

Looking Back to 1956:

Liturgical Music in America

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Those of us who, by our circumstances, are forced to echo Saint Augustine in our laments over how late we came to traditional Catholicism – in too many cases, how late we came to any serious Catholicism at all – harbor an almost unquenchable thirst for knowledge about how the Church was in Western lands before the conciliar and post-conciliar betrayal. We do not seek prettified illusions about Her, any more than we seek the modernists' ignorant and vengeful calumnies against Her. Instead, we simply crave to know, as far as can be known, what actually happened, or – as Leopold von Ranke, historian of the papacy, once put it – “*wie es eigentlich gewesen.*” And if (as has been maintained) the German term “*eigentlich*” is best rendered as “essentially” rather than as “actually,” it makes no difference to our desire. For us, a solitary plain piece of contemporaneous reportage upon the Church customs which prevailed (for good or ill) before Vatican II – “the French Revolution in the Church,” Belgium’s Cardinal Suenens called the Council, not in

despair but with approbation – is worth a dozen exercises in special pleading (even from usually reputable sources) about what *should* have prevailed back then, but did not.

Seen in this light, a 1956 volume with the simple title *Catholic Church Music*, by journalist and academic Paul Hume, acquires singular significance. Few Catholics, however musically well-educated, seem now to have heard of this book, published in New York by Dodd, Mead. (An hour’s trawling through the relevant late-1950s databases located only one review: a tiny, if fervent, encomium in the June 1957 number of the musicological magazine *Notes*.) This unawareness is a shame, since anyone concerned with liturgical history would benefit from reading its 249 crisply-argued pages.

Hume might not be quite forgotten in our time – he died in 2001, less than a month before his 86th birthday – but insofar as he is remembered, it is probably, alas, as

the one American music critic ever to be threatened with personal mayhem by a Chief Executive. When, in December 1950, Hume had published in *The Washington Post* a sharply unpleasant critique of a vocal recital by Margaret Truman, Harry S.’s daughter, the President fired off to Hume a handwritten diatribe, the thrust of which – slightly different versions are given in different sources – was as follows:

You sound like a frustrated old man who never made a success, an eight-ulcer man on a four-ulcer job, and all four ulcers working. I never met you, but if I do you’ll need a new nose, a lot of beefsteak for black eyes, and a supporter below. Westbrook Pegler, a guttersnipe, is a gentleman compared to you. You can take that as more of an insult than a reflection on your ancestry.

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Truman being Truman and not Stalin or Mao, no serious harm to Hume – whether physical or otherwise – resulted from this ultimatum, except that it has obliterated the fame which Hume deserved on purely artistic grounds. (Margaret Truman behaved with the utmost graciousness over the whole affair, publicly defending Hume's right to free speech, however personally unpleasant to her.) Nonetheless, Hume's *Post* role represented but one aspect, and not necessarily the most impressive aspect, of his talent. Hume also routinely announced Metropolitan Opera transmissions, and he won the 1977 Peabody Award for his music broadcasts on the WGMS radio station of Rockville, Maryland. He published (also in 1977) a biography of Verdi that continues to make useful reading, though it has been overtaken in certain respects by later scholarship. Moreover, for a generation (1950-1977) he taught at Georgetown University, which had not yet sunk to the cultural depths implied by Wikipedia's reverential description of present-day Georgetown savant Michael Eric Dyson as "preeminent hip-hop scholar."

Most relevant to our purposes are the facts that Hume converted to Catholicism in his early 30s (he had been raised a Presbyterian), and possessed thorough experience both in organ-playing and in directing church choirs. This experience he brought to bear on the writing of *Catholic Church Music*. So much so, indeed, that his book's effect is less that of a formal literary composition than that of a bracing off-the-cuff lecture given by a conspicuously masculine fellow who is standing only a few yards away from you, and who – despite his considerable capacity for pique – feels for you in whatever needless artistic frustrations your Catholic musicianship will be expected to endure. Or, at any rate, with those frustrations which to the cultivated mind of 1956 were imaginable. The whole Kumbaya mentality of ritualized liturgical moronism lay ahead, unsuspected by even the most pessimistic souls.

From this it might be inferred that Hume's views on the state of liturgical play in 1956 were primarily cheerful. Not so. It seems incredible now that the Catholic music scene should have engendered in him such comprehensive anger, but it did. He bewailed this scene for embodying, no less than secular existence, "the triumph of mediocrity as the standard to which American living is geared ... [t]he let's-give-Mr.-Average-Man-just-what-he-wants philosophy of life (pp. 40-41)," this mediocrity manifesting itself as – *quelle horreur!* – the *Reader's Digest* phonographic spin-off "that hacks the works of the 'standard' repertoire down to size, with all 'unnecessary repeats' taken out so as not to bore the listener" (p. 40). Yes, Virginia, that was 1956's idea of cultural barbarism.

To re-read Dwight Macdonald's similar, and contemporaneous, *New Yorker* philippic against the unabashed depravity of Midcult makes for a similarly eerie sensation in 2011. (If mid-1950s cultural barbarism meant *Reader's Digest* and such harmlessly wearisome novelists as James Gould Cozzens, then what words in the language are left to describe Lady Gaga or Kanye West?) By our own age's enlightened standards, Hume and Macdonald alike might be thought to resemble "the princess and the pea", squealing with indignation against discomforts so trivial as hardly to warrant subsequent notice. But what Hume's artistic discomforts lacked in objective justifiability, they made up for in comprehensiveness.

Particularly upsetting for Hume is any music not in total, phrase-by-phrase accord with St. Pius X's 1903 *Motu Proprio*. Violations of that ruling – such as a 1953 performance of Gounod's admittedly over-lush *Messe Solennelle de Sainte-Cécile* – reduce him to despair. He denounces the long-popular *Mass in B Flat* by one Henry Farmer ("the first Mass I ever sang, when ... I was hired to sing at a Catholic wedding" [p. 4]) in tones of moralistic aversion that today might seem excessive even if applied

to The Compleat Beyoncé. Likewise with such other dull but inoffensive minor 19th-century liturgical musicians as Luigi Bordese and Johann Kalliwoða, both special *bêtes noires* of Hume's. "Lambillotte [*Louis Lambillotte, a Belgian priest-composer who died in 1855*], although he still has a few loyal followers, isn't much of a threat these days," Hume writes rather gloatingly, "and I haven't heard a note of P. Giorza in years" (p. 41).

Hume even expresses the devout hope that "your church might still cling to its soprano soloist, but she doesn't sing 'O Holy Night' by Adam at Christmas, or 'Oh Promise Me' by [Reginald] De Koven at weddings. (Does she?) [pp. 4-5]." Even those of us who will be content if we never again hear "O Holy Night" – or several of Hume's other detestations, including the hymns *Bring Flowers of the Fairest* and *To Jesus' Heart All Burning* – will find ourselves surprised at Hume's blunderbuss approach. Yes, no doubt it was dreadful that the 1903 edict was once contravened by such ham-fisted expeditors as fitting Aquinas's poetry to the sextet from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*; but what musically literate *Novus Ordo* adherent would fail to welcome these alleged atrocities as almost inconceivable improvements on what he actually has?

Happily not everything with Hume represents the vociferation of the spoilt-for-choice. There is solid wisdom to be found elsewhere in his account, including some tart remarks about the need for historical perspective when it comes to Catholic society:

The Church in America [circa 1910], barely emerged from the 'Know-Nothing' era, had a lot on its mind besides music. Vicious feuding between national groups threatened its peace. The social abuses condemned by Leo XIII were a far more immediate problem than the musical abuses deplored by Pius X (p. 5).

Also, Hume hammers away at the need for serious funding to be disbursed in the competent Catholic music director's bailiwick:

Existing salaries seem to cover every decimal place between nothing and about \$3,000 a year. ... But in weighing the problem, real enough in a struggling parish, of whether to give the poor choirmaster a raise this year, the pastor should keep Leo XIII in mind as well as Pius X (p. 17).

This means nothing – or, rather, less than nothing – without a reciprocal allegiance by musicians to professionalism *per se*.

He [a priest] would not allow his new heating and air-conditioning system to be serviced by a willing Holy Name man who has been watching a TV do-it-yourself course; he wouldn't allow his appendix to be removed by a Boy Scout with a merit badge in first aid (pp. 16-17).

Ruthless auditions for aspiring choristers quickly become essential, and the needed interactions – far from representing musical considerations alone – would have been fully perceived by, say, Vince Lombardi:

There is no formula for urging an impossible wobble, or a saw-toothed rasp, to resign from the choir, once they are entrenched. But the choir director who introduces any new wobbles, rasps, quavers, honks, or flats into the group has only himself to blame ... Timid choir directors, arise! Say to yourselves at least ten times a day, 'I'm the boss! I'm running the show!' (pp. 23, 26).

By the same token:



Nothing will blacken the eye of Gregorian Chant in the congregation's mind sooner than to have it sung to them in an emasculated, frilly, feminine manner (p. 49).

Not that we would want to mention any culprits' names or anything, but ... yes, probably every reader of this periodical has encountered *that* particular syndrome now and then. Elsewhere Hume accords us sapient advice regarding suitable items for weddings and funerals (he had a much keener ear for the great merits of such late-Romantic organist-composers as Charles-Marie Widor and Sigfrid Karg-Elert than most music-lovers – Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or heathen – possessed before the 1990s), and he makes at least one commendable pre-emptive strike against theological dog-fights at the keyboard:

The Catholic organist should have no hesitation in drawing upon the riches of the organ literature of Bach. I know that very few Catholic organists do hesitate to use Bach. I mention so foolish a scruple only because it does crop up from time to time (p. 113).

Altogether any organist or choral conductor whose duties involve the Latin Mass has every justification for consulting *Catholic Church Music*, for ignoring its displays of excessive stylistic squeamishness, and for absorbing its instances of good counsel. The discography – comprising monaural LPs only, of course, this being 1956 and thus pre-stereo – is, 55 years on, so utterly obsolete as to be a collector's item: good luck locating *any* of its entries in even the most esoteric interstices of eBay. (It contains one outright error of fact, describing Hindemith as "the world's foremost Catholic composer": Hindemith, though he contributed on occasion to the Catholic rite, never abandoned Lutheranism.) Reservations aside, one must pessimistically ask oneself whether one's own prose on Catholic church music will contain, 55 years hence, anything like the interest which attaches to Hume's commentary now. ■



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