

The Future of Classical Music in the Church

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As we walked from Marquand Chapel after my lecture there on the assigned theme of this article, a faculty member from the Institute of Sacred Music commented: “Well, in some ways, we have to admit, it does come down to a matter of taste.” He was referring to the taste of some for what we were calling “classical” music and the taste of some others for anything but such music. On some levels his question, and my benumbed response – which was one of hesitant, partial agreement – could be conversation-enders, or conclusions that might stifle further inquiry about the subject. Certainly they served as a humbling admission that in matters of the arts, also in the church, some conflicts will never be decisively settled. The conflicts that issue from debates over classical music in the church are of that character. No final arbiter, no infallible pontiff with authority, can wave a scepter and settle an esthetic question.

Perhaps I should not give up so quickly. First of all, “taste” is not the only issue. Matters of theology, liturgy, history, to say nothing of a variety of musical standards and norms, at least deserve a hearing before the reduction to a charge of “subjectivity” is sounded and heard. Second, philosophers who specialize in aesthetics do set forth some grounds for ruling more or less objectively what is good and what is bad. Lacking qualifications to do such judging and ruling, I am still in the camp of those who aspire to point to what is better and what is worse, if not objectively, then in ways that depend on varying contexts. An Oregon pinot noir is “better” than a glass of Mogen David wine, a Rembrandt etching better than graffiti on a wall, a Shakespeare sonnet better than doggerel by a lovesick teen. The endeavor to “raise” tastes even when one lacks objective norms is valuable. Efforts to educate the palate, engage in art criticism, and explore the sonnets have their place in education and the living of a full life. Still, the issue cannot finally be determined. We may well settle for Duke Ellington’s “there’s only two kinds of music: good music and bad music.” “Classical” music stands a better chance of being good because more tested, weathered, criticized, and enjoyed through time and in many places.

Speaking of places, context matters. In recent years I have been studying and writing on global Christianity. I am impressed by the way “good” church music, as Europeans and North Americans have regarded it, travels to sub-Saharan Africa and the Asian sub-continent. This is evidenced by the achievements of choirs in churches there, whose music is largely autochthonous, their worship having grown up out of their own soil, travails, and triumphs. I have learned to recognize that their quasi-Pentecostal or indigenous songs, some of which find their way into North American worship books, “belong,” and are likely some day to be regarded as classical, in their own way, among congregants who now confront them as new. Shall we try to kill off “gospel” and “soul” and “spiritual” among African-American congregations and supplant them with Gregorian chant, Lutheran chorales, or Anglican hymnody? Not profitably! Yet, even as I type such a sentence, I am reminded that I have heard more than passable, and sometimes almost great, renditions of the Euro-American classical line in African-American and Asian churches. Music travels in both directions, east and west, north and south, and we have no good reason to restrict the concept of the classical within narrow geographic lines.

“Classical,” the assigned word, raises as many issues as does the matter of taste. During the seasons when I was preparing my talk, and, since then, as the assignment to complete this

reflection remained on the agenda, I have given much thought and some conversations to the question of this naming. All agree that we need some word other than “traditional” to set against “contemporary,” as so many congregations do when they plan and advertise music for their worship. The words serve to polarize and divide worshiping bodies, but do not do well as pointers to anything distinctive or helpful. Does a forgettable and forgotten (everywhere except in certain “with it” congregations) pop-song of the ‘sixties, back when “with it” was contemporary lingo, deserve to be thought of as “contemporary,” while a profound song, rich in references to our time, published and first used this year, properly gets dismissed as “traditional”?

“Southern Harmony,” “Shape-Note Hymns,” Appalachian mountain airs with spiritual words, African-American spirituals, and Welsh folk-hymns come from long ago and live today. They should be regarded as classical, even though they do not get “performed” as would a Mozart or Haydn Mass or a Gloria by Vivaldi. What keeps non-classical from becoming classical? Really bad hymns, by any standard, and badly-conceived instrumental works, which were junked a century ago, do not become classical just because of their age or their originally-intended use. Much of the music one hears in contexts that are of a genre marked as “ephemeral” stands no chance of becoming classical. It bears all the marks of being commercial, faddish, determinedly “of the moment.”

We may be reduced to impressionistic subjectivism: just as a judge who rules on pornography admits he cannot define it but knows it when he sees it, so, here, on a different plane, we cannot define “classical,” but we have some sense of what the term points to. At the very least we can define it by the enemies it makes among people who want to supplant it and have it soon forgotten. So it stays on our chalkboard as I confront another problematic word in the title: “the future.” I am a historian, and thus have no professional, intellectual, or instinctively acquired competence to talk about the future. We historians have to wait for something to happen, after which we may write or talk about how inevitable the outcome of particular events has turned out to be. However being agnostic about the future does not mean that thinking about the future in the light of the past is useless. I join many historians in quoting Abraham Lincoln, who said that if we could first know where we are and whither we are tending we might know better what to do and how to do it. We get to the “where” and “whither” by studying the past and the present – then we can plan strategies and write scripts for the variety of futures open to us. Here we assess where we are and whither we are tending with the past and present of classical church music.

Add one more to my list of problematic prolegomena: it seems to me that in debates over genres and styles of church music, people here described as favoring the “classical” will find no profit, and make no points, in whining or carping about the ever-growing list of churches and, we hear, generations, whose music we abhor. Much of it is bad, simply bad, by any standard. And much of it is favored by worship committees, and gravitated to by the coming generations, and by publishers who have an eye not on the top of the tradition but the bottom of the academic line. We have all heard, and some – I am included here – have scorned, those emergent dominating church music styles that are so adapted to the mall, thus: “If we have to go to heaven with that kind of music, we are not going.” If being lofty helps the classical sorts sustain their morale in sonically-dismal times, well and good. But such complaining, or expressions of envy or bemusement, will not win anyone new to the enjoyment of worship with

profound, even when simple, musical styles. So, what does one see and do?

Thesis: the future of all church music is niched. Niche: “a recess in a wall, a cranny, a special area of demand for a product or service.” One reason many lovers of the classical whine is because they bring provincial and sheltered views of how things in “the church” used to be. Thinking that others did what we did at our best was easy because we did not know the others. Ambrosian chant and Wesleyan hymnody, no doubt pervasive in some cultures, sub-cultures, and sub-sub-cultures (global in the Wesleyan case), actually occupied cultural recesses, churchly crannies, and “special areas of demand.” Seldom were full churches and energetic congregations positioned to be determiners of culture-wide preferences and activities. I would wager that many habitués of Zimmermann’s coffee shop in Leipzig “in classical times” would not recognize a toccata by their “contemporary,” Johann Sebastian Bach, but could have gone down the street to the nearest Bierstube and belted out “traditional” profane lyrics and grunts. On the American frontier Wesleyan souls had access to major hymnody, but who knows what they were singing on the other side of the hill from their little brown churches in the wildwood? Today travel, mass media, and commerce – oh! Commerce! – make available an awareness of all the expressions that do not match our cherished “classical” church music. The alternatives, however, are also not universal, and they too find their niches.

We can think of the location and influence this way: the whole church, two-billion believers strong, as a niche, its culture also secondary or utterly unknown by seventy percent of the human race. The many parts of the church are niched. We may experience and then compare Quaker silence, Pentecostal shouts, cathedral choruses, and songs around Christian youth campfires, each doing something appropriate in its niche. We may think of various modes of music resounding in aural niches, which are carved and colored by experiences related to race, ethnicity, generations, experiences, and markets. So, given the nichedness of church music as it is heard in the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, why dream of one style gaining hegemony or monopoly? It is more profitable to ask: “What kind of niche are we addressing? How ‘good’ is the music in it? How help assure the ‘good’ and, frankly, how be missionary about the spread of that ‘good’ since no mode or genre or style has to be destined only to become a sonic museum piece or to die away?”

You have just read an attempt to break out of liturgical and musical Thwackumism as it relates to “the classical.” This syndrome is named for Parson Thwackum in Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, who, when discussing religion – a vast subject – cut it to fit his niche: “When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion but the Church of England,” etc. Breaking out makes possible bringing “the good” from one’s niche into positive confrontation with the niches of others. One sings and one hears, one plays and one listens. Such interactions enlarge the concepts of the classical and its place. Much classical music, in the narrow definition of the musical dictionaries, never was *Gebrachsmusik* for the church. It was intended for performance. The great Masses of Bach and Beethoven, and the sacred services by Handel and Haydn, were not part of the worship of the church-in-action, but were part of a great aural spillover, a kind of penumbra around the normal activities in cathedrals and chapels. The grand classics were – and new contributions today are – extrapolations on the anthems, chorals, and folk-hymns of the people.

Paradise Lost took off from the Bible, John Donne's poetry reflects but is not hymnody.

Rather than overdo the concept of the classical niche, I'll compensate by thinking of a classical zone. A zone is less confining than a niche. Entering a certain area one reads "Quiet. Hospital Zone." It is easy to know that one is in such a place: there's a hospital in view outside the window. One does not later read: "Make Noise. End of Hospital Zone." So with worship and the zone of the classical. Instead of a hospital, this zone centers around church(es). Forget performance now, and come back to worship. We recall:

First, a church is a congregation, not a clientele or a constituency. It may be hard to recover a sense of the "ontology of worship" in a time when the church appears to be the invented object of pick-and-choose constituencies. A congregation may have some aspects of a market, or may be partly gathered by appeals and advertisements of the market, but a thriving congregation does not let advertisements and market analyses dominate. A gathering of the faithful learns to measure itself by what most profoundly reinforces and expresses its core meaning and mission; it draws on the old stories, the long histories, the consistent intentions of the community of faith, always being open to newness and discovery.

On these terms certain features of what we are calling classical church music bring assets. Classical church music is more likely to be storied, reflective of the Christian narrative, sometimes thick with biblical allusion. Such music must stimulate a sense of awe. The pipe organ seems to have been invented for this, as it emits the divine elemental roar or the subtle near-silence of a flute stop. But classical church music does not always roar. One gets a sense of awe during a quiet anthem on Christmas Eve, or new dimensions of community when youth gather with guitar or flute around a campfire. "Take the shoes off your feet," Moses hears, "because the ground on which you are standing is holy ground." The resultant awe is not born of terror in the face of the faceless Yahweh, whose voice is revelatory. Instead, this "Other" is not tyrannous, even when it announces commands or impels mission.

Such music, further, makes room for human intimacy; it is always occupied with community. Yes, one can practice classical church music alone, or hum it in the sick room, and quote it when writing, yet its essential character shows that it belongs to community. The classic classical church music is the *Te Deum* or, better, the *Te Deum laudamus*, reflected in the English pronoun, "We praise you . . ." One wonders whether the performance of praise songs in front of a set of listeners can convey this communal dimension quite as well? To build community such music is based on, or related to, memorable words, or words that are candidates for memorability. The testimony of those separated from their community – prisoners, captives, the shut-in, the seriously ill – is that if they ever knew any words and tunes they rely on remembered words that they associate with classical hymnody, often words apparently long forgotten. Do the alternatives to such music help provide such sustenance? The Christian church is a storied community. Much or most classical church music draws on and reinforces that narrative, through long periods of time, or it may be freshly told in the language of today. We are living in a time of creativity in recognizing and adding to the language of the global church.

If such virtues exist in the classical, which is so hard to sustain and draw upon in our time, we can ask how it is to be advanced? How can those who care today hope to assure the future, whose outlines I as an historian am not equipped to detail? Here are a few gleanings from much reading, travel, and listening to experts:

1. Don't whine. We have said enough on this.
2. Don't be snobs about alternatives. Expressions that publicly dismiss such alternatives promote backlash and counter-dismissals of "elites" and "esthetes."
3. Form links with non-classical sorts who might have an ear – and then a voice – for the classical. The way jazz musicians are attuned to contrapuntal chants and choral preludes provides a clue, as do occasional best-selling CDs of those who chant in medieval styles.
4. Seek to advance taste, understanding, in the classical by making it part of an invitation to seriousness. The ancient church had a *missa catechumenorum* from which one moved on to a *missa fidelium*. As one can grow in grace, a congregation can grow in taste. We have all known such places. Once again, I know I am skating past some bases for judgment of what it is to "grow in taste."
5. The church is a teaching church. Often classical music has descended on people who have no background or experience. This descent follows the German model, "Friß, Vogel, oder stirb" — "Eat, bird, or die." Very often growth in the classical understanding is associated with some cognitive as well as esthetic approaches. If people know why that hymn was chosen, with what to associate that organ prelude, how the choral anthem connects to anything, they will grow in appreciation. This framing or teaching does not have to be done pedantically; brisk ways to add to comprehension exist, the way the associate in the stadium booth explains in a line or two the last play or anticipates the next one. Many good hymns come with good stories. Many biblical texts throw light on the anthems and hymns that, in turn, throw light on the texts. These can be taught and made memorable. Many alternative forms of church music offer little for this reciprocal movement.
6. Classical music can be graded for children, "for of such is the kingdom of God." When Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee sponsored a contest in Catholic schools, one prize given to the winning children meant that they and their parents were invited to the episcopal residence for dinner, conversation, and then a recital by the accomplished pianist who happened to be their archbishop. The *New Yorker* reported that when Archbishop Weakland stepped to the piano some in the company thought he would perform semi-classical or pop music. No, he said, they were winners: they deserved the best. So he played Chopin études. Children of the church can be introduced to "the best," and build on it.
7. The devotion to classical devotional music demands much of participants. Annie Dillard, having suffered through weak and wan and bad church music and inept liturgical practice, chided those who led worship and provided music, in paraphrase saying to the church, "You've been at this 2,000 years and have not learned to do it well. The high school drama club and musicians do better after six weeks of rehearsal." A parent, hearing a different Gilbert and Sullivan operetta performed by junior high schoolers each year, learned how adept "the kids" were and are at dealing with the intricate and the complicated. So can and do the madrigal choirs at some schools. Through such experiences they are seeing that leaders are effectively putting to work the classical in their youth groups, choirs, and congregations.
8. Recall that in the end, all worship is celebration. That does not mean it all has to be jumpy, superficial, giddy, or evasive. The Christian liturgy walks one through pain and suffering,

mourning and lamenting and repenting, but it is never complete unless it advances celebration of the acts of God among God's people. Note how often classical church music enhances that celebration.

9. Move toward cosmopolitan approaches, as one is happy to note that new service and hymn books do with their fresh offerings. One can hear Anglo congregations growing in their sense of scope and openness when they learn a Hispanic chant or a South African hymn. After such vocal and aural traveling, one returns home with a new understanding of what home has been about, or, at its best, intends to become.

10. Listen and take lessons from places where the classical works, especially in congregations for which it is new, and not part of an apparently dying heritage. Just as Harlem children learn to excel in playing chess and singing the best (often sacred) music because they have the proper teachers, mentors, exemplars, coaches, and incentives, children and adult children of God can add to their repertoires. Some elements of these will be old and classical. Other elements will be new – and classical.

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