



How I Choose the Music Sung at Mass

October 13th, 2015

Occasionally parishioners ask how I select music for the liturgies at St. Benedict. This is a great question, an important one. I hope this little essay can provide you with some insight about the connection between liturgy and music, and how that influences my musical choices.

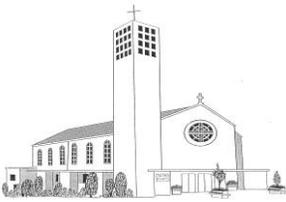
There are several documents that instruct and suggest how music should be selected for Mass. There are some instructions in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2011) and more detail in *Musicam Sacram* (1967), *Music in Catholic Worship* (1983), and *Liturgical Music Today* (1982). All of these documents have one goal: your full and active participation! So if you're not singing you need to start! And all four documents layout three "judgments" for deciding if a piece of music should be used.

The first judgement is musical: is the piece a good piece of music? Does it express the appropriate sentiment, is it aesthetically pleasing, does it have enough gravitas to belong to the rest of the Mass? The musical style is not so important as the quality of the music within that style. A song like "In Every Age" is in many ways a pop song. But the words and the music are really good, the message is profound, so it works well.

The second judgement is liturgical: Does the music reflect and support the liturgy of the church and of the day? There is a hierarchy of singable moments in the Mass. Does this particular piece fit with the other music being sung at this Mass? At St. Ben's we sing as much as we can, which allows for rich choices at the moments of the Offertory and Communion. If we didn't sing the Gloria and the Lamb of God it would feel strange to sing a communion hymn.

Another liturgical point that needs consideration: are the readings reflected in the music? Fr. Jim Harbaugh, S.J. at St. Therese and Fr. Steve Sallis here at St. Benedict both told me, "It's all about the readings." I sit in my office and think how profound that instruction can be. I don't try to jump ahead or explain or "process" beyond the readings. Instead I look for good music that either is the reading (perhaps a paraphrase, like "Shepherd Me, O God") or at least enters into the spirit and meaning of the readings. This gives focus to the Mass and often allows us to sing echoes of the readings and points from the homily.

The third judgement is pastoral. Is this song what the congregation needs to hear and sing this week? Is this the right song for this people in this place at this time to express our faith? From the Congregation for Divine Worship, "All means should be used to promote singing by the people." (Again, if you're not singing you need to start!)



St. Benedict Catholic Church

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So I am trying to find music that is good music, that fits the Roman liturgy and lectionary, and is what the good people of St. Benedict need and want to sing. That sounds like a lot of restraints, but the joy of singing with you gives me the freedom and persistence to continue. Music is an emotional response to the words of the prayers and readings, so that we present ourselves to God fully, as both intellectual and emotional people. May our prayers rise up in song!

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