

The Mystery of Music: Why and How We Sing

Paul Turner

Music is so much a part of musicians that it is hard to separate one from the other. But “Sing to the Lord” admirably analyzes what music is, where it comes from, and how it works. All of this helps liturgical musicians appreciate their craft. The opening chapter is called “Why We Sing” (paragraphs 1-14), and a later section develops the notion of how liturgical music works (67-71). Together these sections unfold the mystery of music.

“Why We Sing” treats the divine origins of music (1-2), the biblical testimony to musical prayer (3-4), the symbolic nature of music in the liturgy (5-6), as well as its paschal and evangelical dimensions (7-9). It then treats participation: the fulfillment of diverse liturgical roles (10-11), and the internal and external dimensions of participation (12-14).

“Sing to the Lord” opens with the assumption that music has a divine origin. We assent to this every time we speak of someone as a “gifted” musician. Every musician practices, but some have a God-given gift, and others do not.

The gift of music, however, is not the private possession of the musically gifted. All human beings are made for music. Everyone can appreciate its diversity and delight in favorite tunes. Like food, music can cross cultural boundaries. People who do not speak the same language can eat the same food and enjoy the same music.

“God has bestowed upon his people the gift of song.”¹ So opens “Sing to the Lord.” “God dwells within each human person, in the place where music takes its source.”² Music is present within us because God is present within us. And when one of us sings in praise, God is revealed.

Music also dwells in community. Whenever music sounds, “it is accessible to others.”³ We experience music personally, but we share the experience with those who sing, hear and play the same sound. Singing together in church expresses the sacramental presence of God.

Why do we sing? We sing because we must. God is within us, and God will not be silent.

Musical worship is ancient. Both the Old and the New Testaments bear witness to it. “Sing to the Lord” highlights the musical ministry of Moses, Deborah, David and the

¹ SL 1.

² Ibid.

³ SL 2.

community of Israel.⁴ It includes perhaps the earliest testimony to compositional inspiration, when God told Moses to write out a song and teach it to the people, “so that this song may be a witness for me.”⁵

In the New Testament Jesus, Paul and James promoted singing. Jesus concluded the Last Supper in song.⁶ Paul and Silas sang Christian hymns while in prison.⁷ Other references to music appear in New Testament epistles.

These biblical examples show that music is integral to our praise. “Sing to the Lord” explains the divine origins of music with arguments resembling natural law,⁸ but it also shows biblical evidence for the same truth:⁹ We reach God with song.

Formally this happens in our liturgical prayer. We do what our biblical ancestors did. “This common, sung expression of faith within liturgical celebrations can foster and nourish faith.”¹⁰ We can and do worship God anywhere and anytime. But when we worship in song at the liturgy, we have a unique opportunity to foster our faith. Of course, it must be done well. “Good celebrations can foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken it.”¹¹

Music is among the many words, signs and symbols we use to praise God. It follows a sacramental principle cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. “<P>erceptible realities can become means of expressing the action of God.”¹² Catholics use bread, wine, water, oil, palm, ash, wax, stone and wood to reach God. Just as we use what we see and touch, so we use what we hear and sing.

Liturgical music has a special purpose.¹³ It proclaims the victory of Christ, and it moves us to spread the Gospel.

As in the Book of Revelation¹⁴ the saints sing of the Lamb’s victory over sin and death, so all Christians sing of a new Exodus.¹⁵ Our music is not just an expression of natural desires. It affirms the supernatural plan of God made clear and certain in the resurrection.

⁴ SL 3. Unaccountably, this paragraph fails to mention the Book of Psalms, the most important historical collection of texts for liturgical music.

⁵ Dt 31:19.

⁶ Mt 26:30, Mk 14:26.

⁷ Acts 16:25.

⁸ 1-2.

⁹ 3-4.

¹⁰ SL 5.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² CCC 1148.

¹³ SL 7-9.

¹⁴ 15:3.

¹⁵ SL 7.

Although we sing praise to God most excellently in the liturgy, we carry this song even when we are dismissed. “Christ, whose praises we have sung, remains with us and leads us through the church doors to the whole world.”¹⁶

Our music, then, has an evangelical dimension. It is not just for the praise of God or the nourishment of the believer. It also moves believers to carry on their mission in the world. “Charity, justice, and evangelization are thus the normal consequences of liturgical celebration.”¹⁷

Participation in the liturgy will prepare us to participate in mission after the liturgy. Because of the diversity of gifts, various ministries serve the liturgical assembly. Each person fulfills a proper role.¹⁸ This especially applies to the congregation. “The full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else.”¹⁹ Participation is the assembly’s source of the true Christian spirit.

This participation is both internal and external. An internal participation comes from attentive listening to the prayers and readings proclaimed by others, and by the music sung by a cantor or the choir.²⁰ Even though another minister is active, participation is universal. Silent participation is counter-cultural and difficult to foster. However, silence will attract those who seriously seek God.

External participation takes many forms. In this context, singing is its obvious expression. In any form, external participation expresses internal participation. It works when we are internally at prayer. External participation without internal meaning is the formalism condemned so often in the bible. Our singing does not have to be especially artful, but it must be sincere. “The quality of our participation in such sung praise comes less from our vocal ability than from the desire of our hearts to sing together of our love for God.”²¹

“Sing to the Lord” concludes its introduction with a pastoral note about the challenge of singing when one’s interior dispositions may not fit the liturgical moment. “Sometimes, our voices do not correspond to the convictions of our hearts. At other times, we are distracted or preoccupied by the cares of the world.”²² Still, Christ invites us to enter the song. When we do, we join ourselves to his sacrifice for the glory of the Trinity.

So, how does it work? In a chapter detailing the different kinds of liturgical music, “Sing to the Lord” offers these explanations. The holiness of the music comes from its connection

¹⁶ SL 8.

¹⁷ SL 9.

¹⁸ SL 10.

¹⁹ SC 14, cited in SL 11.

²⁰ SL 12.

²¹ SL 13.

²² SL 14.

with the liturgical action, “whether making prayer more pleasing, promoting unity of minds, or conferring greater solemnity upon the sacred rites.”²³

This is first accomplished through the ritual dimension of sacred music. It needs to fit the structure and the shape of the rite.²⁴ If there is a procession, music accompanies it; it should not overshadow it. A responsorial psalm should function as a part of the proclamation of the scriptures, not as a distinct aria.

Music also relies on a spiritual dimension, “its inner qualities that enable it to add greater depth to prayer, unity to the assembly, or dignity to the ritual.”²⁵ Music that fits the ritual is not enough; it needs a deeper purpose. It draws us into prayer, and it binds us as one. Successful liturgical music is not a recitation or a performance. It taps the divine origins of music, and returns the believer to the presence of God.

“The *cultural context* refers to the setting in which the ritual and spiritual dimensions come into play.”²⁶ Factors ranging from ethnicity to age to musical tastes all have an influence on the way music works. A piece that works in one setting may not work in another.

Music is as diverse as musicians. Various styles afford manifold opportunities for enhancing the liturgical celebration. “Sing to the Lord” promotes selections “from the Church’s treasury of sacred music” as well as “a fruitful dialogue between the Church and the modern world.”²⁷ Not every contemporary musical style fits the liturgy. This has been true throughout history. But some new styles have the potential for deepening our prayer, and the Church is open to them.

We sing because we must. We do it in sincerity of heart. We rely on the wisdom of the past and the experience of today. God who is present in every age is always present to us whenever we sing in praise.

“The Mystery of Music: Why and How We Sing,” *Pastoral Music* 32:4 (April-May 2008):13-14.

²³ SC 112, cited in SL 67.

²⁴ SL 68.

²⁵ SL 69.

²⁶ SL 70.

²⁷ SL 71.