

WELCOME TO THE LITURGICAL MUSIC CORNER!

This portion of our semi-monthly newsletter will focus on various aspects of Musical Liturgy. In this month's newsletter, we will take a look at the importance of rehearsals for the vocalists and instrumentalists within the Ministry of Music.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC MINISTRY REHEARSALS

The Second Vatican Council stated emphatically that choirs must be diligently promoted while ensuring that "the whole body of the faithful may be able to contribute that active participation which is rightly theirs..." (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 114). The choir must not minimize the musical participation of the faithful. The congregation commonly sings unison melodies, which are more suitable for generally unrehearsed community singing. This is the primary song of the Liturgy. Choirs and ensembles, on the other hand, comprise persons drawn from the community who possess the requisite musical skills and a commitment to the established schedule of rehearsals and Liturgies. Thus, they are able to enrich the celebration by adding musical elements beyond the capabilities of the congregation alone (*Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, no. 28).

At the Liturgy, the main choir is not the vocalists, nor the cantor, nor the instrumentalists – it is, first and foremost, the *assembly*, or *gathered faithful*. The ministers of music are present to *support* the gathered faithful in their song and may also enrich their singing by adding harmonies and descants (*Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, no. 29). In addition, the primary role of the organist, other instrumentalists, or instrumental ensemble is to *lead* and *sustain* the singing of the assembly and of the choir, cantor, and psalmist, without dominating or overpowering them. The many voices of the organ and of instrumental ensembles, with their great range of expression, add varied and colorful dimensions to the song of the assembly, especially with the addition of harmonization (*Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, nos. 41 and 42).

In order to properly support and lead the gathered faithful both vocally and instrumentally, there should be certain standards to enable the effectiveness of this leadership. For the music to be rendered well, adequate preparation prior to the Liturgy is of utmost importance. It must be kept in mind that if the music is perceived by the assembly as either poorly or tentatively prepared, it can then become easy for them to tune it out and lose their attention. Conversely, if it is well prepared and exudes confidence, chances are that the congregation will remain focused in regard to their full, active, and conscious participation.



WHEN AND WHERE WITH INSTRUMENTAL ACCOMPANIMENT

In some parish communities, finding the opportunity to gather everyone together for rehearsal can be a challenge. The personal, family, and professional schedules of the music ministry members may sometimes be non-conducive in establishing an official meeting day and time. However, if there is effective communication between all members and the director when figuring out a potential rehearsal schedule, a particular day and time to meet as an ensemble will always become a reality. After completing either a first effective rehearsal or one that has not taken place in a while, the director and the music ministry members at the Liturgy will be able to feel the confidence that comes with adequate preparation. The gathered faithful will also be able to perceive this, thus leading to strengthened participation and overall prayerfulness.

As soon as a working schedule has been established, the next step is to find a location for the rehearsals. Some parish communities may have a dedicated music room or similar space while others may not. The music area of the church can be utilized, provided that permission has been obtained to do so. Even in parishes where it is stated that there are no available spaces for rehearsal including the church, there will always be at least one [small] portion of the campus that can be utilized. Directors of music should not be apprehensive to inquire about finding an adequate space for these most important meetings. It is praiseworthy to keep in mind that sacred music is part of the Liturgy which is “the source and summit from which all parish activities flow” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1324; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 10). Therefore, as part of this source and summit, it behooves each parish community to support sacred music that is well prepared and prayerfully rendered.

When the rehearsal location has been finalized but is *not* a dedicated music room, a tonal and polyphonic instrument should be available, preferably a piano or electronic keyboard. A guitar can also work, but it is not as effective in assisting to teach the melody or harmony parts. If an older piano is to be used, be sure that it is decently in tune. And if an electronic keyboard is utilized, be sure that it has a strong enough volume for all to hear.

LET US PRAY

At each rehearsal, it is a praiseworthy practice to begin and end with prayer. It need not be long and drawn out, nor should it be too short and rushed. Its purpose is to give thanks to God for enabling everyone to gather at the appointed time, and to also hear the intentions of thanksgiving and concern as individuals and as one community of music ministers. It is also praiseworthy to take some time at the beginning to read



out loud the prescribed Gospel of the upcoming Liturgy. Doing so enables the members to have a clearer understanding of why each hymn has been specifically selected in relevance to the Good News of Christ as well as to the other prescribed Scripture Readings.

These prayerful practices remind all vocalists and instrumentalists (and the director, too!) that the ensemble is, first and foremost, a *ministry* whose primary calling is to serve God and His Faithful People through the sung Word.

PREPARATION OF SHEET MUSIC

All sheet music for both the vocalists and instrumentalists should be adequately prepared by knowing exactly how many copies need to be obtained for each member. Enough copies of the hymns should be purchased prior to the rehearsal. Or, *if permission has been granted by the publisher* to reproduce a certain number of copies, this should be done ahead of time. In the rehearsal space, the copies of each hymn should be placed in chronological stacks near the entrance – this saves time by enabling each music minister to take what they need upon arrival rather than having to pass things out during the rehearsal.

REHEARSAL PREPARATION AND PATIENCE

Specific rehearsal and pedagogical techniques are beyond the scope of this article. However, there are some basic protocols that all can benefit from.

Before the beginning of any rehearsal, solid preparation by the director is of utmost importance. Knowing exactly which hymns to go over as well as thinking ahead about potential musical anomalies in both the vocals and instruments are key to enabling a smooth, well-paced, and well-planned practice session. Directors should have a complete “game plan” ready to go at least a few days prior to the rehearsal, and this plan should be adhered to as closely as possible with minimal changes.

It is an absolute blessing to work with volunteer ministers in parish communities. However, it is realized that many of the community’s volunteers may not possess professional-level skills and would need extra time and effort on the part of the director to strengthen their musical abilities. With this in mind, it is always imperative that each music minister is met *where they are at*. For example, if there is an ensemble of vocalists who can sing a melody with strength but who become lost when attempting to sing harmony parts, the concentration then focuses on developing a solid and well-blended *unison* sound. Remember that vocal harmony and descants are great elements to enhance the sound of the assembly but are *not* required. The priority is, first and foremost, a well-developed *unison* sound so that the melody has



strength to support, lead, and encourage the singing of the gathered faithful. Only when this solidness has been achieved can the attempts to integrate harmony then be realized. Two parts are a great way to introduce harmonic possibilities, with the addition of three or more parts as everyone settles in and becomes more comfortable. This process will not happen overnight, so be patient and take as much time as needed to achieve this particular goal.

OPEN MY EYES (AND FIRST AND FOREMOST, MY EARS!)

During the course of the rehearsal, musically sensitive ears on the part of the director (and each member as well!) are imperative. The ability to improve the sound of the voices and instruments using various techniques is always an integral part of the preparation process – however, as previously mentioned, these techniques are beyond the scope of this article. Aside from any pedagogy that is utilized, the most basic elements to listen for are a good and cohesive blend of all voices as well as a good blend between the voices and instruments. Amidst vowel unification, intonation, articulation, phrasing, rhythmic accuracy, entrances, releases, blending (no individual voices sticking out!), musical genre, and other elements of choral decorum, are the vocals the first priority that can be heard and understood by all? Is the melody prominent? If there are harmony parts or descants, are they blended in such a way where they *compliment* the melody rather than overpower it? Are the instruments at a proper volume so as to not drown out the vocals, and are they also well blended with each other just as the voices are? Is the overall volume adequate to allow the voices of the gathered faithful to be clearly heard and not overpowered by the music ministers?

Even without the use of advanced techniques, a decent sound can be achieved when the overall blend is good. However, extra effort is required by both the director and all music ministers to achieve a level that is higher than just “decent.” Directors should consistently remind all members, both vocalists and instrumentalists, to always watch them while singing and playing. Hesitation with entrances and releases disrupts the flow of the melody as do rhythmic inaccuracies when things are not sung nor played together as one – these anomalies can be remedied when everyone watches the director for all cues.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When everything is on point, the result is a much stronger and confident presence from the gathered faithful. In addition, music ministers should be reminded that amidst all of the preparation and technical aspects, the Ministry of Music is *not* a performance organization, nor is the choir area or choir loft a stage. All music is prepared to the highest level possible, in service to God and His Faithful People, to



ARCHDIOCESE
of LOS ANGELES

OFFICE FOR
DIVINE WORSHIP
(213) 637-7262

4311
WILSHIRE
BOULEVARD

LOS ANGELES
CALIFORNIA
90010

ensure the *prayerfulness* that is integral to the full, active, and conscious participation that rightfully belongs to the assembly.

For additional information and consultation regarding rehearsal techniques as well as the spiritual and musical formation of music ministers, please contact Victor A. Wheeler, Coordinator of Sacred Music Formation, at (213) 637-7054. You can also send him an e-mail at: vwheeler@la-archdiocese.org.