On Beauty & Sacred Music
And How to Identify Beautiful Liturgical Music

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Music is among the many and great gifts of nature with which God, in Whom is the harmony of the most perfect concord and the most perfect order, has enriched men, whom He has created in His image and likeness. Together with the other liberal arts, music contributes to spiritual joy and the delight of the soul. (MS §4, 1955)

These words were published on Christmas Day in 1955 by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical Musicam Sacram. From the beginning, the Catholic Church has always expressed a positive view regarding the development of sacred music. In the same encyclical, Pope Pius XII articulates his continued support:

Thus, with the favor and under the auspices of the Church the study of sacred music has gone a long way over the course of the centuries. In this journey, although sometimes slowly and laboriously, it has gradually progressed from the simple and ingenuous Gregorian modes to great and magnificent works of art. ... (MS §16, 1955)

Music Genre — Sacred Music

“Music contributes to spiritual joy and the delight of the soul,” he says. How true these words are, but why? What makes beautiful sacred music a universal experience? And how do we identify beautiful liturgical music? If we are going to recognize which pieces are beautiful and appropriate among the vast repertoire of liturgical songs, old and new, which are available today, we need some tools. We need a set of criteria which we can use to recognize specific characteristics of beautiful sacred music.

What is it exactly that makes some works of sacred music, written centuries ago, so timeless and still beloved today? What is it about Franz Schubert’s Ave Maria that makes it so popular at weddings? George Frideric Handel composed the "Alleluia" chorus of the Messiah in 1741. How is it that today, almost 300 years later, we still hear choirs all over the globe preparing it at Eastertime? Johann Sebastian Bach composed Sheep May Safely Graze, not for the Nativity of our Lord, but for the 31st birthday of his friend, the Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels. Yet, Midnight Mass in my community just isn’t as beautiful without it.

There are technical aspects in these sacred pieces that elevate them to the level of high-quality music. Just as sacred architecture is “legible,” with a hierarchy of structural and non-structural elements—such as columns and arches, ornaments and decorations—which together reveal the building’s function and importance, so, too, one can “read” sacred music by analyzing the various musical characteristics—such as sound, harmony, and melody. In Handel’s Messiah, for example, the melodies are singable. The harmonies are rich. The overlapping rhythms and melodic lines are woven together into a complex tapestry of sound. This is the “stuff” that makes sacred music beautiful.
Sub-genre of Sacred Music—Liturgical Music

Within the genre of sacred music, there is a sub-genre which we call liturgical because of the specific role it plays in the liturgy. Like sacred music, in general, liturgical music in particular will be more or less beautiful in proportion to the richness or the poverty of the various musical elements. However, unlike the broader genre of sacred music, in order for liturgical music to be perfectly beautiful, it will also have certain other qualities corresponding to its given role within the context of the liturgy. For this reason, not all sacred music is appropriate within the context of the liturgy. An exquisite performance of Rossini’s Stabat Mater may truly be beautiful sacred music, but if played as the opening hymn for Easter Sunday it would not be a stellar example of beautiful liturgical music.

What makes liturgical music more or less beautiful is the degree to which it reveals its own sacramental nature. The music is a sacramental sign which brings about certain supernatural realities. For example, at the Holy, Holy we join our voices with the heavenly choir. At the Lord, Have Mercy, we, the Church, enter into a conversation with the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, earth and heaven unite, as we feast together at the wedding banquet of the Lamb. This is the “stuff” of which liturgical music is made. The more clearly the music manifests these realities, the more beautiful it is.

Overview of Plenum Reflection

I propose a two-part structure for this plenum session. Part One focuses on the technical musical aspects that make sacred music beautiful. We will study works of sacred music from different musical eras and draw out common elements. We will identify the careful treatment of the text, the attention given to the melodic line, and the use of rich and complex harmonies. For the musician, these musical terms will be familiar. I hope you can use these examples as a springboard for your own analyses. For the non-musician, if you bear with me through the vocabulary lesson, you will find concepts and principles which we find in our everyday life and experience. We can all recognize a wedding cake with lots of layers of chocolate and vanilla. That’s just like the stratification of melodic lines in a polyphonic motet. It looks great and it’s probably pretty good. These musical terms can come in handy when trying to explain why a given song is good.

In Part Two, we will examine the theological aspects of music that is part of the liturgical celebration. Drawing from liturgical theology, we will add to our set of handy vocabulary words such qualities as doxological, eschatological, cosmological, and sacramental. My hope ultimately is to develop a set of criteria from our glossary of musical and theological terms which can be helpful when identifying and evaluating beautiful liturgical music.

A Word to the Musician

Since we will be scrutinizing so carefully the qualities of beautiful sacred music, it is fitting I believe to give a word of encouragement to the one who creates the beautiful music: the musician, that is, the artist. The Catechism of the Catholic Church articulates the nobility of the artist:
Arising from talent given by the Creator and from man’s own effort, art is a form of practical wisdom, uniting knowledge and skill, to give form to the truth of reality in a language accessible to sight or hearing. To the extent that it is inspired by truth and love of beings, art bears a certain likeness to God’s activity in what he has created. Like any other human activity, art is not an absolute end in itself, but is ordered to and ennobled by the ultimate end of man. (CCC, §2501.)

The next paragraph in the Catechism mentions beauty no less than three times in reference to the artist’s particular vocation:

Sacred art is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its particular vocation: evoking and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God — the surpassing invisible beauty of truth and love visible in Christ, who “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature,” in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” This spiritual beauty of God is reflected in the most holy Virgin Mother of God, the angels, and saints. Genuine sacred art draws man to adoration, to prayer, and to the love of God, Creator and Savior, the Holy One and Sanctifier. (CCC, §2502.)

It is notable that these paragraphs come from the chapter called “You Shall Love Your Neighbor As Yourself.” The Church sees the artist (and therefore, musician) as one who creates in order to give a gift to others.

And, of course, where can we find greater words of encouragement for the sacred artist than from Pope John Paul II in his Letter to Artists, given on Easter Sunday in 1999. In this warm and affectionate letter, he mentions beauty no less than 40 times. In the very first sentence of his letter, he describes the artist as a creator of beauty, in imitation of God the Creator, who looked at all he had made and called it good:

None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when—like the artists of every age—captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colors and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you. (JP2, Letter, §1, 1999)

**Part I. Technical Aspects of Beautiful Sacred Music**

The musical examples I have chosen for our studies come from different musical eras. Just as we find examples of splendid sacred art and architecture representative of all centuries and cultures, so, too, do we find masterpieces of sacred music from every musical era—Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic, 20th century, and even in our present age. My intention in placing side by side these examples from different centuries, cultures and styles, is to underline the point that there are objective universal characteristics of beautiful music which transcend time and nationality.
Treatment of the Text

The skillful treatment of the text is one of the musical elements that all masterful works of sacred vocal music have in common. When dealing with a sacred text, a priority for the composer is obviously to bring out the meaning of the words. There is an infinite number of ways that the text can be brought to life through the music. Over the centuries, some of these ways have been articulated and conventionalized. Some of these conventions are easy to identify when listening to a piece or looking at a score.

Agreement between musical and textual accents. Probably the most obvious convention used to clarify the meaning of the words is make the musical and textual accents agree. Using a more technical vocabulary, we would say that it is best to have the strong beat of the music correspond with the emphasized syllable of the word. You and I do this every day. Imagine that the tones and inflections of our speech patterns are the music. When we speak with one another on a conversational level, we normally put the emphasis correctly on the accented syllable. It would be odd if I spoke with the emphasis regularly on the wrong syllable. In the same way, composers usually design the musical beats and inflections to respect the important syllables and words. The work is more beautiful when there is agreement between the musical and textual accents.

Word-Painting. Another technique for clarifying the text is word painting where the music sounds like what the words mean, a sort of onomatopoeia for music. We see this often in Gregorian chant. For example, the melody of the introit at the Christmas Midnight Mass is all contained within the range of a few notes. The music resembles the hush of night. By striking contrast, the famous introit “Puer natus” of the Christmas Mass at day opens with a bold leap of a perfect fifth. The music resembles the rising of the sun at daybreak.

Three days later in the Christmas octave, the communion chant for the feast of the Holy Innocents Vox in Rama resembles the loud cries and wailing of the mothers mourning the tragic loss of their baby sons: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more” (Jeremiah, 31:15).

A few centuries later, we find a wonderful use of text painting in the polyphonic motet Duo Seraphim by Tomás Luis de Victoria. The words are based on Isaiah 6:3. Duo seraphim clamabant alter ad alterum: Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth. Plena est omnis terra gloria eius. Tres sunt qui testimonium dant in coelo: Pater, Verbum, et Spiritus Sanctus; et hi tres unum sunt. The text translates: “Two seraphim were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ Three there are who give witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.” Some things to listen for: How does he musically paint the words duo (two), alter ad alterum (one to another), sanctus (holy), tres sunt (there are three), and plena est gloria eius (full of his glory)?
The text is short and simple. Yet the melodic line of each phrase and even each word is carefully elaborated. Victoria takes the first six words and develops a full and elaborate introduction. From the same starting pitch, the soprano and alto enter one after the other on the words *Duo seraphim*—two angels, two voices. The two voices end the word *Seraphim* at the same time, but one is high and the other low; they again sing the same pitch, but this time from a great distance. The word *clamabant* begins a short canon. In a canon—*Row, row, row your boat*, for example—several voices sing the same melody but they start at different times. In this case, Victoria uses the canon to give the impression of the two angels calling out to one another *alter ad alterum*. This clever introduction musically paints *Duo Seraphim* as if the soprano and alto are two angels introducing themselves— independent but working together.

With the words *Sanctus, sanctus sanctus*, Victoria shifts from a narrative style (every syllable has its own note) to a florid or melismatic style, where the single word or syllable has many notes. What are the two seraphim singing? *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts.* We can imagine the angels continually singing praises before the heavenly throne in just this way.

The music on the words *tres sunt* (“Three there are...”) shifts from *polyphony* where each of the four voices are independent from one another to *homophony* in three-part harmony. He is speaking about the three persons of the Triune God, so he changes the voicing to three parts in a unified rhythm. With the name of each person (*Pater, Verbum, et Spiritus Sanctus*) the voices break back into polyphony. Each person of the Trinity is given an independent melodic line. Then with the declaration *et hi tres unum sunt* (and these three are one), not only do the voices join together in the same rhythm, but the meter even changes to triple time, today we call this a 3/4 tempo. What a clever way to musically describe the Trinity: three voices sing one unified rhythm in triple meter.

See how the words *plena est omnis terra gloria eius* (full of his glory) resemble what they describe. The words *plena est* (is filled) enters successively in each voice on pitches that range from low to high, literally singing the fullest tessitura of sound. Then with the words *gloria eius* (his glory) the melody is melismatic, similar to the *Sanctus*. Many notes are used here to musically paint the glory of God. What an ingenious way to musically paint the meaning of the words. What careful attention is given to every word and every note throughout the piece. Bravo, Victoria!

Harmony

The next element of music we will consider is Harmony. Harmony refers to the chords which support a melodic line. Songs with a thin harmony often fade out of use within a generation. But a rich and full harmonic treatment of a melody is what gives a timeless quality to a piece.

Harmony is the general term for how all the sounds are put together. There are many technical terms that refer to the harmonic treatment of a piece — key, tonality, major, minor, modal, perfect-authentic cadence, plagal cadence, chord, triad, root position, inversion, dominant seventh, five-three, five-seven, five-nine, modulation, transposition, progression, dissonance, resolution, dominant, tonic, diminished, augmented. Harmony is related to mathematical proportions. Just as there are an infinite number of possible mathematical equations, there is an infinite combination of sounds that can be joined to develop a strong harmony.
Johann Sebastian Bach has left one of the greatest legacies of creative and masterful harmonization of a melody. He had no qualms about using a melody written by another composer. He harmonized the melodies of Hassler, Luther, Nicolai, Crüger, and many others. His concern was to beautify that melody with a rich harmony. It is possible that many of the hymns we cherish today are still beloved because of Bach’s harmonization of the melody.

Among the more well-known tunes harmonized by Bach are: WACHT AUF [Wake, Awake]; NUN KOMM, DER HEIDEN HEILAND [Savior of the Nations Come]; EISENACH [The God Whom Earth and Sea and Sky]; VOM HIMMEL HOCH [From Heaven Above to Earth I Come]; ST. THEODULPH [All Glory Laud and Honor]; CHRIST LAG IN TODESBANDEN [Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands]; SALZBURG [At the Lamb’s High Feast We Sing].

Perhaps the most famous of all is Bach’s harmonization of Hassler’s melody PASSION CHORALE [O Sacred Head], the subject of our next study. This tune appears no less than five times in St. Matthew’s Passion. Bach uses a different harmonization each time to evoke different sentiments, based on the context within the oratorio. He proves that there is never just one possible harmonization of a given melody.

It is not necessary to analyze each chord of the Passion chorale to appreciate some of the beautiful techniques Bach uses to add depth to the harmony. For example, he makes ample use of contrary motion, dissonance and resolution, singing bass line, and parallel sixths and thirds.

Singing Bass.  At the end of each line, the bass line moves toward the final note in a stepwise motion that is itself a nice melody, even more singable than the Soprano. A bass line that sings gives a strong foundation to the voices it supports. Even if the tenor and alto lines move very little, the singing bass gives the whole passage interest and color.

Parallel Thirds and Sixths. Parallel thirds and sixths are notes from different voices, say Soprano and Tenor, which are a third or a sixth apart rise and fall together. In the middle line, the use of parallel thirds and sixths add a sweet color to the harmony. The Soprano and the Tenor move together in parallel sixths for three notes. Then the Bass joins the Tenor in parallel thirds for the next three notes. The Alto picks up the parallel motion in sixths with the Tenor for four notes. Finally, the Soprano and Alto move together in parallel thirds for three notes, moving into the cadence. Though the whole line is sweetened by this parallel movement, the sweetness is subtle since it alternates between sixths and thirds every few notes and between the different voices.

Contrary Motion.  Contrary motion means that two voices move in opposite directions. Bach uses contrary motion to strengthen the harmony at the beginning of both the first and the last lines. Whereas parallel motion adds sweetness, contrary motion adds strength. In the first line, the contrary motion is between the Soprano and the Tenor. The two voices “exchange” notes—the Soprano moves down from A to F, while the Tenor moves up from F to A. In the last line, the contrary motion is between the outer voices of the Soprano and Bass. Since it is easier to hear the Soprano and Bass because they are more exposed, the contrary motion has an even stronger effect than if it were placed in the inner voices.
**Dissonance.** When two notes which are right next to each other are sung or played at the same time it creates a dissonance, or harsh sound. The regular use of dissonance and resolution throughout the piece adds another level of depth to the harmony. In the first two full measures, Bach places back-to-back dissonances between the soprano and alto voices. The dissonance creates tension, whereas the resolution gives a sense of peace. These dissonant harmonies are a particularly effective way to convey the sense of the passion of Christ.

Audio 3: Hassler’s PASSION CHORALE: Harmonization by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) [1:00 minutes]

**The Melodic line**

Another element common to marvelous sacred music is a lovely melodic line. Songwriters are perpetually searching for a good melody. Most people can recognize a good tune when they hear it—they often find themselves humming it later on. It is rather remarkable that throughout the ages, new and beautiful melodies are continually created. And how many there must be that have not yet been written.

Beautiful and singable melodies typically share a set of common qualities. The shape of the melodic line has a climactic moment. The movement up and down the scale is often stepwise. Leaps are limited and deliberate. A large interval is followed by a smaller interval in the opposite direction. The melody suggests the overall harmonic structure. Throughout the centuries, these and other recognizable qualities common to beautiful melodies have come to be known as the “rules of counterpoint.”

These counterpoint rules are derived from sounds, proportions, patterns, and movements commonly found in the natural created world. Writing a creative and beautiful melody without breaking the rules is a skill that requires much discipline and practice. Counterpoint—counterpoint—counterpoint: this has been the law at conservatory for generations of composition students. We see it in the works of great composers of every age and culture: from Palestrina to Puccini in Italy, from Bach to Brahms in Germany, from Byrd to Britten in England. Victoria, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Puccini, Fauré, and America’s own George Gershwin—they were all steeped in counterpoint. Over time, these rules were modified to reflect the developing musical style of the age—renaissance counterpoint is different from 19th century counterpoint, for instance—but the basic principles have never changed.

We can observe these basic principles in the Soprano line of Mozart’s *Ave Verum*, the subject of our next study. Some things to consider as we listen: If we connect the notes like dots, what would the “melodic” line look like? Where is the highest point of that line? Where does the melody make really big leaps? Why? Does the melody go down or up after these big leaps?

**Shape of the melodic line.** In this *Ave Verum*, Mozart creates a well-constructed melody, based on the counterpoint principle that the best melodic lines have a single culminating point. If we connect the notes like dots, we can see the melodic line more clearly, standing out in relief. We can think of the melodic line both on a large-scale dimension—the whole piece—and on a smaller-scale dimension—the four main phrases.

In the first phrase, the line shows a culminating point at the beginning. In the second phrase, it culminates in the middle. In the third phrase, the highest point of the line is near the beginning, with a lesser high point closer to the end. In the last phrase, the highest point is at the end of the line, dropping quickly to the lowest note for the final cadence. Each phrase has only one culminating point and it is placed in a different part of the phrase each time.
At the largest dimension—that is, the whole piece—the single climactic moment comes right before the piece ends. In the second half of the final phrase, the melody rises to an E, which is the highest note in the whole piece and is reached only once. Saving the single culminating moment for the end is an effective way to keep the melodic interest.

**Movement by leaps and steps.** In *Ave Verum*, Mozart’s the melody is wonderfully singable because of the classic treatment of leaps and stepwise motion. Melodic steps are movements from one note to the next note higher or lower on the scale. Stepwise motion is similar to walking up and down the stairs in your home. Melodic leaps are movements from one note to another at a distance greater than a step. They are like skipping a few steps when running up or down on the stairs.

Two important principles about melodic leaps are: 1) to use them sparingly; and 2) to follow them with a movement in the opposite direction. Leaps are more difficult to sing than steps. Too many becomes problematic for the singer. And when there is a leap, especially a large one, it is easier for the singer to regain confidence if the melody turns around to a nearby note. Because of the demands that a melodic leap places on the singer, there should be a good reason for it.

Right at the beginning, Mozart catches our attention with three leaps in a row. It is an effective use of leaps to not only capture the interest of the listener but to bring out the meaning of the word *Ave*. Notice how each leap is followed by a movement in the opposite direction. And the last leap is followed by steps. Another smaller leap begins the next semiphrase. The rest of the phrase finishes out in modest stepwise motion.

In the second phrase, a series of three leaps is used to approach the culminating point. Each successive leap is followed by stepwise motion in the opposite direction. The third leap is the most important since it is not only the highest note but is held the longest. By placing it on the word *cruce* Mozart draws out and clarifies the meaning of the phrase: “immolated on the cross for men.”

In the third phrase, the line is mostly stepwise, with only two leaps followed by steps in the opposite direction. The final phrase, similar to the second phrase, uses a series of leaps to create an energy as the movement approaches the culminating point on the word *mortis*. However, unlike the climactic leap in the second phrase, the long note on *mortis* is not followed by a step in the opposite direction, but pushes even higher to the E, the highest note and most important moment of the piece.

Of course, there is much more to observe about the melody here and how Mozart creates an effective interpretation of the sacred text. His treatment of the melodic line and careful use of leaps and stepwise motion, however, offer some useful examples which can be helpful in developing a set of objective criteria for evaluation and identifying beautiful sacred music.

**Part II. Theological and Sacramental Qualities of Beautiful Liturgical Music**

So far, we have been developing a technical vocabulary drawn from the language of music which we can use as tools to identify beautiful sacred music. The works we have studied would all be appropriate as part of a liturgical celebration. But how do we know which sacred pieces are appropriate in a liturgical context and which are not? As part of a liturgical celebration, the degree of beauty depends on how closely the music conforms to sound theological and liturgical principles. In this second part, we will now add to our handy glossary a technical vocabulary based on the language of liturgical theology.
The more that liturgical music reflects the theological dimensions of the liturgical celebration, the more beautiful it will be. For example, beautiful liturgical music reveals the splendor of its own ontological reality. It is *doxological*, giving glory and praise to God. It is an *eschatological* music that calls to the attention of the faithful the world that is to come. It is a *cosmological* music in which the entire cosmos sings in harmony of the glory of God. It is music grounded in the nature of the liturgy, which is theocentric, ordered, harmonious, complete and consonant to a restored nature. It *sacramentally* makes active and present the music of heaven. Through it the faithful participate in the heavenly liturgy, and become transfigured by experiencing the “already, but not yet” of the world to come. It is salvific and transfiguring. It makes us partakers of the Banquet of the Lamb. It unites us with the angels in singing the praises of God. In other words, liturgical music is most beautiful when it clearly and effectively glorifies God and sanctifies mankind by being conformed to the heavenly liturgy and to the nature of the praise of God.

**Doxological.** Music is *doxological* when the text and the music work together in praising and glorifying the Lord. This music is obviously theocentric, or God-centered. It is most beautiful when it actually accomplishes the act of giving fitting praise to God. It is most like the songs of the angels, who day and night never cease to sing the praises of God before the heavenly throne: Holy, holy, holy—Lord God of hosts!

**Eschatological.** Music that is *eschatological* in nature, makes known the world as it will be at the Second Coming. From Scripture, we know that the world as we know it will pass away and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Music that is filled with imagery about the glory of heaven and the life that is to come inspires in the faithful a yearning for the Second Coming and the full restoration of fallen humanity. The texts of the Roman Missal, the Lectionary and the Liturgy of the Hours are replete with the eschatological texts drawn from Sacred Scripture, especially the Psalms and the Book of Revelation.

**Cosmological.** *Cosmological* music manifests the reality of all creation giving glory to God. As the Scriptures say, “The heavens proclaim the glory of God! (Ps 19:1) ... Ice and snow, bless the Lord! Sun and moon, bless the Lord! (Dn 3)” At Mass, the priest says, “We join our voices with the angels and sing, Holy, holy, holy Lord...” The cosmos includes all of God’s creation, the visible world and the invisible. The whole Mystical Body of Christ, the faithful of every time and age, on earth in purgatory and in heaven all sing together of the glory of God and his saving work.

**Sacramental sign.** Liturgical music is a *sacramental sign*, revealing and making present and active the hidden spiritual reality it signifies, which is the union of heaven and earth in worship of the Triune God. Because the Mass confers a unique sacramental grace, the music of the Mass is an especially effective sacramental sign since it is so closely connected to the liturgical celebration. The music clothes the liturgical texts and makes present and active the conversation between the Father, the Son and His Bride, the Church, through the breath of the Holy Spirit.

**Transfigured.** As a sacramental sign, liturgical music transfigures the soul into the likeness of God and readies it for heaven. It is the means by which the priest and the congregation enter the Godhead’s dialogue of love and become transformed by this love. It has a *transfigured* quality when it reflects the supernatural realm to which we are called.
Participants in the Heavenly Liturgy. Through the liturgical music, the faithful participate in the truth of which they sing. The acclamation Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth begins and the faithful actually join their voices with the host of angelic choirs. The people sing “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us,” and he actually does. The priest sings, “The Lord be with you,” and God condescends to man, while at the same time lifting him to the heights of heaven: “He will be their God and they will be his people.”

“Already, but not yet.” When the people enter into a liturgical celebration, through sacrament they enter into the “already” of heaven, even though they are not yet there in full. God allows his people to share in the joy of heaven while they are still on earth that they might become like him and fit for heaven.

The Wedding Feast of the Lamb. The Book of Revelation describes the heavenly liturgy as the wedding banquet of the Lamb. The heavenly Jerusalem is splendidly described as the Bride of Christ and also as the setting for the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rv 19:7; 21:2). At this feast, the cloud of witnesses praises God night and day, singing Holy, holy, holy (Rv 4:9-14). The Lamb once slain proclaims that he is coming soon (Rv 22:12). The Spirit and the Bride cry out, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rv 22:17).

Salvific. Through the liturgy, the saving work of God continues. At the Incarnation, the glory of God entered human flesh, restoring it to its original dignity. But God’s divinity remained concealed until the Transfiguration, when Jesus made his glorified body manifest to Peter, James and John. Then, by the Resurrection and the Ascension of Jesus Christ, God glorified human flesh by raising it from death and taking it to eternal life in heaven. Now, through the liturgy, God unites heaven and earth and perpetuates his plan of salvation.

Our next study is by Maestro Domenico Cardinal Bartolucci. Sicut cervus is a motet for choir and organ based on the text from Psalm 41:2: Sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum, ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus meus. “As the deer longs for running waters, so my soul is longing for you, my God.” On a musical level, it has rich harmonic elements, strong melodic lines, and masterful treatment of the text. For example, in the quick notes of the organ accompaniment, we can almost hear the delight of the deer frolicking along banks of running waters. On a theological and liturgical level, the psalm verse clearly reflects the doxological, eschatological and cosmological nature of the liturgy. As a song of praise after Communion, for instance, it could be quite effective in helping the participant to enter deeply into the mystery of the heavenly liturgy. The piece summarizes these theological and liturgical principles, while also modeling the musical aspects we touched on in the first part.

Though Bartolucci’s Sicut cervus is relatively unknown outside of Italy, it is a masterpiece of sacred music. They say that the artist often exposes his interior disposition in his art. In this case, Bartolucci reveals his warm and tender love for God. We hear this especially in the middle section as the unaccompanied voices linger over the words Deus meus. The moment is transcendent. We are awakened from this heavenly reverie by the organ’s gentle reprisal of the delightful deer theme. I believe Bartolucci’s Sicut cervus is an especially effective means for lifting faithful hearts to the heights of heaven.

Audio 5  Sicut cervus by Domenico Cardinal Bartolucci (1917–2009) [6:00 minutes]
Concluding Remarks

At this point, we have identified a number of technical terms which we have gleaned from the language of music and sacramental theology. Altogether, they form a handy glossary for evaluating beautiful liturgical music. From the musical perspective, we examined the treatment of the text, especially word-painting, accent agreement, and clarification of the text. We analyzed elements of the harmonic structure, in particular the singing bass, parallel thirds, contrary motion and dissonance. We considered the rules of counterpoint regarding the shape of the melodic line with its culminating point and the proper use of leaps and stepwise motion. From the theological perspective, we examined how the liturgy is doxological, eschatological, and cosmological. We reflected the sacramentality of the liturgy as a sacramental sign, transfiguring and salvific qualities. Of course, the list is hardly exhaustive, but perhaps it can be a starting point. Now, we’ll review our handy glossary of technical terms and apply them to a piece of sacred music to see if it holds up as beautiful liturgical music.

The chronological pattern of our studies leads us to our present day. So, naturally, the subject of our last study is a work of contemporary liturgical music. Now, we will be using this piece for an experiment, that is, to use our glossary to analyze whether or not the piece is beautiful. Therefore, since this a rather delicate matter, I have chosen something that I myself composed recently. If our experimental analysis finds it beautiful, great. If not—no worries—I can always go back and revise it.

This is setting of the Responsorial Psalm for the Christmas Midnight Mass “Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.” The music is written for cantor, congregation, organ and a small schola of three female voices. Unlike the other studies, the words here are in the vernacular—well, mostly. At the beginning and the end, the organ drops out and the schola sings a brief coda in Latin.

**Audio 6 Today is Born our Savior by Sr. Rosemary Esseff, O.P. (2018) [3:30 minutes]**

**Agreement between textual and musical accents.** Right away we can see that the textual accent and the musical strong beats are in agreement. The music respects the natural flow of the words. The music even changes how many beats are in measure so that each word and syllable have the space they need to be sung clearly and naturally.

**Text-painting.** There is a bit of text-painting on the words Christ and Lord. The notes go from high to low representing God the Son, descending from heaven to be born on earth for us.

**Singing Bass.** Looking now at the harmonic treatment, the organ accompaniment reveals a singing bass line, especially in the last couple of measures. In the coda, there is also a singing bass in the lowest voice of the schola. The singing bass gives a strong foundation for the voices above it.

**Parallel Sixths and Thirds.** In the organ accompaniment, there are parallel thirds and sixths in every measure. They add a sense of sweetness to the music, but it is subtle because the parallel movement alternates every few notes between sixths and thirds and between the different voices.

**Contrary motion.** There is contrary motion in each measure. On the word “Savior” the upper voices and the lower voices move in contrary motion. On the word “Christ” the Soprano and Tenor move in contrary motion exchange notes—the Soprano moves down from C to A, while the Tenor moves up from A to C. On the word “Lord,” the outer voices of the Soprano and Bass move in contrary motion giving strength to the harmonic cadence.
Dissonance. There are no harsh dissonances to add tension. In this case, the text may not call for the sentiment of strong tension—just the opposite, actually. However, in the coda, there is a softer dissonance on the word Dominus, which resolves on the last chord. This gives music interest and strengthens the word Dominus.

Shape of the Melodic Line. Turning our attention now to the melodic line of the refrain, we can see that the shape of the melodic line culminates in the middle. The highest note is touched twice. Perhaps it would be better if the highest note were reached only once. I will go back and look at it. The Alto, Tenor, and Bass melodies, on the other hand, have only culminating point. In fact, they are stronger melodically than the Soprano.

Movement by leaps and steps. In the Soprano, there are fewer movements by leaps than by step. The first two leaps—on “Today” and from “our” to “Savior”—are followed by a note which moves stepwise in the opposite direction, making it easier to sing. The next two leaps—from “Christ” to “the” and from “the” to “Lord”—are not followed by movement in the opposite direction. Hmm. Well, I could justify this by saying that downward leaps are easier to sing than rising leaps. It’s easier to skip steps when you are running down the stairs than to skip them on the way up. But it would be better actually if I revised those notes.

Doxological. Evaluating the piece now from a theological perspective, we can easily find a doxological quality. The verses of Psalm 96 are filled with praises of God’s glory: Sing to the Lord a new song; Tell his glory among the nations; He shall rule the world with justice and the peoples with his constancy.

Eschatological. The eschatological dimension goes hand in hand with the doxological: They shall exult before the Lord for he comes; he comes to rule the earth!

Cosmological. The cosmological aspect is quite clear: Sing to the Lord, all you lands; Let the heavens be glad, and the earth rejoice; let the sea and what fills it resound; Let the plains be joyful and all that is in them; then shall all the trees of the forest exult!

Sacramental Signs. As a sacramental sign, the singing of the psalm brings about the reality it signifies. We sing “Sing to the Lord, bless his name! Tell his glory among the nations.” And the very words which we utter are brought about as we sing them.

Transfigured. Entering deeply into the prayer of the Psalm, we become transfigured and molded more closely to the likeness of Christ.

Salvific. This participation is salvific—it brings about and effects our salvation. This is the very truth about which we sing “Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.”

Evaluation. On the whole, we find most of the qualities from our handy glossary. A few things were lacking, such as failing to have a single culminating point in the Soprano, and the failing to follow each leap with a movement in the opposite direction. But on the whole, the piece is fairly good. Perhaps we can say that it is not exquisitely beautiful, but it is quite nice. Time will tell, though, whether I am being too kind to myself.

I would like to close as I opened with the words of Pope Pius XII from his encyclical Musicae sacrae. He expresses so eloquently my own sentiments in sharing these thoughts with you today.
Hence, We hope that this most noble art, which has been so greatly esteemed throughout the Church’s history and which today has been brought to real heights of holiness and beauty, will be developed and continually perfected and that on its own account it will happily work to bring the children of the Church to give due praise, expressed in worthy melodies and sweet harmonies, to the Triune God with stronger faith, more flourishing hope and more ardent charity. (§83, Musicae sacrae, 1955)
Study 1. *Vox in Rama.* Communion for Holy Innocents (*Graduale Romanum*)

Comm. 7.

OX in Rama * audi-ta est, pló-ра-tus

et u-lu-lá-tus: Rachel plo-rans fi-li-os su-os,

nó-lu-it con-so-lá-ri, qui-a non sunt.
Study 2.  

Duo Seraphim by Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611)


rum  Sanc – cius,  Do.

San – cius  San –

rum  Sanc – cius, San –

San – cius  Sanc –

Secunda Pars

Tres sunt qui te – sti-mo-ni-um dant in coe – lo: et Spi-ri-tus sanc


Tres sunt qui te – sti-mo-ni-um dant in coe – lo:

Pa – ter, et Ver – burn, et Spi – ri-tus

San – cius: et hi tres u-num sunt, San –

San – cius: et hi tres u-num sunt, San –

San – cius: et hi tres u-num sunt, San –

San – cius: et hi tres u-num sunt, San –
Study 3. Hassler’s PASSION CHORALE, Harmonization by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Hassler’s Passion Chorale, Harmonization by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)
Study 4. *Ave Verum* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

**Shape of Melodic Lines.** Measures 3–18, 22–43, *Ave Verum*, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

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A - ve a - ve, ve - rum Corpus na - tunt de Ma - ri - a Vir - gi - ne:
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Ve - re pas sum im - mo - la - tum in cru - ce pro ho - mi - ne.
```

```
Cu - jus la - tus, per - for - ra - tum un - da flu - xit et san - gui - ne.
```

```
Es to no-bis praeg - su - tum mor - tis ex - a - mi - ne, mor - tis ex - a - mi - ne.
```


```
A - ve a - ve, ve - rum Corpus na - tunt de Ma - ri - a Vir - gi - ne:
```

```
Ve - re pas sum im - mo - la - tum in cru - ce pro ho - mi - ne.
```

```
Cu - jus la - tus, per - for - ra - tum un - da flu - xit et san - gui - ne.
```

```
Es to no-bis praeg - su - tum mor - tis ex - a - mi - ne, mor - tis ex - a - mi - ne.
```