

Singing the faith: Music and Liturgy seeking the face of Christ

Mgr. Marco Frisina

Art and music in the spiritual and cultural experience of men

Art is a great gift from God to help men to reach deeper into their hearts and the light in the heart of God. Every creature bears the signature of the divine Artist. His hands have moulded the universe making every creature a part of a complex and marvellous masterpiece in which all natural laws obey their Creator in a wonderful “symphony”. But the admirable score of the world needs a hermeneut, an interpreter who understands everything and who is able to communicate it, a creature in God’s image, after his likeness; a man able to perceive the creation with the same joy as God, able to find the hidden meanings and to recognize in every creature the divine signature that makes them beautiful.

“The heavens declare the glory of God. The expanse shows his handiwork.”, as psalm 18 (19 for us) proclaims. Every creature proclaims, announces, tells the glory of his Creator, but only man understands with his voice, only he can grasp the meaning and comment on it, elaborate it, amplify it, discovering all the beauty and depth. God is an artist, and so is man, because, as his Creator, he can produce eloquent works of art which declare the truth in a bright and luminous way. Beauty is in fact the glory of the Divine Being that He communicated to his creatures and to man, who can understand and enjoy it. Beauty shows the face of God and reveals all the pleasantness and the magnificence, because it is light enlightening the human heart.

For this reason, we cannot give up art. Every age and civilization felt the need of producing objects, works of art, writings which revealed the perception of the essential being of every man. Our five senses are the doors through which the soul communicates with the world, doors necessary to perceive the light, the colours, the smells, the flavours, the sounds, the creature’s perceptions. Art uses the same senses, not in one direction, but both for entrance and exit, as an instrument of perception and communication of the experience of the human soul.

Art extends our senses making them capable of expressing what is beyond the senses themselves. The artistic image elaborates the image perceived from reality, revealing what is hidden to the eyes of the body, but not to the eyes of the soul. This is true for music too, which elaborates the sounds and lets the listener not only listen to what is not perceived by the ear, but also to see, taste and smell. The miracle of music, like the other arts, is to expand the human perception beyond the sensorial bounds, drawing to the soul senses to come back to the corporal senses, filling them with astonishment. In art the corporal and the soul senses live a marvellous symbiosis, because the

former is in concert with the latter, and together they show the creature in the most complete way. This is the amazement of beauty, of contemplation, an advance of that contemplation of the glory of God which will make us joyful forever in heaven.

Contemporary culture often seems to divert our attention away from the Sacred. It seems to profane, to trivialize, undermining the sacred expressions to make them too day-to-day. Of course this often happens because of the sudden change of cultural categories, and we did not very seriously consider what the Second Vatican Council prophetically predicted about the need for a vivid cultural dialogue with the contemporary world. As a consequence, we are not ready to lead the sacred forms of art into the new context. Nevertheless, the communication of God is still fundamental and the demands of evangelization do not allow us to seek refuge in ivory towers, detached from the reality that surrounds us. We have to make suggestions, to express, to sing to God with all our brothers and sisters, in this world, with those means we have.

Music has an important role in the history of civilization and in the religious culture of each people. Art enables the summarization of important messages and meanings of a community, giving it a voice in such a way that every work of art, whenever and wherever it has been produced, becomes universal. Music knows and allows the knowledge of the depth of the human heart: this is the great power of art, especially of music, which is the most fleeting but the most deep-seated in the life of men, the most “ethereal” but the most physical of the arts. It is made of physical vibrations to which men mysteriously associate sensations, memories, messages, coming from their deepest unconscious or forgotten experiences. The “mystery” of music lies in the fact that it is the least controllable of the arts, the most instinctive, despite having a strong mathematical and physical structure. One could say that the world of sensations, of feelings and memories, joins with the world of harmonies, structures, symmetries and forms. The aesthetic pleasure of music, in fact, results from the perfect and harmonious union of these two realities, the sensible and the intelligible one, the former made of sonorities and timbres, the latter made of rhythm, structure, and form.

Music, though, is a part of those symbolic and allusive realities, which, when organized together, create a language capable of communication and enabling people to communicate. Music itself is expressed through a language that has to be comprehended by the listener in order to be communicated, and it can be more or less appreciated according to the abilities and the language education of the listener. When structure, coherence and symbols are joined together, we have musical communication; and, as a consequence, music becomes a means of values, of philosophy and poetry, and sometimes also of policy and information.

The power of music has never been ignored in history, and its use has always been of great importance for its ability to deeply penetrate the human spirit, regardless of culture or language. It summarizes many things which are transferred to people's hearts in a convincing, direct manner without the need for translations or comments.

The voice and musical instruments are the means of music. The human voice is the principal and immediate means of music. It is the pre-eminent instrument, being the symbol of communication itself where a man himself sings to another man. It is the first kind of music that appears in all cultures from birth. Through singing, man speaks in a special way, distinguishing trivial communication from poetry. Singing is always reserved for higher occasions, for prayer and ritual, for joy and feasting, for love, which has its highest expression in poetry and music. Apart from this, we should not forget the social value of singing, from stadium chants to political choirs, from war songs to national hymns.

Choral singing has a special role in rituals: the union of different voices merged into a single musical event is a clear symbol of the union of the group and the people, whereas solo singing takes on a specific and authoritative role – we would call a “ministry” – which the community accepts and to which it gives a specific role.

Music in the Holy Scriptures

The use of music in the Holy Scriptures reflects the ancient world's use, but with a new and fundamental interpretation for the meaning it has within the Christian Liturgy.

It is God himself who evokes the song in the human heart, raising it up to Him with prayer. It is He who inspires the words and supports the song, joining Himself, in Christ, to the marvellous song of the renewed creation. The canticles of the Old Testament always have a specific position in the narrated event.

If we consider, for example, the story of the Miracle of the Sea in *Exodus 14-15*, we notice that the narration “in prose” describes the wonder and the actions of the protagonists; then it comes to a sort of contemplative state, where the commentary to the event is given to song. The Song of the Sea in *Ex. 15* becomes at the same time a commentary and a song, contemplation and a hymn of thanksgiving to God: in a word, it is the “responsorial psalm” that follows the proclamation of the previous sacred reading, it modernizes and universalizes it. It puts into the mouth of every man the words of the redeemed Israel: “*I will sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously triumphant...*”. The salvific event becomes a song. Praise comes from the depths of the history of salvation and extends all over the world.

This is also true for other canticles, such as Deborah's in *Judges 5*, a war song and the epic war song of Israel, Hannah's in *1 Sam 2*, a thanksgiving song and a prayer of joyful astonishment for the redeeming power of the Lord, thanks to whom "*The barren wife bears seven sons*". Of course we have to remember David's psalms, both in the books of Samuel and in the Psalter, all within their historical setting and the event to which they relate, as in the *Miserere (Ps 51)*.

The Psalter is, in fact, the collection of all those songs summarizing different feelings, different reactions: joy and suffering, life and death. Everything is before God, in dialogue with Him, as a prayer. Psalm 150, which closes the Psalter, enumerates all the musical instruments that join in human praise. The various instruments are symbols of creation itself: the drum- leather, the strings of the harps and lyres - the wood and the brass of woodwinds and cymbals, the ram's horn of the shofar, because every creature must symbolically be present in the praise of God with man and his song.

In the prophetic books, the oracles are written in rhythmic prose and, probably, they were songs. Thus, books such as *the Song of Songs* have to be analyzed with reference to musical structures, internal and external, which are fundamental for their own comprehension.

The New Testament too is a part of this great tradition, especially *Luke*, who imitating the Greek style of the Septuagint, shows us Mary singing her *Magnificat* as a joyful commentary to Elizabeth's words, as Hannah, Deborah and Jude did in the Old Testament. The same thing can be said for Zechariah in his *Benedictus* and old Simeon in his *Nunc dimittis*. When the Saviour was born, the angels sang the *Gloria* (glory), their hymn of praise in Bethlehem, while Paul of Tarsus puts hymns and canticles in his letters, songs that were surely used in the liturgy of the first Christian communities.

The Scripture, thus, teaches us not to separate the song from the salvific event and not to forget the importance to express, with the full participation of mankind, the joy of the redeemed creation.

Music in the Liturgy

Liturgy is the moment of the renewal of salvation in the history of men, the open door that lets us communicate with Christ's redemption. The task of liturgical music, which is always sacred, is to sing this redemption, and in order to do this, it has to follow specific rules given by the Church. Music, as we have said about biblical canticles, is the language that emphasizes, interprets and translates in an artistic way, and in the same way ritualistically, the theological event.

It is necessary, though, to explain the difference between sacred (or religious) music and liturgical music, because in the last centuries the two definitions have resulted in different kinds of music. If we performed all the sacred repertoire of the 17th and 18th centuries during a liturgical celebration, it would be difficult and sometimes embarrassing, since the musical structures are not always compatible with its rhythms and characteristics, and the freedom of expression of some scores are in contrast with the sense of the Liturgy.

Music must not overlap the liturgical action, but has to be guided by it. The celebration of the mystery of our redemption demands music to express the mystery it celebrates, and not itself. For this reason, the Church has always considered the Gregorian chant as normative, not to paralyze the liturgical music's repertoire, but to fix the rules in such a way, that every musical liturgical production has the same content and form. The forms of the Gregorian chant, in fact, are easy, clear, and modify themselves according to time and musical experimentations: the antiphony, the psalmody, the responsory, the acclamation etc. These forms allow multiple participations, not only of the choir and the assembly, but also of the celebrant, the psalmist and the small choir in dialogue with the others.

In my opinion, though, the directions given by Vatican II are just an affirmation of the principles that guided Gregorian production, even though the reference is to a different cultural and historical experience: the variety of Gregorian forms admits the song of God's praise in every space and time. Gregorian chant does not put the words on the music, but the music simply amplifies and enlarges the meaning of a word: it is music in service of the Word of God, in service of Christ.

As a musician and composer, I often think about the importance of the text sung. Liturgical music is always in service of the proclaimed words; its role is to exalt the meanings and to communicate them within the human heart. In this sense the aim of liturgical music is achieved, and this aim is completely different from that of other musical genres because it has to celebrate the mystery of God and the communication of it. The other musical genres can emphasize some aspects, but they do not have as this principal aim of a vertical and "mystic" dimension.

In the history of the Church, the use of polyphony has become an important way to express the celebrated mystery and to underscore the contemplative aspect of the liturgical celebration, glorifying the sung text in a particular way, through the counterpoint and the consequent harmonies, but always in service of the liturgical function. For example, during the Offertory or as a second Communion song, when all the people have taken Holy Communion and are in meditation, we can all pray together with a marvellous motet of Palestrina.

The Assembly's song is part of this tradition and has to conform to the celebrative context. It is not just a moment where we let the assembly participate with song, but it is the normal expression of the people of God praying in communion with all the Church.

Liturgical music, as a result, is based on the equilibrium of all those elements: the traditional Gregorian chant with the participation of solos, choir and assembly, the song of the ordinary of the Eucharist, the ancient and modern choral polyphony, and chants for the assembly. To all these elements, we can add the use of musical instruments to enrich and to underscore some celebrations, according to the various characteristics of the liturgical seasons. I believe that the use of musical instruments, even though not essential, can add colour and emotion both to the music and to the interpretation of the text.

The council remembers, in the end, the value of non-liturgical sacred music, which, as I have already said, cannot be performed during the Liturgy for functional and structural reasons. However, I believe that it is a fantastic means to recover the great heritage of sacred music, and a way to write more free and inspired compositions, where the most specific musical characteristics can better emerge.

The choir in the service of the Liturgy and the liturgical assembly

We have to bear in mind that the musical performance cannot be considered outside of the celebrative context, because the aim of liturgical music is the glorification of God and the spiritual edification of men, and it represents one of the highest forms of the faith of the Church. Such a presupposition makes the function of the choir fundamental, because it is the choir that mediates between the celebrated Mystery and the assembly. It has to raise the assembly to the Mystery and has to translate it for the assembly. Moreover, it is not sufficient to have the people sing, but we have to make them pray. The real difficulty is not to sing, but to make the hearts pray when singing and, through it, discover the joy of the prayer and understand that the Eucharist is the most important event in a Christian's life.

There are beautiful and very good choirs that do not help the people to pray, not because they do not sing well or with no rules, but because their feelings do not move the assembly that sings with them.

The Council talks about the choir in the service of the assembly, a choir which makes the assembly participate, helping the people to enter the mystery of God. The assembly should not be a passive listener, but should be engaged not only directly with proper parts, but also indirectly, by choosing spiritual and religious pieces. It is important that these pieces should also be easy to

perform, suitable for the people: during the celebration difficult songs or chants should not be performed, nor can we follow the fashion of the moment or our own personal theological views, because we are celebrating a mystery which transcends our perception of music and our musical choices. In fact, it is the Church itself that teaches us to pray with the Missal, the hymnbook or the Liturgy of the Hours and it is not I who teach the Church. We are requested to use all our passion and our art, our attention and abilities to enlighten in a beautiful way what the Liturgy offers.

Of course, we have to consider the people we are working with: we cannot ask them to sing a Gregorian hymn if they are not able to make the Sign of the Cross, but if we clearly have in mind the aim of our action, we will use suitable means to bring them to that aim.

We live in a very busy world, where we have to do more things at the same time, and this also happens in the Liturgical service: one has to do this, the other that, and, in order to make everyone participate in the action, the mass becomes a sort of work. In fact, it is not always true that the more we do, the more the assembly participates. Every action, of course, has its own meaning, and it is the meaning that is important: a gesture without substance is completely meaningless. If an external action does not correspond to an internal movement, all the Liturgical service is just a theatre performance for the choir, which, after an hour's performance, has not been pray at all.

In order to avoid this, it is necessary to recover the contemplative dimension, it is fundamental to open the door of our hearts to God, to be ready to find the beauty in every little thing. Only with this attitude will we be able to help our brothers to sing in the Church, teaching them to adore the Eucharist, to look at the crucified Christ and the Virgin Mary, we will remind them that our hearts must always look at the face of Christ.

The role of sacred music in contemporary culture

Sacred music breaths with two lungs: on one hand, it is music that speaks about and with God, it is poetry, it is the song of men who live in their time, and, as a form of art, it goes beyond every horizon to explore new languages and limits. On the other hand, if it is used in the Liturgy, it has to fit the liturgical needs, its times, its structures and limits, because it is the Church that prays with the music. The composer cannot force the Church's prayers to his musical expression, but has to force his art to the Church's liturgical use.

What I have just said does not mean that there is no place for more high-class sacred music, or, as some people claim, that there is no music in the Church. Every abuse against the liturgical music of the last decades is the result of misunderstandings that drifted many composers away from

liturgical composition simply because they did not find the classical structures of the “sacred genre”. The Church of the 21st century is not as focused on European culture as it was in the past, it experiences different cultures and lives, as everyone, in a completely new world where the old standpoints are no longer strong. The communication of the musical language’s symbolic references, the sense of the past and history, technology, economy, the invading media communication, all these elements make musical reflection a massive subject, with pro and cons.

In such a situation we cannot be “*laudatores temporis acti*” (worshippers of the past), we cannot exile ourselves in a barren regret of the past. As I said at the beginning, we have to work with the present means, with the current language and forms to communicate and live our faith, remembering that in the Liturgy we are in a situation that is different from that of “free composition”. In the liturgical music, the celebration has no subjective characteristics, but universal ones. The Liturgy breathes the Church’s time that is not just contemporary but also the “today” presence of the Risen Christ, the current expression of a vivid tradition, the tradition of our fathers.

In my opinion, the biggest problem is the absence of authentic sacred music outside the Liturgy: I’m not talking about music that tries to reproduce the “sacred genre”, but music that expresses the authentic faith of the composer. The composer’s sincerity is a duty here, and, despite the declarations, sometimes these pieces do not reflect the faith or the internal torment, a sincere and enthusiastic quest, praise or a deep meditation. This is not a composer’s fault, but it is a misunderstanding that relegates sacred music to the sacristy more than in the human heart.

The time we are living in, despite all its contradictions, is a favourable one to propose a strong musical art in which God is the kernel of the artistic communication, where we can listen to the present man and the eternal one, a creature singing his being, with all his force and torment. Liturgical music would have a prominent role, because it would interpret all this in a simple and clear way, becoming an authentic summary of the world’s faith in God.