

# Choirs and Traditional Catholicism: A Few Thoughts

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Recently in *The Remnant*, church musician Dr. John Kaess deplored tendencies in liturgical music-making within certain traditional Catholic parishes: above all, using the primacy of Gregorian chant as an excuse for banishing non-chant. "In too many 'traditional' choirs," Dr. Kaess complained, "polyphony is being suppressed, and choirs are being discouraged or disbanded. Even the organ is being gradually suppressed."<sup>1</sup> Not long afterwards, fellow church musician Patrick Williams concurred – also in *The Remnant* – with Dr. Kaess's findings: "I, too, have noticed the promotion of Gregorian chant to the exclusion of polyphonic and accompanied music by various 'authorities' in the SSPX, FSSP, and elsewhere."<sup>2</sup>

It should be with diffidence that any non-American Catholic musician offers his own thoughts on the situation which Dr. Kaess and Mr. Williams both reprehend. But possibly there can be enough common ground between traditionalists in their country and in my own for some of these thoughts to seem useful. (One needs to recall that outside traditional Catholic churches, an undue emphasis on plainchant will seldom be a problem. Quite the opposite: as an American editor of a Catholic magazine lately pointed out to me, parishioners in many a Novus Ordo church are pathetically grateful for what little chant they can get.)

To clarify one thing immediately: unlike Dr. Kaess, but like Mr. Williams, I am too young to say "I was there ... before Vatican II." Though I have been an organist here in Australia (with the relevant qualifications from the national examination board) since the 1970s, I spent the first decade of my own organ-playing in a Protestant church, which in my ignorant pre-Catholic boyhood I supposed to be the acme of religious devotion. I afterwards frittered away years as organist in various, predominantly uncouth, Novus Ordo churches, before becoming properly appreciative of Catholic tradition. Converting (all too late) to Catholicism and to the Mass of all time, I was for four years organist at an SSPX church, and since 2005 have been organist at an FSSP church. There, I am blessed to work with a brilliant small choir for which plenty of other Catholics would give their weight in hen's teeth.

Still, in one crucial respect, apart from the obvious matters of geography and chronology, my experience as church musician differs from Dr. Kaess's. He blames the problem upon clericalism. My own experience has indicated that outside the U.S.A., the problem derives not from priests at all, but from elements of the laity. For what it may be worth, I have found local priests to be entirely sensible when it comes to proper musical observance. It is from the wilder flights of various spottily-educated laymen's fancies that I have found the main trouble comes.

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In part, these vexations, far from being church music's exclusive concern, apply to music in general. British composer, organist, and academic Sir John Stainer – an Anglican – diagnosed the disease back in 1892:

Music seems to be an art which offers a peculiar temptation to many who are by nature very poorly equipped for its mastery. To be 'fond of music' is frequently accepted as synonymous with 'having a gift for music' and the miscalculation of their own powers is not discovered by such persons until their eyes are rudely opened by the adverse judgement of qualified examiners.<sup>3</sup>

No-one imagines that being "fond of" engineering, or of biochemistry, gives anyone the right to bombinate on these matters in public; but all too often with musical considerations, a preposterous leveling prevails. The strife is compounded by various factors peculiar to traditional Catholicism: its place on the margins of ordinary Catholic

life; the aversion it inspires in vast numbers of bishops; the physical isolation of many a traditional parish (so that switching to a different parish becomes either hard or impossible); and – perhaps most significant of all – the exclusively Anglo-Celtic idea that sacred music is all very well for women, but demeaning to heterosexual men. These are not social conditions conducive to sanity at even the best of times, let alone in 2006.

What follows is merely a small sheaf of leaves from one traditional Catholic organist's casebook. I did not consciously collect these data. They came my way by repeated (sometimes weekly) accident, and could be worth passing on, if only in the spirit of comparing notes, and of learning to identify, before real crises ensue, the Lay Choral Troublemaker.

• He is exclusively male. Women do not take particular pleasure in bringing rehearsal after rehearsal to a halt by boycotting, or otherwise sabotaging, non-chant performances. (Some women may disrupt proceedings – such is our fallen human nature – but not, for whatever reason, in that specific way.)

• He is disproportionately likely to be an ex-seminarian. Why that should be so, I am at a loss to speculate. I merely report this quirky statistic.

• He has never completed – he has never attempted – the simplest formal music course. (Such a course he generally regards with the same visceral horror that an imam feels near a pork chop.) Bottomlessly erudite – or at least voluble – when it comes to the Solesmes monks' handiwork, he is worse than useless in polyphony, or even choral homophony. Staff notation in itself seems to defeat him, however confidently he may have mastered the *Liber Usualis*'s neumes.

• He will grossly underestimate the challenges for most people in comprehending such neumes. Frequently he will attribute any individual's failure in this regard to malice, crypto-Protestantism, Freemasonry, or whatever his pet hate is this week. There is something behaviorist, indeed John-Dewey-like in its utopianism, about his belief that he can turn any non-malicious Catholic into a note-perfect chant practitioner.

• He is incapable of registering the fact that the choir director's contribution may be more valuable than his own, let alone that the seemly worship of God is more valuable than either.

• His attendance at rehearsals while intoxicated is not as rare or discreet as one might wish. This foible he will often seek to defend by quoting garbled Bellocian tributes to grog. The relevance of such tributes to (say) practising the intricate lattice-work of a Palestrina *Sanctus* is not immediately evident.

Lest anyone suppose that these observations represent merely an individual musician's flaming paranoia, I wish to quote the words of Dr. Kurt Poterack in the distinguished quarterly magazine *Sacred Music*, who makes somewhat different complaints to the above, but who is equally alarmed at what he hears. Dr. Poterack, of Christendom College in Virginia, has this to say:

It is not uncommon for an Indult choir to consist of five middle-aged-to-old women (with screechy voices) and two men singing (or better yet, croaking) the Rossini Psalm Tone Vespers and, maybe if you are lucky, the Henry Farmer *Mass in B Flat*. In other words many Indult Masses tend to be, not exemplars of *musica sacra*, but nostalgic museums of the way Mass was celebrated at a typical parish in 1962 – precisely the accusation made by detractors. And

this music is, often enough, controlled by a certain type of layman whose talent ... is in inverse proportion to his psychological desire to control (i.e. there is a firm resistance to any attempts to improve the music – or to being dislodged from the choir loft).<sup>4</sup>

Since the choir director's chief responsibility is the choir as a whole, rather than endless ingratiating towards one particular malcontent, it is perfectly clear that the buck must stop at the rostrum. When (as often happens in smaller churches) the choir director and organist are one and the same person, keeping the malcontent somehow under control becomes still more urgent. The tips below may aid this outcome, and are chosen because, on sound Catholic principles, they cannot do harm:

• A good, firm, authoritative priest is a treasure far above rubies. If he can make the time to attend the occasional rehearsal, he should be profusely thanked. Let clergy be present, and even the worst choral subversive will usually find that he can put a brake on his own tongue-lashings, on his tendency to storm out of the rehearsal room amid hissy-fits, and on other undesirable antics.

• If you are a choir director, consider leading the singers in a short general prayer – even if it be only "St. Cecilia, pray for us; St. Pius X, pray for us" – before each rehearsal. Doing so may well have a tranquilizing effect upon any resident maniacs.

• The more choristers read St. Pius X's *Motu Proprio* in its entirety, the better. (It is easily enough available on the Internet.) As Dr. Kaess himself shows with his discussion of this document, ripping particular passages from it out of context – notably misinterpreting the phrase "Gregorian Chant is to be given pride of place" as "Gregorian Chant is to have an exclusive place" – is a mug's game.

• One really feels foolish spelling this out, but there is no Jansenist craziness so self-defeating that some half-schooled traditional Catholic has not adopted it, so here we go. If the malcontent has got into his head some all-consuming private racial, sexual, or political maggot, *expel him*. It is not his place to adopt a stance of *Non serviam* if the choir director is (or if any choristers are) female. It is not his place to bemoan non-Caucasian choristers' presence. It is not his place to turn rehearsals into a forum for his eulogistic bloviations about the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, or even about David Irving. It is not his place to perpetrate violence in the choir loft. (I wish I could make these things up.)

This too is perchance worth remembering: the church musician is a kind of altar server. He might not wear clerical vestments, but he must be as completely attuned to the tabernacle as are those who do. If he is not, then the question inevitably arises: why is he in church at all? Quite rightly, we traditional Catholics are hypersensitive towards sacrilege in the Novus Ordo. Alas, sacrilege can take many forms, and we should ask ourselves whether we are facilitating more subtle varieties of it if we sacrifice choral discipline to human respect.

## NOTES

- (1) John Kaess, "Are Traditionalists Preserving Tradition?", *The Remnant*, April 30, 2006.
- (2) Patrick Williams, "Chant v. Polyphony", *The Remnant*, May 31, 2006.
- (3) Peter Charlton, *John Stainer and the Musical Life of Victorian Britain* (David & Charles, Newton Abbot, England, 1984), p. 97.
- (4) Kurt Poterack, "Rome, Ecône and the Traditional Liturgy", *Sacred Music*, Spring 2006.

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