



# The Reform of Church Music\*

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THE question of church music has been much before the world of late. The discussion, at first confined to specialists, is now rapidly spreading to the general public, the musical and the unmusical, the faithful and the faithless. It may be useful, therefore, to bring out as clearly as possible the fundamental principle of the art of musical prayer, in order that principle, and not caprice, may be brought to bear to the solution of the problem. It is, then, with principles that I propose to deal. Should a concrete school-of art be deduced in the course of these pages, it is not by way of limitation, but of illustration.

First, then, we want an adequate test of church music, an explicit standard of artistic value. We have been too long content to make beauty. in the music *as music* the Alpha and Omega of such test, a method wholly inadequate in this case. For church music is an art made up of two elements, music and prayer, and it cannot be judged by the value of one of its elements tested as a separate entity. We need a test that applies to the art as a whole, and we find it in the simple formula "Lex orandi lex cantandi." Here the crux of the whole matter; the law of prayer must be the law of song, both that our prayer (I use the word *prayer*, not in the sense of a mere petition, but in its wider meaning, a lifting of mind and heart to God) may be good art and that our art may be good prayer. Prayer and music must so combine as to make *one art*; the music must pray, the prayer-must sing. Otherwise the prayer is forgotten in the detached beauty of the music, or the music is forgotten in the detached beauty of the prayer. Unless the prayer and song thus rise to heaven as a single "spiritual groaning," unless they become one, merged in a true marriage of the spirit, their association is an offense both artistic

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\* This classic article originally appeared in "The Atlantic Monthly," April, 1906

and devotional. This, then, is the true test of a musical composition for the church: Does it conform to the law of prayer? It is good art. Does it seek independent paths of edification? It is bad art.

In opera we recognize the same principle. There the law of the drama is the law of the music. The music cannot be gay when the characters are sad, or *vice versa*; and thus the spirit of the music agrees with the spirit of the drama. But more than this, their forms must coincide; the hero leaping from a crag must not be left suspended in mid-air while the orchestra finishes the working out of the theme. The spirit and form of the drama regulates the spirit and form of the music. This principle is universally recognized as regards opera; but the very musician who applies it as a matter of course to the theater is dumbfounded when asked to apply it to the church. The modern composer is equally shortsighted in his methods; a man with no conception of love, if such there be, would scarcely undertake to set to music the drama of *Tristan and Isolde*; yet a man with no conception of prayer—and of such there are, alas, many—does not hesitate to set to music words of whose meaning he has not the vaguest practical knowledge. And when confronted with his ignorance, he cheerfully admits it, adding, as though this covered the whole ground, that he knows the laws of musical composition. Plainly, such a composer is equipped for half his task only; for if the law of drama be the law of music in opera, and the law of prayer be the law of song in church, the composer must understand the meaning of the drama, in the one case, and the meaning of prayer in the other, in order to give either an adequate musical setting. It may be possible to write beautiful music to sentiments he does not understand, but the chances are small that he will write appropriate music; and good art is the appropriate intensified to an ideal.

It is clear, then, that familiarity with the laws of musical composition, while indispensable, is not sufficient in itself, for it is no less shallow to expect the law of counterpoint to teach us the law of prayer, than to expect the law of prayer to teach us the law of counterpoint. Our education must be twofold. By studying the rules of composition, the individual corrects his musical eccentricities by the standard which has been evolved from the musical experience of the centuries; his devotional eccentricities need the same correction, that they may be brought up to the standard evolved from the spiritual experience of the ages. We need to equip ourselves. spiritually as well as musically; educate ourselves not only in the works of the masters in the art of music, but in the works of the masters in the art of prayer; bring our musical perceptions into touch with Palestrina, with Bach, with Beethoven, and our devotional perceptions into touch with those geniuses in religion whom we call saints. Not that we need all be saints in order to write, or even understand, church music, but we must have at least some apprehension of sainthood, of what constitutes true spirituality as distinguished from false, even as we distinguish between true and false art-principles. But the laws of music are, comparatively speaking, so easy to learn, and the laws of prayer so hard, that we allow ourselves to be content with the merely beautiful in our church music, and to drift away from the ideal of the appropriate. To this ideal we must return.

I shall henceforth limit myself to a discussion of the music of the Catholic Church, not merely because the present reform movement originated there and is being worked out systematically under the leadership of that great musician, Pope Pius X; but more especially because in the Catholic Church we have the problem in its most concrete form. There, the music is not merely an accessory, but an integral part of the ritual; words and music form together a complete artistic whole. The ritual of the Catholic Church is fixed, because the idea is fixed of which ritual is the outward manifestation. Ritual bears as natural and inevitable a relation to faith as the gesture does to feeling; the material manifestation, it is true, but a necessary one to the normal creature, who—being not yet a pure spirit—possesses no other means of expression. As ritual without faith becomes a lie, so faith without ritual is ineffective, a talent buried in the earth. So long as we remain human beings, the spiritual must take an outward form—of word, of gesture, of action,—that it may be part of our nature. Even God became man that He might be fully apprehensible to His creatures; He translated Himself into terms of the tangible; which is, indeed, the sacramental principle. And so we must have ritual. But this ritual must really express what is behind it; it must bear a very logical relation to faith, even as the gesture does to the thought. We do not express our affection by a blow in the face, nor gesticulate violently when the heart is an icicle. Every ritual-result must be the direct manifestation of a corresponding faith cause. Herein lies the true importance of church music. For it is not enough that it should not hide the faith; it must reveal it, even interpret it, and, through the outward manifestation of faith, raise the heart to an understanding of its inner meaning; it must, by means of the natural, help the weak human heart to rise to the heights of the supernatural.

This is why the Pope attaches such importance to this reform in music; why he insists that these three hundred million people of his, not all artists by any means—the tiller of the soil and the worker in the subway—should listen to a certain type of music, and no other. What is the music whose use the Pope wishes especially to enforce? The Gregorian Chant. To quote from the Encyclical: “The more closely a composition for the Church approaches in movement, inspiration and savor, the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple.”

Thus, in the Pope’s judgment, the standard is fixed. This sounds, on the face of it, somewhat arbitrary, like binding ourselves to an antiquated art-form, and clipping the wings of progress. And so it will be interesting to examine the claims of the Gregorian music, and determine where and why it is superior to any more modern form as a setting of liturgical prayer.

The Gregorian is objected to as an antiquated art-form, a musical archaism. But an art-form does not become antiquated through mere lapse of time: Greek architecture and Greek sculpture, which dates still farther back, remain the standard in plastic art. The Catholic liturgy is, as we have seen, fixed in its general character and scope; the form that best expresses it, then, need not be the latest fluctuation of popular taste; it

need not even be the form which is most interesting, judged from a purely musical standpoint. But the highest art will be the form that best fits the liturgical form. Granting, even, that music, as an art, has advanced and developed since the days of St. Gregory, the question remains, which, for us, is the important one: has it advanced and developed along the lines of prayer, or the reverse, in religious or in secular channels? For if it has not advanced along the lines of prayer, then the earlier form will be the best art for our specific purpose.

One can trace a certain definite sequence in the development of every art. First we have the idea which strives to express itself in form. This form, at first crude, gradually perfects itself, until the point arrives when idea and form become synonymous. Then we have the classical period. Any further development of form is at the expense of the idea; it is the beginning of decadence, the lowest ebb of which is reached when art has descended to pure matter without idea. When form has thus submerged the idea, the painter uses color for color's sake, the musician revels in mere sound, in "tone color," the orator in "fine words," sonorous phrases, tickling sound, dazzling color, *vox et praeterea nihil*,—and art lies dead. Perfection of form is good art, display of form is decadence; and so the psychological moment when idea and form coincide must remain the classical period for all time, the highest expression of that particular idea. A true development in art can only be brought about by the entrance of a new idea. Thus after the vocal idea comes the instrumental; after the melodic idea, the contrapuntal. One succeeds the other, but one does not improve upon the other. Gregorian Chant represents the culmination of the melodic idea, the highest conceivable development of unisonous music, and further development had to take the form of polyphony.

The important question, then, is not whether we ought to go back to antiquity, but whether, by so going, we shall or shall not find the classical period in the art of musical prayer: the moment when the idea—prayer—and the form—music—became identical.

Let us briefly examine the characteristics of liturgical prayer; for Chant, as an art, stands or falls on the basis of its adaptability to this purpose. If it can be proved that the Gregorian form, and that form only, succeeds in translating the liturgy into music, in fitting that particular idea with form, then its value as an art is proved.

The liturgy of the Catholic Church serves a twofold purpose: to pray and to teach. The latter, her teaching function, is defeated by the use of any but unisonous music, because polyphony makes the words, in a greater or less degree, incomprehensible. In Chant the words are not repeated, twisted, turned upside down, inside out, and hind part before; they are uttered slowly, distinctly, pensively, each syllable lingered over as though with tenderness. It is a "musing," a quiet spiritual breathing. We can hear the Word of God and absorb it. Thus the teaching function of the Church demands the use of Chant.

Her prayer function demands it no less. Structurally, her prayers were conceived in a spirit of Chant and not of music,<sup>†</sup> their very length precluding a more elaborate setting. A single illustration will suffice: during Holy Week the history of the Passion is read in all Catholic churches as the gospel of the day, while the congregation stands. Bach has given the Passion a musical setting,—one of the greatest of all pieces of devotional music. Yet it has one fatal objection: its performance takes no less than five hours,—a somewhat severe test upon the bodily strength of the congregation. Thus the musical structure of the period prevented even the great Bach from clothing his great idea with suitable form. Chant merely enunciates the words, music embroiders on them; one is the principle of concentration, the other that of diffusion. Chant is, therefore, the only form in which the whole liturgy can be sung at all.

So much for the merely structural demands of the liturgy. Its aesthetic demands are no less clear.

Liturgical prayer is not the expression of individual reaching up to God, as in private devotion; it is the Church praying as a Church, officially, as a corporate whole. Her prayer has a fixed form, the outgrowth of the spiritual evolution of the Church, a survival of the fittest in the realm of religion. This prayer has, first of all, dignity; it is addressed to Almighty God. For this reason our modern rhythm, the outgrowth of the dance movement, is out of place, the form being too trivial to express the idea. I am speaking on purely artistic grounds. Again, prayer must have spontaneity; any insincerity kills prayer as prayer. For as we have seen a form attracting attention to itself detracts from the idea, and the idea in this case is God. Thus a prayer in rhyme would so obtrude its form as materially to detract from the idea. In precisely like manner is a prayer in music inferior to a prayer in Chant. Music, with its fixed measure, its regular strong and weak beats, is a formal garden, cut and trimmed into conventional avenues, adorned with hothouse plants. Chant is nature, the beauty of the fields and the forests. The formal garden has indeed its own place, its proper functions; but prayer trimmed into a formal garden is an anomaly. The spirit bloweth where it listeth. Music moves with the regular rhythm of poetry; Chant with the free rhythm of prose, the cadence of a fine oratorical period. Chant has feet but no measure, and these feet succeed each other naturally, not artificially, so that there is no conflicting form to obstruct Chant in its effort to take the identical shape of the words and phrases of the prayers.

Modern music has two scales, or *Modes*. Chant has eight. It is evident that eight modes give greater variety of expression than two,—an advantage for which even our modern indiscriminate use of the chromatic does not fully compensate. A mode is a manner. As in speech the speaker's manner shades the meaning of his words,

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<sup>†</sup> Music is here used in its restricted sense, *i.e.* figured or harmonized music as distinguished from unisonous Chant; and to denote what the Ceremonial of the Bishops officially styles *musica*, and what is meant in modern language by “une Messe en musique,” “eine musikalische Litanei,” “musical vespers,” etc.

sometimes even alters it, so in music the mode, or manner, determines the character of the composition. The meaning of a triad, for instance, depends entirely upon whether its manner be major or minor: lower the third, and its manner is sad; raise the third, and its manner is gay. Our present musical system is limited, then, to two manners, the major and the minor; and so Chant has the advantage of greater scope and variety. But more than this: the character of these two modern scales compels us to choose between a gayety almost frivolous on the one hand, and, on the other, a sorrow savoring of despair; neither of which emotions has any place in the Christian soul at prayer. The eight modes of the ancients, on the contrary, were devised to meet the requirements of prayer in an age when art was exclusively the servant of religion. They enabled the composer of the period to seize the subtle prayer-spirit, that elusive characteristic of Christianity, the rainbow tints of *joy* in suffering. Chant is joyful, but with the joy of the Cross, as distinguished from the joy of the revel. Chant is fervent, but with the passion of asceticism, as distinguished from the passion of the world. Prayer-sorrow is never despair, nor is prayer-joy ever frivolous. Chant is the artistic embodiment of this spirit; the minor idea and the major idea are so interwoven, their relation is so intimate, that to disentangle them is impossible. We are never left in sorrow, yet our joy is never without a cloud. Even in those bursts of ecstatic joy of the Easter Alleluias lurks the memory that we are still a part of earth, still in the valley of tears. Light and shadow play tantalizingly in and out, like the sun shining through a forest; glimpses of heaven caught through rifts in the clouds of the world.

We do not find in the ancient modes the same violent contrasts of mood as in the modern. They combine a solemnity, a grandeur, with the most tender and fervent devotion. Their minor tendency gives not so much the impression of sadness as of great solemnity and awe; their major tendency, not so much the impression of merriment as of a tender and ardent devotion. Thus we have the combination that makes true prayer: reverence in love,—the prayer that, like David's, rises as incense before the altar.

There is something obvious about the two scales of modern music. Christianity is not obvious. It is a philosophy of seeming contradictions: joy through renunciation: happiness through suffering, triumph through failure, victory through death. These emotions are not common-place, to be neatly pigeon-holed under the headings, "gay" or "sad," "major" or "minor." No, let us use artistic discrimination in this matter: the modern scales, the modern measure, our entire musical system as it at present exists, was devised for secular uses, and is perfectly adapted thereto. But when we try to adapt this modern music to the exigencies of liturgical prayer, we simply spoil two good things: we ruin not only our prayer, but our modern music as well, for we rob this music of its own character and give nothing in its place. Thus modern liturgical music, if it succeeds in being non-scandalous, becomes, at best, negative; which in itself defeats the true purpose of church music. For it is not enough that it be negative; it must be actively spiritual. It is not enough that it should not distract; it must stimulate. For the sole principle upon which the use of art in church is justifiable is this: that, by acting upon the imagination, it interprets and intensifies hidden beauties in the realm of the spirit. Church music must not have less character than secular music, but its character must be

different; a difference not of degree but of kind.

There is no emotion more intense than religious emotion, but its intensity is along other lines than those of worldly emotions. The same is true of religious music. This is a distinction which many of the great composers in the past have recognized. Thus Wagner, who is not open to suspicion of partiality for antiquated art forms, frankly borrows the Church's form when wishing to construct a religious drama. By means of one Gregorian progression, a single phrase borrowed from the treasure of the Church, he gives his entire opera a stamp of pseudo-spirituality of which quality his own far from spiritual development of the theme does not succeed in wholly robbing it. Such is the force of the Gregorian. Beethoven and Brahms made frequent use of the old modes, instead of the modern scales, when wishing to create an atmosphere of purity and, highest mysticism. Indeed, a study of the great composers would seem to bear out the theory that the more lofty the thought, the less adequate becomes the modern scale, and the more intense the emotion, the less adequate becomes the modern measure. The general tendency of modern music is toward greater variety than the present system allows: greater variety of mode and greater variety of movement. Even for secular purposes, we are beginning to feel the cramping effect of the artificially constructed measure, more especially in moments of intense emotion; and we struggle toward freedom by constant use of the syncopation, of alternate double and triple time, and of any device which ingenuity can contrive to bring us nearer to the natural freedom of Chant. The modern composer in search of variety of mode makes pathetic excursions into the music of various nationalities; he borrows the scale of the Hungarian, the Arabian, the Norwegian; he makes use of Negro melodies, of Irish melodies, of Indian melodies, and imitates the freedom of rhythm of these peculiar styles. There is a general feeling of unrest in the air, a dissatisfaction with the formalism of our present system. The freedom of mode and freedom of movement, after which we are striving, is the natural property of Chant.

In listening to Chant, we must listen with the ears of faith. We must enter into the atmosphere that created the art; seize, first of all, the idea, that we may understand the form to which it gave birth. Chant must not be listened to *as music*; for music, in our modern sense, suggests that formal arrangement of sound, that conventionalism, to which our ear is accustomed, and does not, therefore, include Chant in its popular use. Chant is a form of declamation, a musical, and very devotional, recitation of the text. It does not attempt to reproduce the illusion of the text, as in the theater. It aims higher: at suggesting the sentiments brought out by prayer in the human soul. In this sense its spirit is subjective rather than objective. It seems like a soul bending back upon, and into, itself; a soul meditating inwardly, not a soul expressing itself outwardly. It suggests a meditative mood, and does not give the impression so much of a giving out, as of a taking in.

If the Gregorian Chant makes great demands upon the understanding and sympathy of the listener, how much greater still must be the demands it makes upon the musical and devotional perception of the singer! It needs art of the highest character to

render these melodies; and failure to recognize this fact is directly responsible for their present unpopularity. An impression has prevailed that the Gregorian melodies, on account of the simplicity of their intervals, need no study, no artistic rendering; that all they need, in fact, is to be spelled out; whereas, in reality, they demand not only study and art, but genius. If a piece of modern music can be killed by an incorrect performance, how much more must this be true of Chant, with its exalted aspirations! For this reason the general public could scarcely fail to dislike the Chant in view of the shocking performances by which alone they have been able to hear and judge of its merits; performances on the artistic level of that of a schoolboy spelling out Shakespeare, or an ignorant peasant interpreting Dante. We can now confidently hope for an improvement in this matter. Much of the trouble has been caused by practical difficulties in deciphering the ancient manuscripts, which, owing to the fact that the writers possessed no exact musical notation, and, furthermore, no printing, have come down to us by means of a system of hieroglyphics, something like our modern shorthand, further complicated by the vagaries of the individual copyists. But the last few years have seen the deciphering and arrangement of these melodies on a scientific basis by the Benedictine monks, and there will be no further excuse for incorrect performances.

Not only has the Gregorian been thus, of necessity, condemned without a hearing, but it is also very often condemned without a clear idea of its aims and true meaning, or even, indeed, of its mere technical construction. A Rip Van Winkle of the twelfth century awaking in the twentieth could be hardly more ignorant of our modern music than we are of the Gregorian, nor could he expect to understand our music fully, and sound its artistic depths, without some little study, and something more than a few cursory hearings, confined, perhaps, to its more elementary forms. I therefore plead with the Rip Van Winkle of the twentieth century for a little more patience in his judgment of the art of the past, and a little better understanding of Chant before he utterly condemns it. At first, indeed, it sounds merely strange; its unfamiliarity alone impresses us, like the sound of a language we do not understand. And, like a new language, its very unfamiliarity lends it a seeming monotony: all the phrases sound alike, because all are equally incomprehensible. But with the key to their meaning this seeming monotony is dispelled, with the clouds of our own ignorance. So it is with this, to us, new art language: the unusual succession of its tones and semitones and the consequent phrases, the unexpected intervals and progressions, are still as unfamiliar idioms. We hear, indeed, but we do not understand. The infinite variety of the modes is, to us, a closed book. But with familiarity and a little study we begin to understand the language and find ourselves admitted into a new world of artistic possibilities. For Chant is by no means monotonous to trained ears. We have the variety of the eight modes, each one of which corresponds to a separate prayer-mood, and has its own individuality, its own peculiar idioms. We have, furthermore, a variety of form as marked as that which distinguishes the song-form from the sonata, in our modern music. These melodies follow strictly the spirit of the liturgy: they are Simple where it is simple, elaborate where it is elaborate. And so there are the simple or syllabic melodies, which have one note only to a syllable; the melodic, which have several

notes, or even a group of notes, to a syllable, and finally the florid, which becomes almost pure song; as, for example, in the Easter Alleluias: here we have reached the emotional altitude where speech ends and music begins, for unable to express our Easter joy in language, we shout out the cry “Alleluia,” while the melody supplies the meaning.

This art had birth with the birth of liturgy. The liturgy took its present form under St. Gregory, to whom also is due the solid foundation of Chant as an art. Prayer and music were thus: the fruit of a common conception, and together grew to maturity in the Centuries that followed; together they reached their full height in the golden epoch of Christianity. When correctly rendered, this, music breathes forth a spirit of devotion, pure, ardent, tender, truly characteristic of a period that produced a Gregory, a Bernard, a Bonaventura, an Aquinas, a Dominic, a Francis of Assisi and inspired a Dante, a Fra Angelico, a Della Robbia, a Palestrina. The great masters of asceticism inspired great masterpieces of ascetic art, as by cause and effect. The highest kind of mysticism found expression in these melodies, the full “out-flowering” of the faith meditated upon; and these flowers of art are truly Christianity’s own flowers, not, in any sense, flowers engrafted from a foreign stem. The age of faith produced the art of faith. Then came the Renaissance of the sixteenth century, with its return to the study of pagan art-forms, and introduced a pagan spirit into the art of its time. Not that pagan art-forms lead necessarily to the adoption of pagan ideals, nor that Christian art is inconsistent with classical perfection of form. Christian art, like other arts, is perfect only through true perfection of form; but Christian art is opposed, more than all others, to *display* of form, and so the student turns, not unnaturally, to subjects wherein he can give free scope to his powers. With the Renaissance begins the gradual but steady secularization of art, the consequent secularization of public taste in art, and, as a result, the final intrusion of purely secular art into the church.

In striking contrast to the ascetic ideal is our modern art, the keynote of which is naturalism. Whether it be in literature, in painting, or in music, we are busy portraying and glorifying the purely natural emotions: sorrow is intensified to despair, gayety to ribaldry, love to license. The animating principle of modern art is emotional self-indulgence, a letting-down of barriers, rather than a strengthening of the will, which is the Christian ideal. Modern art is a glorification of the line of least resistance: Christian art the glorification of struggle. The two art tendencies are not antagonistic only,—they are contradictory.

If the Christian ideal in its fullness produced the truly Christian art-form, may it not be possible, by an inverse process, to enter into the ideal by means of the art; by studying the effect to arrive at a better understanding of the cause? Familiarity with this classic prayer-music must reveal something of the prayer ideals which gave it birth, and thus bring about a new era of faith. Does art seem an insignificant approach to such a renaissance of spirituality? Not necessarily, for the language of art is, in a sense, universal, in so far as it touches the subconscious personality, and creates a receptive mood. Art cannot do the work, but it can at least pave the way.

Piety is not, it is true, a mere matter of the emotions, but real piety, which lies in the intellect and the will, can often be approached and set in motion by means of the emotions: a permanent result be achieved through a transitory cause. The emotions are simply a motive power, but not on that account to be despised. They are to piety what appetite is to physical life; not the food, but the impetus to take food. They are a means to an end. But it is the food itself, and not merely the appetite, which supports life; the appetite simply makes easy and natural what might otherwise be difficult. To stimulate appetite is not, in itself, unsanitary, nor is to stimulate the emotions necessarily unspiritual. But as the emotions are prone to run away with us along false paths, we strive to stimulate them as much as possible along the lines of true piety, that we may absorb food and not poison. That is the theory of ascetic art as a whole, the test of whose value lies simply in the quality of its stimulus.

One more aspect of this movement, which must not be forgotten, is its democratic character. For the carrying-out of the full ideal demands the co-operation of the entire people, who will no longer assist at, but take part in, the liturgy. This may not be accomplished in a day, but the Church works for the future, and already she is sowing the seeds. The little Catholic school child is learning to pray, not only in words, but also in song; not only in the Church's language, Latin, but in her musical language, Chant; and when these children grow up, our choirs will be the whole Catholic world. While the variable and the more elaborate parts of the liturgy will demand the great genius, the great artist, the simpler parts will be taken up spontaneously by the entire congregation; producing the superb contrast of, on the one hand, the perfection of art, and on the other, the majesty of numbers. This is, indeed, nothing new: it is thus that the liturgy is intended to be rendered; it is thus that it has been rendered in the past, and is still rendered in a few centres of Catholic life. It is simply a return to the true ideal, a "renewing of all things in Christ," a revitalizing, through art, of the spirit of Catholic democracy and universality.