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Music in Catholic Worship

BY JOE SCHOEN, DIRECTOR OF MUSIC

“Without music, life
would be a mistake”
— Fredrich Nietzsche

Catholic Bishops of the United States wrote that within the Mass, liturgical music serves as a necessary and integral component. *Music in Catholic Worship*, a statement of the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy was published in July of 1972, has greatly assisted that renewal of the liturgy, particularly with in the church of the United States. Known to most Catholic Church musicians, the “Music Documents” was one of the first publications I read as a young aspiring director of music.



“To serve as a music director in the Catholic Church is a privilege as well as a serious responsibility. It is a privilege because the gift of music is not given to everyone, and it is a responsibility because musical leadership must foster the full, conscience and active participation of the assembly.”

— Dr. Elaine Rendler.

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Music Serves the Expression of Faith

Among the many signs and symbols used by the church to celebrate its fate, music is of preeminent importance. As sacred song united to words it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.

Yet the function of music is ministerial; it must service and never dominate. Music should assist the assembled believers to express and share the gift of faith that is within them and to nourish and strengthen their interior commitment of faith. It should heighten the texts so they speak more fully and more effectively.



The quality of joy and enthusiasm which music adds to community worship cannot be gained in any other way. It imparts a sense of unity to the congregation and sets the appropriate tone for a particular celebration.

In addition to expressing texts, music can

Reflection Questions

- **Does the music during the Liturgy at the CSC connect you closer to the readings?**
- **Does the music bring you joy and set an appropriate tone for the particular celebration? Why?**

Meaning and Feeling

also unveil a dimension of meaning and feeling, a communication of ideas and intuitions which words alone cannot yield. This dimension is integral to the human personality and to grow in faith. It cannot be ignored if the signs of worship are to speak to the whole person.

Ideally, every communal celebration of faith, including funerals and the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, penance, anointing and matrimony should include music and singing. Where it is possible to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours in a community, it, too, should include music.

To determine the value of a given musical element in a liturgical celebration a threefold judgment must be made: musical, liturgical, and pastoral.

Is the music technically, aesthetically and

Reflection Question

- **What would your experience of liturgy at the CSC be like if there was no music?**

expressively good? This judgment is basic and

The Musical Judgment

primary and should be made by competent musicians. Only artistically sound music will be effective in the long run. To admit the cheap, the trite, the musical cliché often found in popular songs for the purpose of “instant liturgy” is to cheapen the liturgy, to expose it to ridicule, and to invite failure.

I sometimes wrestle with this part of the document. In some respects, if a popular song

fits with a priest's message during his homily,

Reflection Questions

- **Do you believe this to be true?**
- **Does the CSC admit cheap, trite, or too much popular music?**

would I discount that opportunity to further the message with a song that could possibly connect the congregation closer to the text?

Musicians must search for and create music of quality for worship, especially the new musical settings for the new liturgical texts. They must also do the research needed to find new uses for the best of the old music. They must explore the repertory of good music used in other communions. They must find practical means of preserving and using our rich heritage of Latin chants and motets. In the meantime, however, the words of St. Augustine should not be forgotten: "Do not allow yourselves to be offended by the imperfect while you strive for the perfect."

We do a disservice to musical values, however, when we confuse the judgment of music with the judgment of musical style. Style and value are two distinct judgments. Good music of new styles is finding a happy home in the celebrations of today.

To chant and polyphony we have effectively added the chorale hymn, restored responsorial singing to some extent, and employed many styles of contemporary composition. Music in fold idiom is finding acceptance in Eucharistic celebrations. We must judge value within each style.



The musician has every right to insist that the music be good. But although all liturgical music should be good, not all good music is suitable to the liturgy.

On the door of my classroom at school is that quote shared at the beginning of this article. "Without music, life would be a mistake." After my own personal reflection on these documents again, what continually replays in my musical heart and mind is:

Reflection Questions

- **Do you believe that one "style" of music is best for Liturgy?**
- **Do you think that the CSC should consider the importance of various styles, including chant and traditional hymns?**
- **After reading portions of "The Music Documents" how does the CSC respond to Liturgy through music and song?**

"Without music, liturgy would be a mistake."

