Pro Musica Sacra 22 (2024), s. 63–72
https://doi.org/10.15633/pms.2205

Jacob Benda
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0668-3064
University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota USA
https://ror.org/05vfxvp80

Magnificat: an exploration of sacred music in the United States[1]

Esteemed colleagues, it is an honor and privilege to speak to you today about three things I am most passionate about: music, liturgy, and faith. In my capacity as a Music Professor and Director of Music, Liturgy and Sacred Arts at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota (USA), I am fortunate enough to have the opportunity to exercise these passions daily through teaching, performing, and assisting in the liturgical life at the University of St. Thomas. I want to extend my deep gratitude to the organizers of this conference for their marvelous work, and for the kind invitation to offer a few words regarding the dynamics of sacred music in the United States as it relates to education and worship.

In the United States there are approximately 50 colleges and universities that offer degree programs in sacred music; these institutions identify with faith traditions ranging from Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Evangelical, and Non-Denominational, to Jewish and African Consortium. The most popular and prestigious institutions that offer sacred music degree programs identify as non-denominational, and these include schools such as the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, Yale University in New Haven Connecticut, and Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey. There are only a handful of competitive Roman Catholic universities such as the Institute of Sacred Music at the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, and the University of Saint Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota where I currently work and teach. It is worth noting that the number of students enrolling in sacred music programs is decreasing, while the number of career opportunities

[1] Article presented at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Poland, 20.11.23.

in this field are increasing. I believe this decrease of enrollment stems from a lack of awareness of the vast opportunities available within the American "church music industry." The challenge moving forward is to convince classically trained musicians, especially pianists and organists, that they can be formed into marketable full-time, or part-time, church musicians across any denomination with proper instruction that stems from the Roman Catholic Mass.

As a practicing Roman Catholic and professor at a Catholic University, my natural expertise and interests align with the study and practice of Roman Rite worship music, therefore that will be the primary focus of this article. However, throughout my career I have had the privilege to serve as a professional musician within a wide array of faith traditions ranging from Presbyterian and Lutheran, to Episcopal and Methodist; these experiences were invaluable to me because they not only broadened my perspective of sacred music and fostered musical growth but affirmed my love and appreciation for the Roman Catholic liturgy. Since 2015 I have served as a music director, organist, and liturgist at several Roman Catholic parishes in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis/Saint Paul, Minnesota), and during this time I witnessed differences in liturgical expression between parishes located only a few miles away from one another, and at times within the same parish itself. The landscape of sacred music in the United States is broad and wide and cannot be neatly defined into a collective approach or style. Furthermore, the boundaries of Roman Catholic sacred music in America have been expanding further and further since the establishment of the liturgical reforms outlined by the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), and it was through this new sense of "freedom" that alternative styles of liturgical music emerged during the past 60 years. Interestingly, the state of Minnesota was at the center of this liturgical music revolution as composers associated with the University of St. Thomas, St. John's University, and St. Catherine's University composed a large portion of 'new' liturgical music. I am a native of Saint Cloud, Minnesota, and there are three things that you should know about the state of Minnesota: (1) it is located in the Midwestern region of the United States (on the Canadian border) (2) it is referred to as "the land of 10,000 lakes" even though there are actually 11,842 lakes throughout the state, (3) it is home to a group of composers (as previously mentioned) who revolutionized Roman Catholic worship music in the United States in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. These composers include Fr. Jan Michael Joncas ("On Eagles Wings"), Marty Haugen ("Eye Has Not Seen"), David Haas ("Blessed Are They"), Daniel Kantor ("Night of Silence"), and others. This folk-style form of sacred music became widely popular in America beginning in the 1970's as it embraced two key points of emphasis declared within *Sacrosanctum Concillium*: (1) "the full, active,

and conscious participation in the Mass"[2] and (2) allowing the celebration of the Mass in the vernacular language of the faithful. These composers sought to increase the participation of the faithful within the context of the Mass by abandoning the Latin language, utilizing the English language through poetry and scripture, and implementing musical idioms/instrumentations that were fashionable at the time in popular American music such as simplified chord structures, lyrical melodies, use of acoustic and electric guitars, drums, piano, rain stick, synthesizers, eclectic percussion, etc. Relatedly, many churches saw the abandonment of pipe organs and classically trained choirs altogether because organs and choirs were too reminiscent of the 'old way' linked with pre-Vatican II Gregorian Chant and 'traditional' church design. In addition to the musical reform following Vatican II, traditional architectural designs based on the 'Latin Cross' saw a complete overhaul as the celebration of the Mass *ad orientem* (toward the west/high altar) was replaced with *ad populum* (facing the people). This shift in the orientation of the Mass placed emphasis on the role of the congregation in worship, and therefore the high altar was replaced with a more common table that was re-located to the center of the church on an elevated platform with seating arranged on three sides much like a theater or auditorium. Beautifully crafted décor was replaced with minimalistic and abstract sacred artwork, and the exterior of Catholic churches became both simpler and brutalist in design to reflect the architectural styles of surrounding civic buildings such as banks, shopping malls and business offices. During the past ten years, however, there has been a noticeable reaction to the described post-Vatican II movement as the music of Joncas, Haugen, Haas, Kantor, and others is gradually disappearing from regular use (although one is hard-pressed to attend a funeral without hearing Joncas' "On Eagles Wings"), guitars are being replaced with the re-installation of pipe organs/electronic organs, choirs and cantors are replacing 'folk bands,' churches built during the post-Vatican II era are being redesigned so as to reflect the aesthetic of pre-Vatican II church design even though Mass is still largely celebrated *ad populum*, and the musical training of seminarians is leaning toward the practice of chant and polyphony.

As the proverbial pendulum continues to swing from one style of liturgical music to another in the United States, it is not uncommon to encounter a fusion of these approaches. For example, I served as the music director at a variety of Catholic Churches since 2015 and encountered nearly every possible style of Roman Rite Catholic worship music in America. The first position I held in Minnesota was at a large Catholic Church with modern architecture, a hardly

---

[2] Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4.12.1963, no. 14.

operating electronic organ, and theater style seating that surrounded the centered altar on three sides. The parish had a membership of over 4,500 families and a very difficult music ministry to manage because most musicians were not classically trained. There were over ten different vocal ensembles ranging from a small adult 'traditional' choir to a quasi-Christian 'rock band' called "SINGcerely His" that *performed* with drums (trap set), electric bass, electric guitar, and other pop instruments. Additionally, there was a large handbell choir, youth band, children's choir, and instrumental ensembles that comprised classically trained violinists and flutists. At times it was utter chaos because there were so many different musical styles being practiced within a single parish, and this chaos resulted in a lack of liturgical unity. After I left this parish, I was hired as the music director and liturgist at other churches in Minneapolis/St. Paul, and I noticed that the musical style/instrumentation at each respective parish gradually shifted from 'contemporary' to 'traditional.' The last position I held before being hired at the University of St. Thomas was as Director of Music and Liturgy at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Minneapolis. It was a privilege to serve at this parish because the acoustic was ideal due to the traditional architecture of the church, the musicians were classically trained, and they had a stellar choir that was trained in Gregorian Chant as well as more modern musical styles. I found this to be the ideal parish to work within because I was able to unify the liturgies with one style of music—a blended style that incorporated chant and hymnody, organ and piano, and additional instruments such as violin, cello and trumpet. Therefore, based on my experience in working with pastors and parishioners in several Roman Catholic churches, I have come to discover that the preferred style of Roman Catholic sacred music within the Mass is a blended style that fuses the old with the new—meeting in the middle, so to speak. My goal has always been to elevate the Mass and encourage the participation of the faithful with beautiful music, and this has been achieved by selecting the best of the best from a variety of musical genres. The greatest compliment I received from a priest came when I worked at a parish that preferred a contemporary approach to sacred music, and after being hired I slowly incorporated more traditional music and instrumentation within the liturgies; the priest said to me a few months after I began, "you have made our prayer more *beautiful, joyful, and real*." I will never forget his words because I believe they sum up the ultimate end of liturgical music—to support and elevate the celebration of the Mass, which itself is a transcendental reality full of joy, beauty, and power.

Whether a seasoned sacred music professional, or a new student being introduced to the art of Roman Rite sacred music for the first time, it is of the utmost importance to ask two questions on regular basis: "What is liturgy? What is the role of music within the liturgy?" Stepping back to answer these questions will provide

clarity for educators, students, and church musicians alike as it relates to the reason and purpose for corporate worship, and the role that music plays within the context of the sacred liturgy. We begin our pursuit of answering these questions by referencing three figures who demonstrated: (1) a proper disposition for the liturgy [Mary, the Mother of God], (2) an understanding of the liturgy [Pope Benedict XVI], (3) a recognition of the transcendental power of the liturgy [St. John Paul II]. Let us first look to Mary who modeled a proper disposition for worship in her *Magnificat*; a song of praise, humility, faith, hope and love:

> And Mary said: 'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
> and my spirit exults in God my saviour;
> because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid.
> Yes, from this day forward all generations will call me blessed,
> for the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name,
> and his mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear him.
> He has shown the power of his arm, he has routed the proud of heart.
> He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly.
> The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away.
> He has come to the help of Israel his servant, mindful of his mercy
> according to the promise he made to our ancestors-
> of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever' (Luke 1:46–55).[3]

Echoing Mary's Magnificat within his book, *The Theology of the Liturgy: The Sacramental Foundation for Christian Existence*, Pope Benedict XVI masterfully encapsulates the essence of the liturgy:

> What is liturgy? What happens during the liturgy? What kind of reality do we encounter here? In the 1920's the suggestion was made that we should understand the liturgy in terms of "play" (or "game"). The point of the analogy was that a game has its own rules, sets up its own world, which is in force from the start of play but then, of course, is suspended at the close of play. A further point of similarity was that play, though it has a meaning, does not have a purpose and that for this very reason there is something healing, even liberating, about it. Play takes us out of the world of daily goals and their pressures and into a sphere of free purpose and achievement, releasing us for a time from all the burdens of our daily world of work. Play is a kind of other world, an oasis of freedom, where for a moment we can let

[3] *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Doubleday 1999.

> life flow freely. We need such moments of retreat from the pressure of this way of thinking, but it is insufficient. It all depends on what we are playing. Everything we have said can be applied to any game, and the trouble is that serious commitment to the rules needed for playing the game soon develops its own burdens and leads to new kinds of purposefulness. Whether we look at modern sport or at chess championships or, indeed, at any game, we find that play, when it does not degenerate into mere fooling about, quickly turns from being another world, a counter-world or non-world, to being a bit of the normal world with its own laws.
>
> We should mention another aspect of this theory of play, something that brings us closer to the essence of the liturgy. Children's play seems in many ways a kind of anticipation of life, a rehearsal for later life, without its burdens and gravity. On this analogy, the liturgy would be a reminder that we are all children, or should be children, in relation to that true life toward which we yearn to go. Liturgy would be a kind of anticipation, a rehearsal, a prelude for the life to come, for eternal life, which St. Augustine describes, but contrast with life in this world, as a fabric woven, no longer of exigency and need, but of the freedom of generosity and gift. Seen thus, liturgy would be the rediscovery within us of true childhood, of openness to a greatness still to come, which is unfulfilled in adult life. Here, then, would be the concrete form of hope, which lives in advance the life to come, the only true life, which initiates us into authentic life—the life of freedom, of intimate union with God, of pure openness to our fellow man. Thus it would imprint on the seemingly real life of daily existence the mark of future freedom, break open the walls that confine us, and let the light of heaven shine down upon earth.[4]

While highlighting key elements of Mary's *Magnificat*, Pope Benedict XVI hints at a transcendent reality that is likened to a "kind of anticipation… for eternal life," and it is then St. John Paul II (our mutual friend as a Polish Pontificate and St. Thomas Aquinas Scholar) who brings an awareness to the transcendental power of beauty within his Letter to Artists in 1999:

> Beauty is a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence. It is an invitation to savor life and to dream of the future. That is why the beauty of created things can never full satisfy. It stirs that hidden nostalgia for God which a lover of beauty like Saint Augustine could express in incomparable terms:

[4] *Joseph Ratzinger Collected Works: Theology of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, 2014, pp. 5–6.

> "Late have I loved you, beauty sold and so new: late have I loved you!" Artists of the world, may your many different paths all lead to that infinite Ocean of beauty where wonder becomes awe, exhilaration, unspeakable joy.[5]

In his address to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church in 2002, he stated further: "The Church has always maintained that, in some way through all the expressions of art, the infinite beauty of God is reflected, and the human mind is almost naturally drawn towards Him."[6] Lastly, in his words to the International Youth Orchestra: "As with prayer, every artistic expression—especially music—lifts the soul beyond mere earthly existence; it allows us to face life and God who created it with humble devotion, open to the splendor of its truth." It is here that St. John Paul II is reiterating the point that music, and all art, should reach beyond itself toward our Creator.[7]

The first fruit of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) came with the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concillium* (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) by Pope Paul VI on 4 December 1963. Within this document we come to understand the sacred liturgy through the lens of the universal church:

> The liturgy (the Mass) is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows…The liturgy in its turn moves the faithful, filled with "the paschal sacraments," to be "one in holiness"; it prays that "they may hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by their faith"; the renewal in the Eucharist of the covenant between the Lord and man draws the faithful into the compelling love of Christ and sets them on fire. From the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, as from a font, grace is poured forth upon us; and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed as toward their end, is achieved in the most efficacious possible way.[8]

---

[5] John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, 4.04.1999, no. 16, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html.

[6] *Address of John Paul II to the Participants in the Plenary Assembly of The Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church*, 19.10.2002, no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20021019_pcchc.html.

[7] John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, 4.04.1999, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html.

[8] Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 10.

As Catholics, we profess and believe in the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist; during every Mass we are called to be present with Christ on Calvary where His Paschal sacrifice is continually offered for the salvation of souls. In the Mass He offers us Himself—we offer Him our very selves—and we are united into one as we receive the Body and Blood of Christ during the communion rite. This is a wondrous and glorious mystery!

The Mass is rich with meaning beyond our comprehension, and every liturgical action has a purpose that bestows grace. It is crucial for church musicians to seek understanding regarding these actions so that fitting music can be selected to accompany the liturgy. This is where I believe a general disconnect has existed within Catholic liturgical music in America during the past 60 years—pastors and music directors have been more concerned about what will draw people to Mass rather than focusing on what will draw people closer to God.

Sacred music educators should aim to form classically trained musicians into well-rounded liturgical musicians who can lead a congregation in song on the pipe organ, direct a liturgical choir, and function as a liturgist, because these three skillsets are often interwoven into a single full-time position. Additionally, students need to learn 'people skills' to interact effectively with priests, pastors, choir members, and congregation members; many musicians do not possess these skills because we are naturally introverted creatures who spend much of our time alone in a practice room. Lastly, it is vital to train all musicians within the context of the Roman Catholic Mass no matter the student's faith background. The reason for this approach stems from the reality that most Western Christian liturgies are in some way derived from the Roman Catholic Mass, and the skills needed to understand and perform the wide variety of musical styles practiced in the American Catholic Church can be useful within any Christian liturgy.

In conclusion, we are still trying to figure things out in America as it relates to the practice and education of sacred music. However, we are learning that the liturgy is the first 'teacher' of catechism, and that sacred music must be an instrument that draws the faithful to Christ.[9] Perhaps asking one final question will illuminate our paths moving forward so that God can be glorified, the faithful sanctified, and a transcendental reality realized in our worship: *are we magnifying the Lord?*

---

[9] *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the "Scholae Cantorum" of the Italian Association of Saint Cecilia*, 28.09.2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/september/documents/papa-francesco_20190928_scholae-cantorum.html.

Abstract

Magnificat: an exploration of sacred music in the United States

The landscape of sacred music in the United States is broad and wide and cannot be neatly defined into a collective approach or style. The boundaries of Roman Catholic sacred music in America have been expanding further and further since the establishment of the liturgical reforms outlined by the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), and it was through this new sense of "freedom" that alternative styles of liturgical music emerged during the past 60 years. Interestingly, the state of Minnesota was at the center of this liturgical music revolution as composers associated with the University of St. Thomas, St. John's University, and St. Catherine's University composed a large portion of 'new' liturgical music. This article explores the musical trends of the past 60 years in the United States, and offers suggestions regarding the practice and education of sacred music in America and beyond.

Keywords: Sacred Music; Roman Catholic Church; United States; Higher Education

References

Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the "Scholae Cantorum" of the Italian Association of Saint Cecilia, 28.09.2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/september/documents/papa-francesco_20190928_scholae-cantorum.html.

Address of John Paul II to the Participants in the Plenary Assembly of The Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, 19.10.2002, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20021019_pcchc.html.

John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, 4.04.1999, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html.

Joseph Ratzinger Collected Works: Theology of the Liturgy, Ignatius Press, 2014.

Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4.12.1963.

The New Jerusalem Bible, Doubleday 1999.

Jacob Benda, DMA – appointed in 2022 as the Director of Sacred Music, University Organist, and Organ Professor at the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA, Dr. Benda is a published author, editor, organ consultant, and has been featured as a solo recitalist and lecturer at universities, festivals, and cathedrals

thro-ughout the United States. Enthusiastic about new music, he has performed premieres by Pamela Decker, James Sclater, Gary Bachlund, James Callahan, and has championed the music of 20th century American composer Clarence Mader. His landmark commercial recording, Music at Midnight, A Tonal Palette, Organ Music by Clarence Mader, (Centaur Label, CRC 3361), was applauded by the American Record Guide as: "an important picture of American organ art in the 20th century… talented young American organist Jacob Benda performs with confident rhythmic stability and polished technical assurance." He earned his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Louisiana State University in 2015 under the mentorship of Professor Herndon Spillman, protégé of Maurice Duruflé. In 2018 he was appointed as the understudy for the world-premiere performance of The Seven Last Words and Triumph of Christ by Pamela Decker, and since then he has performed the piece throughout the United States to wide acclaim.