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Worship Music in a Synthetic Culture

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(This article by Professor Davis, D.D., of Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary, Maywood, Illinois, was presented as an address to a convocation at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.)

YOU asked me to speak to you on some subject of my own choosing within the area of worship and culture. I have chosen the announced topic because I am deeply concerned about it not so much as a musician but primarily as a man of the church. I think there are aspects of this subject which are of vital concern to the whole church, all of us together, and I know no place in the United States of America where I think the kind of questions I want to raise today will get a fairer and more intelligent hearing than on the Concordia campus. I shall address myself particularly this morning to those of you who do not think of yourselves as musicians.

I hope I do not give you a wrong impression when I speak of our culture as synthetic. I do not mean either to condemn it or to praise it. I suspect that there may be one or two aspects of our culture that perhaps fall a little short of perfection, but I do not now intend the word synthetic as a term of disparagement. On the contrary, some things in our synthesis seem to me to be quite clearly gains of no slight importance, but I am not inclined to brag about it either. I use the term "synthetic culture" for what it is worth as a descriptive term. What I mean by it will, I hope, become clear as we discuss the question of church music.

The condition I have particularly in

mind is the result, of course, of modern developments in transportation and particularly in photography and the reproduction of sound. I think these things have brought on a situation which calls for a reconsideration of a good many things because it is absolutely unprecedented. Images of sight and sound from a hundred cultures, traditional ways in art and craft and thought and manners, come together in our living rooms, and our experience is a synthesis of them all. Jacqueline Kennedy deplanes in India, and we not only see her and the crowds and the buildings of India but also hear the plaintive flutes speaking a musical language so strange that we do not know whether they are affirming or protesting.

Multiplied 100 times and varied in 1,000 ways, these impressions do not leave us as we were before. Any American's taste in the arts is likely to bring together unrelated bits from all over the world and all periods of history. On my mantel for example, is a neck-stretching crane, hand carved from black buffalo horn by an anonymous artisan in South India. There hangs a wooden mask from the island of Bali, a face which apparently reflects something amusing but is very, very non-committal about it. Here is a "St. James Boanerges" by Richard Caemmerer, Jr., which I bought in your bookstore. There is a "Christ on the Cross" by George Rouault, No. 57 of his "Miserere." And here between bookcases hangs a page of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* with accounts and woodcuts of three worthies and an eclipse

of the sun that occurred at the sixth hour on Aug. 28, 1448. I shudder to think what this collection could do to me in the hands of a Freudian analyst.

The stock of photographic images in the brain of an American, the stuff of his visual memory and imagination, is drawn from all races and climes and from all periods of history that have left monuments on the surface or under the surface of this planet. This synthesis, or whatever you wish to call it, imposes the necessity of eclecticism. It has everything to do with the way we build churches today. And what is much more important, in my judgment, it has everything to do with the way we look at churches and use them after they are built. The architect only designs and builds the church. It is the people who must make it an instrument of worship.

But our concern today is with music, audible images of memory and imagination. What the *National Geographic* and other magazines have for many years been doing to our eyes, this the radio, the phonograph, the tape recorder are now doing to our ears. An American can hear a wider variety of music in a week than his grandfather could hear in a whole lifetime, and many of them do. It is not only music from all contemporary cultures; it is from all the centuries backward, as far as there are written documents for the musicologists to work on. When my wife tunes in the early morning program on our FM station, we may of course hear anything at all this side of Haydn and Mozart. But we are quite as likely to hear Handel and Bach, or Vivaldi or Corelli or Heinrich Schütz or Gabrieli (we heard Gabrieli yesterday morning), or Palestrina or Jos-

quin De Pres. And on occasions that are not very rare it may be music even older than this: Dufay in the 1400s and Machaut in the 1300s or early polyphony in the school of Notre Dame in Paris when that cathedral was still unfinished and Thomas Aquinas was still unborn.

And the unprecedented thing about our cultural situation is that all this music is accessible, not only in manuscripts and printed scores for the use of professional or semiprofessional musicians but also as living sound for anyone who has ears to hear it. Because the variety of accessible music is so great, different persons in our Sunday congregations come with musical experiences and tastes as different as if they lived in different worlds. The churchgoer's musical standards and ideas are no longer limited, as they once were, to the music performed in the church and schools and other occasions in his community.

All this raises questions about the music of worship in our churches. Many of these questions have to do with historical and theoretical matters in which I cannot expect all of you to be interested. Yet the music of worship is of vital concern to us all, as for example, church architecture is a vital concern to us all. The questions about church architecture have been raised, and I think they are being faced and even answered interestingly, if not always with entire success. I do not think the question of church music has yet been raised with equal clarity. I wish to raise a question or two about it.

First, there is the professional music of the organ and choir, the special music in which the church's part is to listen and not to participate in the performance. Here a sensible person can only rejoice at

the greatly enriched repertoire made possible by the new interest in older music. Fine music of the past not only is available for performance but also has improved the quality of contemporary compositions. The Word of God and the Gospel of Christ can speak in our churches in a voice more worthy of its ageless power.

Yet let us face the fact that the taste for such music is an acquired taste. It does not speak to everyone alike. It is professional music, developed in Western and European culture, and its full appreciation calls for a semi-professional listener, a person with whom so-called serious music is a special interest or hobby that distinguishes him from those about him and perhaps marks him as an odd-ball. In my granddaughter Florence's gang at high school, rock and roll was the thing last year. I do not know what it is this season, but I do know that recently, when she was heard humming a Beethoven theme in the hall, she would have died rather than tell what it was.

Now I am quite sure we shall go right on using the very best music we can in our churches, as we ought to do. And in the long run both Florence and her cronies will be glad if we do. The worship of God should make high demands on us, should stretch our minds and hearts to larger dimensions. But I do not think we can afford to ignore the questions raised by our cultural situation, or suppose that they have already been definitively answered.

The question of music for the congregation's part in liturgical worship seems to me to be a far more critical question. If the church is the people as we say it is, if the worship of God — the prayer, praise,

thanksgiving, confession, self-commitment — must be not only congregational but corporate, performed by all acting as one, not by the minister and choir while the people merely witness it, then the music needs to be a natural and spontaneous expression of what is deepest and most personal in us all. And where shall we look for music of this kind? This becomes a concern of the whole church, not just of professional church musicians.

Shall it be English chant, since we are worshiping in English? Shall it be unison melody like the chorale of the German and Scandinavian tradition, since we are Lutherans? Shall it be Gregorian melody, since that has voiced the prayer of the Western church for a thousand years, and we are Westerners? Theoretically, it may seem that the oldest church music, tried and proved by long use, must necessarily be the best. That is a widespread assumption, is it not? I think it is a questionable assumption.

Let me ask you to look at this question in the light of what we think about church architecture. If it is stultifying to imitate the style of medieval and Gothic architecture, why is it wholesome to imitate the style and mood of medieval music? Or to put the question less negatively, if the church in our day is called to fresh, honest, and contemporary ways in building, is she not called to fresh, honest, and natural ways in musical expression? If she can build freshly, why can she not sing the praise of God freshly?

As a matter of fact, the attempt to recapture the past in music is more hopeless than in architecture. Byzantine and Romanesque and Gothic ways of building have left monuments in substantial stone

which can be seen, measured, photographed. Ancient music has left no such monuments in sound, and music is sound. A manuscript or printed score is not music. We simply do not know how ancient Christian music sounded, plainsong or Greek chant, or Syrian, or any other, for two reasons. First, there was no notation to show exactly how it went. Secondly, there was no assumption that music could be written exactly as it was sung, or that it should be sung exactly as written by everybody alike. That is a very modern and very Western notion indeed.

Plainsong, for example. The only Gregorian music you and I have ever heard, is a 20th-century reconstruction. It follows the interpretation of ancient documents by antiquarians who do not always agree on their interpretation, and it is sung, whether at Solesmes or Beuron or wherever, by voices trained in a European *bel canto* style of singing that would no doubt sound very strange to medieval Christians.

I hope that I may not be misunderstood at this point. I am not an enemy of Gregorian music. Rather I love it, as I love the sculpture and stained glass of Chartres Cathedral. Nor am I opposed to its use in our worship, if we are to use any old music and if it can be successfully divorced from the Latin language and happily remarried to the English. I think that has as yet been done only with a few hymns and those simple and flexible melodies or intonations that we call the Gregorian tones. When Dr. Buszin sets the text of an Introit to one of these little tunes, he is working with the very oldest music in Christian history, not Gregorian strictly speaking, but much older than Gregory. The studies of Curt Sachs, Idelsohn, Eric

Werner, and Egon Wellesz have traced these very tunes from the synagogue through the Eastern churches and languages and into the Latin rite. It should not surprise us that, if any old music can be a fit medium for the Biblical text, it will be this music.

But the question, as I see it, is not which one of the older musical traditions the church should follow in its worship music, but whether it should attempt to perpetuate any of the older musical styles. The question is easier to raise than it is to answer. I do not come with an answer, for I do not think that any wholly satisfactory answer has yet begun to take shape.

How different should the music of worship be from the music outside the church? It can safely be said that in the past every time the music of worship has renewed and enriched itself, it has done so, not by a return to an older style of church music, but by a synthesis of the best musical theory and practice known at the time outside as well as inside the church. This was conspicuously true of the birth of Protestant music in the 16th century. It is also true that since the Renaissance the greatest Christian music has been written by men who composed it very much as they composed music for use outside the church. How valid is the distinction between sacred and secular in music? Between liturgical and nonliturgical music? Why does the best religious music from Mozart and Haydn to Stravinsky and Poulenc get performed and heard only in the concert industry, the recording and broadcast industry, and seldom if ever in the church?

The people of Christ's church are of course a peculiar people in their generation

and culture. The worship of God is not an ordinary activity like all the other people engage in. The Word of God and the Gospel of Christ are not a consensus of the best thoughts and dearest wishes of mankind. But must we require people to accept not only these but also a peculiar and perhaps unnatural kind of music that goes along with them? This question becomes crucial when we hear Christians in Africa, India, and Japan trying to sing the praise of God in a musical idiom that is peculiar to West-European culture.

Up to now I have said nothing about current proposals to use popular music in the worship of the church. Theoretically it might seem that this is the thing to do. If we had a traditional music that was vital, that was familiar and natural to us all, that belonged to the whole people, not just professional musicians and a few amateurs, a music through which we were accustomed to express our inner selves—then undoubtedly, in my opinion, this is the music out of which we should shape

our praise. But one penalty of our synthetic or diffused culture is that we have no traditional music. Jazz is no more the music of us all than is Latin American music, or mountain music, or stage music, or folk ballads, or for that matter, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, or Bach.

I have to stop this, though we have only begun to inquire into the question of worship music. Let me say only one thing that I deeply believe. I believe the church is called in this day, as in every day, to sing the praise of God freshly, in music that is an honest and natural response to His grace, our own response, not the imitation of some former response. I believe that when that is done, it will produce a real synthesis of old and new, as all genuine art is. It will be an offering which nobody but we can make, of a kind that could rise only in our time and place. I believe that we are all called together to this task and that it is the task of us all.

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