

## Extraordinary Music Workshops - Krakow - August 2022

### V - The Food of Love?

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Duke Orsino says: "If music be the food of love, play on". This idea of music as the 'food of love' gives rise to my final reflection today. I want to consider if and how music and particularly sacred music can form us for love. For if only the lover sings, can it be said that singing creates lovers?

This is a question which I hope we can discuss at some length, drawing on our own experiences and observations. Permit me to offer my own thoughts on this, based on my daily life as a Dominican friar, as someone who has been Cantor of various communities, and as someone who engages in choral singing daily, has led congregational singing for several decades in different contexts – in parish churches, schools, and convents – and who has been a chorister since my teenage years. It seems to me that our tradition as religious has handed down an acquired wisdom, which is that singing is conducive to building up a community that lives together in charity. We are not asked to recite or speak aloud the Divine Office together, but rather to sing it – something that in my Province we endeavour to do even if there are only two of us present, and even if we're not the most capable of singers. Nevertheless, we are determined to maintain a sung choral Office. Sometimes, when we're struggling, I wonder why we do this, and why we should bother, which is what led to these thoughts on the wisdom of choral singing as something formative of love. My reflections today will also be something of a recapitulation, as I return to the theology of song.

#### **Singing in the Church today**

In our time singing has become something unusual despite the global proliferation of singing competitions like "The Voice". People seldom sing in the streets or in the fields or in the office as they work even though they're often connected to music-playing devices. In England, communal singing seems relegated to drunken pub settings, or tribalistic songs are antagonistically bellowed out in the rugby and football stadium. Consequently, singing, even in church is rare. Many of the observations made by Thomas Day in 1990 in a book called '*Why Catholics Can't Sing - The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste*' still pertain. At best, some Catholic parishes can muster a small repertoire of metricated hymnody perhaps, but rarer still but undoubtedly more beautiful and venerable is the type of singing that we religious do: sung communal prayer. The words of the sacred Liturgy are thus enfolded in ancient musical forms, giving voice and beauty to the prayer of Holy Mother Church.

As preaching friars, therefore, we serve the Word of God not only in our preaching – although St Thomas rightly notes that this is the most important of all – but we also

serve the Word in song. Given how much we sing together we must be comfortable (if not proficient and expert) in our singing – the preaching friar must, in some sense, be a singing friar because music and song is intrinsic to the Christian life, and to our work as preachers. Indeed, this pertains to all the Baptised, for as Cardinal Mueller said at the FOCUS Student Leadership Summit 2020 in Phoenix: “As Christians, we have a musical awareness of life: In our hearts resounds the song of thanksgiving of being redeemed.” Singing, therefore, is the proper *magnum opus* of the Christian people, of those who are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Thus the book of the Apocalypse says that the multitude of the redeemed “sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth.” (Apoc 4:3)

What is this new song that we, the redeemed, are being taught, and that we must learn if we’re to sing the eternal song of heaven? The New Song, as Clement of Alexandria said (and as I’ve pointed out in the first talk), is Jesus Christ. Each of us, drawing the breath of the Holy Spirit have been given grace, through Baptism, to sing the New Song, that is to say, to embody Christ in our lives, to be conformed to him, through charity. Only the Lover, therefore, can sing this song, and so we are called to learn how to love, and I believe that choral singing helps us exercise those natural virtues that lead to charity.

### **The formative power of music: in the lives of the Saints**

The power of music to beautify and sanctify a life is hinted at in our Dominican hagiography. We’re told, for example, that St Dominic often sang as he walked the length and breadth of Europe, a sign of his joy as well as his familiarity with the Divine Office which hallowed his hours and sanctified his day. And this wasn’t yet another eccentricity of St Dominic’s. In his letter to St Raymond of Penyafort, Master of the Order, one brother Romæus says that our Order’s protomartyr Peter of Verona was journeying to Milan on Easter Saturday. And as he walked, he sang “the *Victimae paschali laudes* in a loud voice. Immediately Brother Dominic, who was soon to join him in suffering, joined in. When another brother, named Conrad, tried to harmonise at the fifth in the same chant, Brother Peter turned kindly to the brother and said, ‘Please let me and Brother Dominic sing alone, because you are singing discordantly.’ So the two sang the whole Sequence in a loud voice while the other brother kept silent.”

The brothers who were soon to be martyred sang the hymn of Christ’s triumph; they sang of the innocent Paschal Lamb who was slain but who thus conquered death. The singing of the Sequence Hymn of Easter becomes an expression of the interior reality for St Peter and his socius Dominic. For they are able to sing the hymn and sing it confidently because they, like the redeemed in the book of Apocalypse, had been

taught the “new song” of redemption. Through grace, and through repeated meditation on the hymn, they had been so conformed to Christ the Paschal Lamb that they are able to sing the hymn as they walked from Como to Milan. They know the song “by heart” because the song of Christ’s Easter triumph is the soundtrack of their lives, not as background noise but truly expressing the authenticity of their Christian lives, becoming the “core of their lives”. But brother Peter still has to learn, his life still has to be conformed to Christ’s, and to come into deeper harmony with Christ. As such, his contribution to the new song of redemption is said to be “discordant”.

The song therefore is used as an indication of the interior disposition of the friars, a reminder that what we sing with our lips must come from the heart, and also both form and inform our heart. As the Rule of St Augustine says: “When you pray to God in psalms and hymns, the words you speak should be alive in your hearts.” (II-3) On the other hand, MacMillan says that “when you use music simply as background, you lose the essence of what music is”. The essential nature of music is that it is given, just as time, and our lifetime, and indeed, our being itself, is all in God’s gift. For although music is time-bound, it is paradoxically, as MacMillan says, able to “expand one’s awareness of the reality of timelessness”, and indeed, make us conscious of God who is outside of time, who is *ipsum Esse subsistens*. To lose the essence of music, and make it mere background noise is thus to risk losing sight of God and his gifts to us. When the songs and psalms we sing become just background noise, then the Word of God no longer penetrates to the heart, and no longer moves nor changes us from within.

Now, the Rule of St Augustine, which is the Rule under which we Dominicans live, begins like this: “*Primum, propter quod in unum estis congregati, ut unanimes habitetis in domo et sit vobis anima una et cor unum in Deum.*” Interestingly, *unanimes habitetis in domo*, which could be rendered literally as ‘to live unanimously in the house’, has been translated as “to live harmoniously”. The translator relies on a musical term to express unanimity, to show that one is of one accord, one mind, and even one soul. As we have seen, St Peter Martyr and Brother Dominic sang together, unanimously, and so showed that they were, together, of one accord with Christ the Paschal Victim. The power of choral singing, therefore, is that it brings together and unites many voices, and homophony is an especially powerful symbol of unanimity. Hence almost all of the music that we sing is choral and homophonous for thus we express our collective union of heart and soul. For “the main purpose for your having come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God, with one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32).

### **The formative power of music: in our lives today**

Before I ever took up a camera, my first love was for choral music and I have been singing in choirs since I was a child. I have taken part in international choral

competitions, and have sung in a range of choirs both in church and in secular contexts. While I was in University, I was involved in four different choirs which meant that I was exposed to a broad range of choral music. However, every choir had the same intent: to make the many voices blend as one voice. The best choirs have a unity of heart and soul, led by their conductor – the frequent complaint of every choir director I’ve known, therefore, was that we didn’t watch him! But it wasn’t enough to watch the conductor. We also had to listen to ourselves, and to one another. These are crucial skills, I learnt, for singing well in a choir: listening to the other voices, blending my voice with theirs, and being sensitive to changes in tempo, volume, and tone, and accommodating myself accordingly.

A good choir, like a team playing a sport, needs its members to be attuned to one another, and so to work together to create one beautiful sound. Although there may be very fine solo voices in the choir, these have to learn to blend their voices with the others and thus to contribute to the common good, to create a unified choral sound. A poor choir, conversely, is one in which the singers do not work together; in which individualism is rampant so that distinct voices stand out, or in which the singers don’t pay attention to pitch and movement in the music; or in which singers barely move their lips even if they are capable of singing, and so they do not really contribute to the common good. I have observed this for some years, and it seems to me that how a choir sings together reveals a lot about their relationships with one another, their discipline, and their unity of heart and mind, or the lack thereof. With all this in mind, I want to think of those aspects of religious life that I think are fostered by singing in choir. I draw attention to this because I am most familiar with it, but I believe and hope that what I have to say about our Dominican life applies to the Christian life in general, for religious life is but a distillation of the Baptismal life that you and I have in common.

As you may know, the only public promise we Dominicans explicitly make, is that of obedience: we promise obedience to God, to Our Lady, to St Dominic, and to the Master of the Order and his successors. Obedience, it seems to me, is the first virtue that choral singing inculcates and perhaps one of the most precious and necessary for our time, for our salvation, for it helps us to grow in Christ-like charity. Thus Pope Francis says in *Desiderio Desideravi* 15: “In fact, there is only one act of worship, perfect and pleasing to the Father; namely, the obedience of the Son, the measure of which is his death on the cross. The only possibility of being able to participate in his offering is by becoming “sons in the Son.” This is the gift that we have received.”

### **Gregorian Chant: signing as an exercise in Obedience**

Consider that the music that we sing in choir, and that we sing as consecrated religious and Dominicans, therefore, is something given to us, something handed on as tradition

to which we are obedient. So in the first place the music that is to be given “pride of place” in the Roman Liturgy is Gregorian chant. This is, *par excellence*, the music of the Church, and we singers have the joy and privilege of giving voice to the love song of the Bride of Christ. Pope Pius XII thus said that “The dignity and lofty purpose of sacred music consist in the fact that its lovely melodies and splendour beautify and embellish the voices of the priest who offers Mass and of the Christian people who praise the Sovereign God.” However, according to the Church, chant is especially fitting for the Liturgy because of one particular characteristic: it is obedient to the Liturgy and serves the Word of God. As Vatican II says: ““The main reason for this pre-eminence [of chant] is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy” (SC 112). One might think analogously of the human person who is a unity of body and soul. So too the sacred text animates the musical body. Or one might think of the divine Word who took flesh and was made Man. In an analogous way, the written Word of God is made incarnate in time and space through the song of the Church, the Body of Christ. There is a clear correlation between music and words, and this is what distinguishes chant and renders it sacred, for it pays attention to the inspired texts, comments upon them in song, and serves the Liturgy by giving musical expression to the prayers and texts of the Liturgy. As Pope Leo XIII said: “in truth, the Gregorian melodies were composed with such prudence and wisdom, in order to elucidate the meaning of the words.”

Hence the Benedictine musicologist Dom Jacques Hourlier of Solesmes is of the opinion that “Gregorian chant... binds the chant to the Latin word and to the idea expressed by that word... The chant... tends to give each word the fullness of its meaning through the construction of the melody... Through its capacity to take the listener beyond the surface meaning of the words, Gregorian chant truly expresses the way in which Church Tradition reads the Scriptures and writings of the Fathers. It is a vehicle of Tradition and an authoritative point of reference for theology since it brings out the proper meaning of the sacred texts that are sung in the liturgy”. Seen in this light, one can understand why the Council Fathers at Vatican II desired that “steps should be taken so that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them” (SC 54).

For we do not sing in obedience to our current mood or the latest musical fads or to whatever catches the fancy of the Cantor. Rather, in learning the virtue of obedience we strive, first of all, to sing the words of sacred Scripture, particularly the psalms, and we do so in union with Christ and his Body the Church, through her sacred Liturgy; the ancient song of Mother Church thus becomes our song, and we singers, as lovers of the Bridegroom and his Bride, become the chorus that sings alongside them as we read in the Song of Songs. Recall that many today read the Song of Songs mainly as a text of

erotic love and sensuality but the Fathers of the Church and Jewish rabbis have read it mainly as a spiritual text pointing to the highest nuptial love of God for the human soul. In 1952 the French Dominican fr Dominique Delalande OP wrote an *apologia* for chant which emphasised the virtues of singing Gregorian chant, and its qualities, which he linked to poverty, chastity, and obedience. His comment on the chastity of the chant is noteworthy. "By speaking of the chant's *chastity*, Delelande has in mind its avoidance of all sensuality and sentimentality. Freed from the tyranny of the need to please, the chant rises up light, flexible, spontaneous, and so more musical than ever." This phrase - freed from the tyranny of the need to please - is vital. For so often, I have seen musicians and families struggle to choose music to please the congregation at a wedding or funeral or Sunday Liturgy. But if concentrate on pleasing and obeying God rather than our fellow Man (cf Acts 5:29), then we too are freed for prayer, for virtue, for love.

Hence the *General Instruction to the Liturgy of the Hours* says that our prayer, obedient to the Liturgy of the Church, draws us into the relationship of the Blessed Trinity, of the Father to the Son. The GILH says: "Christian prayer draws its dignity from its sharing in the filial relationship of the Only-begotten Son to the Father. The prayer he expressed in his earthly life with his own words in the name of and for the salvation of the entire human race, he continues to address to his Father in the whole Church and in all her members." The pre-eminent prayer, of course, which we repeat in the Mass and in the Divine Office is the Lord's Prayer. However, this conforming of our voice to Christ's and to his Bride's, as we take on Christ's words becomes evident whenever we pray the psalms. In fact I find that I am schooled in prayer because I learn to pray not because I *feel* like praying a particular psalm or in a particular mode, but rather, I have to mortify my preferences, die to myself in that moment, and so allow myself to be elevated by the Church's prayer and song; to raise my mind and my mood so as to be conformed to Christ's. Fr Bede Jarrett OP, an English Dominican who re-founded our Province admirably sums up St Thomas's doctrine of prayer thus: "Prayer is lifting up, not pulling down. It is not pulling God down to my will; it is lifting my will up to God – that is prayer. It is not to make God agree with me, but to make me agree with God's dealings with me".

The Liturgy of the Church, therefore, and our giving of ourselves to it in song schools us in genuine prayer as we lift up our hearts and voices to God, and we allow God to touch us and move us and to reveal himself to us. This can be an immensely graced moment, when we let the Liturgy be, and so we let God act. For us, willing to pray in obedience to the Church, and lending our voices to her song, is also an act of love. Because love isn't so much about feelings, although it begins as a passion to draw us in, but for love to continue and to be strengthened it has to be purified in the fires of faith

and of obedience so that we knowingly and deliberately choose to love, choose to sing the songs we're given, choose to give ourselves to the service of God in the Liturgy. We're ruled less by our passions, therefore (which as we saw was the great worry of the Fathers with regards to music and worship), and we're ruled more by filial love which is a rational act.

Love, too, is a sacrificial act, and so Fr Aidan Nichols OP explains Delalande's thought about the sacrificial nature of chant: "Sounds can find their place in the liturgical life of Christ's mystical Body only by losing themselves – losing their previous existence, losing what made them an object of interest in their own right, rather than an object of interest because they relate us to Christ. The rule is the same, Delalande writes, for sounds as for human beings. In each case it is a matter of denying ourselves, emptying oneself. To be ordered to the supernatural, then, music must lose its natural seductiveness while nonetheless remaining music – that is, remaining beautiful sound. The chant is such music. It is music in the mode of sacrifice. And sacrifice is not chiefly destruction, it is chiefly consecration. What is disordered is destroyed but the rest is ennobled by being put at the service of God, the God of revelation and of salvation. The Church favours the chant because she has confidence that her children can move forward towards God by means of it."

So the Liturgy teaches us the New Song of the redeemed, and this schooling is especially powerful, it seems to me, if we sing the same songs in the same chant melodies that have come down to us across the centuries and that transcends every human culture. In a fast-paced globalised urban culture, people can feel uprooted and disorientated. The Liturgy of the Catholic Church, therefore, should provide some antidote to this, and music can be a powerful unifying force. As Pope Leo XIII observes: "if in Catholic churches throughout the entire world Gregorian chant sounds forth without corruption or diminution, the chant itself, like the sacred Roman liturgy, will have a characteristic of universality, so that the faithful, wherever they may be, will hear music that is familiar to them and a part of their own home. In this way they may experience, with much spiritual consolation, the wonderful unity of the Church". And this is a universality not just in space but also in time, as this sacred song of the Church roots us in our history.

As Dominicans who vow obedience to St Dominic, then, it seems to me that we exercise this virtue when we sing that music and those liturgical texts proper to our Order and our history. Often certain well-known chants like the *Tantum ergo* will have a particular Dominican form that is peculiar to the Order. It can be easy to give in to pressure from our parish congregations, and to sing the more dominant Romano-Benedictine form. However, obedience to St Dominic and finding our place in our

history and Dominican identity, I'd suggest, means that we must give due attention to the Dominican chant that is proper to the Order. As musicologists have noted, our chant is often simplified and less melismatic because Blessed Humbert of Romans, 5th Master of the Order, instructed us to sing "briefly and succinctly" so that we can return to study and to preaching. This instruction can be abused, especially if it causes communities to rush the singing of the Office, or to habitually abbreviate it, or to even omit singing on the grounds of brevity. Instead, we will find that our Dominican chants themselves, and our traditional manner of singing the Office had already integrated the demands of this instruction.

Lastly, there is obedience to the Master and his successors. This means that we promise obedience to those who are elected to service in the Order, those who are appointed to serve the common good. In our tradition, the one appointed to have charge of the Liturgy of a Priory, especially in choir, is the Cantor. The Cantor, therefore, sets the pitch, the pace, and determines what is to be sung, in obedience to the demands of the Liturgy. Just as a good choir has to watch the conductor, so the friars choir should listen to the Cantor, and be mindful of the pitch that he has set, the pace at which he intones the psalm, and also the duration of the pause between the two lines of the psalm. A prudent Cantor will be mindful to pitch the music sensitively – not too high in the mornings, for example, when voices are not yet warmed up. Thus the Cantor is also obedient to the community and its needs. For at our profession, we asked for God's mercy and the mercy of our brethren. Which is why we must be sensitive to one another, and listen to one another and become mindful of what each brother needs and is capable of.

### **Liturgy is Boring!**

Therefore, when we come together to sing in a choir, we must first listen, observe, and be attuned to one another. In other words, we must be obedient to the community, to one another. For, as you'll know, the word obedience comes from *ob-audire* meaning 'to listen', and so, in listening to one another in choir we are being schooled in this mutual obedience which in fact is characteristic of our Dominican form of life. For obedience is not about dominance of the will. This kind of thing underlies the phenomenon of stronger singers loudly drowning out the weaker singers, or singing without any care for the balance of voices in the choir. Rather obedience is an intelligent common search for wisdom, for the truth, for unity of heart and mind. In the above instances of obedience to God, Our Lady, and St Dominic there is, at the heart, a fundamental desire to appropriate the wisdom and riches of the Church and her traditions. So, too, when we are obedient as a choir and as a community. The fruit of this kind of obedience is a common voice, indeed, a unanimous voice which will be distinctive to this particular community at this time. When I was a student in Blackfriars



Oxford, a small group of students (led by fr Robert Mehlhart OP) formed a Schola who would sing the responsorial psalms during the Triduum, and we knew each others voices and temperaments well so that we could sing together as one unit, with intuition and sensitivity. Several people commented that they could tell that we worked well together and enjoyed singing together. This, I think, can be observed in healthy Dominican communities and choirs the world over. However, it can't always be subjectively fun and enjoyable.

I have often thought that the key to actual participation in the Liturgy, for all of us as a Church, is to attend to it as an exercise in Christian asceticism, of dying to ourselves, of sacrifice, as Delalande observed. For all too often, in a world that loves sensation and noise, we give in to the demands of aestheticism, to the sensual, the exciting, and so on. Even people who love the older forms of the Liturgy do this, seeking ever more splendid forms of the Mass, and more esoteric historical forms and rituals, not, it seems to me, for the glory of God but for the thrill of the moment. But to be honest, I think that Liturgy sometimes has to be boring. Why? Because we don't attend to the Liturgy in order to be entertained or thrilled, even if its metaphysical realities are deeply exciting! Likewise, dare I say, our best friend or even our spouse is not always interesting and exciting, but true love is being able to be bored together and even bored of each other without being alienated or estranged from one another. True love, is about a commitment, "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health"! This, I think, is the challenge and demands of true Liturgy, and our singing can lead us deeper into this mystery. Therefore, Pope Francis recently reminded us that Liturgy, properly understood and practiced, can "free us from the prison of a self-referencing nourished by one's own reasoning and one's own feeling". We're invited instead, to receive "the gift of the Paschal Mystery of the Lord which, received with docility, makes our life new." (*Desiderio desideravi*, 20)

These words of St Paul's so-called Christological hymn, I think, should be borne in mind always: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil 2:5-11) So, as singers in the Liturgy, as friars in choir, as a Christian community, let us have the mind of Christ among ourselves. So, we come together in humility and in obedience, that is to say, in a union of heart and soul. And because we are obedient – listening to one another, listening to the Church,

listening to the sacred music given to us – so we can lift up our voices with joy, and with all the cosmic voices of creation, joyfully proclaim and sing of the Lordship of Christ, giving glory to God the Father through him.

Therefore, the Church herself exhorts us that “Those taking part in this prayer should make it their own so that it becomes a source of devotion, abundant grace and nourishment for personal prayer and apostolic activity. In praying it worthily, attentively and with devotion, they must attune their minds to their voices. If the grace of God is not to be fruitless in them, they must wholeheartedly co-operate with it. They must seek God and penetrate ever more deeply through prayer into the mystery of Christ. With that same mind which was in our Redeemer, they should praise God and pray to him.” (GILH 19).