# PRAISE HIM WITH THE LYRE

By JOHN MICHAEL EAST

FOR living liturgical musicians — those, that is, who are ready to move into the future — the moment of truth, or at least of asking the truthful questions, has, I feel, at last been reached. Nor is it merely a question of moving forward. Our reflections are concerned as much with bringing all that is relevant from our knowledge and appreciation of the past, which gives another dimension to our present considerations.

The ideas and the energies which rose to the surface in those first reactions to the new freedom contained in the liturgical reforms of a dozen years ago have now lost their initial freshness, their half-instinctive responses. As the movement lost momentum, many of the ideas which it sparked off have revealed themselves as lacking permanence, as blighted at their very root: shallow and all too ephemeral. In addition, there is now a new generation of young adults who are asking, with some perplexity, what has happened to their traditional birthright of a liturgical language and a liturgical chant which their Catholic schools and parish churches have not handed on to them. These, who are as important to us as the rest of the faithful, are perplexed by the contradiction between the pride which they are expected to have in the Church's two thousand years of spiritual growth, and various contemporary manifestations of that growth. For them, too, this is a crucial time of questioning, rather than a mere backward glance at the past.

What we need at this present moment is a more reflective and extended consideration of music as embedded in the liturgy, its principles of growth and formation, its precise function; and the same care is necessary in formulating the questions asked as with the answers we can give and the action which is to follow. All the knowledge in our possession, the learning by which it was acquired, the illumination and the values it enshrines, must be brought into

play during this careful and caring time of re-assessment, as the twentieth century draws to a close.

First and foremost we need a deeper understanding of the psyche of man; since it is man who creates the liturgical action. This must lead to a more profound appreciation of the aesthetic of the music which he is to use, or which is to be offered for his use, in expressing this action. A knowledge of psychology and aesthetics have not received much encouragement among us; perhaps because both are subjective, and therefore, thought to be dangerous — or at least disturbing. To meet the challenge of the times — or of the young — the Church must shake off its feebleness, its fear of being disturbed. The elimination of fear in the area of formation has already proved its worth in a developing awareness of the close relationship between man's inner being and his involvement with music. We also need a more rounded concept of music as 'the handmaid of the liturgy' and employ her more intelligently. Only thus can music be seen as a therapeutic agent, as an outstanding educational medium leading towards that abundance of life promised by the Lord.

## AESTHETICS AND LITURGY

'If the best men in the nation would rather preach dogmatisms and platitudes than take the human psyche seriously', wrote Carl Gustav Jung, 'then the powers of darkness will never be overcome'.[1] In what follows, it is assumed that the making of liturgy is concerned with overcoming the powers of darkness, and revealing the power of light. I would hope to avoid either mere dogmatism or platitude.

The more deeply one looks into the fundamental nature of man, the more one sees how the efforts of a decade ago to create new liturgy were too narrow and too shallow for him. Rather, it was all too often devoutly wished that expediency might happen to coincide with truth. But expediency implies accepting what is less than wholeness, less than truth. Another corollary of expediency is the speedy re-occurence of the problem in a more chronic form.

> Truth is always greater than so-called fact. Until all things have been expressed not only in their scientific and religious aspects but also with full relevance to art and its graces, and all these aspects then translated precisely into living behaviour, they have not been expressed in their totality. Surely that is Blake's ultimate justification for predicting that when the arts decline, nations decay? Art, for me, became

[1] *Collected Works* (New York, 1953-60), vol 9, part 1, p 453.

> increasingly a manifestation of pentecostal spirit, seeking to make men aware of a greater reality. It introduced the seed of a greater becoming in the midst of our being: and out of this element of becoming we derived our senses of meaning and belonging. I saw art as a kind of magic mirror making visible what is invisible in us and the life of our time. An instrument also for making what is oldest in the human spirit contemporary and new. It was an unfailing source of increasing human awareness, and by such increase enabled life to renew itself in greater and more authoritative expressions of itself. Without art truth was not whole.[2]

When Jung visited Uganda in 1925, he found it axiomatic amongst the people that the Creator had made all things good and beautiful. 'When I asked', he wrote, 'but what about wicked animals who kill your cattle? they replied: The lion is good and beautiful'.[3] If we are inclined to dismiss such a reply as too primitive, too instinctive, or indeed no answer at all, then it is my belief that we shall never find the answer ourselves. The aesthetic sense is in no way a prerogative of the self-conscious élite, any more than is the true spirit of Christianity or anything else which affects the unconscious. It can only be approached humbly and with an open-minded perception originating in the senses.

*The aesthetic sense*

Before attempting to define the aesthetic sense, I believe that we must first consider this sense 'in action'. A stranger to our religion, who contemplated the interior of some of our churches with its altar torn from its original position, its attendant area of clutter, its rows of pews which are so difficult to get into or out of, might well be left wondering what on earth we are about? By contrast, when we ourselves stand on the rim of the ruined mediterranean amphitheatre, we cannot help experiencing something of its atmosphere and purpose. There everything seems to have a focus. We feel moved to discover the position and function of the chorus over against the protagonists, with the altar, the centre of the stage, between them: the interplay between 'the priests' and the people, with whom and within whom the deeper meanings of the drama or rite would begin to grow as it unfolded and was interpreted by the 'chorus'.

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[2] Laurens van der Post, talking of his childhood, in *Jung and the story of our time* (London, 1976), p 20.

[3] *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London, 1967), p 296.

The Greeks believed that beauty is moral goodness, and that ugliness is a sin; and surely we believe that the expression of what is moral and good in our religion should lead to an expression which manifests the beautiful. At any rate, we accept that the evil shall be represented by the deliberately ugly, whether in the plastic arts or, say, by the demons of Elgar's *Gerontius*. But how often does our Catholic musical expression lack beauty and show forth ugliness just by carelessness or deficiency? What does it say about our faith and morality?

Beauty declares a union of relationship such as must spring from liturgy. But this can be realized only if it is a union of formal relationship: that is, of what has been properly formed in itself, and presented in a sufficiently formal, though not over-formal context. Typical english informality, in the wrong place, can be an expression of the formless, of the unformed, of the useless.

The word 'aesthetic' derives from the classical greek verb *aisthanesthai*, 'to apprehend through the senses'; and its implication is perception through sensation of beauty. This can be quite primitive and instinctual, like the Ugandan's perception of the lion; it has no connection with an over-cultivated sense of tastefulness, of refinement. Gentility can be disastrous for liturgy; it would be erroneous to identify it with aestheticism. When we are speaking of a person's instinctual or natural perception, the question at issue is decidedly not whether that perception is primitive or developed. The problem arises only when the instinct or the development of perception has been atrophied by the impedimenta of contemporary living.

Walter Shewring, looking back to the pre-industrial age, has written:

> Every workman was in fact an artist; and as he knew that good work was expected of him, so he expected it of everyone else. Thus the cobbler's work was to make good shoes; but at every point of his life he was using things well-made by others. His house and household things, the church he prayed in, the sculptures in it, the painted Saint Christopher by the door, the chant in the church and the songs at home: all these things had been well made by those whose calling it was to make them; and there could be no quest for art, because art was the tissue of common life.[4]

[4] Shewring, Walter, in *Topics*: 6, Art and Work Distributism (London, 1940).

In the end it is not the loss of these well-made things in terms of the 'stuff' of their making that matters; it is the aesthetic loss in the perception of following a calling and of being involved in an expectation implying mutual trust. It is true that we cannot retrieve an age that has gone, any more than we can retrieve our own childhood; but its lessons should never desert us. The will to form and to make, and the unconscious instinctual aesthetic sense are still there; they can be touched and made whole. Liturgy should contain and be concerned for this 'touching'. Liturgy must find this touching, to which the careless or the expedient is inimical.

Another attraction of the word 'aesthetic' is that it avoids the trap of our words 'art', or 'beauty'. What is art is not always beauty; and what beauty is, is not always what art is. Independently of these, man's aesthetic sense has shown itself to be a permanent and normal part of his nature. But remove from man the opportunity to fashion things for his own use to earn his bread with honest work, to love, to express himself, and you have what an inhuman industrialization and an over-sized bureaucracy have failed to cure: a materialistic existence, one that is in no sense fully alive, but rather subject to uselessness, to waste and to violent destruction. Ordinary man — everyman — has an aesthetic sense. There are things, and there are ways of doing things, which he instinctively admires. To deny him this, in the involvement we provide for him in the liturgy, is a far worse crime than snobbery; for we assume that he knows less than we do about the intellectual cultivation of an appreciation of art. It is even worse, on the other hand, to provide slabs of 'art' music, such as polyphony, on the same assumption. The Ugandan appreciated the lion through knowing him as dangerous. Today, in Uganda, as everywhere else, he will equally appreciate the red sports car; but he will forget that it is dangerous. In our approach to liturgy, we must appreciate the aesthetic and realize its dangerous power. Dogmatism and platitude must be recognized as a bogus substitute.

The aesthetic sense is an innate ability to appreciate. It is a quality that is more than material, more than intellectual. It is spiritual. However primitive or instinctual, it is man's fullest comprehension of the complex of creation, of which he is a living creative part.

*Lyre and guitar*

At first sight, it would seem that the banner under which I am trailing these thoughts is rather ironic. In fact, it simply underlines

the whole dilemma. The lyre is a handy instrument, chiefly used for accompanying the voice when the voice is expressing high flown sentiments or personal thoughts at no great length; hence the epithet 'lyrical'. We can recognize the modern successor to the lyre, which is now used to accompany (sometimes with electrical amplification) the vocal expression of sentiment tailored to the length of the album-track and the broadcast slot. The reactive wish to praise God only with the archaic, or the symbolic language of the past, is a natural reaction to the attempt to praise him without a living aesthetic: that is, a genuinely contemporary aesthetic. The unaesthetic use of guitars, and the no less unaesthetic use of plainsong and polyphony as a reaction to it, has created a tension which polarizes rational thought concerning liturgical music, liturgical solemnity and liturgical language. It follows that we have at last arrived at the time of a new readiness to relax, and to look with a new sense of the human aesthetic. To begin with, this will teach us that any violent cutting-off of the past is more a sign of an immature reaction than a real acceptance of the pains of growth.

Thus far I have been reflecting in rather general terms. Is it possible to answer two specific questions? The Church was patron of the arts in the past: should she be resuming that role today, in relation to liturgy? Is it now possible to discern a common aesthetic in our pluriformity of different cultures? These questions, in one form or another, currently recur in the search for answers. I have already mentioned the need for prudence in asking questions, when the answers to which they are likely to lead are simply prefatory to action, to the setting of new patterns. These questions, then, at least in their usual formulation, are not likely to lead to profitable answers.

*Questions and answers*

The first question, concerning the Church as patron of the arts, reduces itself to that of the Church as patron of the artists: that is, of men with an aesthetic sense giving authority to others with creative power. It certainly does not mean a committee which thinks that such delegation is its rightful task. In the specific area of music, the question concerns the Church as patron of liturgical musicians. If this is one of its functions, the further question arises: Who commissions whom? What sort of liturgical musician should be commissioned to do what? There is a general feeling among musicians that the Church is too nervous, too unsure of its own aesthetic sense

willingly to provide the patronage of just reward and encouragement. It is safer to commission the design and building of a new organ than to provide for the training and employment of a new organist. Again, the idea of a liturgical musician concentrating simply on raising the standard of participation and of performance of what is already done is one that finds little understanding or response. But one of the demands of our post-conciliar liturgy is that much more time should be spent in preparation, in the selection of what is to be used: that is, it must be made possible for our church musicians to afford to spend at least part of one day a week neither in rehearsing nor performing, but simply in preparing. Musicians are just as much themselves in need of thoughtful change as anyone. The few liturgical musicians already developing the right response with and within the liturgical community are those who are responding to a challenge rather than looking for purely musical opportunities. This challenge is to put all their musical experience and expertise to new purpose, new service. The challenge is there, because the unchanging use of traditional music and traditional methods are no longer, in themselves, proving adequate for today's society. It is a challenge to solve through acceptance of the situation as it is. We need a different breed of musician, ready to use the resources of his own parish community with professional skill, and to enliven them with his own conviction and caring for them. He must work from within them, accepting that there may never be anything to show, in the usual sense, for what he does; but that there will be something to feel for what he does.

Whether one thinks in diocesan or in parochial terms, musicians, along with liturgists and with all the people of God, must interest themselves in the conscious requirements of a reformed and a reformable liturgy — a liturgy whose very nature demands constant reform. It is in this sense that liturgical musicians must truly be reformers. They must be aware, as never before, that the people who come, come to celebrate and to be involved; they are not a sort of gratuitous or passive audience. Liturgy is no longer something done 'up there' in the sanctuary according to the rubrical directions, studded, as it were, with musical or rhetorical jewels from the past, whose purpose is to make the affair more palatable for 'the regulars' and help swell the collection. Our concern is for an action of the whole people of God, celebrated together with the sacred minister. From this it follows that all the people must be touched inwardly, so that simply their being there (which may have cost much) is

itself an offering. And if they have come with other spiritual gifts, of reflection, of eye or of ear or of hand or of voice, these can also serve to enrich the community, and thus its liturgical worship.

The musician then, is just one amongst the other participants. Circumstances, and the special place of music within worship, have tended to give him more power in its creation than is often justified. He is not a 'professional' who happens to share (perhaps not all) the beliefs of those 'putting on the show'. Rather he must be part of the worshipping community; one who is so concerned for those beliefs that he wants to work within them as a believer who happens also to be a musician. He must cultivate his own liturgical awareness, which is an aesthetic awareness interpreted with the crucial qualities of simple humility and imagination. So much has gone wrong, or has simply failed in the past, because imagination has been feared, stifled, rejected. We are now conscious that it is an essential quality, one that must be encouraged before it can be disciplined into a true sense of service. Whilst we recognize it as the lion, we are also aware that it will languish in permanent captivity.

*The liturgical musician*

The basic question for the musician (who must know his parish before attempting to answer it), is not so much, 'what sort of music can I put on here?', but 'how can my musical gifts and my imagination inspire this community to make their offering to the *greater* glory of God?' 'How can I help this community to keep in touch with its heritage of gregorian chant, polyphony and traditional hymns, freed from their traditional use?' These are the important questions, particularly in an age as confused as our own; for they demand real contact with those who have handed on to us their own use of that tradition. If we are to find a sense of direction in our confusion, we must first touch and feel that tradition. At the same time, we must develop our own sense and use of it, so that we can properly perform our function of handing it on, further enriched and enlivened by ourselves, to succeeding generations. Exercises in mere expediency are simply a waste of the valuable time we need to create the balance of the new music which is the appropriate expression both of our own time and of the timeless.

One of our main tasks is to avoid underestimating other people's ability in their moments of inspiration, so that we can play our full part with them as they reach beyond the mundane and the mediocre. Musical skill is an ability to solve musical problems. The enjoyment

of conducting Byrd or Bach, of playing a guitar or being a cantor are good things; but the musician's enjoyment is only a very small part of what the liturgical assembly, with all its resources and with its serious purpose, is about. The congregation must be involved, not in vain repetition of the low level, but in continually responding to the challenge. Then the choir's place and function becomes assured: its work is also prayer.

The Church's function is certainly not that of a patron in the old sense. Works of art are peaks of achievement. Each generation has to begin a new climb. Ours is not a time in which to patronize musicians; but to lead more and more of God's people on the way of worshipping pilgrimage.

*Pluriformity in liturgical music*

Pluriformity is clearly a stimulus for the evolvement of contrasting styles, balanced and fused with imagination and an aesthetic sense. Its extent will depend upon the actual diversity within the actual parish community. This may differ according to the times of celebration: saturday evening, sunday morning and sunday evening. Pluriformity within the liturgy itself is nothing new. The Universal Church has naturally inherited and used a catholicity of styles. It is self-deception and an unreal nostalgia to conceive of the 'tridentine' liturgy or of gregorian chant as anything other than examples of pluriformity. Marvellous as were the ceremonies of the old rite, they embraced a pluriformity of language, of music and of local tradition, and never a monochrome aesthetic. Otherwise, they would have appealed only to one culture. There is a significance in the fact that the Church found its centre early on in Rome, rather than in Greece. Too much emphasis on aesthetic quality presents a danger to the purpose of liturgical music, which here in this world must be more concerned about revelation than perfection. Yet it is fatuous to expect revelation, whose concrete forms must always be limited, to transcend the aesthetic sense. The transcendent can only emerge from a rhythmical balance of tension.

The task of the musician, even when he is neither composer nor originator, is to find or create new interpretations from the old archetypes of religious music. Until he can do this, much of the richness contained in post-conciliar liturgy will not emerge into the general consciousness, at the expense of its goodness. We have to believe the Church to be that body of growing consciousness, of growing awareness promised by our Lord. Otherwise, Vatican

Council II remains a mere exercise, an activity; and we ourselves as merely residing within a sect, inert and living in the past.

Unless we evolve new interpretations, we cannot expect to leave behind the present stage of apparent shallowness, whether this is pseudo-contemporary or the interpretation of yesterday served up cold. In other words, we are *from* the past, rather than simply *for* it. Certainly the principles of the past must inform the future; but they cannot be mere reproductions of their out-dated form. Their form was of then; we must make the form of now.

A little girl — about four years old — was taken to Mass in her local church recently. Though she had often been to Mass, she had never attended a solemn celebration, nor heard the priest singing his part, and in Latin. 'That', she announced afterwards, 'was a proper priest with a proper voice with proper words'. Some of us may be inclined to think that dangerous. She thought it beautiful.

*Into the future*

The way forward is the way of re-creation according to the principles of past experience. The way to reach up and beyond ourselves is to see the light shining through the gloom of a uniform mediocrity: it is to deepen our sense of sense. A liturgical musician today is one who can willingly accept, with humility and confidence, that he and his fellows, with all their skills, have a constructive, a creative job to do: which is to touch and join altar and people, people and altar, to be chorus with the people, to join hearts with them, and so put a new song into their hearts and voices.