

THE ISSUE OF QUALITY IN WESTERN CHURCH MUSIC*

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*“Liturgical music [...] can be a sustained resistance
to the devaluing of language and life.”*
Erik Routley (1959: 213)

Abstract

The article comprises seven parts: I. This author’s viewpoint on the sad state of affairs of Western Church music. II. 20th century testimonials: times are bad Western for church music. III. Church music must be good art music. IV. [Art as] theological imperative. V. Seeking the divine: theoretical and practical theology. VI. Cross-century advice. VII. Problems and solutions, culprits and victims: a summary. Based on an often humorous context provided by 20th and 21st century writers. Fol concludes that on the large scale, today’s Western Church music is of particularly bad quality because of the rise of narrowly specialized training in music, the disappearance of musical apprenticeships offered by church musicians of the past, the rarity of the complete musician who can compose, conduct and play well and would be championed by a church, the misunderstood democracy as a ‘free-for-all’ reign that leads to the gradual disappearance of the job *Kapellmeister* / *mâitre de chapelle* / *maestro di cappella* and its replacement by a “worship team”, and the demise of steady employment and the rise of per-service honorariums, among others.

Fol blames the lack of institutionalized support on behalf of many Western churches for the study, development and application of church music, the lack of vision for long-term sustainable development, the lack of continuously updated learning resources, the lack of qualified teaching personnel, the lack of full-time jobs that can attract qualified musicians, who would consider church music as a viable career path, the lack of a properly designated music budget forcing music ministers to become beggars before their own community, anti-intellectualism, repertoire stagnation, disappearance of quality criteria for new repertoire selection, usage of illegally

* The expression Western Church Music designates vocal and instrumental musical genres that developed to support the Western rite of Christian worship after the Schism: most of Catholicism, and later on Protestantism, and the derivative church music traditions originating from Western Europe and North America.

reproduced paper and media materials, and the acceptance of rampant mediocrity of music ministers on behalf of clerical staff in the name of misunderstood ‘niceness’.

Fol provides theological and historical research in support of her thesis that church music must be of high quality in order to be appropriate for usage in church services and accuses informed and educated persons in community leadership positions of nonchalant attitude and of avoiding taking steps to improve the situation despite being in a position to do so and knowing very well they should. Regardless of the call for hope, Fol’s conclusion does inspire mostly despair and hopelessness.

Keywords: *Western church music, ecumenical overview, quality, theology, education, proposed solutions*

I. This author’s viewpoint on the sad state of affairs of Western Church music

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.” (Dickens 2004)

Any Western church musician harbouring an interest in literature would surely recall the opening of Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, poetically comparing days past with days present, as they acquaint themselves with old publications addressing the decrepit status of church music in the majority of christian religious establishments.

Quality in church music constitutes a crucial aspect of corporate worship, a fantastic tool for proselyting, an issue of which many underestimate the importance, a topic not sufficiently addressed in depth, and a subject unjustly neglected today.

The rise of narrowly specialized training in music, the disappearance of musical apprenticeships offered by church musicians of the past, the rarity of the complete musician who can compose, conduct and play well and would be championed by a church, the misunderstood democracy as a ‘free-for-all’ reign that leads to the gradual disappearance of the job *Kapellmeister / maître de chapelle / maestro di cappella* and its replacement by a “worship team”, the demise of steady employment and the rise of per-service honorariums, are all factors that jointly spell the death of quality church music and its replacement by second-rate muzak-inspired theologically shallow and mediocredly executed hogwash that passes by the name of ‘service music’.

The small number of surviving professional church musicians cannot join a regular musicians' union for various reasons and are left to fend for themselves. Their precarious working conditions preclude the establishment of a stable community that can advance together towards a common goal, lest I say in a Hegelian-inspired fashion, advance together towards God. As Thomas Day says:

"Anyone, who has worked as a musician for the [...] church will develop calluses, in order to survive. Abuse and failure come with the job." (Day 1992: 103)

Though the decline of professional music criticism, the death of respect for expertise, the replacement of the notion of stylistic diversity with the frivolity of bad taste, the over-cautiousness in the name of so-called niceness, the fear of retaliation, and the so-called 'microaggressions' would prevent most, if not any serious negative criticism from being published today, 20th century books offer a splendid array of colourful commentary, written in hope of inspiring people to care about quality of church music.

As we will see, those efforts remain in vain.

Western authors examining the topic pay only cursory, if any, attention, to the relationship and exchanges between Western and Eastern churches, notably the Orthodox church. Wilson-Dickson, the author of *The Story of Christian Music*, arrogantly talks about the "three great Churches of Europe – Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist" (Wilson-Dickson 1992: 81), ignoring, as many Westerners so, whatever contributions Eastern church musicians might have made to 'the story of Christian music':

*"But while music was low on the list of critical issues in the violent debate, it nonetheless provides a microcosm on the problems then facing the Christian world. As far as their music was concerned, the three great Churches of Europe – Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist – demonstrated a triangle of dissension of which there are still echoes in every argument concerning the liturgy and its music: **The Catholic, in church, listens without singing; the Calvinist sings without listening; the Lutheran both listens and sings – simultaneously!** In other words, for many Roman Catholic worshippers, participation in Christian music was not possible. As in so many other aspects of the faith, the church took it upon itself to act as an intermediary between God and his people. The Calvinists, believing that the Christian church on earth had to be begun again, went back to what they could learn of the early church; Christian music had to conform, with everything else, to what they read there. The Lutherans managed to hold a precarious balance between the congregational singing characteristic of the early Church and an expression of faith through the art-music of experts."* (Day 1992: 103)

According to my necessarily limited survey of opinions, and to my own vast experience playing for different denominations, recent developments of church music on the grand scale seem not to have panned out in the best of ways.

II. 20th century testimonials: times are bad Western for church music

With this Written in 1968, this Thibodeau's "Threnody for Sacred Music" constitutes one of the saddest cries of desperation that appear in print in the 20th century, the sobbing of someone, who has lost all hope to witness a renewed striving for the transcendental. He writes as a person, familiar with music in Catholic churches and compares it negatively with music in protestant ones. Surely, the grass always appears greener on the other side, doesn't it? In his words:

"Whatever impact the "death of God" may have had on Catholicism, it is apparent that it has been paralleled by the death of sacred music. [...] it is now five years since the promulgation of the conciliar Constitution on the Sacred liturgy, long enough to see shattered the dreams of the liturgists for a noble singing Church. Sacred art music has become the victim of an unwritten Declaration of irrelevance. [...]...of the "People of God" [...] have now been reduced to a non-community of non-singers performing non-music. We have made two artistic compromises in our Church music: we have tried cheap vernacular settings of mass-texts, and vernacular hymns; and we have tried, in the name of youth, rock and folk music. Both compromises have been found invalid, because both have failed as the vaunted panacea for our musical and liturgical woes. The main reason for the failure is obvious. The musicians who might have helped have not only been left out of the deliberations, they have actually been defenestrated, like so many Renaissance fall guys, their leadership repudiated by ill-advised pastors.

[...] Without the strong choirs and professional organists and directors of the Protestant tradition, popular participation in singing, whatever its promised glories, is doomed to failure, It's as simple as that. If anyone has any doubts, he has only to go to Mass, and then attend a service in a normal Protestant church some Sunday morning. The contrast is enough to make men weep.

[...] There has been created in the Church a musical vacuum. Into it have rushed legions of litlooks, with priestlings in the van. With no knowledge of music, and, regrettably, no culture of any sort, they have rushed in where angels fear to tread with their rock-and-roll and manufactured-for-profit "folk music". In both congregational hymn singing and "folk" Masses, the rationale of the incompetent authority has been to cater to the Lowest

Common Denominator, to “give people what they want” (Thibodeau 1974: 196–198)

Thibodeau writes during the years following the Second Vatican Council, which released in Chapter VI of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* its views on liturgical music. Among other things, the Council recommends the establishment of sacred music institutes and the provision of proper training to all parties involved.¹

Émile Martin describes in a pretty concise manner how well this plan turned out in reality:

[...] l’esprit réactionnaire, l’intransigeance doctrinale, le conservatisme étroit ne furent pas étrangers [au] déclin [de la musique sacrée]. [...] En fait, les divers “Instituts de musique sacrée”, ordonnés par le Motu proprio, patronnés par l’épiscopat, n’ont guère été, en dépit de leurs titres pompeux, que des entreprises plus ou moins avortées. Aide financière pratiquement nulle, et, sauf quelques exceptions brillantes et... éphémères, affligeante médiocrité du corps professoral.” (Martin 1968: 207)

The above paragraph alone nails the two most important reasons for bad church music: underfunding and mediocrity of the teaching personnel. Martin does not shy from enumerating specificities on why and how music in Catholic religious establishments does not attain high quality, including sexism and unqualified clergy. He concludes by saying that the church becomes a refuge for failed singers, a result he calls “badly placed charity”:

“Tout a été dit sur “l’état d’esprit” des maisons religieuses (des deux sexes) où les dons artistiques étaient souvent considérés comme des signes de non-vocation. Le nescire cantum, idéal des séminaires sulpiciens, fut aussi celui de nombreux noviciats : Du Motu Proprio, on retenait surtout que “les femmes ne devaient pas chanter à l’église”. encore l’absence de formation musicale était-elle préférable à certains “déformations” : De (207) grands séminaristes chantaient couramment à voix égales ce qui était écrit pour voix mixtes... Le maître de chœur n’avait pas la moindre idée de la tessiture vocale ! Et que dire des “théories d’accompagnement” et des “méthodes d’harmonium” utilisées dans les maisons religieuses où les ordonnances pontificales n’était pas “lettre morte” ! Et l’on s’étonne que l’expression “musique du curé” soit devenue péjorative ! Ce qui ressort le plus nettement des nombreux rapports sur la question, c’est qu’en marge des professions de foi théoriques, la hiérarchie n’a jamais pris

¹ The entire document can be viewed here: “Sacrosanctum Concilium.” La Santa Sede. La Santa Sede, n.d. Web. 21 Sept. 2015.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_fr.html>.

au sérieux l'organisation pratique de la musique religieuse. "On n'a pas voulu les moyens" écrivait récemment un spécialiste de la pédagogie musicale, et l'on voudrait récolter après avoir si mal semé. Disparition des maîtrises et pénurie de Maître de chapelle se recoupe. L'orgue de concert supplante "l'orgue liturgique". Quelques chantres gagés se partages encore de maigres subsides et de squelettiques lutrins. La profession est décriée, On "travaille" pour entrer dans les chœurs de l'Opéra ou de 'O. R. T. F. : l'église devient le refuge des ratés : charité bien mal ordonnée..." (Martin 1968: 207–208)

Both serious and popular publications have addressed the presumably benevolent, yet harmful misinterpretation of the Second Vatican Council's recommendations pertaining to the faithful's participation and, by extension, to the music: from the Swiss Catholic portal, that addresses some misunderstandings point by point in the article «Vatican II: Le Glas De La Musique Sacrée?»², to Thomas Day's frequently humorous eulogy of "the triumph of bad taste" (Day 1992).

In Chapter 5, "Ego Renewal", of his book, *Why Catholics Can't Sing*, Day shows how the two most frequently adopted approaches by Catholic churches today fail completely to inspire the congregation to sing. The first failed approach, says Day, has become the "new Catholic sound" (Day 1992: 51):

"To witness Ego Renewal at its worst, select ten parishes at random. The chances are very good that Ego Renewal will be flourishing, in various forms, at perhaps nine of them. American Catholics are familiar with one of the most irritating and most common possessors of the renewed ego, the parish songleader, whom we shall call Mr. Caruso. [...] Mr Caruso roars into the microphone at the top of his voice and performs a duet with the organist, while most of the assembled worshippers watch him in stupefied silence. Sometimes the congregation tries to project its singing, sometimes the organ tries to assert its presence, but, whatever happens, Mr. Caruso makes sure that his voice, his immensely amplified voice, will be the loudest thing there and will crest over the sound made by everyone else." (Day 1992)

After describing in depth the how such "failed opera stars" (Day 1992: 53) hijack community participation and how "[...] Catholic congregations bravely endure these amplified soloists, who are neither inspirational nor helpful" (Day 1992: 53), Day addresses passionately, and with humour, the leprosy of the second failed approach, the "folk masses", and their "three-chord guitarists", "easy listening sound" and "musical equivalent of the warm bubblebath"³:

² «Vatican II: Le Glas De La Musique Sacrée?» Cath.ch Portail Catholique Suisse. Cath.ca, n.d. Web. 21 Sept. 2015. <<http://www.cath.ch/blogsf/vatican-ii-le-glas-de-la-musique-sacree/>>.

³ For fuller descriptions, see pp. 58–59 of Day 1992.

“The victory of the folk style, reformed or otherwise, is so great and so blinding that many people cannot see beyond that apparent success to what could mildly be called the problem with this music: simply put, nearly all of it – no matter how sincere, no matter how many scriptural text it contains – oozes with an indecent narcissism. The folk style, as it has developed since the 1960s, is Ego Renewal put to music.”⁴

Day then helpfully provides a long list of bad “folk songs introduced in the 1960s, [...] which would set the tone for countless imitations.” (Day 1992: 60)

He is by no means alone in providing helpful lists of bad vocal repertoire used in Catholic masses and services. Many of those compilations exist online, created to elicit easy laughs. A recent one, compiled by Joe Carter, includes video links, which occasionally pair the shallow silly music with appropriately tacky video montages. (Carter 2015) In short, music used in Catholic religious establishments has become a joke.

The concern regarding quality of musical output transcends, of course, Catholic churches. The following excerpt describes the reactions of professional musicians to the misguided comments of the Bishop of Leicester, who, as many anti-intellectuals and professed anti-elitists regularly do, uses the word ‘academic’ as an insult and hides his own ignorance behind calls for ‘popular’ music:

“At this point I venture on to ground where I would tread warily, and would not seek to offend. [...] I here refer to a somewhat truculent criticism of [the Music in Church, SPCK 1951] report, which was made in 1957 by the Bishop of Leicester in a diocesan leaflet. The Bishop contended that the values expressed in the Report were those of ‘academic’ musicians, and as such irrelevant to the needs of parish churches. His protest was written with the gusto that informs the statements of those who would identify themselves with the ‘plain man’. ‘We find’, he wrote at one points, ‘all the usual stress on the necessity of using music properly constructed from the point of view of composition, and all the silly little points of liturgical purism, such as that there must be no recessional hymn after the Blessing, and so on.’ The Bishop’s article contained also a strenuous plea for ‘popular’ music in church. This, of course, provoked great wrath in the leading musicians of the Church of England. The Editor of English church Music, Mr. Leonard Blake, in an editorial comment (Vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 65ff) wrote a strong rejoinder. (61) [...] The logical end to the Bishop’s argument is to throw up the whole struggle towards better music, decoration, furnishings, or levels of taste they were born or have sunk into. [...] Now let there be no mistake about your present author’s opinion, which is that the document that gave occasion for these denunciations is a repulsive piece of ignorant philistinism evincing an

⁴ Day, Thomas. *Why Catholics Can’t Sing*. New York, USA: Crossroad, 1992. Print. p. 60

attitude to the musicians of deliberate misunderstanding which is painful enough in the ill-informed, but in the influential, catastrophic.” (Rutley 1959: 61–62)

Some of the most competent writers calling for ‘reform’ of the “mess we are in” (Bradley 2012: IX), such as Bradley, fail rather spectacularly to properly situate the problem of quality, or rather, the lack thereof.

Bradley mistakenly declares that church music “can’t survive (as it is), [...] because it is leader-dominated” (Bradley 2012: 38), manifesting his lack of comprehension that a true leader would focus their efforts to help involve worshippers actively participate in the celebration, because being a leader constitutes a calling, and enticing community participation is their job as music minister. A person in position of power (to use Bradley’s insistence on this terminology), who fails to do that is no leader, but rather someone who embodies the ego-centric model, described so splendidly and correctly by Day and briefly touched upon above.

Bradley naively, and may be even idealistically considers that “in the praise-and-worship model, the music is managed by a small band of experts”. Experts, really? Which churches has he frequented lately? May be the ones programming “Shine, Jesus, shine”?

As a typical American, Bradley declares that the church music is “elitist”, because the “most educated and most talented” (Bradley 2012: 39) are empowered, as though meritocracy, were it to be actually implemented, constitutes a bad *modus operandi*. It would have been nice if the most talented were empowered. They are not. Pretending the opposite is true does not help any person and any church community.

Bradley calls for “broad-based community input or collaborative planning” (Bradley 2012: 38), essentially inviting too many self-proclaimed cooks in the proverbial kitchen, who can’t even cook, guaranteeing a lack of any distinct vision, and a colossal waste of time and money. He predicts the death of the hymnal as it is “not a communal” (Bradley 2012: 43), but “a power book” (Bradley 2012: 43), a short-sighted wrong conclusion that I, having played for a number of communities suffering from a lack of a solid common core repertoire, don’t even feel the need to formally rebuke.

III. Church music must be good art music

Church music ought to elevate the human spirit and assist a person in approaching the transcendental, the divine. Only well-composed and well-executed music, chosen carefully by a musically qualified authority to ever-so-slightly challenge the musicianship level of the various music ministers and the involvement level of the congregation, thus defying them to strive and giving them a sense of purpose, is capable of uplifting the soul and inspiring the mind.

In my article “Ontological topics of music composition” (Fol 2010) I enumerate what I consider the essential properties of an art-work, and I contrast them with my list of properties that apply to a craft-work. Though written from a philosophical, rather than a musician’s point of view, the characteristics, which I reproduce in full below, readily invoke the necessity of possessing at least some specialized training in the field of music in order to produce quality output that, even if not an example of an art-work, will at least constitute a perfectly suitable craft-work.

Reproduction of Table 1: Comparison of the properties of Art- and Craft-works (Fol 2010: 5):

Properties of Art / an Art-work	Properties of Craft / a Craft-work
The means equate the end: Art for Art’s Sake	Difference between means and end (as per Collingwood’s first symptom)
Can possess a design independent of the structure (as in foreground and background in music)	The design depends on the structure and the purpose (an object passing for a chair always needs a place for someone to sit on, else it will not be a chair)
Certain facets of connectivity between the different layers reveal themselves after the completion of the work.	The result is foreknown and there are no surprises (as per Collingwood’s second symptom)
Its value depends on the possibility for aesthetic contemplation (as in a painting)	Its value depends on the possibility of reuse (as in a chair)
Can be abstract (as in a piece of music or a geometric ornament)	Cannot be abstract (must be measurable and/or have a habitual usage)
Its meaning can be subject of a hermeneutical evaluation.	Its meaning depends on its purpose of usage alone.
Its semiotic weight depends primarily on the relationships between the different materials/elements.	Its semiotic weight depends on the possibility for a multiplicity of its usage (a chair is primarily used as a chair. A block of wood, however, can be used for a number of things.)
Has to incorporate more than one idea	Has to incorporate more than one process
Reveals a vision of a possible aesthetic order.	Does not strive for a vision of a possible aesthetic order (but may be discovered to possess one upon creation and move closer to the realm of art)

The call for musical compositions worthy of the noble goals of a church music ministry is nothing new, and one would think that in an increasingly secular world, those would be seen as a valuable tool for evangelization. Unfortunately many excellent books on general topics of theoretical or practical theology, written to appeal to people of different educational levels and involvement aspirations, with regards to church-related issues, do not address the topic at all.⁵ Overwhelmingly, only specialized ones do. In *Church Music*, for example, W. H. Hadow underlines the “habit” of the Anglican church of

“[...] admitting to the services of the Church compositions by men who have no qualifications which should win them acceptance.” (Hadow 1926: 28)

He calls this harmful habit *incuria* (negligence) (Hadow 1926: 27) and proposes the following straight-forward solution to the issue of bad music:

“The best way to make men dissatisfied with bad or unworthy work is to familiarize them constantly with the best; the negative methods of prohibition and denunciation are never really effective because they impose their standard from without. It is far better that we should encourage it to grow from within; partly because it is then far more firmly established, partly because it makes the unity of the congregation (29) more corporate and more organist. Let us, therefore, begin with discarding all music which, when it is seriously considered, is recognized by everyone as unworthy, either because it is dull, or because it is meaningless, or because it is trivial, or because it degrades religious feeling into a soft and luscious emotionalism. There is no need at all that our music should be austere; there is every need that it should be devout, and within these limits it may cover a wide emotional range and many varieties of presentation.” (Hadow 1926: 29–30)

Transforming “genuine religious feeling” into “soft and luscious emotionalism” and mistaking one for the other seem common to musically uninitiated individuals prone to outdated pseudo-romantic-era sensibilities, who miss, or misidentify a musician’s competence, understanding, talent and genuine involvement, by holding them to non-applicable standards. Hanslick addresses all these notions in the following passage:

⁵ In *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*, Burrell does not address the great disagreements between Jews and Christians on one side, and Muslims on the other, with respect to the liturgical use and importance of music, cause for many cultural clashes over the ages. Despite an empirically proven success, music remains conspicuously absent from Richardson’s evangelization tactics in *Reimagining Evangelism*. Intrieri does not consider music in any of his proposed community-building exercises, even though music enjoys enormous importance in Italian Catholic culture. Were those authors too intimidated to approach such a highly specialized subject matter in their otherwise excellent books, or they did not consider it important?

“Initially the composer has only a vague notion of the outlines of a composition. It is chiseled, from the individual beats up to the distinctive shape of the completed work, from the individual beats up to the distinctive form orchestral guise. This labour, proceeding step by step as it does, is to deliberate and complex that nobody can be expected to comprehend it who has not so much as tried his hand at it. [...] Without spiritual ardour, nothing great or beautiful has ever been accomplished in this life. In the composer (Tondichter), as in every poet, feeling will be found to be highly developed, only it is not the creative factor in the composer. Even when a powerful, specific emotion possesses him totally, so that it becomes the cause and inauguration of many an artwork, yet that emotion never becomes the subject of the work. That we know from the nature of musical art, which has neither the ability nor the vocation to represent a specific feeling.” (Hanslick 1986: 46)

Though music cannot represent feelings, no one denies that it possesses the power to invoke them. Within the context of church music, ministers and worshippers are called to experience a wide range of those: exaltation, joy, awe, remorse, to name but a few. In order for any composition to elicit as much of a sophisticated spiritual and emotional response as possible, it necessitates voices and instruments that possess a large timbral variety, sufficient registral ambitus, ample capability of nuance, and good quality of repertoire. The appropriately named writer David Music addresses specifically the topic of instruments used in church celebrations within the context of quality repertoire:

“ [...] the pipe organ, which we think of as sacred instrument, was in its beginnings very much of a secular instrument. Through composition of sacred music for it, it came to be thought of as sacred, a process that stretched over many years. But more is asked by the church. Not only must music be sacred for use in the liturgy, it must be art. This applies both to composition and to performance. One readily grants that standards of art vary, and circumstances of place and wealth, education and custom, do make a difference in what qualifies. But, in a word, what is offered to God can only be the best. I have the uneasy feeling that too often the guitar or the piano is employed because the competency necessary for organ performance is not at hand. This does not mean that the art of piano or guitar performance is not demanding of high standard. But it does mean that we are allowing inadequate performances on these instruments since the incompetency is tolerated more easily than it is on the organ. [...] Works played on guitar and piano, even for accompaniment purposes, are not part of the great repertory for those instruments. So often what is done is borrowed in the manner of a ballad, a folksong or some popular tune. As art it fails to qualify; as sacred music it does not pass the test. Pope Paul VI said that such music, good for many other purposes, should not be allowed to enter the temple. A sacred

text does not necessarily make a piece worthy of liturgical use; the music accompanying the text must itself be sacred and art, both in composition and in performance.” (Music 1998: 180)

The repertoire performed, or accompanied on guitar and piano, most frequently employs the aforementioned “folk mass” style and, complete with shallow lyrics peppered with mindless musical and textural repetition, fails not only to teach theology to believers, but also to inspire in church-goers awe and admiration of the divine. No congregational singer, and no professional singer, can successfully approach the transcendental if not supported by appropriate instruments – and this does indeed mean that a massive organ 32-foot pipe that reverberates across the floor of the building supports singing better than a plucked guitar, amplified to comically and even dangerously high levels.

This conclusion is supported by the following curious research study, conducted in Canada by Adnams, who asked the participating worshippers to describe their singing experiences as ‘really worshipping’ or ‘just singing’:

“In the Canadian context (where this research was conducted), the two most prominent worship styles that emerged are inadequately referred to as ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ and feature very different sung material and approaches to singing. The music of ‘contemporary’ worship consists of songs characterized by simple, popular styles of text, music and instrumentation. These ‘Praise and Worship’ choruses are accompanied by guitars, keyboard and drums and often completely replace traditional chorale-style hymns and revivalist songs accompanied by organ and piano. Hymnbooks are left in a rack in favour of the digital projection of song texts onto screens, and in many cases, choirs disappear giving way to self-sufficient, amplified, small vocal ensembles fronting the band. [...] I conducted research in a church in a western Canadian city. [...] (185) Central to my research was asking congregational singers. ‘What is happening inside you as you sing’ one of the most interesting themes to emerge was a contrast of experiences interviewees called ‘just singing’ and ‘really worshipping’. The former was expressed as a negative state while the latter seemed to be the major goal for those who preferred contemporary choruses to traditional hymns.” (Adams 2013: 185–186)

So, congregational singers who attend ‘contemporary’ worship strive, but fail to achieve the ‘really worshipping’ state they seek. What to do? An obvious answer emerges: music must be art, because, within the context of a church, art music constitutes a

IV. [Art as] theological imperative

Hadow's approach to compare the standard of the "great composers" with the ones "afforded by [the] liturgy" (Hadow 1926: 28) indicates that church music, rather than tolerated in a place of worship as a sanctuary for mediocrity and self-aggrandizement of ambitious amateur or failed musicians, must be held to the same standards as any other art music. In his book *Church Music as Art*, Hoelty-Nickel proposes the following premises to support this thesis, calling on Martin Luther for theological espousal.

"We have advanced four bases for the claim that church music must be valid art: first, the principle that even the best offerings in honor of God are barely good enough and that, for this reason, the tradition of ecclesiastical art is a tradition of quality; in the second place, the consideration that it is part of the mission of creation for "created" music to realize its inherent possibilities fully and to develop them into the highest form; in the third place, the affirmation that music, fashioned into church music in association with God's Word, can fulfill its special commission of proclamation only if it is true to its character as music – that is, as art – and that it can then also develop a gain in the power of awakening faith; and finally, the presupposition, self-evident for Martin Luther, that art music stands at the head of all musica practica because it is an image of the freedom of the Gospel" (Hoelty-Nickel 1967: 30)

In drawing on Luther's writings, Hoelty-Nickel defines music as *creatura* in his theological argument about the necessity of musical quality:

"[...] for Luther music is not primarily art, nor is it primarily science as it was for the Middle Ages, but before and above all else it is creatura – creature of God. Thereby Luther wishes to express what we call today the ontological quality of music. Music has been in existence since the beginning of the world; it was created simultaneously with all other creatures and was implanted in them." (Hoelty-Nickel 1967: 26)

Hoelty-Nickel's conclusion focuses on Martin Luther's calling on the Holy Spirit for the composition of hymns to conclude that striving for quality in music constitutes an essential Lutheran theological component:

" [...] we will surely all agree with the statement by R. Barilier in his study „Le chant d'Église": 'We presuppose the validity of the principle that whatever is done for God ought to be done well and that anything consecrated to God ought to be as beautiful as possible. This is a principle which controls

all religious arts – architecture, painting, music, poetry – and which needs no defense here. We may simply observe that the Protestant tradition in the area of church music is indeed a tradition of quality.’ Perhaps I may be permitted to underscore that what Barilier calls “tradition of quality” with an observation – I prefer not to say marginal, but rather “central” observation. It is known that the leaders of the Reformation, particularly Martin Luther, required the collaboration of the Holy Spirit for the creation of their church hymns. To them this also implied the assurance of a high artistic level for these hymns.” (Hoelty-Nickel 1967: 30)

Inspired by the Lutheran movement, Calvin gradually crystalizes his own theology of music, where intelligence and conscious participation play a major role. Garside explains how:

“In the Institution of 1536 Calvin had warned “that unless voice and song, if interposed in prayer, spring from deep feeling of heart, neither has any value or profit in the least with God. [...] But to the heart he now joins intelligence. [...] Calvin’s stress on the necessity for intelligence in singing is made here within a specifically Augustinian frame of reference. „Now the heart requires intelligence”, he writes, „and in that (says Saint Augustine) lies the difference between the singing of men and that of the birds” [...] Memory, the third requirement for the proper singing of psalms, is by no means least. (26) [...] By 1543 he had become so convinced of the efficacy of music to engage the heart, and thereby to enhance prayer, public as well as private, that „to pray without ceasing” was at the same time „never to cease from singing”. The association between the two had become indissoluble in his mind.” (Garside 1979: 26–27)

One would have hoped that the evolvement of Calvinist theology, the Catholic variety of repertoire and customs, the perceived stability of the Anglican musical establishment, and the Lutheran tradition of excellence would inspire a continuous trans-denominational support of music ministry. However, breaching the divide between wishful thinking and practice proves albeit not completely impossible, at least very, very difficult.

V. Seeking the divine: theoretical and practical theology.

Many musical theologians of the 20th century are philosophically, rather than musically trained, and thus tend to avoid proposing practical solutions to the topic of bad music. Söhngen’s theses of church music remain formulated in a deeply abstract language that would not affect the reality of practice, because philosophers, rather than professional composers and performing musicians would read his

texts. He presumes, as many theoretical philosophers do when constructing their absolute theories, theological depth and musical sophistication, when, sadly, those preconditions do not exist today on any respectable scale. Here is an example of Söhngen's Thesis 13:

"13. Den Urwiderfahrnisse und -erlebnissen der Liturgie kann nur eine Musik gerecht werden, die in Rhythmus, Tonalität und Melos der Sprache der musikalischen Urelemente und der reinen musikalischen Formstrukturen (185) spricht. Eine Musik, die den Menschen in seinen subjektiven Emotionen und privaten Stimmungen felthält, vermag die Gemeinde ebensowenig vor das Angesicht Gottes zu stellen wie eine Musik, die mit außermusikalischen, programmatischen Bedeutungsgehalten aufgeladen ist." (Garside 1979: 26–27)

Söhngen's call for anti-sentimentalism and proper compositional form remain buried in his theoretical works on music and theology. His flowery language, proper to German intellectuals, contrasts sharply with the following call by Routley, who dares to title the ninth chapter of his book *Church Music and Theology* with the spectacularly enticing words "Bad music". The chapter starts thus:

"If the Old Testament urges us to avoid pride, and the New Testament to look for positive good; if the doctrine of the church which we hold insists that our behavior, and therefore, our church music, be conformable to the Gospel which is in the life, passion and resurrection of Christ, what should we say about the prevalent abuses in church music?" (Routley 159: 70)

In the introduction, right after calling humanity to beware the "abuses in church music", Routley invites his readers to examine a "highly conventional hymn tune" by G. J. Elvey that "today has few friends" and "is quite wonderfully dull" (Routley 159: 70–71). It constitutes an unfortunately exceedingly rare pleasure today to find people who are ready to publish judgement calls on musical quality and stand by them, but Hunter's description of the average seeker of the divine, written in 1930, sounds as pertinent eighty-five years later, as it probably did then:

"[...] nothing ever happens that makes people forget their workaday cares for a little while to seek converse with their own souls. [...] the music is of an indifferent order; the ritual has no sequence; the hymns are tawdry examples of poor composition set to worse tunes – sounding like the joint effort of Pollyanna in collaboration with some second-rate jazz-artist." (Hunter 1930: 62)

Composers are not the only target of Hunter's wrath. He takes a stab at mediocre performers as well:

“The man who finds himself driven to the wall by his problems and seeks quiet and calm and a fresh grip on the majesty of a divine guidance, these days, had better go out and take a long walk in the woods, along the bank of a river, and try to find god there, than to make the disillusioning adventure of going into some churches, where he cannot hear himself think, for the racket of whispered conversation, which even the nerve-wrenching dissonances of the average organist and the unholy screech of the average choir cannot drown.” (Hunter 1930: 63)

When mediocrity affects the inner state of mind to the point where it impedes a seeker from finding God, shouldn't everyone interested in the good of a church community unite to change the situation?

VI. Cross-century advice

Attempting to engage a community in a serious discussion about church music can be difficult. Authors are quick to explain that fears of superficiality and distraction from worship are unfounded when discussing worship music, and that the depth of significance of church music precludes the deliberations' descent into triviality:

“The fear of distraction from the spiritual aspect of worship is a recurring theme within talk about worship music. Christians worry that talking about music and potentially ascribing power to it in a setting where direct encounter with God is expected risks ascribing power to the experience that should not become powerful and potentially confuses the source of encounter. Talk about music, in other words, is talk that has the potential to detract from ‘proper spirituality’, rather than open up important aspects of spiritual experience, mediation and negotiation. Such concerns again seem to stem from a particular conception of what music-talk might be expected to look like – if music style is neutral and primarily a matter of personal preference then talk about music will have significance only on a relatively meaningless level and thus will inevitably be a distraction from the true purposes of worship. I want to suggest that in examining experience in which music already takes on a range of meanings and significance we find that rather than distract from the core concerns of worship we enter more deeply into them. (Porter 2013: 202)

The search for good repertoire, as well as the fight for its inclusion in the canon has been going on for a number of centuries, as the following paragraph by Saliers exemplifies:

“Involved in the struggle for better hymnody is not only the securing of texts and tunes of the highest quality but also the educational techniques needed to teach them to young and old. Hymn singing has played a great role in certain periods of church history. There have been eras of hymns singing by large masses of people. [...] when the Roman Church cut off the lay worshippers from singing hymns, men appeared from time to time to lead them in singing outside the church, among them St. Francis of Assisi, whose laude spirituali in the Italian vernacular were patterned after the singing of the French and Provençal troubadours. The Reformation movement gains strong momentum after Luther adopted the practice of hymnodizing its basic principles and beliefs. During Calvin’s brief exile in Strasbourg he was so deeply impressed with the chorale singing of Lutheran congregations there that he vowed to have something just as powerful eventually in Geneva.” (Saliers 1967: 171)

Practical advice with respect to performance also abounds, and some of it, written long ago, appears very contemporary today. The following pointer, found in Pratt’s gem *Musical Ministries in the Church* dating from 1901, appears in the chapter “The Choir”:

“[...] as choir music is performed under peculiarly trying conditions, it requires peculiarly careful preparation. Like all public music, it needs to be correct and tasteful in execution, but it needs in addition a somewhat special perfection and winsomeness of style, as well as a fairly definite moral purpose. Choir rehearsal, therefore, should be exceptionally thorough technically, and exceptionally thoughtful and earnest besides. If church music be a means to an end, surely the end should be clear in the minds of the choir. Through every available method the leader should endeavor to stimulate enthusiasm among his singers for their work, aiming to keep its dignity unimpaired and to rouse every worthy ambition in it.” (Pratt 1901: 143)

Pratt warns against assuming people cannot handle depth and encourages ministers in charge to give people a chance to rise to the level of expectations by saying that

“The defenders of this popular hymnody [...] often very gravely underestimate the capacity of the popular mind to rise above vulgar embodiments of truth and to shake itself free from perverted sentimentality, and they constantly mistake the zest of animal enjoyment in a rub-a-dub rhythm or the shout of childish pleasure in a „catchy” refrain for real religious enthusiasm.” (Pratt 1901: 60)

Instead of competing in eloquence with the above authors, I shall conclude this study by summarizing the problems facing church music today and enumerating some proposed solutions.

VII. Problems and solutions, culprits and victims: a summary

The following constitutes a partial list of problems that plague Western church music today:

- Lack of institutionalized support on behalf of many Western churches for the study, development and application of church music.
- Lack of vision for long-term sustainable development
- Lack of continuously updated learning resources
- Lack of qualified teaching personnel
- Lack of full-time jobs that can attract qualified musicians, who would consider church music as a viable career path
- Lack of a properly designated music budget forcing music ministers to become beggars before their own community
- Anti-intellectualism
- Repertoire stagnation
- Disappearance of quality criteria for new repertoire selection
- Usage of illegally reproduced paper and media materials
- Acceptance of rampant mediocrity of music ministers on behalf of clerical staff in the name of misunderstood ‘niceness’

The reasons for the state of affairs vary and differ with respect to the scope of the examination. On a small, local, scale what could be easily manageable obstacles on the way of a flourishing music ministry become unsurmountable hindrances. Some examples:

- Willful ignorance
- A nonchalant attitude on behalf of the majority
- Occupation of functions by people who lack the competency to fulfill them
- People making music ministry about *them*, rather than about a common long-term goal

By far the biggest culprits for a particular community’s mediocre music ministry are clergy members and wardens who, despite knowing very well what should and could be done to improve the situation, don’t take any steps to amend it. Plainly said, using Christian terminology: this is a sin.

Most unfortunately, everyone involved in a church community knowingly and unknowingly suffers from a complacent acceptance of a second-rate music ministry.

My proposed solutions, addressed to clergy, wardens, and music ministers alike, would apply to more than one of the problems enumerated above. They all apply on the relatively small scale of a single church community, because, as we already know from history, any attempt to institute changes on a large denominational scale,

fail due to their ambitiousness, but mostly, due to the general disinterest and apathy on behalf of people who prefer to always continue “as we have always done”.

- Campaign for the endowment of [a] full-time, protected, music ministry position[s].
 - For clergy: only hire qualified musicians. A good musician can provide better services for 3 hours’ worth of pay than a half-time employed wannabe amateur or a full-time volunteer. By opting for an unqualified amateur you are not being ‘nice’ to the amateur – you are stealing the opportunity from someone who invested in the passion of studying music and you are depriving your community of the best they need and deserve.
 - Make short-term, medium term, and long-time plans.
 - Insist on defining a clear budget for the music ministry. Explain that this is necessary to protect all ministries as it allows for better planning for everyone.
 - Seek out contributions to the music ministry not only in the form of money, but also technology, participation, time.
 - Don’t always segregate music ministry events in the form of concerts. Include quality music in some form or another in various church activities.
 - Institute an apprenticeship programme in partnership with a local music school or university.
 - Offer to your local denomination’s school to integrate church choir as a school class.
 - Emphasize children’s participation in music ministry. Children are the future of the community.
 - Stop underestimating children’s ability to discern quality. When given the opportunity, children always gravitate towards artistic depth. They want to be taken seriously and know when adults present a dumbed down version of music or poetry.
 - Procure up-to-date music teaching materials.
 - Keep an organized and up-to-date library of scores, hymnals, anthems, instrumental music.
 - Only use legal scores. Every illegal photocopy steals the meager living of a musician and of a (usually mom-and-pop) small Christian music store. Only when copyright breaches are stopped will people really notice that music is precious in all meanings of the word. For priests: this is a good time to remind people “Thou shalt not steal”.
 - Work to change nonchalant attitudes by establishing personal connections with people in leadership positions.

All disillusioned good musicians, who will, or who have already chosen to abandon a career in church music due to the impossibility to secure the dignity of sufficient work and respect will hopefully retain a small amount of optimism for the future with respect to Western church music. We can always hope that

someone, something somewhere, sometime in the future would serve as the catalyst for change towards the better for the generations to come. After all,

“Music is the only art that enjoys ubiquitous ties: it has been variously considered a promoter of thought and provoker of feeling, a therapeutic drug and an exciter to action, a fascinator of primitives and an enchanter of the civilized, a social coagulator and a psychological activator, an education tool and a commercial requirement, an inducer of dark satanic powers and an emanatory of luminous divine blessedness.” (Barricelli 1988: 169)

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