

Chapter ix: *The Mass Setting.*

IF MUSIC BE THE FOOD of love, *play on*, begins Shakespeare's great Christmas play, which doesn't mention Christmas (except very slyly), but is somehow so fragrant with gingery mulled wine and plum pudding and roast venison – and insinuates so well what velvet evening gowns look like when women loll in them quaffing hot claret cup, and recalls so intensely dreamy hours in front of big hearths after feasts (I am sounding old-fashioned deliberately) – that if the title page had been lost we may still have guessed what the play is called: *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare, without any Christmas theology, conjures up the mood of the twelfth night of Christmas, when the three Gentile kings finally turn up in Bethlehem and jovial midwinter is complete. Outside, as the play's final song declares, it rains (*every day, it raineth every day*), but for mankind the season is merry and peaceful – mysteriously peaceful. This mood seems to come from beyond the world, and to be perpetually secure. We sing now because song has come upon us from without. Music fits midwinter because there is some close connection between the fact of Christmas and the need to sing.

People remember the first line of *Twelfth Night* as pretty praise of the science and sweet art of music. But everything in Shakespeare is more complicated than that. Duke Orsino's speech goes like this:

*If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die. . . .
That strain again! it had a dying fall:
O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound,*

*That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour! Enough; no more:
'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.*

This, it seems to me, is an astute explanation of how music works on us, and why it stops working. Orsino, as we discover in the play, is an affable trifler, a *dilettante* and *poseur*, in love as in everything else. The first thing he says (while in the background his court orchestra toils its way through a elaborate concerto) is that he wants to hear *too much* music, or anyway too much of the scrumptious, emotive, erotic bits, so that by gorging he'll grow sick of music and therefore tire of his erotic frenzy – which as a matter of fact is pretty tepid. He's hardly said that when he hears from the orchestra a refrain, a tuneful passage everyone remembers and hums in the shower. "Oh, I like this bit", he thinks, and he asks – or commands, since he is duke and it's *his* orchestra – *Encore!* They play the tune again, with its doleful wee dying fall. *Oh yes, that's nice enough to be a movie theme, it's like the theme-tune to Love Story, to An Officer and a Gentleman, it's florally scented as Olivia's bathroom – let's hear it again. It's enough to moisten a grown man's eyes. Again, sirrahs. This is like enjoying a medley of all movie tunes (I love medleys). Ag – Enough; no more: 'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.* All that sweetness has cloyed. The appetite has sickened, and so died. The listener's poisoned himself with too much sugar.

People like Orsino think they're being romantic, but in fact they're severely utilitarian. They want music to perform one function: they want it to arouse a specific elementary emotion. They want that emotion, whichever emotion it is, aroused as efficiently as possible. *Æ*sthetics and decorum can go hang. Orsino's quite happy to break into a delicate concerto if he can wallow once more in *that* dying fall, for it touched a nerve – *touch it again; again; again – no, stop, it's used up now; I'm not getting any more tingle.* We're not far from pornography. Orsino thinks Renaissance polyphony exists to stir his erotic desire or (by overdoing it) disgust.

And there are lots of people like Orsino. A football chant is calculated to whip up boisterous team spirit. A 'torch song' is fashioned to produce the thrill of pretend-grief, or pretend-remorse, or real self-pity,

or some other snug sentiment. Film-makers employ their sound-tracks aggressively, to dictate what the audience is to feel about what it's being shown. Most popular music over the last ten years (if I may be allowed to turn middle-aged for a moment) has been cynical, over-wrought fluff merely well-tooled to produce sensation.

There's nothing wicked in these uses of music as a mood-drug. But it's a *low* use of the art (and necessarily unstable, for, as Orsino discovers, what is crudely contrived to tickle the palate soon nauseates). I've dwelt on such sensationalism as a way of saying what the Mass is not. Sensationalism is rather B.C. In A.D. centuries, Christmas centuries, the proper – as opposed to improper – use of religious music is diametrically different. We'll come back to Orsino's sensibility later in this chapter (more's the pity), but for now let's thrust him aside.

Hard and high

OF COURSE THERE'S SUCH A THING as popular Christian music – carols, for instance, which are rollicking and jolly, and sometimes pleasantly sentimental, and impossible to dislike. But at the pinnacle of Christian music is the Mass setting, which must represent the opposite of Orsino's self-indulgence. It is absolutely not about massaging human moods. It is not even primarily about being heard by men. Mass music is not in that sense *performed*: the Mass isn't any sort of concert, which is why the choir never faces the congregation (in decent, as opposed to indecent, churches). Like everything we do in the Mass, the music is directed eastward, toward the altar and the God whose altar it is. At Mass we offer to the uncreated One the incomparable and awful Sacrifice of His Son's Body, and we dress this unspeakable Gift with tiny human offerings of smoke, reverent gesture and music: not much, but the best we have. The Mass is sung to God.

On our parish website (www.ascensionandsaintagnes.org) we find the English poet laureate Robert Bridges asking himself what church music ought to be like, and answering

it must be something different from what is heard elsewhere; ... it should be a sacred music, devoted to its purpose; a music whose peace should still

be passion, whose dignity should strengthen our faith, whose beauty should find a home in our hearts to cheer us in life and death; a music worthy of the fair temples in which we meet, and of the holy words of our Liturgy; a music whose expression of the mystery of things unseen never allowed any trifling motive to ruffle the sanctity of its reserve.

That's rather portentously put – Bridges was, after all, a heavy Edwardian. But I'm sure he's right that liturgical music must be *something different from what is heard elsewhere*, because unlike any other music it is not chiefly meant for human consumption.

The music of the Mass is naturally hard and high.

It's [hard](#) because sacred music is the food of divine love, and loving God is a strain: it lies at the edge of what human beings can manage. In the words of the *Kyrie* man strains to say how much he craves forgiveness, at the *Sanctus* he tears himself open to show his awe at the One. The music of the *Kyrie* and *Sanctus* share in the work of the words: it is sent up toward God with the *libretto*, along with the burnt incense. It expresses as far as we can express our craving, our desperately serious yearning for mercy, our visceral awe. The words are wrung from the core of man's conscience: the music has to fit that almost-painful deepness. Such music is unlikely to be glib or easy. It is (and this is a universal paradox of art) restrained because it is straining to say so much. It does not leap into your lap and tweak your chin. Grasping it is work.

Saying *Lord: have mercy* nine times or crying *Holy!* thrice is not like saying *Happy birthday to you*. The traditional melody of *Happy birthday to you* is entirely suitable for its words. When the *Kyrie* and *Sanctus* are sung they ought to sound *something different from what is heard* at birthday parties. (It's sad to live in an age when this has to be said.)

And Mass music is properly [high](#), or culturally and musically elevated. Music is the food of love; Mass is, musically as otherwise, a *banquet* of love. It's not a hamburger, it's not a trawl through a box of chocolates for as much sweetness as can be borne. It's a feast served up to God by a composer, a musical master, and we, who help serve it to God (by listening reverently and by praying the music) need that humility also necessary in great restaurants. The *chef* knows more about cooking

than we do. We want to offer God the best mankind can offer, and that means music at the height of artistic accomplishment. On our own we may incline to casual cheese sandwiches with Hellman's mayonnaise, and to Billy Joel; but we are not in church to amuse ourselves. The Sacrifice is to be offered fittingly as possible, which means with the greatest music, even (or especially) if that music is sublime, solemn, majestic, extreme and formal beyond our usual tastes.

This means Mozart, and Monteverdi, and Gabrielli.

Again: all Christian music is 'high' because (as *Twelfth Night* hints) it is Christmas music. Christian music began the night Christ was born, when the host of highest heaven sang *Gloria in excelsis!* to the first people they could find in the vicinity of Bethlehem not asleep – certain shepherds, as it happened, who had to be half-awake to stop jackals eating their flock. The story of this singing was first recorded in St Luke's Gospel, almost a century later, and by then Christianity apparently had quite a repertoire of sacred music, especially hymns. But we're not just being whimsical when we say that this angelic choral music was the foundation of the music of the Mass. For the eternal rejoicing over God of the immortals could only sound to us like a great music – it must be too ordered and tremendous to sound to us like mere speech. St Luke realised that angelic choirs *must* have sung *In terra pax, Peace on earth!* when Christ was born. The heavenly music *must* then have descended to earth.

Conversely, human music now reaches up to God in the most literal way. Christ as a man sang psalms and hymns, and indeed as a boy in Egypt would have heard the subtle music of the ancient Greek (which is lost to us, but is said to have been great). Now He, still human, reigns over the cosmos from the burning heart of Godhead, and hears the human music offered Him humanly.

The Incarnation melds eternity and human affairs. In the Mass we celebrate and seize on the Incarnation.

Because of the Incarnation we dare to sing to God as if we were ourselves angelic. Because of the Incarnation Godhead hears it as one of ourselves.

Supreme musical artistry in the Mass is thus not a matter of decoration or taste; it's implied by the Christian creed.

PEOPLE EITHER HAVE a musical education, or they don't; I don't (hence the technical innocence of these remarks). But sometimes the babble of the ignorant may be useful; in any case, here is me babbling ignorantly. I've just tried to explain the theology behind Christian music, especially the high artistry of Mass 'settings'.

Now I'm going to say what's been going on musically for the ages of our Body, the Church, as far as I understand it.

Finally I'll say what has happened to contemporary Mass music – which is (to deflate your suspense) cataclysm, disintegration, defilement, idiocy, vulgarisation, patronising cynicism, vandalism, anarchy, loss, annihilation: the apparent triumph of Orsino and his artistic master, red Mephistopheles.

A millennium of Sundays

IN THIS SERIES OF FREEZE-FRAMES, plotting point by point the progress of Mass, we have reached the *Kyrie* and *Gloria*, and last chapter we began to consider the idea of the [Mass setting](#).

Certain elements in the Mass rite – most essentially *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus*, *Benedictus*, and *Agnus Dei* – have traditionally been set to complex choral music, usually as a compositional whole by one composer. When a musician says 'the Ordinary of the Mass' he means, not the whole Ordinary (the unchanging portion of the rite), but these elements. When he says 'a Mass', he means a composer's particular setting of the musical Ordinary. Congregational hymns and choral anthems (except where they arise out of the minor propers – as they often do here) are in a sense decorative: we could get by without, although it would be a huge loss. But the elements which make up the musical Ordinary, the 'Mass', are structural. They have to be there; if they weren't sung, they'd still have to be said (which is a second best). These words are integral to the rite, they form the immense prayer to God which *is* the Mass.

Whole Masses, that is, Mass suites for choirs, have been composed at least since the fourteenth century (before that it seems that

choirmasters generally selected plainsong, or Gregorian chant, settings of *each* element). The 'art Mass' is now very rarely composed, but it remains potentially one of the most demanding and grand *genres* of Western music. Stravinsky said that the Mass and [Motet](#) (a choral anthem inserted into the Mass) "are not simply defunct forms but parts of the musical spirit in disuse," and he regarded this disuse as a disaster.¹ But in certain ages they were not in disuse: they were the pinnacle of Western artistic adventure. In the period historians of music call the late Renaissance, and historians of the Church the Counter-Reformation, polyphonic Masses reached an astonishing level of ethereal beauty and passion. This was the age of Byrd, Lassus, Vittoria, Monteverdi and above all Palestrina; and at Ascension and St Agnes we are fortunate to offer to God this Counter-Reformation music often. After the age of the Baroque, which saw a decline in ecclesial patronage, the music of the Mass reached another peak with the Viennese masses of Haydn and Mozart, written for orchestra as well as choir, with the dramatic intensity of the opera absorbed into worship. We often have this music here as well, and tomorrow night at the Midnight Mass we celebrate Christmas with one of these Viennese brilliant settings: Mozart's *Spaur-Messe*, for orchestra and choir.

Of course, like all good things Mass settings can be overdone, and there were Masses, for instance, with such prolonged and elaborate *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* that music covered the entire (silent) Canon, murmured by the priest at the altar – which made the Consecration suspiciously like a devotion during a concert. Moreover, in the nineteenth century, as the Church became less the cultural centre of our civilisation, some lushly Romantic Masses really were written for the concert hall rather than for actual use as Masses. Nonetheless, until a few generations ago the Mass, the ultimate rite, naturally called forth the Mass, the musical form, and everyone could see that this solemn and splendid music was fitting.

A fine example is today's setting, by the Canadian Anglo-Catholic Healey Willan. He composed it in 1934, using for his motif the ancient

¹ *Conversations* (Doubleday, 1959), p. 141.

and delightful music of a very ancient and delightful ‘sequence’, Prudentius’ hymn *Corde natus ex parentis*, which is sixteen centuries old – or rather young, since it always sounds as if it were written for this Christmas night.

*Corde natus ex parentis ante mundi exordium
A et O cognominatus, ipse fons et clausula
Omnium quæ sunt, fuerunt, quæque post futura sunt.
Of the Father’s love begotten, ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega, He the source, the ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!²*

Willan set his Mass text in English, and the music is understated – we are, after all, still in Advent, and Willan obeyed the spirit and letter of twentieth century austerity. But the four-part choir hint at this Christmas hymn in the *Kyrie*, *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*; finally, in the *Agnus Dei*, the whole chant appears, so that at the moment we call on the Lamb of God for mercy, the music proclaims Him as ground and goal of all reality, source of all mercy, existent before the galaxies, born now as a Man for us.

The setting is glorious, and a different setting of the Mass, except for the *Credo*, is offered in this church every Sunday. The *Credo* and minor propers (if you remember what they are) are chanted in plainsong; each Sunday anthems or motets are added from every age of Christendom. Mounds of skill and trouble and hours and cash are consumed here each week on this offering, compelled by love and impelled by the Incarnation. For what could be more fitting for the extreme splendour of Christ’s bodily presence with us than this extremity of musical glory? And what could be better? Who could want anything else?

So far it’s been pleasant Dr Jekyll; now here is raging Fr Hyde.

² *Hymnal* (1940), number 20.

IT WOULD BE PLEASANT (especially since it's only two days before Christmas) to finish here, on this rhapsodic note.

But suppose Noah had taken a zoologist with him in the Ark (and perhaps he did – it would have been prudent). Suppose this zoologist had serenely described each species, its habits and anatomy and tastes, without mentioning that the critter was at this juncture drastically rare. Wouldn't he strike us as a bit heartless? I can't really explain how Mass is celebrated here, noting and praising each excellence, without observing how drastically rare these excellences are at present. We can't just freeze-frame our worship at Ascension and St Agnes without noting that it stands almost alone, like Ararat; for the global Church has been inundated with noxious nonsense, sterile brine on which bobs wreckage, and reeking carrion.

We are not really in the minority. We are at one with Christian worship of every age except this, of virtually every generation past and – I suspect – future. If a Christian from any age except our own were beamed down from paradise some Sunday morning at ten (in toga, tunic, doublet or frockcoat) he would recognise our Mass as his, in structure, in tone, in appearance, and in music – unusually superb music for a parish church (he'd reflect), but normal. If he'd lived before Palestrina or Mozart, he'd be startled by such unguessed-at beauty; but he'd recognise the music as further approximations to the choral music of paradise. He would be at home. – If he were beamed suddenly into almost any other church he would, according to character, shriek or snigger. *Are these Christians, or is this a new faith?* he'd cry. *What has happened to the Mass? And what – what is that noise? What disaster has overcome the Church?*

Let's recall that the Anglican Communion is a smallish part of the Universal Church. There are just over a billion Roman Catholics; 225 million Orthodox (whose glorious musical tradition is still uncorrupted, and beginning to attract more attention from musically orphaned Western Christians); and 65 million Anglicans or Episcopalians (not all of whom realise their inheritance as a branch of the Church Catholic, musically or otherwise). Of those 65 million, 25 million are in England

and only 2 million in America.³ When we contemplate the shipwreck of Western Christian music, we're contemplating a Roman Catholic calamity which then sucked down most Anglican congregations.

How did it happen? What mad trembling fell on Rome?

'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

THE LITURGICAL MOVEMENT BEGAN in the nineteenth century as an attempt to recover plainsong, to purify polyphonic settings, to revitalise and clarify classic forms of liturgy, and to ensure the people understood what was happening at Mass. But in our civilisation, at least since 1789, it has been the fate of reform movements to turn rabid in success. The Liturgical Movement in its triumph abolished liturgy, as that term has been understood for a millennium: it obliterated all existing settings, stopped plainsong, and rendered the atmosphere of Mass so banal it is now impossible to comprehend not because it transcends normal sensibility, but because it falls far below.

Pope Pius X (another heavy Edwardian, a saint but a failed pope) initiated the carnage in 1903 with a *Motu proprio* – which means a declaration off his own bat, without any pressing need in the Church to respond to. Pius X's *Motu proprio* imposed a *doctrinaire* austerity on Church music, effectively silencing every instrument but the pipe-organ, and flinging overboard the glory of Mozart and Haydn. Pius XII began 'rationalising' the rites in the 1950s. But it was not until the 1960s that the real catastrophe began.

The *agent* of devastation wasn't the Second Vatican Council as such. For in liturgical music (as in many other areas) the Council did not itself lay the Church's inheritance waste, so much as breaking down the ancient walls and forms to let in reckless reformers – who then laid the Church's inheritance waste. The Council indeed commanded that the Church preserve and cultivate her "treasure of sacred music". But since the Council had already begun to efface the inherited shape of Mass, and

³ There are, then, 1,350 million members of the Church Catholic (Roman, Orthodox, Anglican); if we count the 650 million heretics and schismatics, we have a total of two billion Christians, a third of the world's population, growing by tens of thousands each day.

since this process, once started, rolled on until Mass shrank to the shabby prayer-service we know today, the Council hypocritically doomed the treasure it commended.

Within a few years of the Council, Catholic music was influentially condemned by the Jesuit Karl Rahner, perhaps the most important theologian of the age, a rotter and philistine. This wasn't because he had no taste in music (a trivial flaw), but because he was lost in Modernist theological error: hatred of serious beauty and contempt for the past (which is to say the real, continuous past, not some archæological speculation about what Mass might have been in the catacombs under Diocletian). Rahner, with a colleague gruesomely named Vorgrimler, pronounced that musical art is "of its very nature – which is esoteric in the best sense – hardly to be reconciled with the . . . basic principle of liturgical reform." There can be no real use for what Rahner airily calls "actual church music" in the new Conciliar Mass (the Mass produced by the Council – virtually a new ceremony, it seems, or at least a ceremony absent from the world for over a thousand years). Indeed there is no rôle for "actual music" in this new religion, Conciliar Christianity. What is wanted is, they say, "so-called [utility music](#)" – a useful term, as is "actual music".⁴

Utility music hadn't then (1969) been invented, but now, God help us, it has.

Here I have a problem. If your experience of Christian worship is only Ascension and St Agnes, or other islands standing above the Deluge, you'll simply not believe me about what has been invented by way of utility music. The first time I visited a Roman parish I couldn't believe my own senses. Was I drugged, or were they? Was it the feast of Groucho Marx? Where was the celebrant's monocycle and red plastic nose?

Lord have mercy on us! Lord have mercy on us!

Christ have mercy on uh-us!

Lord have mercy on us!

– guess the tune to that. The congregation sang, or rather a few of them sang, a farcically, a *rudely* ugly and sentimental 'setting' of the Ordinary,

⁴ Cardinal Ratzinger has recently had some encouragingly harsh things to say about this distinction.

and the service was eked out with ‘choruses’ or ‘worship songs’, pure 1970s soft pop. As Thomas Day points out in his racily-written *Why Catholics Can’t Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste*, most worship songs approximate both the tune and poetic spirit of

*Here’s the story of a lovely lady
who was bringing up three very lovely girls.
All of them had hair of gold, like their mother
(the youngest one in curls).⁵*

I don’t want to be hypocritical. There are gushing Victorian hymns I dislike too. ‘Worship songs’, though a standing insult to the dignity of our Faith and civilisation, and, indeed, our species, wouldn’t matter so much if any ‘actual music’ were allowed to survive as well. But it hasn’t been; and what shocks me more than the silliness of the choruses is the crude manipulation of the new Mass setting now all the ‘actual’ ones are abolished.

Conciliar music is avowedly utility music. It strives successfully not to be hard and high but pappy and low. It is ugly, and means to be, because advertising jingles and other ugly riffs stick in the mind (that’s why they’re called *catches*). Utility music means to provoke an elementary emotional reaction: that is all it’s for. It’s especially fond of the technique of torch songs: swoony, drilling repetition. Of course! We are back with Orsino (*That strain again!*).

In America, the theorist of this musical brutality is the Rt Rev’d Robert Weakland, Archbishop of Milwaukee and enemy of God. One of American popery’s leading progressives, Weakland decreed influentially back in 1967 that

liturgical experience is to be primarily the communal sensitivity that I am one with my brother next to me and that our song is our common twentieth-century response to God’s word here and now and coming to us in our twentieth-century situation.⁶

It’s galling to learn that Weakland, although obviously no great shakes with English prose, is a fine musical scholar and musician (and not really

⁵ Crossroad, New York, 1990; for the fatal likeness to *The Brady Bunch*, see p.166.

⁶ ‘Music as Art in Liturgy’ (1967); quoted by Day, pp. 95, 97.

an enemy of God – I said that because my blood was up). If it comes to that, Duke Orsino may, like Henry VIII, have composed madrigals. But nonetheless Henry VIII abolished the sound of the Mass in England; what Orsino wants from his orchestra is a dependable thrill; and what Weakland *primarily* wants from Mass is the thrill of *communal sensitivity*. The Catholic beside him, so excitingly not an archbishop, is to be made to sing exactly the same lowest-common-denominator *muzak*, because from him is required the same response to God, a *common twentieth-century response*, and oh the work that is being done here by the word *common*. Any individual response is disallowed, and indeed rendered impossible by the crude authority of crude music. Weakland argues that we cannot even try to adapt the Church’s musical inheritance, for though we denounce “the bad theological opinions on liturgy” which prevailed in every generation until this enlightened generation, and fashioned the music of every age but this, the music itself allows the worshipper a way out of *our twentieth-century situation*, and therefore (declares Weakland, with a fine flourish of doublethink) “ends as a *cul de sac*.” We must scrap all that we have and begin from scratch.⁷

What is going on? How can an intelligent and musically literate prelate demand such revolutionary indignities for God’s people? The answer, as we discussed in Chapter vi (pp. 50-52), is generational: the Church was revolutionised in the ‘60s and ‘70s by clerics born in the ‘20s and ‘30s, who were therefore sodden with Modernism, that vanished, sinister trend in our civilisation. Modernism despised the humane past and wanted a new future modelled on the directed violence, square lines and stark cleanliness of machinery. “Start from scartch” said Gropius. Less is more. Decoration is bourgeois. Individual sensibility is to be dragooned into efficient collectivity, the *common twentieth-century response, here and now*.

These were the cultural ideas imposed on the Church with Vatican II, and the hilarious or tragic or grotesque result has been to freeze the culture of the Church at the least attractive moment of the generally

⁷ Day, *ibid*.

horrible twentieth century. Conciliar Church music, as Dr Day keenly remarks, is

the liturgical equivalent of workers' housing designed by . . . Le Corbusier – plain dwellings (all in the shape of cubes), smiling labourers in spotless overalls, straight paths leading to the factory, everything germ-free and clean, everything at right angles to everything else (including the inhabitants), and not a superfluous decoration in sight, not so much as a geranium in a pot. Rahner and Vorgrimler will allow music into this functional environment only if it helps the workers to respond, in unison, at functionally correct places in the functionally correct workers' liturgy; any . . . type of artistic music is unthinkable, since it introduces an element of the mysterious Le Corbusier described a building as a "machine for living." In the Rahner-Vogrimler vision, liturgy is an efficient machine for worship.⁸

This vision sounds quaint and horrible and ludicrous because it is. The great monuments of Modernism – think of the architecture of the Berlin Olympics, or Eliot's pre-Catholic poetry, or Man Ray's photographs, or Orwell's novel *1984* – savour of bleak nightmare. And, come to think of it, there is still something of *1984* in the Conciliar Church: CLAMOUR IS PEACE. TYRANNY IS FREEDOM. Take the priest, no longer the representative Father but our enabling brother, position him behind the altar where he is always beaming down on you, amplify his voice so you can never escape it, snuff out the candles and turn up the search-lights, impose cheery collective singing and compulsory gestures of solidarity like the hug-your-neighbour Pax: BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU.

Modernism was a *cul de sac* for our civilisation; it is defunct everywhere, even in architecture – except in the Church. The Church is where Modernism has gone to die.

Participation

THE MAIN ARGUMENT FOR MODERNIST CHRISTIANITY and its new Mass, if I follow it, is that at least the people are now *participating*. In the wicked rites of every other century, the 'people of God' were betrayed by

⁸ Day, p. 94.

conniving clergy and arrogant musicians into being mere spectators. Now, by suppressing music so beautiful only musicians can sing it, the Church has done away with all such “bad theological opinions on liturgy”, and the bad practice that follows: no more adoration, no more elaborate rites, no more elitism.

The people in this argument doesn't really mean the people, since 'people' must include half-hearted Christians, those floating into the Faith and those floating out, thoughtful spectators, and thoughtless communicants who come because Mass-going is an obligation – the whole heap of the citizenry of Christendom, for whom Christ died and whom the Church serves. 'The people' in this sense are despised by the Modernisers, who much prefer to the universal and tolerant Church of Christendom a small, intensely 'committed' Church – in other words a sect, a Christian sect as cut off from the world as was (they imagine) the flawless Christian sect of the first centuries. One of the most effective manifestos of the Modernisers, Joseph Jungmann in *The Mass of the Roman Rite* (1949), complains that at Mass “every sharp boundary between church and world is broken down, so that Jew and heathen can press right up to the steps of the altar”.⁹ The Council did what Jungmann wanted. It made the Mass more private and more separate (hence more socially and culturally irrelevant) by making anyone who kept attending Church – not surprisingly, their numbers plunged – *join in*. That the modern rites are repulsive and embarrassing, musically and otherwise, is part of their allure to the Conciliar Church. Embarrassment keeps the people, *hoi polloi* out. When the Modernisers use the term *the people*, they mean it the way the early Bolsheviks did: the mobilised proletariat of God, the activist Party of God.

'Participation' in the contemporary Church, then, is a fraud and evil joke: it means the opposite to what it says (so, indeed, does *elitist*, surely the stupidest word in the language. When it means anything at all, it means *what almost everybody naturally prefers*.) Modernism is communalist: participation means compulsory absorption of the

⁹ Day, p. 90. Pius XII, who hastened the demolition of the ancient rites, kept this book on his desk. It should have been kept on the Index.

individual into *communal sensitivity*. In the Conciliar Mass, that machine for worship, the people are the workers in the new stripped-down factory-churches. They are to join in the morale-boosting communal singing, all at the same level of musicianship and spirituality. The American bishops recently forbade any new choral Mass settings; the congregation must Participate, which means all must cohere in *our song ... our common twentieth-century response*.

The great choral settings really were designed for the participation (in the usual sense of the word) of the people (in the usual sense of the word) – not at the superficial level of congregational sing-a-long, but because they were uttered by the choir on behalf of all people. There was external unity and order – all listened to the glorious song offered for them – but internal liberty. Each member of the congregation bowed, knelt and prayed his way through the Mass, or said his rosary, or merely enjoyed the music, or did nothing, as he wished. Pre-Conciliar music arose from devotion; emotion was not its goal; therefore it was restrained, and respected the interior spiritual life of the people. It did not impose a common twentieth century response.

But in Conciliar music there can be no restraint. The new dispensation offers the specious external unity of all being made to sing along, and there is no internal liberty. The traditional bowings and kneelings were all forbidden after the Council. Here is precisely the music of utility: it is designed to *intrude* on the congregant who sings it, and stamp an emotional state on him, just like a cinema sound-track. Decorum protects individuals against the crushing movements of the mob, because it limits what can be done; therefore the new Mass is musically and ritually indecorous. How dare any little parishioner refuse the new freedom of exhibiting the same sentiment by singing the same sentimental ditties with everyone else? There is to be no escape from such freedom; there is to be nowhere to hide.

How do Catholics endure singing such piffle? The answer is, according to Dr Day (and my experience of Roman Catholic churches is the same): they don't. They don't sing at all. They resist being dragooned, and their priests have largely given up on trying to make their flock join in. Increasingly, a 'worship music group' does the music into the face of

the congregation, who sit passive and silent as they never did before the revolution. As a rule, Roman Catholic laity do not now even pick up the mock-folk songbooks. They maintain a silence and therefore a privacy in worship which is not sullen, but rather noble, and a sign of hope.

Resistance.

ONE DECENT HUMAN RESPONSE to liturgical Modernism, as to Internationalist or Brutalist architecture, is [hatred](#). We do want a ‘machine for worship’: the thing is a foe: it is to be torn down and destroyed. A few days ago, on my way to the Library of Congress, I was lucky enough to watch the demolition of a particularly hideous 1960s box-building on Pennsylvania Avenue, opposite the National Gallery of Art. Even in ruin it was ugly – ganglia of steel ropes holding together massive crumbs of pre-poured concrete as its beehive cells were smashed. But the thing was being done. Human dignity was being redeemed. Every crunching whack of the steel ball increased order and loveliness in the world. And so with the new music, the new rites which justify the new music, the new religion which justifies the rites. They are not to be nudged back toward the ancient tradition. They are to be razed.

Another reasonable human response to the Modernist calamity is [horror](#). For it is far easier to ruin than to build, and the Council managed to wreck a thousand years of choral singing in a generation. Except in a few places where choirs refused to be silenced, serious Roman Catholic choral music is over. It’s terrible to think – I’m not speaking loosely like a journalist, I mean precisely the thought brings terror with it – that in a city like Washington (political centre of the planet) there are only one or two places where Masses are sung as Masses. The greatest musicians of our civilisation wrote music for music’s highest possible use, in – *as* – the ultimate human activity, which is the offering of the Mass. And it’s not used. Of course it’s played a good deal; but a Mass in a concert hall is a butterfly pinned in a case, no longer alive, no longer where it ought to be. More seriously, Mass deprived of serious musical setting is a deformity.

The worship offered to God in almost all Roman Catholic churches, in most Anglican churches, is despicable. I am speaking coolly: I mean it

is offered with music the priest and choir and people would despise in any other context. The appetite has sickened and died; music has ceased to work.

That the Church can bring herself to celebrate and offer such trash is not a sign of æsthetic failure, but of mania. This is what we discussed to chapters back: heresy of sensibility, a shoddy apostasy, a sickness.

Restoration.

BUT A THIRD DECENT RESPONSE is [hopeful defiance](#).

I'm finishing these notes in a coffee shop on Capitol Hill which I like because it doesn't play Christmas muzak. Just in that last paragraph (turning on the word *despicable*) the piped music turned from Handel operas and Mozart string quartets to the *Gloria* from a Haydn Mass. By the time I noticed that this glorious music was sounding not in my head but in the cafe it had stopped. But it'll be back. Western man can't get by without this music. Even our film sound-tracks keep falling back on Palestrina, Mozart's *Requiem* and *Ave verum corpus*, Haydn's Masses, Schubert's *Ave Maria* Even in the twentieth century, when the Church repelled serious music, there were some great Masses composed, by Poulenc, Vierne and Langlais, for instance, and by Stravinsky: his Mass of 1948 is one of the greatest musical works of the century (and cries out to performed here one day).

If the man-in-the-street realised that this glorious music was written, not for mere performance but for use, and use in Church, he might have to explore what this use could be about. And sooner or later the man-in-the-pew is going to revolt and demand back what was confiscated from him by clerics in the name of Participation.

I've tried to say in this chapter how eucharistic music works on us, and why it has stops working. Eventually, human desire will demand a restoration. But when the Church comes back to her senses, she'll find it hard to retrieve the treasure she's jettisoned. It can't be retrieved from books; it lives because it is alive. Therefore Ascension and St Agnes and those other parishes and cathedrals which preserve the repertoire and spirit of the Church's inheritance (a minority in the Anglican

Communion, a tiny minority in the Roman Communion) are doing so for all the Church. We are like the Dark Age monks, who preserved Christian culture, including Christian music, amidst almost universal cultural darkness. Then barbarians had come over the external frontiers of Christendom and civilisation and silenced high art. This time barbarians have clambered out of the human heart and overwhelmed by social chaos. But they will pass, and in the meanwhile every properly sung Mass makes the next one possible, until the Church is herself again.

And even if that never happened, to offer the splendid Sacrifice splendidly is worthwhile, and a joy, in itself, especially if It is offered properly only in a few places.

If music be the food of love, play on!

THIS SEEMS AN AWFULLY GRIM WAY to finish a chapter – just before Christmas, too. But perhaps at Christmas we can afford to laugh off the last fifty years. Church music, particularly the setting of the Mass, is not to do with earth, but with paradise, most of all at this joyful season. It is about music beyond this world: exultant beyond human capacity, angelic, supernal, unearthly, and only to do with earth because of the Incarnation. The Prince of Peace has come to save us from all evil, including the evil of deliberately vile music.

So, better than striking heroic postures as Dark Age monks, let's say that we are like the shepherds running downhill into the village of Bethlehem, already shouting to each rough imitations of the music they have heard. The world's black and sleeping, indifferent and cold, but we have heard the music of the spheres, the minstrelsy of the immortals, joy rolling on beyond time, harmony universal, music infinite:

O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant!

Sing choirs of angels, sing in exultation!

O come, let us adore Him!

Gloria in excelsis Deo!