

## *Reflections On Religious Music*

*In an appropriate contribution to a Catholic newspaper, Berlioz expresses his convictions about the proper uses of music for religion occasions, denouncing past and contemporary practices that, in his view, violate fitness of expression and occasion. He is especially harsh on rapid fugues set to words such as "Amen" and "Kyrie," which to his mind imply gentle prayers of supplication. Two years before leaving for Italy, he may already be found condemning Italian churches for bringing opera-house levity into the sanctuary. Yet in general he considers religious music merely a branch of dramatic music, differing only in its scene of action. Deploring the paltry resources available to composers of religious music in France, he evokes the thousands of Levites who, according to Scripture, once gathered to sing the Lord's praises. Berlioz dreams of creating such choirs in modern-day Paris, undergirded by a gigantic modern orchestra.*



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*Le Correspondant*

Of the several branches of the art of music, the religious would seem to be the one that, in light of its sublime subject, sternly majestic ideas, and ancient origin should have produced the greatest number of masterworks, inspired the finest geniuses, and, in a word, risen to the acme of perfection. That is, however, not the case. Several factors have converged to slow the forward movement of this branch of music. They can be found in certain academic prejudices shared in the past and still shared by almost all composers; in the discouraging conditions encountered by all composers who have attempted in modern times to pursue such a career; and, finally, in the extreme rarity of

more or less satisfactory performances and the total lack of means for properly rendering grand compositions.

What is the goal of sacred music?—To stir and lift the soul by expressing the feelings that infuse the words to which it is set. How does it differ from dramatic music?—Religious ideas preclude whatever might foster incompatible levity, but that is the only difference. Indeed, if expression of feeling is the aim of the one, it is also the aim of the other. If religious music is to be grave, serious, grand, terrifying, the same emotions are stirred by the other whenever it covers the same range of ideas. The style of a well-conceived religious opera is absolutely the same as that of an oratorio. The scores of *Adam* and *La Mort d'Abel* are proof of it.<sup>1</sup>

These truths, it seems to me, need no demonstrating. Common sense reveals them well enough. How is it, then, that they are so little known and implemented so poorly?—No doubt because common sense is actually uncommon and the grip of routine very tight.

All the old productions of Italy and Germany are infected with the fugal style, a style barbarous, ridiculous, absurd, and yet extolled by the general run of musicians and held up by teachers to their pupils as an object of veneration. I already see the lovers of fugues casting angry looks at me, but I am not writing for them. I am addressing myself to the prejudice-free reasoning of true friends of music.

“So it’s wrong,” these friends will ask me, “to teach counterpoint in schools?”—No, not at all. It is a very useful exercise. It familiarizes pupils with many of the problems of harmony and teaches them how to draw as much as possible out of a melodic idea. I even grant that the fugal style, with some modification, can sometimes serve to good effect in slow tempos. But to my mind the use to which it has been put till now in masses is on the part of their composers an inconceivable mental aberration. They should at least have tried to set that type of music to words whose meaning could make it tolerable, as Jommelli did in his “*Movendi sunt caeli et terra*.”<sup>2</sup>

But custom demands, on the contrary, that the composer of a mass set his fugues to the words “Amen,” “Kyrie,” or “Agnus Dei.” Let people who

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1. Berlioz refers to Jean-François Lesueur’s *La Mort d’Adam* (1809) and to Rodolphe Kreutzer’s *La Mort d’Abel* (1810). The latter was revived at the Opéra in 1823; in October 1824, the young Berlioz wrote the composer a letter of hyperbolic praise (*CG* 1: 70-71) after a performance that had received a lukewarm public reception.

2. It seems likely that Berlioz is alluding to the “*Libera me*,” the section that contains these words, in Jommelli’s *Solemn Requiem Mass* in E-flat Major (ca. 1750).

have never heard such a work imagine the religious effect of fifty voices furiously braying the word “Amen” four or five hundred times in quick tempo, or vocalizing on the syllable “a” as if to imitate uncontrollable bursts of laughter—and the experience will give them an idea of the vocal fugue that will probably not be to its advantage! I challenge anyone with a feeling for music and with an open mind to listen to a fugue on “Amen” without taking the choir for an army of devils incarnate making a mockery of the sacred sacrifice, rather than an assembly of the faithful gathered to sing the praises of the Lord.

It is no less shocking to see the same treatment of the “Kyrie” and the “Agnus Dei.” Yet nothing is more common; it is a style generally adopted by musicians, and the most unbelievable part of it is that they call this style religious. What a style, good God, which replaces the humble, touching sentiment of prayer with what sounds like frenzied rage or a celebration out of hell! Beethoven himself, the giant of giants, was not beyond contagion. He who in his other compositions broke through and trod underfoot the barrier of routine, who followed only the impulse of his genius and his lofty reason—Beethoven himself, in some parts of his *Missa solemnis*,<sup>3</sup> descended to the level of the contrapuntalist crowd.

Some people resort to a strange justification for the introduction of the fugal style into church music. “A mass mustn’t stir the emotions,” they claim; “and indeed, the fugue is not stirring, but engaging. The mind takes pleasure in following the composer’s combinations; you like to hear how he is going to resolve the difficulties that the genre imposes. Such sensations suffice for religious music.”

Strange paradox! Why should the music of a mass be forbidden to stir the emotions? How would the good performance of a fine sacred hymn offend propriety if it led to tears? I ask this question of all who know Cherubini’s *Marche de la Communion*:<sup>4</sup> is the emotion that you feel on hearing this sublime work tied in any way to earthly concerns?

This depiction of divine love, this adoration at once passionate and respectful, vehement and timid, attains, on the contrary, the highest degree of religious sentiment, the pinnacle of musical genius, does it not? Is it not

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3. Op. 123 (1819-1823). In other articles Berlioz may be found criticizing the “Credo” in particular from the *Missa Solemnis*: see #21 (Jan. 25, 1835).

4. Berlioz refers to the *Marche religieuse* from Cherubini’s Coronation Mass; the march was played for the King’s communion, hence its nickname of “Communion March.”

supremely ridiculous to maintain that church music is made to entertain the minds of listeners with its combinations? Besides, if you deny its capacity to move, at least it mustn't shock. I would be as happy with the masses often heard in Italy, which always feature a violin concerto and a few well-ornamented cavatinas; people come to admire the vigorous bowing and the nimble voices of fashionable artists.

Another cause of the poor quality of this branch of music is the fact that composers find it impossible to obtain good performances of works already written and that they have absolutely no encouragement to compose new ones. If a painter produces a church mural, he can expect that his work will not be utterly lost and that he will at least be reimbursed for his expenses—whereas a composer who has written a mass may be quite sure that no one will buy it and that, to get it performed, he will be forced to spend a great deal of money. There used to be a great number of choir schools in France, which provided a living for many composers. They no longer exist, and there is little prospect of their ever being reestablished.<sup>5</sup> The choir school of Notre Dame in Paris is very poorly maintained, and its resources are so limited as to make it nearly impossible for the chapel masters to have their compositions performed adequately. That leaves only the Chapelle royale. There, to be sure, you can hear the beautiful scores of MM. Lesueur and Cherubini. The performers, drawn from the capital's artistic elite, present an array of talents with very satisfying results. But only those two composers are to be heard; moreover, the space is too small to allow them all the developments that the genre entails.

The ancients enhanced their religious ceremonies with a musical grandeur that we don't even begin to grasp. What can we say of our fifty-instrumentalist orchestras and forty-voice choruses, when Scripture informs us that more than four thousand Levites were employed in Solomon's temple to sing the praise of God?<sup>6</sup> We mustn't believe that the number of performers is unimportant. Grand music demands grand performances. It requires many instruments and especially many voices. And what is false in other circumstances is true here: in a vast space, quantity trumps quality.

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5. Church schools were abolished during the Revolution, in August 1791; a Chapel was reinstated under the Consulate, in 1802, which became an Imperial Chapel in 1804, renamed Royal Chapel under the Restoration Monarchy. But the church schools throughout France once so important to the musical life of the nation remained largely a thing of the past. See *Berlioz on Music*, #13.

6. *Chronicles 1*, 23,5.

Have a fine work executed at Notre Dame by sixty distinguished musicians, and then have the same score rendered by five hundred persons picked at random, but competent nonetheless. In the first case, the effect will be meager, paltry, or even nonexistent. In the second, it will be majestic, impressive, sublime. The listener will be profoundly moved; the composer will be understood; and the art of music will appear in all its greatness.

H.