

The Heart of Our Music

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Underpinning Our Thinking

Reflections on Music and Liturgy
by Members of the Liturgical Composers Forum

edited by John Foley



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Preface

Sixteen composers of the wonderful music we sing at mass have written essays for this series entitled *The Heart of Our Music*. All of these writers are also ministers of the liturgy, and in these chapters they disclose the experience and wisdom that lie beneath liturgy and their ritual music.

The essays are thought-provoking and written for everyone interested in liturgy—especially those concerned with pastoral music in the English-speaking world. This includes pastors, deacons, liturgists, musicians, ministers of the liturgy, people in the pews, and last, but definitely not least, those interested in the future of Christian worship. The authors have devoted their lives to furthering liturgy, because it is the “fount and apex of the whole Christian life.”¹

This series is a product of discussions and sharings at yearly meetings of the Liturgical Composers Forum in St. Louis. I had the good fortune to establish this forum in 1998, and I was privileged to oversee it until 2011 as part of my work as director of the Center for Liturgy at St. Louis University. Since stepping down from that position I have remained a happy member of the Forum, now incorporated on its own.²

In this first volume, “Underpinning Our Thinking,” the reader will find reflections on liturgy and composition—first as an “emptying” or “kenosis” (Alan J. Hommerding); then as sacred (Bob Hurd); as actively inviting and challenging us (Tony Barr); as a turning away from “empire” (Rory Cooney); as “good” in the proper sense (Paul Inwood); and as imaging God (Jan Michael Joncas).

How could a short volume be more interesting? I warmly invite the reader to the feast. Come into *The Heart of Our Music*!

—John Foley, SJ

Notes

1. *Lumen Gentium* 11; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1324.
2. Membership in the Liturgical Composers Forum consists of persons who have composed a representative body of ritual vocal music that is (1) published by a recognized publisher of liturgical music, (2) intended primarily for the Roman Catholic liturgy, and (3) rooted in participation by the assembly.

A Sacrifice of Praise

Musical Composition as *Kenosis*

Alan J. Hommerding

Music was a prominent part of first-century Jewish prayer life. It was a feature of the daily rhythms of Jewish households and the communities they formed. Yet contrasted with other aspects of the life of Jesus such as table fellowship, there is hardly any mention of music in the accounts we have of his life. To be precise, there are three.

One of these is found at Luke 15:25. It is part of the return of the prodigal son. The older, faithful son, who has been laboring dutifully in the field, returns from the fields to the sounds of music and dancing. In other words, somebody got a party started in his absence—not for him, the faithful, dutiful, laboring, sweaty one, but for his greedy, carefree, abandoning, pig-reeking brother. Luke uses the music here to signal a feast being thrown for the least likely guest of honor.

Interesting. But the other two instances serve the purpose of this chapter even better.

In their accounts of the Last Supper both Mark (14:26) and Matthew (26:30) describe Jesus and his followers singing a psalm while they go from the Upper Room to the Mount of Olives. The description is one lone sentence between Jesus' prediction of his own dying and rising, and the prediction of Peter's denial. In the larger literary structure it concludes the narrative

of the supper where Jesus identifies himself with the bread and wine. This sentence inaugurates the narrative that will lead to the crucifixion on Calvary, where Jesus will surrender himself, body and spirit, on the cross.

I like to refer to psalm singing in these Last Supper accounts as a “kenotic hinge” used by Matthew and Mark. The act of singing praise to God is simultaneously an act of emptying one’s body of breath, which was used by the Creator to animate clay into humanity, and an act of emptying one’s spirit in worship. It is this psalm-singing, this musical act of self-emptying, placed by Mark and Matthew between the two great acts of Jesus pouring himself out, that can form a basis for composers to understand their ministry as an act of self-emptying.

Kenosis: The Self-Emptying of Jesus Christ

A basic definition of kenosis is the self-emptying activity that Jesus Christ chose as a means to take on human nature. Appropriately enough, its locus in the New Testament is in a hymn text: Paul’s great hymn found in Philippians 2:3-11.

In using the term, however, a few cautions must be expressed. Kenosis does not mean that Jesus Christ stopped being God, that his divine attributes ceased. Nor does it mean merely that he took on mortal flesh and human nature, as crucial as that is. It also expresses why he did so. Verses seven and eight, the critical verses, describe the purpose of this incarnation as threefold: (a) to become human, (b) to be humbled as a servant (or slave), and (c) to be obedient to death on the cross. This is the goal of the kenosis. It precedes the re-exaltation that begins in verse nine. One might say that the destiny of Christ’s self-emptying was his self-sacrifice.

Paul and subsequent theologians were grappling with a mystery, kenosis, attempting to describe what is indescribable, to explain what is inexplicable. In a similar way, the Council of Trent used the term “transubstantiation” as being “a most apt” (*aptissime*) way to describe what happens to the eucharistic

elements at Mass. Neither term is a complete explanation of these mysteries—a goal beyond our mortal abilities. I include the analogy to Trent because I will place the kenotic dynamic as it pertains to the work of composers into some eucharistic contexts.

Composers have a role in the ongoing creative activity of God through compositions and particular gifts bestowed by the Spirit. But the music we write does not consist of “things” that God has placed in us that we subsequently share with others so that they, too, can access a portion of God. Such an understanding does not contain the sense of surrender that a composer-disciple must be in touch with in order to follow the kenotic, eucharistic call of Jesus Christ.

It is much better to think of ourselves as agents in the ongoing dynamic of revelation actuated by the Holy Spirit, continually recalling this power of the Spirit by which Christ became human as the model for the kenosis of the Spirit in our lives. For this reason, I consciously avoid use of the term “gift” or the expression “self-gift,” since our surrounding culture too often identifies our “gifts” (musical or otherwise) as some objective, quantifiable entity we own or possess, with which we (sometimes over-) identify our very selves.

Compositional “Kenosis”—Three Eucharistic Views

Kenosis as Identity: The Last Supper

“Take and sing” or “Take and play,” the composer might say when offering a new piece of music. It must be admitted that composers inevitably identify the compositions they create with themselves. This is understandable and, to a certain extent, a good thing, for it is one aspect of care or concern about one’s musical craft. It is no accident that composers often use expressions such as “a part of me” or “like my children” to refer to the intimate degree to which they identify with the music they write. Our musical compositions are “my pieces” in more ways than one.

But if composers truly take Christ as their model for self-emptying, a next step would be to recall Christ offering himself in bread and cup “for you” and doing so freely, out of love. For the composer to say in a Christlike fashion that something he or she has written is “for you” (whether that “you” is another musician, a local community, or the wider church) does not mean that the composer is motivated by some sort of personal benefit but is truly offering music out of a desire to benefit others. This is true self-emptying, motivated by love. Paul’s checklist from 1 Corinthians 13:4-13 is a pretty good set of criteria to evaluate our compositional motivations. Am I patient with how long it’s taking the choir to learn “my” new piece? Is it possible I wrote this because I’m jealous of another composer’s setting of the same text?

Misinterpretation is the bane of a composer’s existence. Most composers can relate to it, especially when and if their works are performed in musical circumstances of which they are not a part. It may be difficult to experience interpretations other than one’s own, but the grace of the Spirit can lead us to be freed of that need to control, opening us to the diversity and possibilities that we don’t even know exist in our work. Composers need to empty themselves to offer their music freely, as Christ offered himself freely at the table. The gospels reveal that Jesus had a great deal of insight into the shortcomings of his followers, so it is easy enough to imagine that, as he left them his Body and Blood in the elements of their supper so that they could remember him, he could presume that, along with his teachings, these would be used and interpreted in ways that he did not intend. Yet he still offered himself at that meal.

Kenosis as Sacrifice: Calvary

I am not going to reflect on those long hours composers spend striving to perfect our compositions until our eyes are bloodshot and our backs are sore. That sort of bodily sacrifice truly occurs, but a more important sort of sacrifice is the uniting

of our work with the saving work of Jesus Christ on Calvary. This happens in a twofold way: the church (including its composers) acting as the baptized Body of Christ, and liturgical prayer being sung with the music that we write for it.

The kenotic dynamic through which God became incarnate continues in baptism. As Paul tells us in Romans 6:3-4, this incorporation joins us to the whole reality of Christ's own embodiment, including his sacrificial death and his resurrection. The implications for composers are important. Baptism has placed us and our particular ministry of composition within the Body of Christ as one of its contributing members. When we compose for the church we are writing music for Christ to sing. Far from being a cause for self-aggrandizement, this reality must return us again and again to the emptying, humbling dynamic of kenosis. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ again and again empties himself, humbles himself, incorporates himself with us in each baptized believer—to literally "make us part of the body."

I am using the word "liturgy" here with its widest sweep: not only the eucharistic celebration, but the other sacramental rites, celebrations, and occasions for prayer in which Christ's people gather together to offer Christ's sacrifice to God. The whole of our sung prayer is all part of one great act of praise and thanksgiving. Everything we intend for the liturgy is written to be part of the act of Christ's sacrifice, which we continue through the power of the Holy Spirit. When it comes to writing music for the church's public, corporate prayer, the act of composition is a self-emptying activity per se. For the composer, as member of the Body of Christ, the destiny of kenosis is truly sacrifice. All is the "sacrifice of praise."

Kenosis as Service: Footwashing

Jesus left us commands at the Last Supper. We do better with "Take and eat" and "Take and drink" than we do with "As I have done for you, so you must do." Some (including this

author) have wondered what the church would be like if we also enacted footwashing every time we celebrated the Lord's Supper. We must find numerous practical ways to imitate this in our ministry as composers.

Many of us function in leader-servant musical roles in our communities. But one aspect of the Johannine account might serve us well for some self-examination. Jesus upsets his followers' preconceived notions and images about him, the Teacher and Lord. He lived out the kenosis of his origin, humbling himself to take on literally the form of a servant. We might do well to take a serious look at what expectations or preconceived notions people have about us as composers. Do they, on whatever level, try to make us a kind of celebrity, one who is celebrated, one who unintentionally takes the place of Christ? To exaggerate, might they think the ability to craft a musical composition means that all musical knowledge in heaven and on earth has been given to us? In terms of self-image, in what ways do we fail to empty ourselves by kenosis, preferring instead to be full of ourselves? Do we set ourselves up as "teacher and lord" when we function as composers, especially when we take "our" music to others?

Composers may be surprised to see the potential for personal and musical growth that self-emptying and setting aside of oneself can accomplish. Do I always write for four-part choir? Why not write for smaller forces to discover how a leaner texture better expresses the text, perhaps thereby serving a wider range of communities with limited resources? Am I always writing in response-verse form? Perhaps a strophic hymn text will challenge me to achieve something new. Can I write a compelling single-line chant melody, or do I always default to 3/4 time with an arpeggiated accompaniment? Am I ignoring a real lack of musical settings for certain texts or moments in our prayer because I would rather turn to texts that have already been set numerous times? What music by another composer do I not particularly care for? Can I revisit it and find therein something positive, something that I might do well to emulate?

Ritual: Knowing and Embodying Musical Kenosis

It is time to talk of ritual, which has something of a bad reputation in our culture, a culture that prizes novelty and informality. And yet so many things in our culture are far more ritualistic than anything we do in church! Think of video games and Top 40 radio, for instance. Through human rituals we both know and embody everything from survival (how to eat) to enjoyment (how to dine). It has been said that God took on our human nature in order to fully understand what it means to be human. This might be considered a bit shortsighted, if not a first step down the heresy trail. God did not necessarily have to grow a head in order to understand what it means to endure a head cold. But still, as Paul's letter to the Hebrews explains more precisely, God did take on our human nature so that *we* would understand that God knows what it means to be fully human. The kenosis that Christ undertook, then, was for this knowing, as well as for his embodiment in human flesh. That embodiment continues to this day through ritual.

The music that composers craft for prayer is a way for the assembly of the baptized to ritualize. Through it people come to experience the larger rhythms of prayer as the words of Holy Scripture are placed in their hearts. They learn when to listen, when to respond, when to participate in an interior mode, and when to give exterior expression. Ritual music is a way to amplify an understanding that the church and its prayer is not a solitary exercise but corporate activity. This is why composers are continually compelled to increase their own understanding of the rites and the prayer of the church. Even if the assembled, baptized faithful could not necessarily articulate their knowledge of the rites, ritual music that is crafted to support and respect the rites will bring them to increased comprehension—and perhaps even appreciation.

Ours is an incarnational religion, one that believes that an immortal being took on mortal flesh; and it is a sacramental religion, one that uses the “stuff” of life—bread, wine, oil, water, women, men—to localize the sacred. I am fond of describing

Christianity as a religion *con carne* and our human bodies as our BSUs (basic sacramental units).

In a way complementary to the “knowing” described above, our liturgical compositions also help the rites to become “incarnate” for those we serve. Through music, people embody the ritual and prayer in a way they otherwise would not. Much research has been done in recent years about the effect of singing on the human brain and body, with the unanimous conclusions that no other human activity engages as much of the brain simultaneously and that the effects of singing include everything from increased levels of proteins and antibodies in the blood to effective allaying of everything from stress to depression.

Of course sacred song and the music we write are not merely about biology, nor is worship merely therapy. Music is a primary way for us to get the rites we pray “into our bones” and pray them “by heart.” It is the way we engage others as a thankful, praising assembly of God’s faithful. It is the way we enter into dynamic ritual relationship as a community with particular prayer leaders, the way we express our penitence, our joy, our gratitude, and our commitment. Along with posture and environment, ritual and its music are how we continue to be emptied of ourselves and shaped into Christ, sent as we are into the world as that Christ.

Music as an Aural Emblem of the Reign of God

Finally, let us make our way back to Luke’s use of music in the parable of the Prodigal Son. At its heart the parable describes one of the most self-emptying figures in all of the gospels: the father who could have had his son killed or enslaved for disobedience, or at the very least could have waited stoically for him to return all the way home. Instead, however, he ignores all social demands, legalities, permissions, and conventions by running out to his son who is far off in the distance. It might be noted that many of Jesus’ parables feature a “kenotic” figure like this father.

The return of the son triggers a whole series of “emptyings”: the party itself, the emptying of the pantry, the dancing, and the full embodiment and expression of joy. Binding it all together is music. It underscores the feasting, it compels the dancing. In this, as in other gospel depictions of feasts, we are meant to get the smallest glimpse of the great eternal feast of the kingdom, which is our own destiny. Much more than earthly feasts, the heavenly liturgy is an eternal and infinite self-emptying of the hosts of heaven around the throne of the Lamb. And binding it all together is the great canticle of the saints and angels.

Needless to say, this will be the ultimate time of kenosis. Yet it is already mysteriously bound up with us here and now as every knee in heaven, on earth, and under the earth bends at the name of Jesus. This is what calls composers and musicians to serve others, to be, as Charles Wesley expressed it, “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

This reality is what calls composers to kenosis, to self-emptying in our ministry, to setting ourselves aside for the reign of God.