *abstract* numerical order to the totally *concrete* numerical order.

MUSIC’S FORM INTERACTS WITH ITS EXPRESSION


Having clarified the definition of beauty as something objective, let us return specifically to the phrase “goodness of form” as one of the qualities which sacred music must possess. Let us start first with the word *form*. As I observed earlier, form has to do with the relation of parts to a whole. It is a matter of an art work’s architectonic structure. Indeed, let us make an analogy to architecture. Take a simple structure, like a house, which has four walls and a roof.

Now, let us say that we see a house with the basic structure, but that one of the walls is too short and does not extend all the way up to where the roof is. This would be a defect in the form. It would not be good or, expressed another way, this defect would be a privation of the good. Here, “good” does not refer exclusively to morality but, rather, as the Medievals used the

word in a broader sense, it refers to the perfection (or *fullness*) of a thing. So the house we observe does not have the *perfection* or *fullness* or “goodness of form” that it should have, and to that extent it is not beautiful.

Good music has an ordered structure—a logical organization. This is what makes it beautiful. What makes music different from math or architecture is that there is *expression*. However, expression in music necessarily comes through its formal structures (logically organized pitches, phrases, rhythms, themes, etc.), which can be judged much more objectively than many people realize. Otherwise, the assessment of music would be truly subjective, based exclusively on one’s whims and untutored tastes. As a true art

form, though, music possesses its own elements and structure and logic. Think of it this way: there is an objective art to drama even though it, too, involves the expression of emotion. Otherwise, Shakespearean dramas would be no better than soap operas or cheap thrillers. Sacred music must be true art: it must be well made according to the principles of that art form—music. It must have a goodness of form. If it lacks this goodness of form, it cannot qualify as “sacred music.”

So, in summation, sacred music is music which, in service of the Divine Liturgy, sounds “set aside” for sacred functions (that is, it sounds “holy”) and is artistically well made according to the objective principles of the art of music (goodness of form). These two pillars constitute the essence of sacred music, according to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. 

ENDNOTES

1. Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Musicae sacram*, 1967, art. 4a.
2. Rev. 15:4, New American Standard Bible.
3. Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Musicae sacram*, 1967, art. 4b.
4. St. Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini*, 1903, art. 2.
5. Pope Pius XII, *Musicae sacrae disciplina*, 1955, art. 45.
6. Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Musicae sacram*, 1967.
7. Pope St. John Paul II, “Chirograph of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II for the Centenary of the *Motu Proprio Tra le Sollecitudini* on Sacred Music,” 2003, art. 6.
8. Inculturation could be defined as “the utilization of non-Christian elements in the liturgy after sufficient purification and reorientation to Christ.” Unfortunately, in practice, it can often seem to be the mere celebration of the native culture in the liturgy—without any purification or reorientation.
9. For a non-magisterial re-evaluation see A Nigerian Priest, “Inculturation: A Wrong Turn—Part 4: The Zaire Usage and False Africanism in the Liturgy,” The New Liturgical Movement (blog), August 31, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/yt75uvn7>. Accessed June 7, 2023.

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