

On the occasion of this New liturgical year, I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk about the role of the organ and more generally, music, in the liturgy. The official text of the French Catholic Church for the ceremony of the Benediction of a new or restored organ, says everything that I would like to talk about this morning. The Cardinal, or Bishop, standing directly in front of the instrument, establishes a conversation with the organ, which sings out in response after each exhortation. He begins...

***Awake organ, sacred instrument,
Strike up the praise of God
Our creator and our father.***

***Organ, sacred instrument,
Celebrate Jesus our Lord,
Died and resurrected for us.***

***Organ, sacred instrument,
Sing the Holy Spirit who animates our lives
with the breath of God.***

***Organ, sacred instrument,
Elevate our chants and our supplications
To Mary the mother of Jesus.***

***Organ, sacred instrument,
Make the assembly of the faithful
enter into thanksgiving to Christ.***

***Organ, sacred instrument,
Bring the comfort of the faith
To those who are in distress.***

***Organ, sacred instrument,
Support the prayer of Christians,***

***Organ, sacred instrument,
Proclaim glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!***

This moving dialogue between the Church and its instrument defines the unassailable place of the organ and the vocation of the organist. Furthermore, the physical presence of the instrument is felt like no other, when walking up the nave of a great cathedral, resisting the

temptation to turn around until the optimal moment to be struck by the breath-taking vision of the façade of the organ-case, high on the west wall, half-way between heaven and earth.

The organ's essential place in the church was assured by the 10th century. Up until the industrial revolution, the organ was the greatest technology created by man. The organ-builder had to be architect, acoustician, musician, carpenter, ebonist, metallurgist and far more. The sheer complexity of the action from the keys to the pipes had no parallel. No other instrument is capable of making the earth shake with apocalyptic force and also bewitch us with ethereal, celestial peace. Through its extraordinary diversity of pipes, when carefully voiced, the organ has an almost limitless palette of sound-colours. The organ possesses inexhaustible lungs, just as the "breath of God". Capable of great expressivity, the organ nevertheless has an integral austerity, so suitable to the needs of prayer.

The organ needs an organist to come to life. He is responsible for a blest, sacred object. The organist is, and must be, invisible. He is an invisible servant, just as the generations of stonemasons who built our great Christian edifices. For great liturgy necessitates that no individual personality should cloud the transcendental path between the people and God. This is a fundamental contrast between music in the liturgy and the concert. Olivier Latry, organist of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, as well as one of the most prolific concert-organists of our age, explains that "during the liturgy, the organ speaks to an assembly principally of believers. Music touches their soul, through which it arrives at their heart. In a concert, the process is inverted, the interpreter touches the heart of the public to elevate its soul."

In order to fulfil the inspiring, but highly demanding vocation set out in the benediction prayers of the organ, music is obviously required. But what sort of music?

It is useful to begin by stating what the organ (and organist) are not. The organ is not a hymn-machine or a casual entertainer amusing the distracted minds of the faithful with easy-listening tunes. Nor is the organ a convenient filler of silence, like the radio in the kitchen, or the sounds emanating from the ceiling of a lift in a kitsch hotel. For if there is one place where silence is never awkward..... it is in church.

From this perspective, the said service is perfect. Hushed, intimate, where silence reigns. Who dares break that devotional silence with music, must have something invaluable to add. Worthy of the wondrous architecture of the churches our ancestors have given us, worthy of the hypnotic stained glass which bathes us in divine light. Olivier Messiaen made clear what we must attain when he wrote “The stained-glass windows magnify the light, one of God’s first creations, but the organ brings to the church something similar to light that yet surpasses it; the music of the Invisible. It is the wondrous overture to the Beyond...”

When contemplating the great canon of religious music - the tradition - the organ is blessed with six centuries of wonderful music from across Christendom. The liturgy of the Church and its music has suffered many abuses over recent decades. G. K. Chesterton wrote that “Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.” When I returned to the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes in France just four weeks ago, the liturgy was identical to when I first discovered this wonderful place 30 years ago. Its spiritual force attracts thousands of people from across the world.

Johann Sebastian Bach is universally regarded as the greatest-ever church organist and as the musical “gold-standard” by which every other composer and musician is judged. His overwhelming desire was made clear in his resignation letter to the Town Council in Mulhausen when he was only 23, stating the need for “well-regulated church music to the Glory of God”. His life was full of conflicts, to this end. He left several hundred organ works, so many of them based on chorale melodies for the full liturgical year. His music was at the cutting edge of creative modernity, whilst being firmly rooted in tradition. The hundreds of hours he spent copying Italian and French music, as well as that of the great German tradition ensured that he became the true genius of Western Art music — and all of this to the praise of God. As he wrote on the bottom of his manuscripts S.D.G. — soli Deo Gloria — For the glory of God alone.

Another great organist–composer from more recent times was Olivier Messiaen. All of his huge creative output is the reflection of his deep Catholic faith. Like Bach, his music was at the forefront of compositional creativity. Like Bach, his music was rooted in

tradition — in his case, that of Debussy and Ravel. Messiaen was asked to give a lecture in Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, to the bishops of France and he stated: “It is true that I place religious music even above liturgical music. For liturgical music is exclusively dependant on worship, whereas religious music extends to all times and all places, it touches on the material as much as the spiritual and ultimately finds God everywhere. Liturgical music celebrates God in his church, within his own sacrifice. Religious music reveals him at all hours and all across our planet Earth, in our mountains and oceans, among the birds, flowers and trees and even in the visible universe of stars that surrounds us.”

Within this tradition of religious music, great discernment is necessary in choosing which music is worthy. Contrary to the examples just given, not all composers are blessed with the genius of creative originality, where a musical masterpiece coincides with religious sentiment. There are also hundreds of examples of inferior musical pomposities and gushing sentimental indecencies, reflecting the negative flip-side of tradition, that of being reactionary. Religious music has more than its fair share of what I call musical “gravy and chips”. You might like gravy and chips, but do you really want to serve it up to our Lord, when he comes to dinner?

In conclusion, all of this, when reflected upon, should make every organist think very carefully before pressing down that first note on a Sunday morning, releasing the breath of God into that singing pipe.

As a text to accompany his last work, the huge “Book of the Holy Sacrament” for organ, Messiaen chose these words from Thomas a Kempis’ Imitation of Christ:

“I offer and present to you the gladness of all devout hearts, their ardent affection, their mental raptures, their supernatural illuminations and heavenly visions”. Amen.