The Heart of Our Music
The Heart of Our Music
Practical Considerations

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

edited by John Foley

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Preface

This volume of *The Heart of Our Music* contains what we think of as “practical considerations.”

Columba Kelly speaks of the voices of the presider, cantor, choir, and assembly as integral parts of a framework that is inclusive of the entire liturgy. Then Steve Warner writes about ritual as the voice of people, the voice of thunder—that is, that our liturgies must fully involve our every human capability, including both the physical and the emotional.

Cyprian Consiglio tells us how liturgical music consists essentially and dramatically of melody—but that it includes also the urgency of rock-and-roll, the soaring crispness of Gregorian chant, the earthy rootedness of African rhythms, and the jubilant freedom of jazz.

Lynn Trapp declares that liturgical music has always been various in its styles, nowhere more so than in our own time. The Spirit must be allowed to breathe through the musicians, the music, the community, and then out to the world. Jaime Cortez reflects on what is needed from ministers in order to put their own individual needs aside and think in terms of the collective needs of the larger church.

In my own contribution, I ask about the required three judgments and the one resulting evaluation that are stipulated by the Bishops’ *Sing to the Lord* for music in any mass whatsoever. As a member of the advisory committee that composed that document, I can say that the answer does not come easily. The question I ask is: Who is to make these judgments?

Finally, Tom Kendzia draws lessons from some of the important musicians by whom he has been influenced or with
whom he has worked: Fr. Clarence Rivers; Paul Simon; Peter, Paul and Mary; and even the St. Louis Jesuits! From these he has come to understand that music at mass must be powerful yet singable—part of the Mass, yet not something that takes you out of the experience.

Each essay in this volume is thought-provoking and written for everyone interested in liturgy—especially those concerned with pastoral music in the English-speaking world. As I mentioned in the preface to the previous volume, 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 composer-authors in this series have devoted their lives to furthering liturgy, because it is the “fount and apex of the whole Christian life.” Everything you will find in this series is a product of discussions and sharings at the yearly meetings of the Liturgical Composers Forum (LCF) 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.

— John Foley, SJ

Notes


3. 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.
With One Voice
The Voice of the Church, the Body of Christ

Columba Kelly, OSB

The voice of the church is indeed one, for it is the very voice of Christ its head. That voice, however, uses different members of the body of Christ at different times during any given liturgical service. Article 28 of Sacrosanctum Concilium, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, states that “In liturgical celebrations each person . . . should carry out all and only those parts which pertain to [his or her] office by the nature of the rite and the norms of the liturgy.” During the years since the promulgation of that document, a problem has arisen. In order to attain “full, conscious and active participation,” that voice needs to be truly heard! It needs to be heard no matter by whom it is voiced or where in the assembly it is being sounded. Even the voice of an individual, such as that of the priest presider or the cantor, is the voice of the entire body of Christ, head and members. On the other hand, the voice of the entire assembly, especially when it responds in speech or

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The song to the presider or the cantor, has often not been heard as it truly should be heard. The voice of Christ is heard primarily through four organs of his body, the church: the presider, the cantor, the choir, and the entire assembly. Let us look at how that voice is heard in each of these four members of the total body of Christ.

The Presider’s Voice

The presider of a liturgical assembly is usually provided with a microphone. The artificially amplified sound allows the presider’s voice to be adequately heard throughout the space of the church building. It guarantees that all will hear the gospel, the homily, and the eucharistic prayer. The average church sound system, however, flattens out the overtones and the rich variations in the speaker’s voice and reduces the attractiveness of that voice for the listener. More importantly, the communication is in one direction only: from the speaker to the passive audience. In the case of the important dialogues with the assembly, such as the Creed, the preface dialogues, and the Our Father, the response from the assembly is not on an equal footing with that of the presider. A sound system is designed to be a one-way communication that can overpower any other sound source in the room, even that of a crying child!

The Cantor’s Voice

In most churches, the cantor is provided with a microphone, whether handheld or from the lectern. I once presided at the Sunday liturgies at a parish in which the entire interior space of the church had been “sound-proofed” like a recording studio. There was acoustical tile on the ceiling, thick carpet on the floor, and thick upholstery on the chairs and kneelers. As a result the voices of the different cantors were reduced to a thin sameness that at times became even harsh and hard to listen to as they strained to put sound into the deadened room. Once again, the
communication was one way. The assembly made a valiant effort to sing the response to the responsorial psalm, but from my position at the presider’s chair, I could hear only a faint, thin sound coming from the nave of the church.

According to St. Augustine in his homily on Psalm 130, it is important for us that we not listen to the psalmist’s voice as though it were that of an individual singer, “but as the prayer of all who are within Christ’s body.” He goes on to say,

Being members of his body, they all speak like a single individual; the many are one in him who is one. . . . But this temple of God, this body of Christ, this assembly of the faithful, has but one voice and sings like one individual. . . . If only we want it to be so, it is our own voice.¹

All this is not foreign to our contemporary culture. We are quite willing to listen to a soloist render our national anthem at a major sporting event while we stand at attention and make it our own.

The Choir’s Voice

The choir often has several microphones for different sections of the choir and for the instrumentalists. At another church in which I presided for the Sunday liturgies, a sound engineer was not controlling these microphones. As a result, the microphone for the instrumentalists had been set too loud in relation to that used by the choir, which in turn seemed to be set louder than that of the soloist. The result produced an instrumental solo with the choir and the soloist as background accompaniment! After the Mass I had to ask the singers what the lyrics of the songs were that they had sung. The most serious problem came, however, when they attempted to support the singing of the assembly. The more they tried to help, the less one could hear any sound from the assembly itself. One of the functions of the liturgical choir is to be part of a sound framework that is broad
and inclusive of the entire space. It is to be a part of something that is larger than the sound that the choir itself is making. This can happen only in a room that has enough resonance in it to support, at the same time, both the choir and the assembly.

The Assembly’s Voice

The best singing of an assembly that I have heard was that made by a crowd at a local basketball game singing out their favorite ritual acclamations. The resonant space of the gym held their voices in the air and blended them into one giant triumphant sound. The cheerleaders did not use microphones to lead the shouts of the assembly. They filled their lungs with plenty of air and launched the sound toward the bleachers. When they supported the crowd’s response, their voices did not overpower the crowd’s voice but blended into it to create one great voice. The total sound was rich and vibrant. It seemed that it was the building itself that was singing their chants and acclamations!

Unfortunately, not many American Catholic churches have that kind of resonate acoustic. Most of these churches are like the church I served for several months while the pastor was away. On my first Sunday there, I decided to listen carefully to the assembly as it finished singing the entrance hymn. The choir and the instrumentalists could be heard loud and clear, thanks to the sound system and their individual microphones. As I faced the people from the presider’s chair, a question ran through my mind: “What’s wrong with this sound?” The church was indeed filled with amplified sound from the singers and the instrumentalists, but I couldn’t hear anything coming from the assembly itself in front of me. In fact, I noticed that most of the people were simply watching the musicians as they sang and played the entrance hymn; they hadn’t even opened the hymnal that was in their pew rack!

It was then that I decided to sing the opening dialogue, “The Lord be with you,” on a straight tone without accompaniment. There was an awkward pause, and then a few brave souls sent
back a timid, “And with your spirit!” The look on the faces of many in the assembly seemed to say, “Are we supposed to sing that all by ourselves?” It was only then that I realized that they had never heard their own voice as an assembly in this church space! Yet I knew that these were among the same people who the previous weekend had sung their hearts out at the basketball game. In the resonant gym space, they produced a unified sound that filled the space as if it were the voice of a single person. Now, in the dry, dead acoustic of this church space, their voices did not combine to form a single voice, but each voice remained weak and isolated in its own separate space in the church.

Usually, the presider, the cantor, and the choir have been provided with a sound system to overcome the dry acoustic that is to be found in most of our churches. Only the assembly is left without any aid to support its voice. Even these sound systems, however, do not provide what a good recording studio has available. In another church where I presided at the weekend Masses, the people complained to me that they had spent a lot of money on the purchase of a good pipe organ for their new church, but after it was installed they thought that it sounded like a bunch of cheap tin whistles! They also complained that the assembly refused to join the choir in singing the hymns at Mass. I suggested that they remove the sound absorbent material from the ceiling and the thick carpet that covered the entire floor of the church. A year later, I found out that they had done just what I had suggested. As a result, they discovered that they really had a great sounding pipe organ. The assembly also began to enjoy singing and hearing its own voice in the building.

**What kind of voices are these?**

The voice of the church can be that of an individual voice singing to us the very words of God in a sung scripture reading, or the verses of the responsorial psalm. That voice may be very sweet and polished, as in the case of a trained soloist who brings to life some of the deeper meanings of the words
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she or he sings. That is something that the mere spoken word cannot do. At other times, it is a dialogue between the voice of the presider and that of the entire assembly, especially in the case of the preface dialogue and the Sanctus as the response to the preface itself. In fact, the celebrant alludes to that last part of the dialogue when the eucharistic prayer continues with the words: “Father, you are holy indeed.” At times, that voice of the assembly in its responses may be the rather rough-cut voice of a small parish responding to the presider’s opening prayer or the preface dialogue. At other times, the voice of the church is that of a skilled choir of singers who lift up our minds and hearts in a beautiful choral setting of praise to God. That voice is the result of combining some individual voices from the assembly who have developed their gifts of music and blended them under the leadership of a musical director. The choral voice they produce is greater than the sum of their individual voices, no matter how good each one individually may be. It becomes a symbol in sound of the mystery of the church.

What makes for “voice-friendly” music?

Chant was the Roman liturgy’s first truly “user-friendly” music for the human voice. It has its roots in the use of heightenened speech inflections by someone who wants to communicate firm convictions about something. For Christians, it was speaking boldly about their belief in the risen Lord Jesus. The musical rhythm of chant is inspired and shaped by the sounded words of a good speaker in a large assembly. If you can speak the text with good projection of the voice, clear pronunciation, and intelligent phrasing, then you have most of what you need to sing a piece of chant, whether it be in Latin or in English. As in good speech, each word accent is given its due intensity, while all the other syllables flow rapidly and lightly either to or from that accent. The singer will have the feeling of a pendulum swinging from one accent to the next until it comes to a stop at the end of a phrase. Before the Second Vatican Council,
such techniques for speaking in public were to be found only in college courses on public speaking and in monasteries and convents of religious where prayer in common was a daily event. Now every parish is encouraged to train its lectors and singers in the art and techniques of good public speaking. In *The Ministry of Lectors* James A. Wallace remarks: “Rushing through a reading is a very frustrating experience for a listener. And if the pace is at a breakneck speed, people will turn off.” He goes on to say: “Put the words together that need to be linked in a ‘thought phrase,’” which holds the words together that need to be grouped according to the sense of what is being said.”

For presiders, lectors, and cantors who would like a more thorough presentation of how to speak together in public, I recommend *Getting the Word Across: Speech Communication for Pastors and Lay Leaders* by G. Robert Jacks. When our presiders, lectors, and cantors present a good model of speaking and singing in public, then their parish assemblies will be able to learn that same art of good speaking. This came home to me after I had experienced the contrast between a parish that had learned to speak as an ensemble and one that had not learned to do so. In the latter parish, I heard the entire Creed recited in one breath! I found myself dropping in and out of the recitation to catch a breath as I struggled to keep up with the assembly. Needless to say, the text was almost totally unintelligible. The first parish had learned to recite a text together, thanks to the good modeling of the presider, the cantor, and the choir members who had been trained in the art of public speaking.

In their instructions for singing chant, the monks of Solesmes now state that “the [performance instructions] given here flow from the perfect correspondence of a sacred text to a Gregorian melody. It is for this reason that singers who show respect for the Latin diction, by that very fact already possess the greater part of what is required to execute well a Gregorian piece.” Dom Daniel Saulnier gives the following chant as an example of this. Although each syllable of the word *benesonantibus* has only a single square note, each syllable has a different value and function in the word:
The first three syllables are pre-tonic syllables that pick up speed and volume as they accelerate toward the accented syllable. After this buildup, the accented syllable now contains a great deal of energy and volume/duration. This energy and momentum carries through the next syllable, an intermediate post-tonic syllable. The final syllable of the word then absorbs the remaining energy to bring the forward momentum to a closure at the end of the word before moving on again with the following words *(laudáte Dóminum)*. The melody forms a Roman arch over the word, a hallmark of the Gregorian chant style of composition. As Dom Daniel Saulnier states:

The romano-frankish chant shows an entirely new concern for the construction of phrases: the melodic curve in the form of an arch, a . . . concern [that] becomes a canon of composition for the ‘gregorian’. The same holds true for the treatment of words. In the case of both the phrase and the word, the Latin accent is handled in the composition by a melodic elevation. Grammar has regained all its prerogatives over the music and finds itself elevated as the *custos recte loquendi* (the guardian of right speech).\(^{5}\)

The value of each of the square notes in the following example is determined by the value and function of its syllable and the position of that syllable in the structure of the phrase. Once again, note the perfect Roman arch formed by the melody of the phrase:
The earliest chants for the assembly were created with all this in mind. Some of the earliest examples are the Gloria XV and the Sanctus XVIII. The Gloria is nothing but a repetition of a psalm tone formula for each of the phrases:
The same techniques mentioned above for the lector should be used in singing this English language setting of that same chant. Chants in English should be designed to flow directly from good spoken English. The closer the music is to our native speech, the easier it will be for our assemblies to sing together confidently and prayerfully. If that singing is done in a resonant space, the voices of each individual will tend to blend into one sound. That sound will become the realization of the one voice of the body of Christ, the church.

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The Sanctus XVIII chant is actually an extended acclamation as the assembly’s response to the preface that has just been sung by the presider. It flows directly out of the melody used for the ending of the eucharistic preface:

If you know how to speak the language, then you know how to sing these chants! For this reason, the English language setting of the same Sanctus has been given added notes to the first syllable of the first two words in order to allow the proper stress for the accented first syllable and to avoid the danger of letting the accent slide to the last syllable:
In the final analysis, the most important element in the production of “voice-friendly” music is the use of a resonant space. Organ builders prefer such spaces. The baroque organ builder Arp Schnitger would go into the nave of the church in which he was to build his new organ and clap his hands and sing loudly in order to check the resonance of the space. When asked why he did this, he replied that the sound produced by the building would be the most important stop on his new organ! Choral directors know this very well. They prefer a resonant space for their choir. Many schools have invested in Wenger acoustical shells for use by their choirs when they go on tour. These acoustical shells focus and direct the sound to the listening audience. These modern devices function like the large seashell structures seen behind the pulpits of medieval churches. They produce the focus that the reflector does behind the tiny bulb in your flashlight. Orchestra directors have fought battles with building committees in order to get them to provide enough resonance in a new auditorium for the sake of their orchestra. The sound of a violin string will be only as good as the resonance of the violin casing that acts as its resonating chamber. It is no wonder, then, that a Stradivarius violin is such a valuable instrument!

In summary, the voices of the presider, the cantor, the choir, and the assembly itself have the function of being a part of a sound framework that is broad and inclusive of the entire space. All these voices are to be a part of something larger than the sound they are individually making, but this can happen only if there is sufficient resonance in the building. The sound should linger in the air for at least several seconds. Only then will all the individual sounds and voices blend into one rich and lively sound. No amount of high-tech sound equipment placed in a dry, dead acoustic space can accomplish this. Unfortunately, there are churches still being built or renovated with carpet on all or part of the floor, acoustical sound absorbing tile on the ceiling, and thick upholstery on the individual chairs and kneelers. The sound dies immediately, as in a recording studio.
The lector, the cantor, and the choir struggle to hear themselves, but they cannot. Their voices become harsh and strained. The assembly’s voice is thin and weak, for it is not amplified through microphones as are the other singers. Only when the liturgical space has adequate resonance will all the effort at developing good speaking habits and practicing great texts and rehearsing good music be effectively heard. It is just such a resonant sound that is a powerful image of the one voice of the body of Christ singing praise and thanks to our heavenly Father. Then we will indeed be able to hear our true selves—and so will God!

Notes

4. Translated from the Latin of the Praenotanda (preface) to the Liber Hymnarius (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1983), xvi.