

# What Makes a Good Musical Setting of the Mass?

## *A Worthy Conversation*

With the changes in our liturgical texts, we are now faced with a need to choose among the various new Mass settings. Most of us would agree that there is (and probably never will be) an ideal musical setting of our liturgical texts for everyone. Not every composition is a masterpiece, and not every masterpiece is universally appreciated.

So, is there a way to evaluate a Mass setting? Are there objective criteria? Aesthetic goals? Practical benchmarks? Our liturgical documents give us some direction. Our ministerial experience has taught us many things as well.

### **A good Mass setting...**

- ✘ meets the structural and textual requirements set forth by the liturgy.<sup>1</sup>
- ✘ encourages participation.<sup>2</sup>
- ✘ connects with the ritual, spiritual and cultural needs of the assembly.<sup>3</sup>
- ✘ pastorally draw the people closer to the mystery of Christ.<sup>4</sup>
- ✘ is technically, aesthetically, and expressively worthy of the liturgy.<sup>5</sup>
- ✘ embodies quality, appropriateness and beauty.<sup>6</sup>

Some of those points are fairly straightforward, but many invite a lot

of discernment. How do we begin to judge, objectively and practically?

In addition, there are distinct advantages if most parishes of the diocese share some common repertoire of music for the Liturgy. The challenges arise quickly when trying to reconcile a desire for unity while respecting the strengths and needs of each community. Can there be such a thing as a “universal” musical setting that serves a variety of communities well?

*What would qualify as a good “universal” Mass setting?*

### **☐ Does the melody that falls within a reasonable range?**

Arguably, “most” people can sing roughly from 'B' below middle C to 'C' on the treble staff. A melody that intends to be widely accessible to people would respect this tessitura—on the outside perhaps adventuring to 'Bb' on the low end and 'D' on the high end.<sup>7</sup>

### **☐ Is the melody both simultaneously easy enough to learn without frustration AND interesting enough to endure repetition?**

This applies both to the intervals of a melody and the rhythms of the notes. Such a balancing act!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* [STL] #127.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* [CSL] #14, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM] #18, STL #10-14, et.al.

<sup>3</sup> STL #67-71.

<sup>4</sup> STL #130-133.

<sup>5</sup> STL #134-136.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Built of Living Stones* [BLS] #146-149.

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<sup>7</sup> STL #27.

<sup>8</sup> STL #134-136.

**❑ Can it be led effectively by a wide variety of musical leadership?**

The musical leadership in our parishes is very diverse. One may encounter an *a capella* presider; a cantor/guitarist; a small choir or a large choir; accompaniment by a piano or an organ; woodwinds, brass, strings, handbells and/or percussion... A diversity of leadership is not only found between parishes, but often among the different weekend Mass times in a single parish. A setting that is adaptable to whatever musical forces are at hand would be welcome.<sup>9</sup>

**❑ Does it have an accompaniment that, like the melody, is both accessible to learn and able to bear repetition?**

An accompaniment that is flexible and accessible to organists, pianists, guitarists and more? It has been done, and can be done without the compromises watering the music down to a ruin.

**❑ Can it be sung in both English and Spanish?**

In our diocese, a significant number of the faithful participate in Masses in Spanish. As has been demonstrated in the past, it is a great benefit to have musical settings that can be shared by both language communities, whether celebrating together or apart.<sup>10</sup>

The pitfalls that can shift an assembly from participation to passive listening are many: an impractical range for the melody; music that is trite

or superficial;<sup>11</sup> difficult melodic leaps; an accompaniment that is unsupportive; rhythms that are too difficult to grasp; choral parts that confuse the melody; etc.

It is unlikely any one Mass setting could score perfectly on all of these points, especially from the diverse points of view among various communities. However, some of the composed arrangements will rise above the others, perhaps to become a shared, well-loved part of our faith life.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> CSL #121.

<sup>10</sup> STL #57-60.

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<sup>11</sup> STL #135.

<sup>12</sup> This document is the fruit of conversations among the members of the Grand Rapids Diocesan Chapter of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians (NPM-GR). [www.npm-gr.org]