

# The Office of the Church Musician: A genuine Apostolate

JOHANNES OVERATH

The Church's Instruction on Sacred Music and the Sacred Liturgy of 3 September 1958, which has been announced as the subject of this paper, may fairly be regarded as a summary of all the ecclesiastical directions issued during the past two decades on the subject of *Musica sacra*. The 118 articles of this final document published during the pontificate of Pius XII contain concrete rules for practise ultimately derived from the two great encyclicals of Pius XII "Mediator Dei" on the sacred liturgy (1947) and "Musicae Sacrae Disciplina" (1955) on sacred music. Unfortunately, a whole series of lectures would be required in order to discuss these fundamental documents in detail.

Let us therefore concentrate our attention today upon the basic ideas of these ecclesiastical pronouncements, namely:

1. *the theological position of church music, and its theological dignity; and*
2. *the significance of liturgical and religious music in the Church's apostolate which flows from its theological position and dignity.*

## I

Church music, the church musician and the creation of church music all receive their lofty dignity from that eternal and unchangeable law which commands, in the words of the encyclical *Musicae Sacrae Disciplina*, "that man himself and all his actions should manifest and imitate, so far as possible, God's infinite perfection for the praise and glory of the Creator." (II)

The meaning of all creation is to imitate and glorify God.

That which is created – whether it belongs to the reign of pure matter, as the sea or the mountains; or to the realm of organic life, as the plant and animal; or to the sphere of spiritual things, as a work of art, a cultural epoch, a community, or the spiritual person itself – exists only in order to imitate and glorify God inasmuch as it fulfills the divine idea in its regard and simultaneously unfolds the fulness of values to which it is ordained. For all values – goodness, beauty, the mystery of life, the noble light of truth, and even the dignity of being as such, as opposed to nothingness – all these are rays which radiate from God's being, Who is all holiness. Whatever is good and beautiful, all that possesses a value, is a reflection of His eternal light and imitates God according to its own fashion.

All these values are not only like a dew falling from heaven but also an incense rising to God. For by this very token, to be a value is to be a glorification of God. Whatever is, praises God through that inner preciousness which marks it as having been drawn out of the indifferent...

Man alone can make a conscious response to God's endless glory. He must first of all respond to each value as a reflection of God with joy in that which has a value, with enthusiasm, respect, love; and above all he must adoringly love and lovingly adore God, Who is the fulness of all values. For this glorification of God

voiced in loving adoration represents quite a new dimension of glorification, a different degree of reality, as new as the personal being of the Subject being awakened and penetrated with lucid consciousness, and radically different from that of all impersonal being. The ultimate dignity of man consists precisely in that he can consciously adore and glorify God.<sup>1</sup>

Considered under this aspect, all art – but especially the art of religious music – deserves its high position and is justifiably called “God’s granddaughter.” This renders art fit to occupy an important place in the worship of God.

Accordingly, it necessarily follows that the Church is keenly aware of her co-responsibility for art, though she is not concerned with technical or merely aesthetic questions. But the Church un masks the so-called “art for art’s sake” point of view – which allows art to be practised for its own sake – as a degrading error, thus leading the artist away from that pseudo-freedom which refuses to recognise any moral or religious restraints upon artistic inspiration and indeed views such restraints as bonds which hamper artistic creation. Instead, the Church leads the artist toward that true freedom which is aware of man’s ultimate goal – of God, in Whose service art comes into its kingdom.

This is why the art of church music has always been considered an integral part of Christian worship, and has travelled a long path toward perfection throughout the centuries. Though the journey was sometimes slow and arduous, sacred music has gradually progressed to a high degree of perfection, “namely from the simple nobility of the Gregorian melodies to great and magnificent works of art, to which not only the human voice, but also the organ and other musical instruments add dignity, majesty and a prodigious richness.”

Thus *Musica sacra* is “a fiery tongue of the Holy Ghost.” In the language of music she still proclaims today the Word of God as a beacon for our footsteps, the law of God as the rule of our conduct, the very heavens of God as the goal of our earthly pilgrimage. Sacred music desires to lead to God: it is one of the magnets with which God desires to draw all things to Himself. Therefore *Musica sacra* can only be a language of love, which will be understood by all men, no matter what barriers, linguistic or otherwise, may separate them.

## II

The church musician serves the fulfillment of this exalted task. . . . In the ecclesiastical directives this service is correctly termed an *apostolate*.

All who use the art they possess to compose such musical compositions, to teach them or to perform them by singing or using musical instruments, undoubtedly exercise in many and various ways a true and genuine apostolate. They will receive from Christ the Lord the generous rewards and honours of apostles for the work they have done so faithfully. Consequently they should hold their work in high esteem, not only as artists and teachers of art, but also as ministers of Christ the Lord and His helpers in the work of the apostolate. (Musicae sacrae II)

*In the Church of Jesus Christ there are many types of apostolic activity.* But Christ Himself is wellspring and archetype of every kind of apostolate. Christ handed on His mission as the

1 D. VON HILDEBRAND, *Liturgy and Personality* (New York 1943) 11/13.

Apostle sent from the Father into the world. From the moment that this mission was handed on, there have been men called by God to this apostolic service, which desires nothing other than to cooperate in God's loving concern for men, which is ultimately the concern that God be glorified in all things. All Christians are called to share in this concern, and to continue Christ's apostolic work among all peoples and in every age. In virtue of the universal priesthood, the artist, the church musician and the choir member – each of whom has been incorporated into Christ through Baptism – is also called to perform those general acts of worship which are included in the vocation of every child of God. Regardless of the variety of activities in which the priesthood of the laity can be expressed, all of them participate in the threefold apostolic mission of the Saviour: in His preaching, His priesthood and His function as shepherd. Unless it shares in this threefold mission, the apostolate of church music can neither be correctly evaluated nor indeed exercised.

1.

As “servants of Christ and fellow-workers in His mission” both the creative and the practising church musician take part in *the preaching and teaching mission of Christ*. Musica sacra, too, is called to pass on to all peoples and all ages Jesus Christ as the eternal Word uttered by the Father into the world, to allow Jesus Christ to shine resplendent as the light of knowledge, and to allow Him to resound as the reflected splendour of God's glory in rhythm and sound. In this way, church musicians and choir singers proclaim *Christ* and *His message* with the resources of musical art. Because she is “nobilissima atque ingenua ars,” music of all the arts can do this most forcefully.

In the art of *liturgical* music God's Word experiences an expression which is capable of stirring and deeply affecting the whole man. It is God's Word and the Church's, sanctified through the faith and the love of the centuries. In the Kyrie, whose strains span the centuries separating the early days of the Church from our own, the church musician confesses his firm faith in Christ the Lord: Christos Kyrios. He is privileged to bear the angelic message of Bethlehem onward through the ages in the Gloria. The Credo of apostles and councils takes shape and form through his lips. To him is entrusted the Sanctus which Isaias had already heard in his visions. With the Benedictus he greets the Lord in words which, as the Saviour Himself said, the very stones would cry out, were the disciples to weary of them. And in the Agnus Dei he points, as did the Beloved Disciple, to HIM Who alone is able to take away the sins of the world. A great many similar examples could be cited out of the fulness of the Church's liturgy!

Furthermore, even *religious* music can serve the proclamation of the faith. the encyclical of 1955 specifically emphasises that also such music is to be held in honour

which is not primarily a part of the sacred liturgy, but which by its content and power greatly aids religion. This music is therefore rightly called religious music. The Church has possessed such music from the beginning and it has developed happily under the Church's auspices. As experience shows, it can exercise great and salutary force on the souls of the faithful, both when it is used in churches during non-liturgical services and ceremonies, or when it is used outside churches at various solemnities and celebrations. (Musicae sacrae II)

And as a matter of fact, performances of religious oratorios, Passion music, “spiritual concerts” and Hausmusik are of great pastoral significance. For instance, how many people today never hear a sermon on the Passion except when they listen to a Passion of J. S. BACH?

In this context, special emphasis must also be placed upon the *proclamatory function of the vernacular congregational hymn*.

The tunes of these hymns, which are often sung in the language of the people, are memorised with almost no effort or labour. The mind grasps the words and the music. They are frequently repeated and completely understood. Hence even boys and girls, learning these sacred hymns at a tender age, are greatly helped by them to know, appreciate and memorise the truths of the faith. Hence they also serve as a sort of catechism. These religious hymns bring pure and chaste joy to young people and adults during times of recreation. They give a kind of religious grandeur to their more solemn assemblies and gatherings. They bring pious joy, sweet consolation and spiritual progress to Christian families themselves. Hence these popular religious hymns (Volksgesänge) are of great help to the Catholic apostolate and should be carefully cultivated and promoted. (*Musicae sacrae* II) ... Those in charge of the religious instruction of boys and girls should not neglect the proper use of these effective aids. Those in charge of Catholic youth should make prudent use of them in the highly important work entrusted to them.

(*Musicae sacrae* III)

What St. Peter in his first Epistle (2/9 ff.) so enthusiastically testifies regarding the universal priesthood applies as well to the proclamatory mission of *liturgical and spiritual-religious music* in all of its primordial freshness and power: "You are . . . a chosen priesthood. You should proclaim his wondrous deeds, who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

## 2.

Because of its participation in the prayer and sacrifice of Christ, sacred music actually acquires a *priestly duty*. The more intimately it is connected with the altar, the greater the dignity and force of *Musica sacra*. As liturgical musical art it is, according to the Catholic conception, a part of the "public worship which our Redeemer as Head of the Church renders to the Father, as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its founder, and through Him to the heavenly Father" (*Mediator Dei*, 1947). Sacred music indeed enters more intimately into divine worship than many other liberal arts, such as architecture, painting and sculpture, since it has an important place in the actual performance of the sacred ceremonies and rites themselves. In the process, sacred music should enliven the liturgical prayers of the Christian community and render them more fervent.

The dignity and lofty purpose of sacred music consists in the fact that . . . it should make the liturgical prayers of the Christian community more alive and fervent so that every one can praise and beseech the Triune God more powerfully, more intently and more effectively. The power of sacred music increases the honour given to God by the Church in union with Christ, its Head. Sacred music likewise helps to increase the fruits which the faithful, moved by the sacred harmonies, derive from the sacred liturgy. These fruits, as daily experience and many ancient and modern literary sources show, manifest themselves in a life and conduct worthy of a Christian. St. Augustine, speaking of chants characterised 'by beautiful voice and most apt melody,' says: 'I feel that our souls are moved to the ardor of piety by the sacred words more piously and powerfully when these words are sung than

when they are not sung, and that all the affections of our soul in their variety have modes of their own in song and chant by which they are stirred up by an indescribable and secret sympathy'. (St. Augustine, Confessions 10/33 = MPL 32/799 ff.; *Musicae Sacrae* II)

On the basis of what has been said thus far, it is more than understandable that the encyclical of Pius XII and above all the Instruction of 3 September 1958 expound anew the artistic and liturgical *pre-eminence of Gregorian chant*. It is expressly ordered that the chant be most widely used in the performance of the sacred liturgical rites, and that it be performed properly, worthily and reverently. Finally, it is the Church's desire that the Gregorian chant remain closely connected to the Latin words of the sacred liturgy.

In order that singers and the Christian people may rightly understand the meaning of the liturgical words which are clothed in musical melodies, the encyclical recalls the ecclesiastical prescriptions which enjoin the explanation of the liturgical texts in sermons and catechetical instructions.

Although Gregorian chant receives high praise and commendation, special emphasis is placed upon polyphonic church music, which is not to be excluded from the rites of the Church. Ancient and modern polyphony arising out of the spirit of the liturgy is recommended. In addition to the organ, stringed instruments are capable of being admitted to liturgical use. The rich treasury of liturgical song should not only be preserved and protected against destruction but also against any diminution and deterioration.

The privileged position of church music within the sanctuary of the liturgy makes the church musician and the choir singer into an instrument of Christ: through Christ he offers up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God (1 Pet 1/6); he makes audible to his fellow men the "voice of Christ" as the glorification of the Father which echoes through the ages in the liturgy of the Church. Church musicians and choir members comply with the admonition of the martyr-bishop Ignatius of Antioch (Ephesians 4/2): "Take your pitch together from God, and sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father, that He may hear you!"

This is surely the distinctive characteristic of the liturgico-musical apostolate: to sing one's prayer and to pray one's song. Only he is capable of such an apostolate, who takes to heart the motto of St. Augustine: "Cantare amantis est – love breaks forth in song." The Saint is referring to that love for Christ which expresses itself in joy and emotion, in readiness and zeal; he means the state of being so "filled up" with Christ that one simply cannot remain silent and alone, but desires to – indeed, must! – overflow in song.

The prayerful character of *Musica sacra* demands of liturgical music and of the church musician the ultimate in authenticity: artistic ability plus religious conviction. A purely natural talent, be it musical, artistic or vocal, does not suffice to qualify us for this service of prayer. The pre-condition of this liturgico-musical apostolate is rather a living relationship with Christ.

This prayerful character of *musica sacra* plainly imposes a serious obligation upon the church musician – if the singing of our church choirs is not to sink to the level of a mere "music-making event" and the "*munus liturgicum*," the liturgical office, is not to become something lifeless.

Only he who prayerfully strives, in the spirit of the prophet Isaias, for the cleansing of his own heart and lips may dare to enter into the service of the singing and praying Christ, and to become an *instrumentum Christi*.

Finally, it is as instructress and moulder of the community that church music also shares in Christ's function as shepherd. Wherever a church musician or a church choir is conscious of the fact that his office is Christ's service, there will always be present a sense of commitment to the ecclesiastical community. Although a church choir is capable of *helping form a sense of community* in parish life even beyond the framework of the liturgy, it is nevertheless the liturgical community service which must take precedence, in the spirit of St. Paul: "In all wisdom teach and admonish one another by psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing in your hearts to God..." (Col 3/16).

The educational effects produced by church music in the entire musical life of the Western world would be difficult to overestimate. In terms of music history alone it would be a simple matter to prove the truth of JAKOB BURCKHARDT'S statement that cult or worship and religion are the pre-condition for every culture. And, one may add: of a healthy musical culture as well. In its educative and formative influences upon the musical life of the Western world, the cultic music of the Church of Jesus Christ represents a core element of Western culture.

And today, in an age of the increasingly menacing predominance of mechanical reproduction of music on radio and television, on records and on tape, a very special cultural task devolves upon church music precisely because it appears that church edifices are rapidly becoming the only places in which elementary singing and music making take place. Furthermore, church music is of great significance for the preservation of music in home and family, in schools as well as in the population at large. If man's artistico-spiritual capacities were to continue to recede, it would amount to destroying a portion of his own self-realisation.

The ecclesiastical guidelines refer in many places to the educational and formational significance of church music. The Holy Father POPE PIUS XII above all links his admonition to cultivate popular religious hymns with his hope for the "disappearance of worldly songs which because of the enervating quality of their melodies or the frequently voluptuous and lascivious words that go with them are a danger to Christians, especially the young, and their replacement by songs that give chaste and pure pleasure, that foster and increase faith and piety" (Musicae sacrae III). It would surely testify to imprudence, if such an effective aid to the apostolate were to be held in low esteem or indeed completely neglected.

May the noble intention of this encyclical be fulfilled: that all who are called and commissioned for the service of the church music apostolate may

carry on this glorious apostolate with new ardour and effort, generously, enthusiastically and strenuously. These renewed efforts will auspiciously bring it about, that this most noble art, which has been so greatly esteemed throughout the Church's history and which today has been brought to real heights of holiness and beauty, will be developed and continually perfected and that for its part, it may produce this auspicious effect: that with stronger faith, more flourishing hope and more ardent charity the children of the Church offer in their sacred edifices the praises due the Triune God, expressed in worthy forms and with melodious songs.

(Musicae sacrae IV)