

# Sacred Treasure



Joseph P. Swain

# Sacred Treasure

*Understanding Catholic Liturgical Music*

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It is good to give thanks to the LORD,  
to sing praise to your name, Most High.

Psalm 92:2

The musical tradition of the universal church is a treasure of  
inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art.

*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, article 112 (The Constitution on the  
Sacred Liturgy, Second Vatican Council, 1963)



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## Acknowledgments

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## Preface

*Sacred Treasure* attempts a theory for building authentic traditions of liturgical music for Roman Catholic parishes. It is an exercise in pragmatic music criticism. It explains the continuing turmoil and disappointment in the practice of liturgical music, both within the parish and throughout the world, that has obtained since the Second Vatican Council reformed the liturgy in 1963, and then, by providing a rational basis for evaluating the essential issues, it seeks to show how a spiritually wholesome stability might supplant the confusion.

And so the end is practical, with the modest hope of affecting the lives of real worshipers for the better, but the means are theoretical and abstract. *Sacred Treasure* is not a handbook. There is nothing about how to start and maintain a church choir, no prescription for what is best for a congregation to sing, but rather thinking about their respective liturgical roles and what each body might sing at Mass. There is no categorical ruling about whether it is good to use indigenous folk music in the parishes of New Orleans or Chile, but this book is rather about liturgical and musical principles that govern such decisions. There is no detailed history of Gregorian chant, classical polyphony, symphonic Masses, or popular styles, and no exhaustive survey of those repertoires, but instead analyses of their essences and reasoning about whether those essences may build liturgical traditions in the modern world or not. To be sure, many experiences from real life illustrate the abstractions, and certain arguments lead naturally to concrete applications, but primarily this book is a critique of liturgical and musical principles.

Of these, liturgical principles have had by far the greater say in the conversation since the council. The liturgical sources easily outnumber the musical in the bibliography at the end of this book. Music theorists, critics, and historians have contributed little, and their counsel has not been very much sought.<sup>1</sup> Whenever the matter of liturgical music arises, most often in parishes, but sometimes in episcopal

<sup>1</sup> As an example of the state of affairs, see M. Francis Mannion, "Forum: The Need for and Adequate Liturgical Musicology," *Worship* 64, no. 1 (January 1990): 78–81.

conferences or in the academy or in Vatican documents, the nature of the music, as music, almost never affects the discussion. Even a matter as fundamental as whether a type of music has meter or not and how that aspect may affect the setting of liturgical text is not touched. Now few would argue that liturgical considerations should not have priority in general, but it is quite another thing to behave as if the nature of music imposed no conditions whatsoever on what could be done in the liturgy. If *Sacred Treasure* has one original contribution to make, this is it: to show how the hard facts of music must be taken into account in any holistic conception and any lasting form of liturgical music.

Since understanding a problem's causes often leads to solutions, Part I of *Sacred Treasure* reviews the sources of liturgical reform regarding music and then the cultural pressures and circumstances after 1965 that allowed key aspects of those reforms to be either ignored or replaced by others less authentic. Part II analyzes the musical essences of the four principal traditions for Catholic liturgical music through history: plainchant, classical polyphony, the operatic or symphonic Mass, and popular styles. Of what use is any of these repertoires for modern liturgy? Finally, Part III treats the core issues running beneath the controversies of the last four decades—the sacredness of liturgical music, its beauty, the role of creativity within a tradition, liturgical seasons and language, inculturation, and *participatio actuosa*—in order to separate the wheat from the chaff, that is, to know the principles of liturgical music that are truly essential from those that are ephemeral, superficial, or simply false.

*Sacred Treasure* is written for anyone who cares about the music at Mass: bishops, pastors, liturgical ministers both lay and clerical, other parish leaders, and of course musicians, both those intimately involved with the church and those more distant scholars interested in Catholic liturgical music as an anthropological artifact. Because of the broad readership, I have tried hard to minimize jargon and to explain the basics of Catholic liturgy to nonliturgists and the elements of music to nonmusicians. Because bringing the hard facts of music into the discussion is a primary goal, some arguments are necessarily technical, but on the other hand, it is a sign of the infancy of this approach that the musical facts in question are so basic that no advanced musical training or theory is required to follow the arguments. Readers unfamiliar with musical notation may not appreciate every piece of evidence from the few printed scores, but the substance of the argu-

ments and their conclusions I hope will remain clear. In such an interdisciplinary subject, the writer cannot take what is known by the reader for granted as with a specialized monograph. I ask the patience of the musician readers while I outline the premises of Western harmony, and of the liturgical theologians if I reiterate too often what happens at a Catholic Mass. Finally, while I hope that all the arguments are supported with evidence and reason in rigorous form, *Sacred Treasure* is not a disinterested anthropological study; the point of view from the beginning is unapologetically Catholic, and I care very much not only about the questions raised but about getting the right answers, even if I may never be certain of them.

All biblical citations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition.

Some of these observations various journals have published previously, and I acknowledge with gratitude the kind permissions of the editors to reprint some paragraphs here. The sources are given in the chapter footnotes. The Colgate University Research Council advanced the completion of *Sacred Treasure* with a Senior Faculty Research Leave which allowed time off from teaching to write. For this I am very grateful. I also express my deep appreciation to Prof. Katherine Bergeron, Prof. Robert Kraynak, Prof. William Mahrt, Prof. Michael T. McLaughlin, Ms. Julie Saiki, Deacon Mark Shiner, Dr. Bernard F. Swain, Fr. Jerome F. Weber, Prof. James Wetzel, and others who helped me to write this book in ways large and small, including the good offices of the Liturgical Press. Finally, I acknowledge with inexpressible thanks the support of my wife and family.

Joseph P. Swain  
Hamilton, New York



Part I

# **The State of the Art**



## Liturgical Music Theory

Music is likewise given by God's generosity to mortals having rational souls in order to lead them to higher things.

St. Augustine, Epis. 161: *De origine animae hominis*

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

How surprisingly apt it seems, when contemplating, or better yet, experiencing, the state of Roman Catholic liturgical music today, to recall this epigrammatic opening to *A Tale of Two Cities*. Neither liturgist nor musician, a contemporary of John Henry Newman and the Anglican revival known as the Oxford Movement but not particularly religious, how succinctly Charles Dickens has captured the paradoxes of the state of the art “so far like the present period.”

“It was the best of times . . .” At no time in the two-thousand-year history of Christianity have so many Catholics taken such an active interest in the liturgy. Liturgical societies, multitudes of animated clerics and lay ministers of the Word, music, and Eucharist, liturgical documents and instructions, books, conferences, and controversies abound. Less than two centuries ago, the prospect would have been utterly unimaginable. Liturgy then was a rote execution, a tired automaton, a spiritual brushing of the teeth in most places. Only a few odd clerical scholars thought much about it. But those few prepared an intellectual wave eventually known as the liturgical movement that restored liturgy's ancient fascination and culminated in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (also known as the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), the

first solemn document promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in 1963.

The movement made sense and was long overdue. For most practicing Catholics, the most concrete, real, and active aspect of their religion in their own lives is the liturgy. This is how they most often meet God and fellow Catholics in a spiritual encounter. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* goes further: "For the Liturgy . . . is supremely effective in enabling the faithful to express in their lives and portray to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true church."<sup>1</sup> And further: "every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his body, which is the church, is a preeminently sacred action" (SC 7).<sup>2</sup> And because the church is composed most fundamentally of its people in union with God, the vitality of the liturgy determines the vitality of the institutional church, as is also freely admitted by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in perhaps its most frequently cited passage: "The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows" (SC 10). In this case, perhaps rare, the high-minded theory of the council is ratified by the actions of contemporary Catholics everywhere. "How was the liturgy there?" "How do they do it in . . ." are commonly asked of travelers. The conduct of the liturgy is no longer a routine affair to be taken for granted, as it was in most parishes as little as a half century ago. Rather it is something to lift one's spirit incomparably or to dismay profoundly, to respond to and have opinions about. Feelings may indeed run high because liturgy is central to the Catholic experience.

"How is the music?" There is no more significant shaper of contemporary liturgical experience than its music. No other liturgical aspect occasions more divisive controversy, feelings of inspiration, publications, spilled ink, appreciation, and outrage than does the music at Sunday Mass. Even the musically untutored react to liturgical music because it is natural for human beings to want to praise God. It is part of our design, how God made us.<sup>3</sup> Liturgical music fulfills that natural

<sup>1</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, trans. and ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), art. 2.

<sup>2</sup> The Latin *est actio sacra praeclenter* might be translated as "the preeminent sacred action."

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pars. 27–28.

desire in a way like no other. Strictly speaking, a valid Eucharist needs no music, only an ordained priest, the proper elements, and the proper words, but Catholicism, traditional and modern, has always regarded the “Low Mass,” entirely spoken, as liturgy’s poor cousin.<sup>4</sup> After all, why did God give us the ability to sing? Singing does not produce the next generation, grows no food, defends against no enemies, offers no shelter, and yet is found in every culture, every human society in the world. One answer, as attractive as it is unprovable, is that in song God gave humanity a miraculous kind of speech suitable for praising him as we were meant to do.<sup>5</sup> Certainly the religions of the world have concluded with virtual unanimity that the right way to talk to God is to chant. For Catholics, such unanimity becomes sacramental, as theologian Mary Collins describes: “Augustine in his treatise on the Gospel of John penned a line that would become the basis for later Scholastic sacramental theology: *accedit verbum ad elementum, et fit Sacramentum, etiam ipsum tanquam visibile verbum*. When the word of faith is joined with the Church’s gesture, the sacrament happens—a ‘visible word,’ as it were.”<sup>6</sup> Because it unites with sacred words, music, the sublimely invisible gesture, is the supreme liturgical art.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Jim Castelli and Joseph Gremillion, *The Emerging Parish: The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Life since Vatican II*, 129, report that “A major postconciliar change is the increased use of music in the Mass: 90 percent of Sunday Masses and 70 percent of Saturday Masses had some singing.” The sung Mass seems to have been the norm in the early church, too. Edward Foley reports that for many centuries there was no distinction between lector and cantor, which suggests that the readings were always chanted. See *Ritual Music: Studies in Liturgical Musicology* (Beltsville, MD: The Pastoral Press, 1995), 65–87. And Edward Schaefer contends that one of the most significant misrepresentations of postconciliar reform was the promotion of the “Low Mass,” without any music, to normative status. See *Catholic Music through the Ages: Balancing the Needs of a Worshipping Church* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2008), 147, 168.

<sup>5</sup> See also Joseph Gelineau, SJ, “The Role of Sacred Music,” in *The Church and the Liturgy*, trans. Theodore L. Westow (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1965), 59–60; and Foley, *Ritual Music*, 113–16, where he claims five affinities between the nature of music and the nature of God: historical, elusive presence, dynamic, relational, personal.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Collins, OSB, *Contemplative Participation: Sacrosanctum Concilium; Twenty-five Years Later* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 44.

<sup>7</sup> See also Philipp Harnoncourt, “Neue Aufgaben der katholischen Kirchenmusik (I),” in *Die Kirchenmusik und das II. Vatikanische Konzil*, ed. Philipp Harnoncourt (Graz, Austria: Verlag Styria, 1965), 54–55. “Die Kirchenmusik ist nicht ein schöner Rahmen, der irgenwie zum Gottesdienst passen muß, also ein Element des bloßen

And the omens for the health and surpassing beauty of music in the divine liturgy have never been better. The training of musicians in the Western world, both in number and in quality, is at its historical zenith. The production and distribution of both printed music and recordings to learn from have never been as economical, within the reach of the most modest parishes. And what music they make available! For centuries now the church has owned a repertory of masterworks that is by far the greatest of any institution, nation, people, or religion in the world. In the last two centuries scholars of music history have stripped off the accretions of dubious performance traditions and edited critical editions of these great works while gifted performers have committed them to recordings that should make their creators weep for joy. To this inexhaustible store have been added musical languages from other parts of the world to make the rich even richer.

“It was the worst of times . . .” On the other hand, this treasure may as well be locked up in heaven’s chest, as precious little of it is ever heard on earth. Much of what takes its place “does not bear too much thinking about” by seasoned professionals, an opinion hotly contested by the purveyors and composers of the latest.<sup>8</sup> Amidst the plenty of secular musicians, a famine of trained church organists has broken out in the land; liturgists argue about whether the piano or electronic keyboard can replace this once glorious instrument. In some sad places recorded music apes the department store. The voices of liturgical authority, the Catholic bishops, have not spoken with much practicality, certainly not unanimity, either within their national conferences or within their dioceses. Since they are not, with a few notable exceptions, trained musicians, they seek advice and that advice has conflicted. Musicians of questionable competencies bringing all kinds of music with them, liturgical experts, and other well-meaning people

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Schmuckes, das von außen zur in sich selbst schon vollkommenen Liturgie hinzutritt, sondern sie ist selbst *integrierendes Element* der Liturgie. Sie ist nicht nur Musik *zum* Gottesdienst, sondern *gottesdienstliche Musik*. Die Musik gehört so wesentlich zum Kult der Kirche, daß ein Gottesdienst ohne Gesang grundsätzlich als eine Schrumpfform bezeichnet werden muß.” (Church music is no pretty covering that somehow is made to fit the church service, a purely decorative element, which from outside impinges upon a liturgy already complete in itself, but rather it is in itself an *integrating element* of the liturgy. It is not music for worship but worship music. Music belongs so essentially to the religion of the church that a Mass without singing must basically be termed a dwarf.)

<sup>8</sup> Aidan Nichols, *Looking at the Liturgy: A Critical View of Its Contemporary Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 9.

have rushed in to fill the vacuum of episcopal guidance, while the professional church musician, the once proud *maestro di cappella*, has by and large been shown the door. The results of this paradoxical situation are in. At no time in the two-thousand-year history of the church has its liturgical music, taken in the aggregate, been so derided as it is today by those who know and love music best.

“It was the spring of hope . . . we had everything before us . . .” There was no derision in the mid-1960s, after *Sacrosanctum Concilium* unleashed waves of reform. Instead there was excitement and great anticipation over the prospects of a revitalized liturgical music, of the new options opened by the introduction of vernacular languages into the Roman Rite, of the resources of local musical styles, and above all of *participatio actuosa*, the insistence of the council on active lay participation in all aspects of the liturgy, in its music above all. And within a very few years, most of these in some form had been accomplished in most first-world parishes. For anyone familiar with the historically normal pace of any kind of change in the Catholic world, never mind in something as staid and hallowed as the Roman Rite, those years must have seemed a whirlwind. Things were happening very fast indeed.

“It was the winter of despair . . . we had nothing before us . . .” The euphoria did not last long. A rancorous fight broke out at the Fifth International Church Music Congress held in Chicago and Milwaukee in summer 1966 over issues of the nature of liturgy and liturgical freedom, elitism, and liturgical propriety and musical style. This event reflected similar controversies over other aspects of liturgy, in particular its texts, translations, and proper ministers.<sup>9</sup> It became painfully clear, especially in competing organizations and societies for liturgical music, that there was no common understanding of it.<sup>10</sup> Now for forty years and more bishops, pastors, musicians, and parishioners have groped and grappled with it, adopted and abandoned songs and styles with unprecedented frequency, embraced the musics of Africa,

<sup>9</sup> *Sacred Music and Liturgy Reform: Proceedings of the Fifth International Church Music Congress, Chicago-Milwaukee, August 21–28, 1966*, ed. Johannes Overath (Rome: Consociatio Internationalis Musicae Sacrae, 1969), 89–108. See accounts in Thomas Day, *Why Catholics Can't Sing* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 95–97; Anthony Ruff, OSB, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform: Treasures and Transformations* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2007), 363–64; and Schaefer, *Catholic Music through the Ages*, 149–50.

<sup>10</sup> Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform*, 361.

Asia, and Latin America, spurned plainchant and then reconsidered, abolished venerable institutions of traditional music only to establish similar ones elsewhere, and conferred, argued, and experimented. Much time and effort have been wasted chasing false musical and liturgical values. It is true that after a reform as significant as that of the Second Vatican Council, a certain number of failed experiments and dead ends is only to be expected, but there seems to be no end in sight, and certainly no greater understanding of the essentials of liturgical music that could begin to form a consensus about where all the reforms should be heading. And this ignorance is no mere academic matter: it debilitates the liturgy and its spiritual benefits, fragments and divides the church, and offers no clear way out of the morass.

“It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity . . .”

It was not for lack of ideas and principles such conflicts arose; rather, a surfeit of them, hopelessly unintegrated, existing in isolation from one another, or worse, in direct conflict and contradiction. Liturgical music should inspire people to holiness. Liturgical music should inspire people to sing. Liturgical music must evoke the presence of the Holy Spirit. Liturgical music is an exalted prayer to God. Liturgical music is a celebration of the community. Liturgical music must be simple. Liturgical music must be beautiful. Liturgical music should be the best we can create. Liturgical music should be an honest expression of the people. Liturgical music should not sound like music in the theater. Liturgical music should sound just like the music people hear in everyday life, so that the lessons of the liturgy play out during the week. Liturgical music should transcend this world altogether and put parishioners in mind of the infinite. Just consider:

Pastor: Two verses of the opening hymn should be enough for the procession.

Organist: But the third verse praises the Holy Spirit. Shouldn't we include the whole Trinity?

Liturgist: Actually, the choir should simply sing the entrance antiphon proper for the day.

Here are three principles, passing like ships in the night. The pastor assumes that the function of the music is to accompany a liturgical action, in this case, a procession. When the action stops, so does the music. The organist hears the hymn as amplified congregational prayer, and one does not stop mid-thought. The liturgist believes that

the music must carry the symbols and tradition of the liturgical season in a fashion solemn enough to prepare the congregation spiritually for the Eucharistic celebration to come. The situation today: almost any piece, any decision about liturgical music can be justified—or condemned—by some principle found somewhere.

“It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . .” Visitors from mainline Protestant churches are bemused when they see the results of these many principles in the conduct of a Catholic liturgy. “Please sing number . . .,” “The readings today concern . . .,” “Please kneel . . .,” “We will now bless . . .” Clearly, Catholics do not know what they are doing; they must be coached like schoolchildren at every juncture. In short, there is a great confusion about Catholic liturgical music.

That is why we need a theory of Catholic liturgical music: to replace ignorance with knowledge; to make sense of, to order, and to justify the vast variety in practice; to form rational criteria for judging the liturgical propriety of musics both new and old, including those beyond the Western experience; to provide standards for music and musical performance; to show how to develop lasting parochial traditions of liturgical music for future generations of worshipping Catholics; to lead from crisis to peace.

If these reasons are so compelling, why doesn't the church, after two millennia, already have some kind of theory or theology of music? First, the circumstances are now more urgent and more complex than they have ever been in times past. Abuses of liturgical music and arguments about them indeed parade through history almost from the beginning, but dealing with one dominant European musical language is vastly simpler than dealing with the multiplicity within Catholicism today. Second, for most of European history, except in the philosophical abstractions of St. Augustine, Boethius, and their medieval colleagues in the liberal arts, music in the real world did not attract the attention of theologians or church leaders, except when it got into trouble with the liturgy. Third, then as now the authorities who did from time to time pronounce upon the practicalities of liturgical music, chiefly popes and bishops, were not themselves trained musicians.<sup>11</sup> Their admonitions, encouragements, and guidelines were

<sup>11</sup> A rare exception was Phillippe de Vitry, Bishop of Meaux, France, and one of the leading lights in the compositional practice known as the *Ars Nova*, which, among other things, developed the system of rhythmic notation based on note shapes that has come down to us today.

expressed in terms they knew, necessarily quite general in tone, almost never with technical recommendations regarding composition or execution. Moreover, these documents address particular problems at discrete moments in history and make no attempt to coordinate musical ideals into a comprehensive theory. Again, there never seemed to be much of a need for one, until now.

## **How to Begin?**

The first job of a theory of liturgical music is to discern which principles are valid and central to the tradition, that is, among other things, those which have lasting value, are essentially true, and are not merely an idea that happens to resonate with the prevailing culture at a particular time and place.

The second job is to integrate those principles that are essential. Integration in theory means a kind of coordination, so that the values expressed in the principles support rather than compete with one another as much as possible. Often this means finding which principles take precedence, for not all can have the same value or weight. Just as civil rights of speech, assembly, and the practice of religion are not absolute but have priority one over another according to circumstance, so in liturgical music some principles will outrank others in analogous fashion. Ideally, a theory of liturgical music should coordinate all the various principles into a coherent structure, like a building made of ideas, or better, like the proverbial tree that grows and bends to changing winds without yielding its roots or essential integrity.

A theory should help to ensure that the musical events of a Roman Catholic liturgy are as good as they can be, or at least help to measure how good they are. This goodness has a number of dimensions: the quality of the compositions themselves, especially important at a time when so much new liturgical music appears every year; the judicious use of the historical repertory; performance; and the place of the music within the great sacred drama that is the liturgy. All these are essential. The greatest Mass movement of Palestrina will not make up for poor intonation in singing, nor for singing it in an inappropriate situation. But neither will the finest choir rescue a piece of schlock written by an earnest, amateur composer. We insist on all the excellences of liturgical music. A theory should help us to know where to look and to recognize them when we find them.

In the Western tradition of reasoning, theories grow chiefly from two sources: first principles, from which more specific principles and detailed applications are logically derived, and empirical data, from which they are inferred.

## The Data

The best empirical source for a theory of liturgical music is its history and historical traditions. “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” George Santayana’s aphorism has not been much heeded of late.<sup>12</sup> Some of the most widespread initiatives in congregational singing in the twentieth century, to take one example, repeated radical Protestant innovations made in the sixteenth, innovations which were quietly put aside in favor of more traditional practices by that century’s end. We might have avoided many of the fights over the right character and role of congregational singing had we only looked back.

Here the first postconciliar executors of reform made a mistake. Music in liturgy since the Second Vatican Council has by and large neglected or simply abandoned the historical repertory, the music called by the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* the “treasure of inestimable value” (SC 112).<sup>13</sup> It is true, as Thomas Day has documented, that music older than 1960, indeed almost anything Catholic older than 1960, was regarded with extreme suspicion in the years immediately following the council.<sup>14</sup> A very common kind of musical semantic of association was at work. Traditional kinds of Catholic liturgical music sounded, and still sound for the most part, “churchy,” because that is exactly where they were heard. All the talk of liturgical renewal seemed to rule out anything associated with the preconciliar church almost by definition. Therefore the hallowed musical traditions were worse than useless; they were weeds that choked the renewal of faith. A more mature conception of renewal in more recent years has calmed

<sup>12</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason; or, The Phases of Human Progress*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905), 284.

<sup>13</sup> There are exceptional places of course, such as the Boston Archdiocesan Choir School founded by Theodore Marier, that made significant recourse to the traditional repertory, adapting it to the reformed liturgy. We have much to learn from them.

<sup>14</sup> Day, *Why Catholics Can’t Sing*, chap. 5.

those suspicions somewhat, which is all to the good. We need our music history.

Indeed, the history of our liturgical traditions is like a great laboratory, a fund of empirical data from innumerable experiments. To this we can add the experiences of other religious traditions, for it so happens that the various religions have approached common problems, such as congregational singing, in similar ways. Roman Catholicism has deep roots in the Western tradition and European cultural history, and it would be foolish to pretend that its music is easily compared to other traditions, but it would be equally foolish to ignore what other religions from other parts of the world have experienced in their own sacred musics. Just as knowing a foreign language deepens the knowledge and appreciation of one's own, so might an honest appraisal of some of the world's ancient practices help us recover some of our own.

And recover them we must. Our history offers us the inestimable gift of the repertory, the greatest musical collection—as measured by its quality and by its diversity of genre, provenance, and complexity—in all the world. The church treats this repertory like the fearful steward treated his master's treasure: it is buried, doing no good for anyone. But if, once dug up, it is badly used by way of poor performances or liturgical practices, it may quickly reacquire the same reputation that buried it. The liturgical values of today are not the same as in 1950, as any revival of repertory must recognize. Like archeologists, we must brush away the detritus slowly and carefully, but unlike them, we must imagine contemporary settings for the artifacts, how and whether they are useful today.

Such cooler thinking has become more common in recent years than it was in the hothouse atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s. Of the many researches both liturgical and musical, three stand out. In his witty and incisive *Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste*, Thomas Day has described the cultural influences active in America mostly in the last half century that seem to have prevented Catholic congregational singing from taking off in the way it was dreamed of in 1965. It is significant that, although Day is an accomplished organist and holder of a doctorate in musicology from Columbia University, his most telling criticism is not about the music per se, but rather liturgical values and attitudes, in particular the rampant egoism that has infected so many liturgical ministers. And there is no mistaking his view that most recent liturgical music is of very poor quality, but how so? To cure this state of the art, we must know objectively the nature of the disease.

The second major contribution is Fr. Anthony Ruff's *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform: Treasures and Transformations*, a truly compendious summary of the historical tradition of Roman Catholic sacred music. Ruff wants to answer two fundamental questions: what is the meaning of the term "treasury of sacred music" of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and what place can this "treasury" hold in the reformed liturgy? (SC 112, 114, 121). To answer, he marshals intellectual, liturgical, and musical histories. These include brief statements on the nature of liturgy and musicological summaries of a few highpoints of the Catholic traditions in Europe, but also rather detailed surveys of essential developments: the musical interests of the liturgical movement, the Cecilian movement, the conflicts in the nineteenth-century revival of Gregorian chant, and the twentieth-century Lutheran revival. Then there is a survey of the most significant twentieth-century church documents, both official and unofficial, that treat liturgical music, beginning with Pope Pius X's *motu proprio* of 1903 (*Tra le Sollecitudini*) through the Snowbird Statement (1996). Ruff's answers to his questions are, in brief, that the treasury is not a repertory of musical works but is rather to be "understood as a dynamic tradition," a view that will find resonance here, and that masterworks of the past will be treasured "not for their own sake, but precisely because they correspond to the nature of the reformed liturgy in exemplary fashion."<sup>15</sup>

More recent is Edward Schaefer's *Catholic Music through the Ages*, another empirical study of the historical tradition of Catholic liturgical music. He infers from history three common principles of musical reform in liturgy, which may be encapsulated thus: liturgical music of the highest quality must own "long-established core values," which are best embodied in Gregorian chant.<sup>16</sup> But why? Without understanding the causes of this historical preference, without articulating the core values more abstractly, the ruthless logic of this principle would disown the musical riches of Gregorian chant's successors and of the non-Western world.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform*, 357, 609.

<sup>16</sup> Schaefer, *Catholic Music through the Ages*, 160–64.

<sup>17</sup> To be fair, Schaefer does cite certain musical characteristics as a reason for the special affinity of plainchant in the liturgy: "It is also precisely this distinctiveness that reinforces chant's position as the preeminent music for the liturgy. In as much as the liturgy is a most uncommon event, chant, that is, the music that is uniquely bound to the liturgy both musically and historically, is also the only music that can accentuate the exceptional place that the liturgy holds in the life of every Catholic by means of the exceptional commingling of musical characteristics that it enjoys."

So data there are in abundance, but they are nevertheless insufficient. Those theorists of theory known as philosophers of science have shown quite convincingly that even the most rigorously objective of disciplines never regard data uncritically, never observe phenomena without some background assumptions conditioning those observations.<sup>18</sup> In any empirical study there are significant data and irrelevant data. How are they distinguished? Here is where first principles come in.

## First Principle?

It would appear that a first principle, or guiding criterion, of any theory of liturgical music would be the liturgy itself. Citing a fragment of article 112 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*—"Therefore sacred music is to be considered the more holy, the more closely connected it is with the liturgical action . . ."—Anthony Ruff declares on the first page of his long study that "this strong statement reminds us that worship music is, above all, a part of the liturgy, and that the place of music in the liturgy can only be determined from the nature of the liturgy, not from the nature of the musical repertoires."<sup>19</sup> And so have thought virtually all liturgists who write about its music. This is a cardinal error.

To begin to see why, let us ask a simple question. How should psalm verses be sung at Mass? The traditional Roman Rite is full of psalm verses: at the very beginning, the introit (entrance) antiphon frames a psalm verse, as often do the offertory and communion antiphons; sometimes one appears as the versicle of the Gospel acclamation; and of course there is the responsorial psalm between the first and second readings, or its older forms of gradual and tract. The Greek word *psallein* is usually translated "to sing accompanied." There is no question that these texts should be sung.

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See *Catholic Music through the Ages*, 36. Nevertheless, without a stronger theoretical grounding, it is too much of a leap to claim that these musical characteristics make plainchant "the only music" that can do this. Why should distinctiveness in general, or even plainchant's particular distinctiveness, guarantee liturgical propriety?

<sup>18</sup> This train of thought was touched off by Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1st ed. 1962 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), but many others have followed, especially concerned to save his approach from relativism. See also Mary Hesse, *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974); Clark Glymour, *Theory and Evidence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); and Anthony Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform*, 1.

But there are many methods, sanctioned by both official instructions and historical practice. Psalm verses may be chanted to psalm tone formulas, that method alone accomplished in several ways, or chanted to elaborate, rhythmically subtle Gregorian melodies, chanted for minutes on end to energetic Gospel rhythms, sung like an opera aria, transformed into a congregational hymn paraphrasing the original text, or replaced entirely by a “another liturgical chant that is suited to the sacred action, the day, or the time of year” whose text has nothing to do with the psalm.<sup>20</sup> Each of these methods—and there are many more—has particular technical musical qualities that differentiate it from the others. If “the nature of the liturgy” is adequate as a first principle, then it should be capable of judging these differences “*only . . . from the nature of the liturgy,*” without recourse to the “nature of the musical repertoires,” and justifying the various psalm methods as to their relative propriety. For it is improbable in the extreme, with the musical differences so great, that all are “equally” suitable for the liturgy.

I have never read any synopsis of “the nature of the liturgy” that could begin to make this kind of judgment on its own terms. The fundamental purpose of liturgy according to the most fundamental document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, is “to celebrate the paschal mystery, reading those things ‘which were in all the scriptures concerning him,’ celebrating the Eucharist in which ‘the victory and triumph of his death are again made present,’ and at the same time ‘giving thanks to God for His unspeakable gift’ in Christ Jesus, ‘in praise of His glory’ through the power of the Holy Spirit” (SC 6). Anthony Ruff’s own formula, repeated several times in his book, is “the purpose of the liturgy itself is to enable the Christian community to respond to and participate in the saving work of God in Christ.”<sup>21</sup> Either of these pronouncements could be cited to justify, or even to disqualify, any of the methods for singing psalm verses at Mass.

A true first principle permits of wide application. And in fact, we can imagine “the nature of the liturgy” providing guiding criteria for the architecture of church buildings as many have claimed it should, in a manner analogous to Ruff’s contention for music, but not as a first principle. Were church buildings designed by liturgical principles *alone*, no one would dare enter them. Building materials, bricks and

<sup>20</sup> This last is the so-called “option four” of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, art. 48. See also chap. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform*, 10.

mortar, have their own natures to be reckoned with, and the notes and harmonies of music no less. The disappointing quality of liturgical music in most places these forty years largely comes from an inflexible top-down approach.

The “nature of the liturgy” fails as a classic first principle. We might have guessed this from the outset. The physicist’s “force,” the geometer’s “point,” and the ethicist’s “the good” are intrinsically simple, even called by some logicians “primitives.” Liturgy is intrinsically complex, a compound of many elements, including the music declared by the council to be “an integral part,” and far greater than the sum of all of them. But it is this very summation that resists the easy encapsulation, the fundamental, taken-for-granted essence of a first principle. This explains the widely divergent views of “the nature of the liturgy” that one finds in the recent scholarship,<sup>22</sup> and perhaps why Ruff chose to omit the important qualifying phrase from Article 112 as he began: “whether making prayer more pleasing, promoting unity of minds, or conferring greater solemnity upon the sacred rites.” Delight in prayer, unity of minds, and above all solemnity, after all, complicate a first principle quite a lot. The essential contribution of liturgy to the understanding of liturgical music is self-evident, but not as a first principle operating from the top down. A subtler conception of the relation between “the nature of the liturgy” and the building materials of music is in order.

## Feedback Relations

The relation between the Scriptures and Catholic dogmatic tradition offers a better model.<sup>23</sup> The Scriptures, as the revealed Word of God,

<sup>22</sup> Just compare, for example, Joseph Ratzinger’s concept—“The foundation of the liturgy, its source and support, is the historical Pasch of Jesus—his Cross and Resurrection”—in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 60, with Mark Francis’s—“Liturgy, as the public worship of the church, celebrates who we are and who we are called to be because of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ”—in *Shape the Circle Ever Wider* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000), 20.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin W. Irwin proposes that this model be the foundation for understanding the entire liturgy and its history: “We understand there to be an *ongoing dialectical relationship* between *text* and *context* where the ecclesial and cultural settings in which the liturgy takes place—*context*—influence the way we experience and interpret the liturgy—*text*. But just as *context* influences how the *text* of liturgy is

are the foundation and source for Catholic belief. But “the church does not draw its certainty about all revealed truths from the holy scriptures alone.” Instead, “tradition transmits in its entirety the word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the holy Spirit; it transmits it to the successors of the apostles.” Perhaps the most famous illustration of this relation is the doctrine of the Trinity. “Trinity” never appears in the Bible, but Catholics hold it to be an essential article of faith abstracted from the Bible. Then, as an essential article of faith, the traditional Trinity doctrine informs the rereading of the Bible, which in turn may give birth to new doctrinal abstractions, and so on. That “sacred tradition and sacred scripture . . . bound closely together . . . communicate one with the other”<sup>24</sup> is an example of what cognitive scientists often call a feedback relation, and it characterizes some of the most fundamental perceptions and cognitive behaviors of humanity.<sup>25</sup>

Such a conception of the relation between “the nature of the liturgy” and its music provides what has been missing from the discussion: the facts of music. For, like the building materials of the architect, the facts of music exist in the real world and can be very stubborn things. Reconciliation occurs when principles of liturgical music condition the selection of actual works, which in turn by their own natures reform the understanding of those principles.

A theory of liturgical music must be grounded in “musical truths,” or the perceptions of music shared by the members of a musical community. B-flat sounds higher than A; plainchant has no meter; a pair of four-bar phrases make an easily perceived structure; dissonances in traditional harmony are unstable and imply some kind of resolution. For musicians these statements are just as true as “a team’s inning has

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interpreted, the other side of the equation concerns how that data we call *text* necessarily influences the church’s theology, spirituality and life—*context*.” One might wonder whether, unlike the fixed Scriptures, this model is free of any absolute criterion of evaluations. See the entire second chapter of *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> All citations in this paragraph come from *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, trans. and ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), art. 9.

<sup>25</sup> The most striking real-time mechanisms occur in music perception and speech perception, where dozens of decisions about function and meaning occur each second. See Stephen HANDL, *Listening: An Introduction to the Perception of Auditory Events* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

three outs” and, like the latter statement, are susceptible to implication, inference, and deduction, just as in any rational discourse. Very little criticism of liturgical music, both recent and historical, has informed itself with this kind of discourse, which is the principal reason why discussions of what is good, bad, appropriate, and unsuitable degenerate so quickly into battles of taste. You like this, I like that, and there is nothing more to be said. Even as important an idea as Edward Schaefer’s, that the proper balance between the expressive and formative powers of liturgical music has been lost in most contemporary compositions, is a matter of personal opinion until it can be justified in the musical facts of those compositions. A good theory does not try to eliminate the elements of personal preference or good judgment, but it can show how to rise above the battle and get beyond the idiosyncratic to reach for a common good. To be that persuasive, it has to begin with evident truths, the technical facts of music.

Bringing in the hard truths of musical reality can begin to formulate, in dialogue with “the nature of the liturgy,” a synthesis of music in liturgy. How should psalm verses be sung at Mass? There are many methods, but when we begin with the liturgical proposition that it should be sung and then consider the musical exigencies for congregational performance—as in the modern responsorial psalm—and then the musical semantics that connote “prayer more pleasing” and “greater solemnity,” we see those many methods as more and less appropriate, better and worse, for the sacred liturgy. An informed music criticism, made in musical terms, is no enemy of “the nature of the liturgy,” but neither is it always subservient to it.

Anthony Ruff and his many colleagues may actually agree, despite his dictum on his opening page. Shortly thereafter he allows that “there are good theological reasons for embracing artistic beauty in worship music as part of its purpose of fostering artistic and cultural goods.”<sup>26</sup> This is precisely what is meant by a reality of music—its intrinsic and independent aesthetic value—impinging upon liturgy through theological reflection so that the understanding of “the nature of the liturgy” is changed, just as our understanding of Scripture may be changed through the reading glasses of tradition. The Catholic understanding of what a psalm is must be more than the words in the Scripture; it must embody music as well and may eventually include

<sup>26</sup> Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform*, 17.

texts outside the Psalter, antiphons and the concluding lesser doxology. The only way to maintain the absolute priority of “the nature of the liturgy” in the face of musical aesthetics is to claim that musical beauty is actually a liturgical value, but the incorporation of musical categories into the liturgical merely erases the distinction between the two realms, and in practical terms ends up with a feedback relation anyway.

## The Natures of Liturgy

This critique hardly implies that the concept of “the nature of the liturgy” is fictitious, irrelevant to our musical problems, or useless in theorizing. No, Ruff is most correct in his view that the liturgy provides fundamental criteria for judging its own music. It is only the strict top-down application of such criteria, and the exclusion of musical realities thereby, that has maintained the present confusion.

Confusion comes, in part, from the breadth of opinion among liturgical experts themselves, in their interpretations of what the Second Vatican Council meant. *Sacrosanctum Concilium’s* image of liturgy (quoted above) is a christocentric action. At the same time, the presence and assent of God’s people forms an essential part of this christocentric action. “The faithful indeed, by virtue of their royal priesthood, share in the offering of the Eucharist. . . . Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, the source and summit of the Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God and themselves along with him.”<sup>27</sup> Yves Congar, one of the most prominent theological minds behind the council, wrote shortly afterward in agreement that the liturgy is “the expression of a Church actively living, praising God and bringing about a holy communion with him.”<sup>28</sup> This image of the people of God bound up in Christ is the source of the renewal of their participation in the liturgy.

<sup>27</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, trans. and ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), arts. 10–11.

<sup>28</sup> Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, trans. by Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 428–29. Shortly before the council, Congar wrote, “Liturgy is first and foremost the means through which one penetrates into, and thus experiences, the paschal mystery.” *La foi et la théologie* (Paris: Desclée, 1962), 145–46, quoted in Irwin, *Context and Text*, 24.

In overreaction to the near exclusion of the laity from the liturgy in centuries past, liturgists in the decades following the council often seem to have missed this delicate balance and overshifted the weight of the liturgy's significance to the community's presence in the here and now.<sup>29</sup> To the nuts-and-bolts practicing musician this may seem to be rather an abstract, even arcane, issue, but the shift signifies a substantial and audible reorientation of the very purpose of music in the liturgy.<sup>30</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, perhaps the most significant contributor to liturgical music theory in the twentieth century,<sup>31</sup> explains why in his critique of this shift:

The primary subject of the liturgy is neither God nor Christ, but the "we" of the ones celebrating. And liturgy cannot of course have adoration as its primary content since according to the deistic understanding of God, there is no reason for it. There is just as little reason for it to be concerned with atonement, sacrifice, or the forgiveness of sin. Instead, the point for those celebrating is to secure community with each other and thereby escape the isolation into which modern existence forces them. The point is to communicate experiences of liberation, joy, and reconciliation; denounce what is harmful; and provide impulses for action. For this reason the community has to create its own liturgy and not just receive it from traditions that have become unintelligible; it portrays itself and celebrates itself.<sup>32</sup>

There is no question that the exclusive focus on the community of the moment and the concomitant rejection of liturgical traditions, indeed of the very notion of tradition itself, has depressed the state of liturgical music since the council up to the present. To have even a hope for liturgical integrity, a theory of Catholic liturgical music must assume the liturgy's multivalent nature as the council has written of it. It is a synthesis of great subtlety.

<sup>29</sup> See a review in M. Francis Mannion, "Liturgy and the Present Crisis of Culture," *Worship* 62, no. 2 (March 1988): 98–123.

<sup>30</sup> This is essentially the critique offered by Jonathan Gaspar and Romanus Cessario: contemporary musical styles "all conspire to push man toward the center of the liturgy." See "Worthy of the Temple," *Nova et Vetera* (English Edition) 3, no. 4 (2005): 679.

<sup>31</sup> In the opinion of M. Francis Mannion, *Masterworks of God: Essays in Liturgical Theory and Practice* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004), 177.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today*, trans. Martha M. Matesich (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 32.

Regardless of how one stands on such questions, the reference point of all students of liturgy and liturgical music is the Second Vatican Council and its foundational liturgical constitution, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. A theory of liturgical music begins there.