

# CHAPTER 34

## SACRED MUSIC AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN THE (CATHOLIC) CHURCH

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### **Abstract**

Sacred music for liturgical worship, at the earliest stage of Christianity, did not all originate from Christianity itself, rather there were many influences from the preceding Judaism which provided the historical, natural background from which Christianity emanates. From the Old Testament, or under the old law, the joyous music of the temple fulfilled and played a very elaborate role in compliance with the commands of God. In Exodus 15:1, “Moses and the Israelites praised and worshipped God in songs” In the new law, and by implication, Christianity, the Apostles and the disciples maintained the traditions of gathering on the first day of the week Sunday, as against the last day of Sabbath which they followed Jesus, the master to attend before he was crucified. In these gatherings, one thing common to both is that they would always sing psalms, and praises to God, in worship. However, apart from mere singing of psalms and songs of thanksgiving and praises to God always, there was no known record of any other development in sacred song, until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when the monks and some fathers of the church started composing individuals' plainchants for different rites of the liturgy. How these compositions were saved and improved on nature and the background to the harvest of those solemn compositions, would form the purview, and aim of this historical survey, and exposition.

**Keywords:** Sacred music, Church, Development

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### **Introduction**

The nature or essence of a thing is that which makes it what it is, and not the other, but different from it. Simply put, sacred music, as the coinage suggests is music based on sacred subjects like God, and things about Him, like worship of God, the Holy, Morality, etc., whose aim is ultimately

the exaltation of God, and the disposition of the subjects or the congregation to worship God as such.

According to Vatican II's "*Musicam sacram*", sacred music "is understood as that music being created for the celebration of divine worship; is endowed with a certain holy sincerity of form". Clarifying further on the forms of music that should be considered sacred, it enumerates thus, "Gregorian chants, sacred polyphony in its various forms, both ancient and modern; sacred music for the organ, and other approved instruments, and sacred popular music, be it liturgical, or simply religious"

From the above enumerations, we shall identify the natural and simple forms of praises, ranging from the psalms which are called "*Tehilim*" in Hebrew, songs of thanksgiving implored in the worship of Yahweh in the temple or synagogues of the Jewish people, as the very background of the origin, uses and gradual development of sacred music in Christianity, ranging from the first gathering of the Apostles and disciples after Christ resurrection in history as Christianity.

### **Development of Sacred Music in the Catholic Church: From psalms to Plain Chart**

It is undeniable, to stress here, that sacred songs, spontaneous by originated, through God's inescapable desires to express their spiritual feelings and experiences of joyful praises, and thanksgiving to God, in response to the various marvellous deeds of the Lord in their lives, in their milieu, as captured in their relationship and journey with Him through the ministries and leadership of the prophets, and Apostles in their various times.

Thus, the sacred music used in liturgical worship developed from simple forms, like the recitations of the psalms, by the Apostles and disciples of the early church, to the individual composition, inspired by the monks, and others who were able to do so. The recitation of these psalms was known as the liturgy of the hours. Thus, it was the psalms that provided the materials, upon which other compositions emanated. The general instruction on the divine office (No 100) offers more elaborations on this...

In the liturgy of the hours, the church, for the most part, prays with those beautiful songs composed under the inspiration of the sacred authors of the Old Testament. From the beginning, they have had the power to raise men's minds to God evoke in them holy and wholesome thoughts, help them to give thanks in times of favour, and to bring consolation and constancy in adversity.

So, from the foregoing, it remains clear, that the psalms were borne in the Old Testament era, and were dated as far back, as the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and even later, and were generally, believed to have been authored and composed by David, who was gifted with the playing of the (lyre or harp). Thus etymologically, the psalm is called in Hebrew, "*Tehillim*", meaning 'songs of praise'. In the Psalm,

the Hebrews praised the wonders of the Lord, which he did in history, and continues to do at all times. And responding to the command of the Lord, in Lk 18:1, "Pray without ceasing" the church of the New Testament, continued with the rendering of the Psalms, in Liturgical hours to invoke God, praise him, and often their days. Corroborating this, the prefect of the sacred congregation for divine worship, Arthur Tabera, (1971) says,

In the liturgy of the hours, which the church from very early times has been accustomed to reciting during the day, she fulfils the command of the Lord to pray without ceasing.... The second council of the Vatican, valuing highly this long-standing custom of the church, and wishing to renew it, took care to have this form of prayer revised so that it could more fittingly be used by the clergy and other members of the church in the circumstances of modern life.

Thus, it has become clear, that the sacred music of the church of the New Testament, Christianity, was influenced basically, and mainly by Judaism, or the Old Testament church, other influences came from the 'pagan cultures, assuming the word, pagan to be, 'unchristen cultures, like the Greek and Roman cultures.

According to Fellerer (1969), "sacred music in its origins, developed from the music of Hebrew and pagan, worship, and then separated itself distinctly from pagan secular music" This logically means that since Judaism was the religion of the Hebrews, it was natural to occur, since Christianity was an offshoot from the former, though different from it, influences from the mother religion, even in her music and experience, were inevitable, since it was the same Apostles and disciples, who attended the worship session, at the Synagogues with Jesus Christ, continued in Christianity, after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, would consistently gather to sing songs of thanksgiving and praises, mainly the Psalms, as were done, under the old law, which prescribed using different existing instruments then, like the harp, tambourines, cymbals, lyre, to worship God. A typical example, is in Psalm 150, which says, "O praise him, with the sound of trumpets. Praise him with lute and harp. Praise him with timbre and dance" (Psalm 150:1-2). Furthermore, St. Paul, the later Apostles to the gentiles exhorted the Colossians, in his letter, chapter 3:16, thus, "... teach and instruct each other with all wisdom. Sing Psalms, hymns and sacred songs to God, with thanksgiving in your hearts". The Greek meaning of the Psalms, "*Psallein*, meaning "to pluck the strings of a harp" corroborates the fact that the singing of the Psalms, as *songs* of praises formed the bulk of the sacred songs of the early Christian church.

However, as the church grew in years and experiences and knowledge, changes and improvement in the method, and styles of this religion naturally, followed. Besides apart from the direct influences from the content of Hebrew worship and style, other concrete influences on the sacred music of early Christianity came from Greco-Roman cultures. This was because, those cultures or civilizations were already advanced in education, literature and music before the advent of Christianity.

The Graeco-Roman cultures, then, were regarded as paganist and thus their music was devoted to their different gods. True to type, it was believed and held by the Greeks that the gods were the chief inspirations of music and other arts like poetic writings and dramas. According to an ancient Greek writer, Homer (750BC), "the muses were pre-eminently the goddesses of songs.... And were also seen in the Greek cosmogony as the sources of human wisdom, when it was expressed in speech, especially in poetry, though not merely by the poet". Thus, the Greeks believed that musical knowledge and songs, come from the inspirations from the gods. Little wonder, the Greek word "mousike" is itself derived from Mousa – "muse", and hence was applied it all branches art over which the muses were supposed to preside".

It sounds logical and convincing that their already advanced cultures left some influences on the sacred music of the Apostles and Christianity as a church, because of her contact with them. The disciples from the command of Christ were to "go into the nations, proclaiming the good news" (Mt 28:18-20). After the reception of the Holy Spirit, according to the instruction of Christ (Lk 24:49) some of the Apostles, including Peter, had to go to the Pagan Rome, which doubles as the seat of the world political power then, to proclaim the good news. There at Rome, they were influenced, for example, the organ was a pagan instrument, but was adopted, blessed and christened, for use in Liturgy.

As a result of the influences, from pagan cultures on the music of early Christianity, there came immediately, in the early church, the problem of distinguishing between truly sacred music from secular or profane ones. According to Fellerer J, (1969), "St Augustine, the most remarkable music enthusiast's in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, "struggled to separate the idea of theological music, from the rationalist's conception of ancient music, and he conceived of the ancient song as Christian prayer". Thus, with the conception of ancient sacred songs of the church, Apostles and even the magnificent of Mary (Lk 1:46-55), and the canticles as prayer the faithful, monks, clergy and worshippers at the time were encouraged to focus on singing meditatively. Thus, Augustine's distinction and conception of sacred music as prayer was very crucial in the development of a new course for sacred music in the church. With this conception, and specification, sacred music of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and later was expected to dispose the worshippers into prayer (and meditation) which is communication with God; a communion that involves the praise, and glorification of God, and the sanctification of the worshippers. Corroborating then, Feller (1969), opines that "The religious meaning of music as opposed to ancient pagan production, is that at the same time, prayer and the interpretation of Christian poetry are joined in a purely musical and artistic form.

### **Emergence and Organization of Plainchant.**

With the conception of sacred songs as prayer and the specification that sacred songs should inspire meditation, in the fourth century or early medieval, priests and monks started composing short, and simple meditative songs for the different rites in the liturgy of the church. These songs, in their simple forms, were only single-line melodies that could be sung in unison by one or two

singers at the same time. That, a form of song, or composition, was championed by the priest and monks in the monasteries. As they were simple line melodies, they didn't have any accompaniment. This form of composition in the Latin language was called plain chant. Because they have single-line melodies, followed the direction or conception of the sacred song as a prayer magnet, and are capable of evoking a meditative disposition in the singers, and worshippers. Highlighting the impressive nature of these songs, Fellerer (1969) writes, there existed sacred music, intimately connected to the liturgy, which developed its internal laws through its role in worship, and which filled the ancient musical form with a new spirit.

Of course, there was no other form of music being allowed to try the above description than the plain chant, sung by the monks in unison, with no accompaniment, or harmony. According to Renald (1992), the plain chant has “a calm, other-worldly effect and harmoniously represents the collective voice of the church rather than an individual”. Thus, according to Thomas, (1992), in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, there developed new musical form which was adapted to the use of a new order of divine worship this new musical form precisely called monophonic liturgical chants began in the early middle age, especially in late 6<sup>th</sup> century, with Pope Gregory I (540-604). It was during this time that the vast number of traditional melodies were codified, and organized. During this time, “Gregorian monks want to find a way is transcribe music, so that they could more precisely teach and save Gregorian charts for future generations. It was for this reasoning that the monks developed *neumes*, which are dots, lines, and combinations of the two that describe the type of pitch, or ornamentation in a specific chart”.

It is worthy of note that it was Pope Gregory, the great who championed the codification and organization, of this special type of music for the Eucharist. As such, this music was named Gregorian charts, because it was this Pope that facilitated their organization, during his reign. Interestingly, the Gregorian chant, became the principal form of sacred liturgical music in the church, from the time it was developed to the first millennium (6<sup>th</sup> century, to the first 1,000 AD) beyond the Carolingian times (800-888 AD). This time, however, anticipated future development that would differ from the plain chant. From plain Gregorian chant to counter-point. (Harmony).

### **Development of Organum**

According to Lehner, (1969), “the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the era of the Carolingian renaissance with its palace school and liturgical reforms has also provided the first example of a written counterpoint in the anonymous treatise musical *Euchiriadis*”. Thus, with the development of this written counter-point, a great turning point was achieved, in that it marked a shift from the status which had only single-line melodies in plainchant. Thus, the 9<sup>th</sup> century saw the development of organum. This was where an extra voice was added above the main melody, usually at a fixed interval of a perfect fourth or fifth away. This could be seen as an extremely primitive form of counter-point (the relationship between simultaneously interdependent musical lines), and the beginning harmony as we now know it.

In summary, “throughout the medieval era which spanned from AD500 to AD400, early sacred music evolved from simple melodies sung in unison (monophonic) to complex melodies with harmonies. Thus, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the anonymous, treatise “*Musica Enchiriadis*”, developed most probably by the monks, was the first written form of counter-point that pre-empted the development of polyphony later in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, in confirmation of this development Lehner, writes... in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there developed side by side, with the musical art cultivated by the church, a secular musical art which had its form, its style and methods of performance. This secular music tried to enter the church, not as an attempt at secularization, but as a typical musical expression of the new society”

This confirmation also underscores the significance of the church's musical base as the seed for the development of music, not only in her institution but also in the wider secular society. The church, and her music, through the monks gave attention to music learning and its growth, to the extent that many discoveries and innovations were attributed to them. It was then that they developed solfa notation, through Guido d' Aresso. He created a fixed pattern that directly correlates with the first six notes of a scale, which was the start of the modern-day music technique: solfege which helps students learn how to sing-notated music.

So, through the discoveries, and innovations of the monks of the church, who developed the above pattern, many other improvements were done in the secular society. For example, the initiating and development of counter-point via the monks, which created the idea of harmony and even the modes (scales), paved the way for the development of the 60<sup>th</sup> Organum, and later Polyphony occurs when two or more voices sing independently yet the notes join together to create harmony. Polyphony's discovery, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, was pre-empted by the discovery and development of counter-point, or Organum, by the monks, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Carolingian era.

### **Renaissance**

Sacred music in the renaissance Era (1400-1600) the development of polyphony, in secular society coincided with the renaissance era. Renaissance, etymologically – a re-birth it was a period of rebirth of ancient learning. Indeed, in music, it was a period when the discoveries previously made by the monks were given full attention and development. There was, therefore, a significant increase in religious music because the church encouraged musicians to compose music. Although court/palace musicians played and sang secular folk music, most of the music composed during this time, was sacred music for the church, in the form of masses and motets in Latin. Because of the continual development of musical instruments, composers accompanied polyphonic Latin singing with new instruments such as the viola de Gamba (six-stringed instrument).

Further, it was during the Renaissance, that another significant advancement was made in church music, which was "the wide-scale dissemination of polyphonic musical texts through European countries. It was indeed a period of great musical fecundity and harvest. For example, "at the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ottaviano Petrucci, printed the first music book: “*Harmonic Musices*

*Odhecaton*. A. it was because of this book that music, which had previously been hand-written by monks, began to be printed for larger use within the church.

Besides pressure from polyphonic compositions, from the secular society, it tended to overshadow the lifelong tradition of plain chant style, and hence proved a challenge to the church, whose hierarchy had to intervene to preserve the identity and primacy of Gregorian chant as the centre and core of the church's musical patrimony. Thus, granted that polyphonic composition brought a touching variety, yet came with its attendant problems, but then, Pope John XXII, took a middle course, to arrest the situation. Hence, the church did not reject the polyphonic style totally, while maintaining Gregorian chant as the core of the sacred Liturgical music.

### **The Council of Trent Regulation (1545-1563)**

The council of Trent was held in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and did not lose sight of the need to address and preserve the rich heritage of sacred music acquired or developed by the church, before its time. To check distractive influences from polyphony from the secular world, and music, the council in session 22, on instructing the bishops of different dioceses on what should be avoided in the holy mass states, they shall banish from the churches all such music which, whether by the Organ or in the singing, contains things that are lascivious or impure.

Moreover, in a similar move, in 1562, a canon was approved at the council that banned from sacred music, all seductive or impure melodies, all vain and worldly texts, and all outcries and uproars, and decreed that the words be understandable. Thus, in this way, Trent reacted against the later excesses of polyphony, in its contrapuntal structure, that obscured the understanding of the text. Unlike the monophonic, plain charts, whose words were easily understood, polyphony in its form of music could make the text obscure, while being rendered due to many voices, including the instruments. However, despite this defect, it became the form of music that would be the object of study by some Renaissance periods musicians like Giovanni Palestrina, Felix Mendelsohn, and G. Allegri etc.

In the same Renaissance period, the best works of the time were examined by the masters of the papal chapel, and the chapel of the court of Munich under the direction of Orlando di Lasso (1532-1594)., they did establish norms for sacred music that would correspond with the needs of the Liturgy and the text. Eventually, they decided then, that "the ideal liturgical music set the text in a polyphony that was homophonic, with all the voices singing the same words" in fact, this became a perfect realization of the musical legacy of Pope John XXII and preserved by the council of Trent. After Trent, the next known document that addressed sacred music came in 1657 from pope Alexander VII in the constitution "*Piae sollicitudines studio*" later pope Benedict XIV, in 1749 in his "Annus Qui" condemned the emerging abuses connected with the operatic style. Earlier than that Clement XII had also published the document "musicians in Pagan worship" which was an overview of "Annus Qui".

Critically one thing significant about the late medieval period, and the magnification and mega-development of the polyphonic style of composition, was that unlike the earlier medieval when

the church, through the monks were innovating the Gregorian chants and other discoveries, and advancement, the late medieval, or precisely 1400-1600, saw the secular society, or composers who were not monks, championing the composition of music polyphonic, expressing their styles and innovations. However, the hierarchy of the church consistently acted as moderators, and regulators, which could be said to have been the origin of music commissions in the Catholic Church. This need has often been to maintain the real integrity, identity, and soundness of sacred music, as a rich adjunct, to and vehicle to worship.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sources for the registration of sacred music started with the "Mote Proprio" of November 22, 1963. The fundamental idea of Pius X's "*Motie Proprio*". *Tra le sollicitudini*, states that, Sacred music is an integrated part of the solemn Liturgy. The 'raison degree and importance of sacred music does not derive from the artistic doctrine of art for art's sake, rather, it is an integral part of the Liturgy, and as such, it must be expressed as perfectly as possible in composition as well as in performance...

Speaking at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the pontifical institute of sacred music, on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2011, cardinal Farina, the then director of the Vatican Liturgy and secret archives, said of the rich patrimony of the church's sacred music, and her constant denominator thus

Through the various epochs and their languages, sacred music has translated the liturgy into melody, revealing the mystery of the encounter between God, and the heart of man, who listens. Sacred music is a guide to the palate and resonance that leads to the depths of the mystery. Moreover, in virtue of its universality and the fact that it touches the cords of the most profound desire in every man, sacred music can reach and draw in even the most estranged persons, bringing them to the truth of the word. Prayer becomes Chant and chant becomes a prayer to give glory to God, as the fathers well illustrate (suffice it to think of Ambrose and Augustine), who single out and expressed all the potentialities of liturgical chant.

### **Vatican II Council (1962-1965)**

It will be almost unthinkable, to skip the influential impact of the Vatican II council (Which was held between 1962-1965), on sacred music. In summary, Vatican II, in her *Musican Sacram*, unified all the previous regulations on sacred music, by the popes before her. In her "*Musicam Sacram*", which was issued later after the council on 5<sup>th</sup> March 1967. It simply summarized the roles of sacred music as:

- Expressing prayer more delightfully,
- Fostering unity of minds,



- Enriching sacred rites with great solemnity and fostering active participation of the people, in the liturgy.

Thus, with the above prescription, an enduring modality for guiding real sacred music, in its mission, and value, was laid. Finally, it will amount to a sad neglect and omission, if this detailed historical survey on the development of sacred music in the catholic church, (Christianity), is concluded, without mentioning the fact, that one of the greatest impacts of Vatican II, is the opening of the window of acceptance of the fact that diversities of cultures in the church can start singing and composing sings for the liturgy in their various vernaculars, or languages. This was a sharp, necessary deviation, from the insistence of the Council of Trent or Vad. I left the previous chants only in Latin. So, with this window, the consistent growth in local composition, in various cultures thrived, to the glory of God, and the joy of the congregations, the young, and children, who might not be comfortable with the Latin language.

### **Conclusion**

It is interesting to recall that almost every growth had a simple, gradual beginning to a complex one or stage. It is a truism to remark that a prayerful atmosphere and environment breed inspiration for musical composition. That was why the monks harvested a lot of compositions in plain chants orally, and aurally transmitted and taught, till they grew in large, enormous numbers, that warranted scripting, recording, keeping, and transmission to future generations. Thus in the spirit of the praise and worship of God which sacred music ornaments and facilitates, sacred music remains almost the totality of what worship is and can never be removed from it, without touching its major fabrics. According to Marie Corelli (1903) in her book “The Soul of Lillith” .....

God is the great creator of planets at whose bidding, great worlds are born. To the seven declared tones of music, add seventy million more. And let them ring their sweetest cadence, they shall make but a feeble echo of the music of God's voice”

On another note, a quote from Blessed Hildegard may be succinct here,

The song of rejoicing softens hard hearts, and draws forth them the tears of repentance ...jubilant praise, offered in simple harmony and love, leads the faithful to that harming in which is no discord, and makes those who still live on earth long for the heavenly reward.

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