

## Issue Two: Tradition

# Creativity and Tradition: A Framework for Sacred Music

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### I. Introduction

In *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, Henri de Lubac speaks of the *catholicity*, or universality, of the Church as being primarily a spiritual reality. With a reference to Blaise Pascal's image of human nature as a "strange and fitful" musical instrument, de Lubac points out that not only does the Church call members from every nation on earth, but she calls *each person* by possessing a certain mastery of human nature and knowledge of the human soul:

The Church in each individual calls on the whole man, embracing him as he is in his whole nature. "People think that you can play on a man as you play on an organ. An organ he is in truth, but a strange and fitful one. He who can play only on an ordinary organ will produce no chords from this one." But the Church can play on this organ because, like Christ, she "knows what is in man," because there is an intimate relationship between the dogma to which she adheres in all its mystery and human nature, infinitely mysterious in its turn. Now by the very fact that she goes to the very foundation of man the Church attains to all men and can "play her chords" upon them. Because she is eager to draw them all together she is fitted to do so.<sup>[1]</sup>

This proposed intimacy between the dogma of the Church and the mystery of human nature is a helpful framework for discussing the relationship between the Tradition of the Church and artistic endeavor in the realm of sacred music. Following the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the need for cultivating sacred music in the vernacular language of churches emphasized the role that local culture—an expression of corporate and individual human identity—plays in the composition and practice of sacred music. This development, along with a new understanding of the engagement of the Church with the modern world, has in some places caused a fractured understanding of the relationship of local traditions to the great Tradition, and the local community to the universal Body of Christ.

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In the realm of sacred music, this fractured understanding is commonly expressed as a resentment towards a perceived inflexibility in the Tradition, the rules and boundaries of which have prevented

local cultures—and individual artists—from being true to themselves. The pride of place given to the musical patrimony of the Roman Rite—namely, the repertoire of Gregorian chant—has often been seen as an obstacle to genuine creativity because it obscures the musical identity of the local community. In order for the sacred musician of today to move forward in his work for the Church, an authentic understanding of the relationship between creativity and Tradition must be restored. This understanding must be one that respects, reverences, and receives life from the mysterious embrace of the universal Tradition of the Church and the local customs of particular communities and cultures. In this embrace, human nature, both in the individual person and in the group, is not effaced or obliterated, but enlivened and magnified by the presence of Christ in His Church.

The creativity of a sacred musician is rooted in a style that is both particular to a community and to his person. The creative process for this musician involves a purgative alignment of the personal attributes of his art with the Apostolic Tradition, and with the liturgical tradition of the Rite in which he participates. In order to more deeply understand the creativity that results from this embrace between Tradition and the person of the musician, we will examine three pieces of sacred music that embody an admirable unity between the style of a particular composer and the dogmatic and liturgical Tradition of the Church.

## II. Examples of Authentic Creativity in Sacred Music

### A. The Introit from Mozart's *Requiem* in d minor, K626

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart had a tumultuous church music career. He moved in and out of *Kapellmeister* positions, and he had a harsh relationship with Archbishop Hieronmyus Colloredo of Salzburg, who imposed strict regulations on music used in the liturgy throughout the city. Nonetheless, Mozart enjoyed the opportunity to compose in the forms offered by the genre of liturgical music. These would include many settings of the Mass Ordinary, as well as his famous setting of the *Requiem* Mass.[2] Mozart was enthusiastic about treating the texts of the *Requiem* Mass in a “pathetic style,” a style characterized by the expression of dark emotions.[3]

The “Introit” of the *Requiem* is iconic of Mozart’s compositional power. It begins with a plodding staccato instrumental introduction, full of dark color and *pathos*, and develops into a contrapuntal choral statement of the antiphon text: “Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis.” This music is so emblematic of Mozart that it might be surprising to learn that much of the musical material of the Introit is borrowed from Georg Friedrich Handel. Mozart drew heavily on the opening chorus of Handel’s *Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline*, HWV 264 (1737) for his Introit; both the instrumental introduction and the setting of a chorale melody (“Wenn mein Stündlein vorhanden ist”) in Handel’s opening chorus show a striking similarity to the corresponding elements of Mozart’s Introit.

For the psalm verse of the *Requiem* Introit—“Te decet hymnus Deus in Sion, et tibi reddetur votum in Jerusalem”—Mozart reaches even further back into musical history for his material. The soprano soloist “intones” this psalm text on a metricized setting of the *tonus peregrinus*, also known as the “wandering tone.” The *tonus peregrinus* dates to the ninth century and was used for the chanting of psalms during the Liturgy of the Hours. Following the psalm verse, the chorus restates the melody and text of the antiphon. Mozart not only uses a chant melody for the psalm text in the internal section of the Introit, but he frames the movement with the typical liturgical format of a Gregorian Introit: antiphon—psalm verse—antiphon.

Rather than producing completely new musical material for the first movement of his *Requiem*, Mozart

relies on techniques used by other great composers as well as the musical forms offered by the liturgical tradition of the Roman Rite. The result of his compositional process, however, is not simply an amalgamation of historical influences, but an authentically inspired work that bears the unmistakable mark of the craft of Mozart. That the *Requiem* in d is still celebrated and used at Catholic Masses today is a testament to its truly creative unity of tradition and artistic style.

### B. *Advent Antiphon* by James MacMillan

Sir James MacMillan is a notable Scottish Catholic composer who is well-known for both his secular and sacred compositions. While his own style of composition possesses many modern characteristics, in describing his own philosophy of composition, MacMillan affirms the essential place that tradition holds in his work:

The “modernist” zeal of the post-World War II generation of composers who attempted to eschew any continuation of tradition is anathema to me. I respect tradition in many forms, whether cultural, political or historical, and in keeping up a continuous, delicate scrutiny of old forms, ancient traditions, enduring beliefs and lasting values one is strengthened in one’s constant, restless search for new avenues of expression. The existence of the influence of the old alongside the experiments of the new should not appear incongruous.

The composer’s own use of contrapuntal and polyphonic techniques in his sacred choral works reflects his reverence for musical history and tradition. Within the scope of his sacred compositions, MacMillan is particularly interested in composing music for both amateur and specialist; music that will encourage a congregation to an active, sung participation in the liturgy, but will also utilize the refined technique of the professional musician. One particular work of his, *Advent Antiphon*, is an excellent example of a piece that is geared toward both the amateur and the professional singer. It is also an example of a piece that at once reveres the musical tradition of the Church and incorporates local cultural elements that are integral to the music of MacMillan’s own background.

*Advent Antiphon* is composed for both congregation and soloist. It comprises a simple melodic setting of the four Sunday entrance antiphons for the season of Advent. There are a few levels of creativity at work in this piece that integrate both the tradition of the Roman Rite and MacMillan’s Scottish heritage. First, MacMillan sets the congregational antiphon in English, making it immediately comprehensible and linguistically accessible to an English-speaking congregation, while he sets the text of the psalm verse in Latin, the universal language of the Roman Rite. The melody for the psalm verse and doxology is more complex, requiring a soloist to execute intricate ornamentation in several places. As in much of MacMillan’s composition, the ornamentation of this melody hearkens to Scottish folk song, an integration of his own cultural background into the liturgical chant of the Roman Rite. Finally, though *Advent Antiphon* follows a plan of the congregation alternating with the soloist, the overall structure of the piece is based on the format of a Gregorian Introit: antiphon—psalm verse—antiphon—doxology—antiphon.

In *Advent Antiphon*, MacMillan succeeds not only in combining elements of the Roman chant tradition with the influences of his cultural background, but he also accomplishes one of the goals established by *Musicam Sacram*, the Instruction on Music in the Liturgy from Vatican II: he provides a setting of a proper antiphon that can be sung by the congregation. This is a significant innovation in the liturgical music repertoire, and MacMillan accomplishes it in a legitimately creative way.

### C. The *Missa Luba*

The last example of musical creativity we will consider is the *Missa Luba*, a Mass setting composed by Father Guido Haazen in 1958 for his choir, *Les Troubadours du Roi Baudouin*, at a Catholic mission in the town of Kamina in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Recognizing a deep love for music in his students at the mission school, Father Haazen founded *Les Troubadours* and taught this choir of men and boys the classic sacred music of the Western tradition, including Palestrina, Bach, and Lassus. Finding the native Congolese music beautiful, Father Haazen worked with the choir to compose a Mass setting in their native musical style. The resulting Mass—which involves a great deal of improvisation on the parts of both soloist and choir—is a setting that incorporates the melodies of various African folk songs as well as indigenous percussion instruments into the musical texture. The texts of the Mass parts, however, are in Latin, making for a surprising and innovative integration of indigenous culture into the universal Roman Rite.

The *Kyrie* of *Missa Luba* is written in the style of “kasala,” a Luban song of mourning and follows a call-and-response format between the tenor soloist and the choir. While the use of percussion, the rhythmic quality of the music, and the improvisatory nature of the solo melody might seem foreign to a Western sensibility of sacred music, there is still a sacred integrity to the *Kyrie* that shows a reverence for the liturgical tradition of the Church.

The “*Crucifixus*” section of the *Credo*—marked by the text “*crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, passus et sepultus est* (suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried)” —is modelled on the *kilio*, a Luban song of death, used to announce the death of an inhabitant of a village. Not unlike the psalm verse in MacMillan’s *Advent Antiphon*, this section of the *Credo* in *Missa Luba* exemplifies an effective unity between the liturgical tradition of the Roman Rite and native folk song, a popular musical expression of human experience.

The *Missa Luba* grew to be very popular, particularly once its manuscript was published in 1964. Its success, and the success of a few other Masses composed in an indigenous African style, paved the way for the Church’s promulgation of a *Missal for the Zaire Usage of the Roman Rite* (*Missel Romain pour les Dioceses du Zaire*) in 1988. So, the creative embrace of the Roman Catholic liturgy and the cultural heritage of the Congolese people resulted in the emergence of a local ecclesial tradition, developed in a faithful unity with the larger tradition of the Roman Rite.

### III. Conclusion

The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World from the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, affirms that human nature is “assumed, not absorbed,” by the Incarnation of Christ. The person of Jesus Christ is not devoid of the contextual elements of human nature; like all human beings, the incarnate Son of God possessed a family, a religion, and a cultural background. Present as He is in the living Tradition of His Church, nothing of human identity can be lost when this Tradition is accepted by the faithful. An embrace of the Apostolic Tradition, in its essence, is an embrace of the person of Jesus Christ, and ecclesial liturgical traditions, transient as they may be, are expressions of this embrace in Eucharistic worship. The three musical examples discussed above succeed as truly creative compositions of sacred music, not because they accomplish a list of musical and liturgical requirements, but because they embody an embrace of the Apostolic Tradition through an artistic configuration to the liturgical and cultural music traditions that their composers have inherited.

If the composition of new sacred music is to have a future, it is essential that composers work with an understanding of creativity that flows from an intimacy with Tradition, and not from an adversarial mindset that prizes individual autonomy over the past. The alignment of the vision of the artist with

the vision of the Church is not a matter of Tradition stifling the identity of the artist, but of the artist allowing his own identity to be exchanged with that of the Lord. In the resulting work of art, nothing of human nature, nor of the identity of the artist is lost. Instead, a true spirit of creativity, born of the unity of hearts, produces a new creation that reflects the intimacy of Christ and His creature.

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[1] Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 49.

[2] Christoph Wolff, *Mozart's Requiem: Historical and Analytical Studies, Documents, Score*, trans. Mary Whittal (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 72.

[3] *Ibid.*

