

Why do we sing at Mass?

Why do we sing so much at Mass? Hymns, prayers, psalms, responses...almost everything apart from the homily can be sung in the Mass (I suppose I could sing the homily, but I'll spare you...) What's the deal with this?

The Second Vatican council's constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says this: "The purpose of sacred music...is the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful." We sing to give God glory, and we sing so that through our participation in the work of God in the liturgy, we might become holy. And the song we sing is not something we make up on our own. When we come to Mass, we come to something that we've received as part of a tradition of thousands of years of worshipping God. For example, we still sing the Psalms which were composed almost 3000 years ago!

We also enter into the song of the angels and saints in heaven. Some of the words we sing are taken directly from the lips of angels: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will" (*Gloria*, and Luke 2:14); "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory!" (*Sanctus*, Isaiah 6:3, Revelation 4:8).

To take things back even further, we enter into the song of love and praise of the Trinity, which has taken place and will take place for all eternity: "Christ Jesus, high priest of the new and eternal covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven." Jesus has taken on our humanity and brought us to share in the life of God. And at Mass, Jesus "joins the entire community of mankind to Himself, associating it with His own singing of this canticle of divine praise" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy).

All of this brings up an important distinction: We don't sing at Mass, we sing the Mass. That is, we don't just happen to add songs in at Mass as if they were something extra, we sing the words given to us by the Church and so enter into what God is already doing. Our singing is a participation in the very life of God, singing a song of love with Jesus, in the Holy Spirit, to the Father. For this reason, the Church emphasizes that our singing is a "necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy." As St. Augustine says: "Only the lover sings." We sing because we love, because God loves us and because we seek to love Him in return.

What do we sing in the Mass?

There is a lot to this question, but first and foremost it is important to stress once again that we sing what we have received. If each person were to come to Mass singing his or her own words, or singing the same words but to a different melody, things would disintegrate into chaos pretty quickly. We sing as distinct members of the one Body of Christ, united under Christ our head, each raising our voice in unison to praise God. Pope Benedict even called Jesus the choir director who teaches us to sing along with the heavenly liturgy.

When we pray and sing the Mass, we enter into a tradition of worship of God that the apostles and saints have handed on to us, and which ought not to be carelessly changed. Following the direction of Jesus, the Word of God, we sing the words of the Mass as they are given us by the Church, the majority of which are inspired from or directly based on Sacred Scripture. Christ Himself is the Word. We receive the words of Scripture and the liturgy and should prioritize singing those words in a way that places the emphasis on the words themselves, not changing them to fit a melody or inserting some other text altogether.

Typically, when we speak to someone, we think first and then the words that come from our mouth express the thoughts or feelings we carry inside. In the liturgy, we speak first, not making up our own words, but allowing the words we pray to conform our minds and hearts to the mind and heart of Christ. We don't shape the liturgy; the liturgy shapes us. Praying and singing the words of Scripture teaches us to pray; the parts of the Mass are a kind of extended meditation on the Word of God which leads us to contemplation.

If we were to step through the whole Mass, almost all of its parts can be sung, right from 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit', to 'Go in peace'. We sing the words of the Mass because the back and forth sung dialogue of priest and people symbolizes and sacramentalizes the dialogue of love sung between Christ the head (represented by the priest) and the members of His body, the Church (represented by the congregation). In other words, Jesus the bridegroom and His bride, the Church, are engaged in singing love songs to one another, and we are privileged to be able to join in. For this reason, the Church sees those dialogues between priest and people as being of the first order of importance in what is sung in the Mass. But what about the other parts that change every week, and seem more 'added on', like hymns?

What do we sing in the Mass? (Part II)

In addition to the dialogues between priest and people and some of the other prayers which are standard from Sunday to Sunday, there are other parts of the Mass that change and seem more 'added on', like the songs during the opening procession or communion. What does the Church propose for us to sing at those times? Let's look at what the General Instruction of the Roman Missal has to say (the instructions for how to celebrate Mass). This quote describes the possible options which could be sung at the Entrance Chant (often called the 'opening hymn'):

“This chant is sung alternately by the choir and the people or similarly by a cantor and the people, or entirely by the people, or by the choir alone. In the Dioceses of the United States of America, there are four options for the Entrance Chant: (1) the antiphon from the Missal or the antiphon with its Psalm from the *Graduale Romanum**, as set to music there or in another setting; (2) the antiphon and Psalm of the *Graduale Simplex** for the liturgical time; (3) a chant from another collection of Psalms and antiphons, approved by the Conference of Bishops or the Diocesan Bishop, including Psalms arranged in responsorial or metrical forms; (4) another liturgical chant that is suited to the sacred action, the day, or the time of year, similarly approved by the Conference of Bishops or the Diocesan Bishop.”

Notice that the first three out of four options are all forms of singing the Psalms, with varying degrees of complexity. The last option allows for another chant which may not be directly from Scripture, but is connected to the Scriptures of the day, or the part of the Mass, or the liturgical season. But the strong preference of the Church is that we continue to use the Psalms, the hymnbook with which the people of God have praised Him for going on 3000 years. In the Psalms, God Himself teaches us how to praise Him, and so we give them pride of place.

But what kind of music, or genre, or style ought to be used? More next week.

*[FYI, the *Graduale Romanum* is the standard songbook of the Catholic Mass; it collects all of the ordinary (same words at every Mass, e.g. the *Gloria*) and proper (changes from Mass to Mass, e.g. the entrance chant) chants for the whole liturgical year. The *Graduale Simplex* is a simpler version with a few options for each liturgical season. Both are in Latin. The fundamental principle of each is the same: chanted scriptural antiphons and Psalm verses.]

What style of music is appropriate for Mass?

I'm sure there is great variety in the styles of music each of likes to listen to: rock, folk, pop, classical, etc. We've probably also all heard a great variety of styles of music played at Mass (including maybe all of the above). If, as I mentioned before, the Church's preference is that the Word of God be front and center in the words we sing in the Mass, can we use any style of music we want, as long as the words are from Scripture or are connected to the liturgical action?

Well, to put it bluntly: no. From the Second Vatican Council: "The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy" (SC 112). The musical tradition of the Church is of greater value than St. Peter's Basilica or the Sistine Chapel! That's a bold claim. Of what does the Church's musical tradition principally consist? Again from Vatican II "The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services. But other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations, so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action" (SC 116).

As I've pointed out before, Christ is the Word, and we should prioritize singing the words of the liturgy in a way that places emphasis on the words themselves. Often we may hear things sung at Mass that clearly started with a common tune or melody, and then found a way to fit the words into that melody. What the Church asks for is the opposite. And it is for this reason that she prioritizes chant, which is very much a 'word first' kind of music. Its rhythm is based on the words themselves, not on a predetermined meter, and singing this way allows us to more easily meditate on the Word of God and be drawn into prayer. It's also important to mention here that this isn't simply a matter of preference: I like folk, you like rock, but the Pope likes chant and so that's what we're stuck with in the liturgy. No, rather the very genre of chant is one that was developed in the context of the liturgy and for the liturgy. You may prefer to listen to things other than chant while working out or driving around...I do too! But chant (and its derivatives, like polyphony) are proper to the Mass like pump up music is to working out and 'Take me out to the ballgame' is to baseball. It helps us to know where we are (namely, in the presence of the angels and the saints in the heavenly liturgy).

Does that mean the only kind of music we can ever have is chant? Is it ever appropriate to use a hymn? Or contemporary music?

What other kinds of music might be used in the Mass?

What can we sing at Mass other than chant? We previously looked at the Entrance chant of the Mass and noted the Church's preference for Psalms and chant. The directions regarding the Offertory and Communion chants are the same. What else might be sung in the Mass? And what kinds of instruments ought to be used?

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal notes that, "When the distribution of Communion is over, if appropriate, the Priest and faithful pray quietly for some time. If desired, a Psalm or other canticle of praise or a hymn may also be sung by the whole congregation" (GIRM 88). One of the appropriate places to sing hymns, then, would be to join in a song of praise after the reception of Holy Communion. The liturgy of the Mass officially ends with the dismissal, 'Go in peace', but it is of course a widespread and appropriate custom to accompany the ministers' procession out of the sanctuary with a hymn of praise or perhaps a Marian hymn or antiphon.

What kinds of music and instrumentation would be appropriate to use in these hymns, and for the accompaniment of the other parts of the Mass? The primary instrument in worship is always the human voice. First, because it is the only instrument created directly by God, and therefore is an integral part of the way we praise Him. Second, because it is the only instrument capable of expressing music and word together, placing the proper emphasis on the Word of God and the unity of music and words.

In addition to the human voice, the Church also expresses another preference for instrumentation: "In the Latin Church the pipe organ is to be held in high esteem, for it is the traditional musical instrument which adds a wonderful splendor to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up man's mind to God and to higher things" (SC 120). The pipe organ also has the benefit of being a kind of sacramental representation of the human voice (it's designed to mimic the way our voices make sounds). As a sustained wind instrument and not a percussive instrument, it is also particularly suited to accompanying chant. "But other instruments also may be admitted for use in divine worship...This may be done, however, only on condition that the instruments are suitable, or can be made suitable, for sacred use, accord with the dignity of the temple, and truly contribute to the edification of the faithful" (SC 120). At the very least, one would think this means that the instruments used make it clear that one is at church, and not at a bar or a rock concert.

Allow me to quote from an article by a Catholic musician and composer, Adam Bartlett: "If the liturgy is an earthly participation in the eschatological reality of heaven; a bursting forth of the heavenly liturgy that takes place at the end of time into the earthly liturgy of the fallen world, then its music should be eschatological. The music of this earthly liturgy would seek to provide a foretaste of the liturgy of heaven, the wedding banquet of the Lamb. It would be transcendent and other-worldly, its noble beauty would befit the heavenly King, it would be ordered music free of the effects of the fall, it would transcend the popular musical styles of the world and would actively engage its participants in a foretaste of the heavenly life that is to come."

That's what we seek to embody at every Mass.