

*There's a lot of talk on
secular music but...*

What About Church Music?

by Nicolas Ll. Rose



There are many things in life that we know and experience but which we cannot tell. It is related of St. Augustine that when he was asked on one occasion to define time, he answered he could not define it although he knew very well what it was. To many Catholics, Church music is one of these known but undefinable things. They hear it, like and dislike it, but not say what it is. And there are many others who have the impression that the priest's "Dominus Vobiscum" and the "Amen" of a choir of old men or their singing during a burial service is all the Church music. What an unmelodious music would it be!

But somehow, everybody feels that Church music must be different from the secular; that the latest "song hit" or any love song for that matter cannot be sung in church. For Church music is holy.

Church music is holy, indeed, because it is prayer in melody. Being different from secular music by its very nature, it does not aim at an

earthly effect solely for that effect, but transcends the sphere of the merely artistic to enter the domain of the spirit. Being an integral part of the liturgy, it only aims to glorify God and edify men.

Perhaps we are not aware, but there is a tendency to secularize our church music just as all other fields nowadays. People in church seek to hear that which merely pleases the ear or that which they can enjoy. They dislike Gregorian Chant, because it is not a melody to them. Not unoften, they feel that the "Tantum Ergo" or "O Salutaris" are melodies too cheap for them to sing. They prefer to hear solos that display vocal or instrumental virtuosity.

We should no longer doubt that the profane has already invaded our choir lofts. It has deceived our organists and soloists with its clothing of a sacred text it has stolen from sacred books. Examples of these smuggled secular music are the "Ave Maria's" that we know to be

Schubert's and Bach-Gounod's and which people love to hear during special occasions in church. Explaining the origin of Gounod's "Ave Maria," a Jesuit Father, Fr. Ludwig Bonnin, writes, "Gounod wished to touch the heart of Mademoiselle Philidor and wrote this beautiful contrapuntal melody to Bach's First Prelude with the intent, using as a text for his (love) declaration, two lines of Lamartine. Fearing some difficulty, the young lady's mother substituted the words of the Ave Maria for the burning line of Lamartine. Gounod, when shown this adaptation, realized the value of the setting, re-touched it and adopted it as his own now famous 'Ave Maria'. (Ludwig Bonnin, S. J., CECILIA, May, 1933)

Discovering to us the origin of Schubert's, the editor of the "Cecilia", an American bi-monthly review of Church music, tells us, "In the year 1825 Franz Schubert composed a number of songs from Walter Scott's 'Lady of the Lake' and dedicated them to the Countess Sophie Van Weissenwolf. Among these songs was one entitled 'The Hymn to the Virgin'. Schubert had no intention whatsoever to compose this song for church use. We do not know the individual who first conceived the idea of discarding the lines of Walter Scott and putting the Latin words 'Ave Maria' in their place. At all events we are confronted here with a specimen of secular music being smuggled under false pretense into the Lord's

sanctuary. . . . To be sincere, the publisher ought to say on the title-page: this is one of Schubert's secular songs, fitted out with Latin words."

From these testimonies, indeed, it is clear that these compositions cannot find a place in our churches. Will our soloists be deceived again?

Even the bridal marches—"Lohengrin" and Mendelssohn's—which our organists play when the bride goes up the aisle to meet the groom and when they march down after the ceremonies, are excerpts from operas. Are not our organists aware that the church is not a theater but a holy place of which the reverent should exclaim with Jacob, "How terrible is this place! This is no other but the house of God, and the gate of heaven. ((Gen., xxviii, 17)

The holiness of ecclesiastical music excludes everything profane and secular. It is what makes the sweet melody of Lizts' "Dream of Love" or the dreamy "Beautiful Dreamer" absolutely unfit to clothe the sacred text of the "Panis Angelicus" or "Tantum Ergo". It is this element that makes any melody originally intended for a love declaration totally unworthy to blend with the angelic salutation.

A prelate hit the nail right on the head when he pointed out that the reason why Church music is at such a low ebb in many of our churches is that the distinction between music secular in character and what is truly ecclesiastical is not always ob-

served. All music is not Church music, indeed, although all Church music is music, hence, strictly an art. For it is the sincere expression of truth and beauty. It declares the beauty of holy things. It expresses the Divine truths in its own forceful, meaningful way. It is holiness wedded to melody.

It is this unique character of Church music which explains why some persons who happen to drop in at a chapel of cloistered nuns for benediction are deeply touched, an experience which transcends the mere satisfaction of the hearing. In fact, Mozart, whom not a few music historians consider as the greatest musical genius the world has yet seen, was said to have been so impressed when he heard the preface of the Mass sung that he cried, "I would have been rather the composer of the preface than of all my works!" And a Jew of no mean musical talent, when he heard for the first time the Gregorian Chant, exclaimed, "Most beautiful music I've heard in all my life!"

These remarks are hardly believable to quite many people who have often heard Church music sung unartistically. For what philosophers say "*Optimi corruptio pessima*" (The corruption of the best is the worst) is also true in this case. But this does not mean that Church music is imperfect and to be abhorred. For what is imperfect is the execution and not the thing executed. Here, in-

deed, arises the necessity of forming choirs and training singers able to satisfy the demands of sacred art—an arduous task which is left to our busy pastors and their assistants and which calls for a good deal of goodwill and patience and the monetary element.

There are many parishes that count with good choirs. But there are, unfortunately, more parishes that do not. At the head of our parish choirs are usually laymen called "maestros" or "maestros" who have acquired a knowledge of Church music from experience solely, hence, lack the necessary technical element. The singers, more usually, are women who are all goodwill but who do not necessarily have the qualifications to sing. And what shall we say of some parishes that have a "choir" but which is only staffed with an organist and a singer?

Although today the Church encourages the formation of good choirs, she does not, in any way, discourage congregational singing. On the contrary. For community singing is even more in accordance with the tradition and spirit of the Church whose early members, living a life of an ideal community, prayed together, sincerely loved one another, sang together the same songs that expressed their keenest love for God. "The unity of faith, of heart, of cult," writes a certain Fr. Bruner, C. Ss. R., "is paralleled by the unity of a song. A congregation chanting is never

divided against itself. When all voices are blended in the same melodious expression of common worship, hearts and minds are drawn together in the bonds of Faith and charity. This is true of the faithful among themselves. It is true even more of priest and people."

With this and other salutary effects, congregational singing should be stressed more nowadays when the faithful are being drawn farther and farther away from the unity of the Church by the selfish, individualistic world. In this way, we shall get them to love Church music and everything that it stands for. Then will they prefer not to hear a solo from the choir-loft which sometimes possesses more qualities of an aria than an 'Ave Maria,' as we have already noted.

There has been a move made recently to make Manila a music art

center in the Far East just as Vienna was in Europe before the war. If secular music merited interest in our people, why not Church music that is more pleasing to God? Or is our indifference to sacred music only a faithful shadow of the spirit of our times?

It is high time that Catholic Philippines also started a move to put to practice the desires of the Church in the field of sacred music, which is but another means to bring souls nearer to God. Choirs are to be formed and reformed; organists to be trained and re-trained; the faithful to be taught to let go their sentimental or erroneous outlook on Church music. For only then shall our people appreciate and love Church music, not for its being sweet and melodious, but for being what it is—a prayer, twice pleasing to God.



Mrs. Hooplemeyer was awakened late one night by a knocking on the door. Sticking her head out the window, she called, "Who is it? What do you want?"

"Are you Mrs. Hooplemeyer?" the man on the step asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I'm Mr. Kelly from the pool room up the street. Your husband plays poker there every evening."

"Vel, I know dat."

"He was playing tonight and lost \$2,000."

"Mein Gott, \$2,000! He should drop dead."

"That's what he did, modom. Goodnight."