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Sacred Music vs. "Praise & Worship" – Does it Matter? (Pt. I)

BY PETER KWASNIEWSKI ON MARCH 31, 2016	CATHOLIC LIFE, LITURGY, MUSIC





Part I | Part II

Whenever the popes speak about sacred (i.e., liturgical) music, the very first quality they put forward is holiness or sanctity, which they describe as a certain worthiness of or suitability for the celebration of the sacred mysteries of Christ, and freedom from worldliness or even that which is suggestive of the secular domain.[1] This is why it is *especially* important that liturgical music both be *and seem to be* exclusively connected with and consecrated to the liturgy of the Church. If the musical style is borrowed from the outside world and brought into the temple, it profanes the liturgy and harms the spiritual progress of the people.

This also explains why Gregorian chant is held up as the supreme model and the normative music for the Roman Rite: it is a type of music that grew up together with the liturgy and exclusively in service to it, having no other realm or purpose.[2] When we hear chant, there is no ambiguity or ambivalence about what it is or what it is for; it breathes the spirit of the liturgy and cannot be mistaken for secular music in any way. Something quite similar is true about the pipe organ, which, after 1,000 years of nearly exclusive use in churches, is so completely bound up with the ecclesiastical sphere that its sound practically equates with "churchliness" in the ears of most people. *For the popes, these strong and deep associations are good and important.* It follows that music with a "double identity," music that involves teleological and tropological ambiguity, is problematic.

Applying Catholic criteria to Praise & Worship



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Recently, a friend sent me links to eight pieces for my consideration: four that he deemed objectionable and unacceptable for liturgical use (Toby Mac, "Me Without You"; "Days of Elijah"; Darrell Evans, "Trading My Sorrows"; "Lord of the Dance"), and four examples of "Praise & Worship" that he thought might be appropriate and acceptable for such use, or at least for paraliturgical functions such as Eucharistic adoration (Michael Card, "My Shepherd"; Matt Maher, "Lord, I Need You" and "Kyrie"; Hillsong, "Oceans").

To provide an audible backdrop for my subsequent critique, here are recordings of four of the songs just mentioned—one taken from the category of pieces said to be unacceptable, and three taken from the category of pieces put forward as compatible with liturgy or paraliturgy. Listen for at least a little while to each piece, to get a sense of its style.

Darrell Evans - Trading My Sorrows

Trading My Sorrows - Darrell Evans [lyrics]



Michael Card - My Shepherd

My Shepherd (Psalm 23)



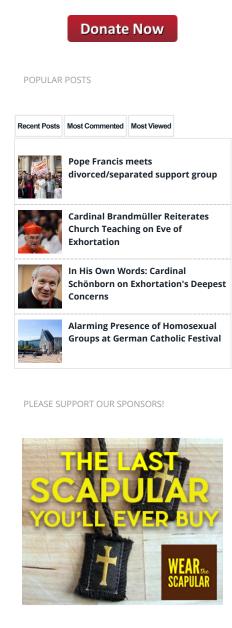
Matt Maher - Lord, I Need You

MATT MAHER - LORD, I NEED YOU (WYD:RIO)



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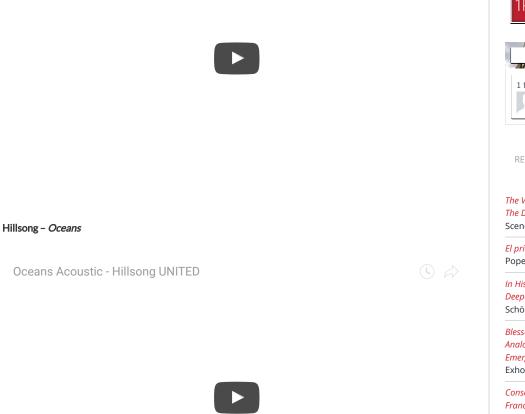
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Now, while there are unquestionably superficial differences between the first category and the second category (one is an unabashed copying of the rock ballad while the other examples are more restrained), in my judgment the latter pieces are not different *in kind* from the former, but only *in degree*.[3] The two categories compare to one another as "soft" and "hard" instances along the same spectrum. They are all religiously-themed pop songs. We can demonstrate this if we look at the three criteria enunciated by Pius X and expounded by Pius XII: **holiness or sanctity, goodness of form or artistic soundness, and universality** (which one might also think of as catholicity).[4]

Holiness

Sacred music is not to have any reminiscences of secular music, either in itself or in the manner in which it is performed. If, however, someone who did not understand English were to hear the foregoing songs, he could reasonably assume that they were secular love songs. Indeed, if one were to substitute lyrics about falling in love or world peace, they would not seem at all inconsistent with the music. (In contrast, think of the comparative absurdity of singing such lyrics to the music of a Gregorian chant, Palestrina's "Sicut cervus," a Bach chorale, or Duruflé's "Ubi caritas.") Moreover, the instrumental approach, with the use of strummed guitars and/or piano, strongly conveys the atmosphere of secular music, since these instruments originated in and are still associated with a variety of styles that have in common their *extra-ecclesiastical nature:* the Romantic concert-hall repertoire, jazz, early rock, and contemporary folk.

The *style* of popular Christian singing is one of its biggest problems. The voice slides from pitch to pitch, with the scooping and warbling that derive from jazz and pop styles. In its origins, this manner of singing was



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intended to be a more passionate, "realistic" style, as opposed to the highly trained and therefore "artificial" voices of operatic singers.[5] But it is no less opposed to the pure tone and lucid harmony aimed at in polyphonic ensembles and the tranquil unanimity aimed at in unison chanting, both of which symbolize the unity and catholicity of the Church.

Goodness of form

The songs have no artistic excellence in regard to the craft of composition: the melodies and harmonies are simplistic, the emotional range is cramped, and the target audience seems to be those of a limited intellectual scope—a sign of which is that a person who was already accustomed to the "great music of the Western tradition" of which Benedict XVI frequently speaks would find them trivial and unappealing.[6] They are lacking or weak in the qualities that are objectively most appropriate to the liturgy and therefore also to sacred music: grandeur, majesty, dignity, loftiness, transcendence.[7] Whatever function they may have, they do not *express or evoke* their divine subject or the human person's spiritual nature with appropriate musical means. The regular metrical beat and the predictable, uninspired melodies suggest a confinement to earthliness and the comfort of familiarity, as opposed to the free-floating word-based rhythms and the soaring, at times capricious, modal melodies of traditional chanting, which so well evoke the eternity, infinity, and 'strangeness' of the divine.

Universality

If St. Pius X is correct, music that has the first two features (holiness and artistic soundness) will have the third quality of universality—namely, it will in some way be accessible to all believers and recognized as appropriate for the liturgy. This is the trickiest quality of the three, because some cultures are so primitive or uneducated that initially they may not have "ears" to appreciate the sanctity and beauty of a certain type of music that other Catholics already take for granted as sacred.[8] On the other hand, Benedict XVI is of the opinion that the great music of the Western tradition has a universal power to move souls[9]; he is therefore also of the opinion that the greatest sacred music has an inherent power to speak to souls and convert them to Christ. Certainly we can see historically that Gregorian chant and polyphony were welcomed and taken up by peoples to whom European missionaries preached, leading to some amazing examples of inculturated but recognizably Catholic music, a blend of the European aesthetic with native colors and accents.[10]

A test for whether a style of music proposed for church is truly universal is to ask whether imposing it on a foreign country or people would be a kind of imperialism. With Gregorian chant, the answer is obviously no, because, like Latin, chant belongs to no single nation, people, period, or movement: it developed slowly from ancient times to more recent centuries, across the entire map where Christianity was planted; its composers are predominantly anonymous; it was taken up by the Latin-rite Church as the definitive musical clothing of her liturgy (which cannot be said even of polyphony, as praiseworthy as it is). In short, wherever the Latin liturgy traveled throughout the world, there too the Gregorian chant traveled, and it has never been perceived as anything other than "the voice of the Church at prayer."

In contrast, the *style* of Praise & Worship songs is obviously contemporary, American, and secular. If missionaries were to impose these songs on some indigenous tribe elsewhere in the world, it would be comparable to asking them to dress, eat, and talk like Americans. It is, in that sense, comparable to jeans, Coca-Cola, and iPhones.

But what about emotions?

I have heard it objected that St. Augustine considers affection of the heart so essential a component of prayer that if one's heart is not stirred, one is not truly praying—even if one has the right thoughts and the right intention. From this patristic point, my interlocutor extrapolated the conclusion that emotionally rousing music, such as one finds in Praise & Worship, is helpful for animating prayer, perhaps even necessary for some people or in some circumstances.

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Let us admit, for the sake of argument, that Augustine is right on this point—although no Father or Doctor of the Church can be assumed to be automatically right about everything.[11] Nevertheless, we cannot assume that *our* conception of what he is referring to as the affection of the heart is what *he* meant by it. Nor can we assume that Augustine would have approved of contemporary Christian music, given that he famously objected to what he considered to be the "sensuality" of Ambrosian liturgical chant, which is not particularly emotional. In the *Confessions* we see him struggling with whether or not music should have *any* role in liturgy, because of the danger that it may draw too much attention to itself or to its performer. He finally concludes that it can and should have a role, but only if it is extremely restrained. A beautiful singing of a psalm might lead to tears, but these are the tears of the spiritually sensitive. Augustine's "affection of the heart" is a gentle movement of the heart towards the divine and away from reliance on the senses and the appetites of the flesh. The words of a modern Byzantine commentator about icons can apply just as well to music for church, which ought to have an iconic function: "Icons lift our soul from the material to the spiritual realm, from a lower level of being, thought, and feeling, to a higher level."[12]

We have to be extremely careful how we conceive of the involvement of the emotions in worship. Except in rare cases, our emotions will always be engaged in some way, at some level. It is not really a question of an emotionless state versus an emotional state, but a question of whether that emotional state is (1) one of self-contained boredom, (2) an excitation and possibly an agitation of feeling, or (3) the quiet intensity of looking and listening for the truth above and beyond oneself. The first and the second differ in the degree of activity, but they do not differ in regard to whether there has been a genuine transcendence of oneself and one's worldly frame of reference.

The need for sobriety

A culture predisposed to think everyone should be "on a high" via athletics, drugs, sex, or rock concerts will likewise incline people (whether openly or implicitly) to think that prayer and worship should be the same way. One should feel "on a high"! Sacred music has never aimed at such an emotional high. In fact, it has conscientiously avoided it, to guard against the danger of fallen man becoming submerged in (and limited by) his feelings. As Dom Gregory Hügle, O.S.B., observes:

Divine Providence has arranged that liturgical music should be austere and unyielding to personal whims; the sentiments of profound reverence mingled with fear and love break the snares which Satan has laid for the church singer.[13]

Sacred music gently moves man's emotions in order to support and promote the intellectual activities of meditation and contemplation. This approach corresponds to the advice of the spiritual masters of all ages, who, while recognizing that emotion (or feeling or passion) has a legitimate value and place in human life, are cautious when it comes to fostering it or tapping into it for the ascent of the mind to God. Emotion is more likely to have a clouding or distracting effect than a clarifying or concentrating one; it can lead to an illusion of self-transcendence that is evanescent and disappointing.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that Flannery O'Connor considered sentimentality "an excess, a distortion of sentiment, usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence."[14] By presenting a "shortcut to lost innocence," sentimentality obscures the difficult path of asceticism that is the Christian way. In O'Connor's words:

We lost our innocence in the fall of our first parents, and our return to it is through the redemption which was brought about by Christ's death and by our slow participation in it. Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite. On this Fr. Uwe Michael Lang comments: "A timely antidote against the spiritual sentimentality of much present musical practice can be found in the earlier Christian tradition with its insistence on sobriety in liturgical music."

In Part II, Dr. Kwasniewski will take up further objections and difficulties, and respond to them.

NOTES

[1] Hence, the fathers of the Council of Trent frowned upon the use of secular melodies even when transformed into the style of sacred music, and why Pius X thundered against the influence of opera. It was not that the music was not good simply as far as the rules of music were concerned; it was that the music was obviously in celebration of the goods of this life—"wine, women, and song," one might say—and not the heavenly goods of the life to come.

[2] See my articles at OnePeterFive on Gregorian chant: Part 1; Part 2; Part 3

[3] One can see this in several ways—e.g., the chord sequences, the shape of the melody, the style of the singing, the ease with which percussion could be added.

[4] Pius X's *Tra le Sollecitudini* (1903) and Pius XII's *Musicae Sacrae* (1955) take up these points most explicitly, but there are numerous parallels in Pius XI, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, to name only the more important witnesses.

[5] The jazz or pop star way of singing has a seedier side, too, inasmuch as it can easily take on a sultry or trashy quality in the female voice and a streetlight serenade quality in the male voice. This problem is not just the result of poorly trained or untrained singers, but results from the very musical language itself.

[6] We should *not* assume, as a matter of course, that young people cannot be cultured or have a wide intellectual purview—that being primitive is an unavoidable condition of youth. It is a social and cultural *choice* we have made in creating the artifical post-World War II category of "the teenager." In reality, as Guardini asserts: "a fairly high degree of genuine learning and culture is necessary in the long run, in order to keep spiritual life healthy. By means of these two things spiritual life retains its energy, clearness, and catholicity. Culture preserves spiritual life from the unhealthy, eccentric, and one-sided elements with which it tends to get involved only too easily. ... [The Church] desires, as a rule, that spiritual life should be impregnated with the wholesome salt of genuine and lofty culture" (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane [New York: Sheed & Ward, 1935], ch. 1). The Church has an obligation to immerse her children into their (our) own heritage, from birth onwards. Failure to do so is a kind of high treason against the supernatural polity of the People of God.

[7] If someone were to object that the Holy Eucharist is a humble sacrament, given under the signs of simple bread and wine, and that humble music, décor, and ceremonial is more appropriate than something elaborate and rich, the response would be that this is never the way the Church has looked upon it: "If we must needs confess that no other work can be performed by the faithful so holy and divine as this tremendous mystery itself, wherein that life-giving Victim, by which we were reconciled to the Father, is daily immolated on the altar by priests, it is also sufficiently clear, that all industry and diligence is to be applied to this end, that it be performed with the greatest possible inward cleanness and purity of heart, and outward show of devotion and piety" (Council of Trent, Session XXII); "Like the woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany, *the Church has feared no 'extravagance,* 'devoting the best of her resources to expressing her wonder and adoration before the *unsurpassable gift of the Eucharist*... With this heightened sense of mystery, we understand how the faith of the Church in the mystery of the Eucharist has found historical expression not only in the demand for an interior disposition of devotion, but also *in outward forms* meant to evoke and emphasize the grandeur of the event being celebrated" (John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia,*

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§48–§49). See the catena of classic texts in Bishop Athanasius Schneider's "The Treasure of the Altar: The Ineffable Majesty of Holy Communion," available in English translation at the Rorate Caeli weblog. I would also suggest meditating on Raphael's famous painting, the *Disputa*, as an "icon" of how we should think about the glory and holiness of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

[8] Much of contemporary American society is as primitive in this regard as some of the pagans to whom the Gospel was first preached—which does not mean that *we* should change our standards, but that we have a lot of work to do in catechizing and forming the faithful and in preaching the Gospel through the fine arts. Regular exposure to the treasury of sacred music counts for a great deal, and, outside of fortunate circles, Catholics are certainly not getting that kind of exposure.

[9] We can see plenty of evidence for this in the immense enthusiasm with which the music of composers like Bach and Mozart was and is greeted around the globe, even in cultures very far removed from Europe.

[10] SAVAE (San Antonio Vocal Arts Ensemble) has done a great service in recording many programs of Catholic music from Central America that display this marvelous confluence; Chanticleer has done the same with some of the music of the Spanish in California. There is, in fact, a great wealth of properly inculturated sacred music that is nevertheless strongly characterized by the qualities the Popes insist on.

[11] After all, some opinions in St. Augustine's works, abstracted from other mitigating contexts, became the germs of Lutheran, Calvinist, and Jansenist heresies; even the Church's Common Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, was a material heretic regarding the Immaculate Conception.

[12] See Constantine Cavarnos, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine & Modern Greek Studies, 1993), 241–45. See also the wonderful little book *Reflections on the Spirituality of Gregorian Chant* by Dom Jacques Hourlier, trans. Dom Gregory Casprini and Robert Edmonson (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 1995).

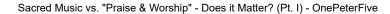
[13] The Caecilia, vol. 61, n. 1 (January 1934), 36.

[14] Uwe Michael Lang, *Signs of the Holy One: Liturgy, Ritual, and Expression of the Sacred* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 144.



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Peter Kwasniewski

Dr. Peter Kwasniewski is a founding faculty member at Wyoming Catholic College in Lander, Wyoming, where he also directs the Choir and Schola. He has published several books, including Resurgent in the Midst of Crisis, and over 500 articles in print and online.

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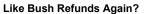


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disqus_Qmc7pDyHTI · 6 days ago

"[T]he target audience seems to be those of a limited intellectual scope"

This seems to be a feature, not a bug...the thinking being the only way to achieve "full and active participation" is to appeal to the lowest common denominator...it's easier than teaching Catholics in the pews learn to sing more challenging music...it's almost like these folks think giving God our best is somehow being elitist.

4 A V · Reply · Share >

monscarmeli A disqus_Qmc7pDyHTI • 5 days ago

But even far greater "teaching Catholics...to sing more challenging music", the truest purpose of sacred music is to lift the mind and heart unto the contemplation of God and Heavenly things. Ultimately, those who force this "popular" drivel on us simply have no true understanding of just what the Mass is and why we are there - they think it's enough to just "feel good" when it's over

1 A V · Reply · Share >

ProfKwasniewski · 6 days ago

[A reader sent me the following email, and I thought its insights were definitely worth sharing here.--PAK1

1. The importation of Pentecostal praise band style music into Catholic worship dilutes Catholic identity, especially when combined with a casual minimalist style of celebration. The general atmosphere becomes quite similar to what's on offer in a big box Evangelical megachurch. It's no accident that about 25% of Evangelical megachurch members were raised Catholic.

2. The dilution of Catholic identity encourages loss of faith in the Real Presence. Once that dribbles away, the Mass loses its center and generic Christianity seems not that different.

3. A huge scary dark chasm has opened up between official Catholic doctrine - what we read in the Catechism — and actual Catholic worship in most parishes. Pop music plays a major role in widening this chasm. The inane words often contradict or dilute actual Catholic teaching.

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4. For serious and well-formed Catholics, pop music seems like an insult to the Real Presence. Since singing this drivel makes one party to insulting Our Lord, the incentive is to absent oneself from the Mass or (if possible) decamp to an EF parish. We're seeing a separation within the Church, where people cluster in the parishes which suit their own preconceived notions, sort of

see more

3 A V • Reply • Share >



Jude • 6 days ago

So now everyone needs to find the Gather hymnal parody that is on YouTube. It is called "Scatter Us Out." Share with the kiddos. "Gather us in, the blitzed and hungover. Gather us in, in tube tops and skorts. Call to us now, and we might awaken. Then we'll leave early, cause Sunday's for sports."

2 A V · Reply · Share >

monscarmeli • 5 days ago

Thank you again, Professor - the insight on sentimentality as "an excess, a distortion of sentiment, usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence." This insight hit me like a ton 'o bricks: THIS explains how crowds of otherwise-"nice" people can come out of Mass feeling all giddy and goose-bumpy over the "awesome" pop-"music", as thought they've had some transcendent spiritual experience -- but then still never set foot in the confessional..... $1 < | \sim \cdot \text{Reply} \cdot \text{Share} >$



Michael • 6 days ago

I LOATHE the song "Trading My Sorrows." If I ever hear it at Mass, I will leave immediately. The first time I heard it was at a protestant church that I attended with my family in the late 90's. It brings back memories of horrid theology propagated by hateful, judgmental, hypocritical people. This experience led me to leave Christianity completely when I was in high school. By the grace of God, I became Catholic when I was 20 and it has been my life ever since.

I DID NOT JOIN CHRIST'S CHURCH ONLY TO SEE IT POLLUTED WITH THE FILTH WHICH I LEFT BEHIND ME WITH THE SUPPOSED INTENTION OF BEING MORE "WELCOMING" FOR PEOPLE LIKE ME.

Catholicism is true. For people who are sincere, that's enough. People shouldn't try to make it "cool," because it isn't. That's just fine though, because it isn't supposed to be. By its very nature, it is at odds with the world. People look like fools whenever they try to make Catholicism "cool." It is beautiful and true- those things, which are eternal things, are worth pursuing. Swallowing live goldfish was "cool" once too. If truth isn't enough for people, then maybe they should go somewhere else until it is.

1 ~ V • Reply • Share >

@FMShyanguya · 5 days ago

YouTube: (Scottish Psalter) The Lord's My Shepherd I'll Not Want | Scottish Festival Singers

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Tamsin · 6 days ago

Thank you for the Flannery O'Connor quote on "our slow participation" in Christ's redemptive action.

The point of this article was brought home to me forcefully when my husband and I took our teen son to see the musical *Spamalot* at his high school on a Saturday night. After listening to the Lady of the Lake belt out the song "Find Your Grail", I did not dare take my son to next morning's

for uplift as we put on a show together before going our separate ways.

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