

In defence of Beauty

Robert Busiakiewicz, DoM, Cathedral of St James, Toronto (Reprinted by permission)

Why is there Church music, and not public Church mathematics each Sunday? Why music and not liturgical mime or congregational origami?

Music is part of our physiology. The heart circulates blood around our bodies in a rhythm. It is not a coincidence that the two extremes of heart-rate, 0 beats per minute and 200 beats per minute, are also the limits of almost all musical speeds, or tempo markings, throughout history. That we walk on two legs is an inescapable rhythmic feature of our lives. The gift of phonation, not even speech – just the ability to make a sound, is something we share as a primal faculty with our animal cousins. This gift is almost inseparable from music-making, as can be attested to by bathrooms and shower-rooms or aviaries across the globe. Rhythm and phonation in combination have followed us as a species long before Pythagoras, Archimedes, or the construction of the Pyramids. Now there is certainly mathematics on display each Sunday in the form of the Church roof or the arches above the windows, but the timeless transcendence and mysterious qualities of music separate it from language, sciences, and the visual arts. These flexible and infinitely diverse qualities lend themselves well to the useful purposes of liturgy, praise, scriptural reflection, and describing the indescribable; this is the habitual business of the Church.

Isn't Church music a dead or dying art; an irrelevant eccentricity now like the Vinyl LP or the printed encyclopedia?

We must acknowledge that North Americans spend more on strip clubs than they spend on theatre, opera, ballet, jazz, and classical music combined. In the words of W.H. Auden, if "a poet among physicists feels like a shabby curate among the bishops", just imagine how a church musician feels among a society of smart-phone addicts, investing as they do. Our secular culture engages itself in disposable music: can you tell me what was number one in the charts three years ago? In 1974

the Canadian-born novelist Saul Bellow wrote, "*The new era will soon produce people who are no longer attached to the past by any habit of mind. For them history will be nothing but strange, incomprehensible tales, there will be nothing in their time that was ever heard before.*" Now I'm not as cynical as all that. Choral Canada commissioned a national survey through a company called Hill Strategies Research in 2017. It reported that there are 28,000 choirs in Canada, with 17,500 of those being church choirs. 72% of the repertoire all choirs sing in this country is sacred music. They estimate that 3.5 million Canadians have sung in a choir in the past year. That is three times as many as have been participating in hockey matches (Oh, how irrelevant). The Anglican Church is also the largest commissioner of new compositions in the English speaking world. But truly transcendent art does not concern itself with surveys and percentages. Johann von Goethe wrote in 1830, "*I have never bothered to ask in what way I was useful in society as a whole. I contended myself with what I recognized as good or true.*" Should we be as lackadaisical as that? Of course not. The enduring nature of the church musician's craft is best alluded to by the great Russian academic and writer, Andrei Sinyavsky: "*The whole world is God's art. At the level of mere existence we can survive without art, but if we consciously do away with art, then being – in the sense of a universe full of mysteries, wonders, individuality, personality – will disappear. All that will remain is flatness. And then art to me is salt: in principle you can eat unsalted food and not die, but it is salt which gives life.*"

How do you distinguish between what you do on a Sunday from a concert of the same music on a Saturday night?

When concerts are given at St. James Cathedral they are preceded by a prayer. This is a reminder that what is being offered, in much the same way as the architecture, plaques, stained glass, lawns and linens, are

offered AMDG. AMDG is an acronym you find on many brass plates through the Cathedral. It stands for Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam, which is the Latin for "To the greater glory of God." Those four letters AMDG form the essential spirit of a faithful church musician's work and mentality. Richard Harries, a former bishop of Oxford claimed in 1993 that *"If I did not believe that God is the source and standard of all that I experience as beautiful, that God is beauty as much as truth and goodness, I would not be a believer at all."* Religion and beauty must not be seen as rivals. The pursuit of beauty for its own aesthetic sake, unrelated to other values, is not possible for the Christian. Musical excellence with a liturgical function can rest upon the truism that instruction doesn't always delight, but delight always instructs. At the more local level, choral services at St. James are not concerts because if they were, the individual pay of the musicians would have to increase four-fold. There is no applause and the motets are chosen as handmaids to the readings. No concert-giving institution in the world would be stupid enough to try to put on 5 free concerts every week. No concert-giving institution in the world would dedicate the energy and effort to perform on Christmas Day, New Years Day, Easter Sunday, Thanksgiving, and throughout the blazing and humid summer. The musicians know they are working for something far beyond showing off.

The music you offer at the Cathedral is not always beautiful, it can be harsh, don't you think that is off-putting?

C.S. Lewis wrote in 1961: *"If you tell me that something is a pleasure, I do not know whether it is more like revenge, or buttered toast, or success, or adoration, or relief from danger, or a good scratch. You have to say that art gives, not just pleasure, but the particular pleasure proper to it; and it is in defining this that all your real work will have to be done. We must never commit the error of trying to munch whipped cream as if it were venison."* I try to reflect upon the challenging nature of the parables, the confrontation of the gospels, jealousy, betrayal, murder, family feud, sea monsters, erotica, earthquakes, pescacide, unicorns,

lions, delightful legs, leery drunks, olfactory malfunction, culinary adventures, and gnashing teeth when considering what music we should offer alongside such biblical language. I am spurred on by the words of D.H. Lawrence at the dawn of the 20th Century: *"Nothing is wonderful unless it is dangerous. Dangerous to the status quo of the soul. And therefore to some degree detestable. It is still nice to eat candy, though one has eaten it every day for years. But the spiritual record of eating candy is a rather thin noise. We must set the whole tree trembling with a new access of life."*

Isn't there something elitist and detached about what you do? Why can't the music be more accessible for those of us who want to join in?

The most profoundly moving and motivating sermon I have ever heard in my life did not call upon me to do anything more than listen while it was being preached. In that I was sitting in a pew, not moving, and not engaging in a dialogue, I was not participating. In a sense it was elitist, because the highly qualified, well read and learned Ph.D. priest was speaking of matters that were beyond my experiences as a young man. In a sense it was detached, because it was a skilled didactic effort of persuasion. It was inaccessible in that it pointed to the verse, "No-one has ever seen God", and called us to change our lives in a way that seemed counter-intuitive. Clearly we can participate through listening, it is not passive. Cardinal Robert Sarah, the chief liturgist for the Vatican was giving a speech last Friday in Germany at a liturgical conference and said this, *"It is necessary to recognize that the serious, profound crisis that has affected the Church is due to the fact that its centre is no longer God and the adoration of God, but rather humanity and our alleged ability to 'do' something to keep ourselves busy during the liturgy."* The composer and historian Constant Lambert traces this phenomenon back to the 16th Century: *"Those who listened to a motet such as Vittoria's O Vos Omnes took part in it spiritually. By the 17th Century, music ceased to be a vital and spiritual experience and degenerated into a mere aural decoration."* The introduction to the 1985

All Saints Alive

10

Canadian Book of Alternative Services is clear in calling us back, however: *"the intimate relationship between liturgy and music transcends the merely decorative. Music is not brought into liturgy to enhance it but belongs by right."* When considered in this light, it is impossible to see liturgical music as being detached. We are lucky at St. James because we have resources to cater to diverse liturgical fashions of the age. Our 9:00am service music is entirely congregational. The 11:00am music is a 50/50 split, with hymns, mass movements, and acclamations sung by all. The 4:30pm Evensong is mostly sung on our behalf by the Cathedral Choir, though there is still hymnody and responsorial prose. 'Joining in' is more than possible at all three, just in different ways.

You say you are defending beauty, but is anyone really attacking it?

I think the threat against beauty exists in each of us. Saul Bellow puts it better than anyone in saying, *"We are waiting to hear from art what we do not hear from philosophy, social theory, and what we cannot hear from pure science. Out of the struggle has come an immense, painful longing for a broader, fuller, more coherent account of what we human beings are, who we are, and what this life is for. I don't really know whether art can exist without a certain degree of spiritual poise; we are in danger of losing our arts together with the quiet of soul that art demands."* It is this spiritual poise and the humility attached to it that I wish to promote. We rush hastily forward to do things with art instead of waiting, *"we give it too little chance to work on us. Thus increasingly we meet only ourselves. One of the chief operations of art is to remove our gaze from that mirrored face"*, wrote C.S. Lewis again.

The musicians themselves are part of the problem, in the words of Constant Lambert, *"The paintings of Da Vinci speak an international language, and so do lavatory drawings. We must beware lest in aiming at one we produce the other. It is fatally easy for the modern composer to rid themselves of parochialism not by intensifying their*

thought but by denuding it, and to reach universality through nullity."

What can we expect for the fate of Church music and its musicians in the future?

More open opportunities for female composers, organists, and conductors. The repression of these creative talents for centuries in western church music must be passionately corrected. We should anticipate a fierce debate extolling the virtues of live music when a growing percentage of underfunded churches are opting for cheap recorded music. I think that experimentation and risk taking in liturgical music continues at a steady pace – one reads in a given month of John Cage's silent 4,33 being offered at Choral Evensong as the anthem, of avant-garde composer Gabriel Jackson composing an Ave Regina Caelorum for choir and electric guitar being broadcast to millions, of Christmas Carols fit with foot stomping and birdsong, of improvisation, whistling, and tongue clicking. This healthy pushing of the envelope is what makes Anglican Church music so alive and refreshing. To carry on a tradition you must add something to the tradition, and this is certainly happening. Children must encounter church music at its finest. They do not encounter it at school and they encounter it less and less on Sundays as society becomes more and more secular. Church musicians must leave the chancel and the cloister and take their music to where the people are, particularly if that means singing and performing in unfamiliar territory. This will require creativity. We must be sceptical of the marinade of correctness and reject what Martin Amis calls *"the fat wet handshake and grinning dentures of bad art."* We must reacquaint ourselves with wonder and discipline, because excellence cannot be had without them. Lastly we must present one another with the gift of patience and humility. One last quotation from C.S. Lewis, *"The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you can not possibly find out."*