

To God, the Joy of My Youth: Sacred Music in the Catholic School

BY ALEXIS K. KUTARNA

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IN THE CONTEMPORARY AGE, when utilitarian aims of education rule alongside individual choice, electives, and test prep, it may come as a surprise that a Catholic school might require each student to participate in a choral music program. A choral program, moreover, that is more than a so-called specials class, more than a diversion in the middle of the school day, more than an easy A. Situated on the campus of the Cathedral of Our Lady of Walsingham in Houston, Texas, Cathedral High School was founded in 2022. Here, music occupies such a central place in the curriculum that it forms one of the four foundational pillars of the school. And it is not the only school of its kind. Across the United States, a movement is taking place to return to the riches of an authentic liberal education.

Catholic schools are once again placing value on the study of the visual and performing arts. The training up of the young



person in the art of singing and the study of music is an ancient and highly valued discipline of education. Music, in the great tradition of liberal education, is one of the four mathematical disciplines known together as the *quadrivium*—on equal footing with arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy.

These, alongside the *trivium* of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, form what is known as the seven liberal arts. “Liberal” here comes from the word “free.” Young minds are freed to truly think, question, and learn in

the search for truth.

As Catholics, we know that truth is not a disembodied idea; Truth has a name, and his name is Jesus Christ. The immense task of the Catholic school music teacher is to help form young people to listen, which, when done properly, leads them to hear the Word of God, to know Christ, and to attune their lives to him. Sacred music, as the language of the liturgy, rightly deserves a central place in the life of the Catholic school.

Forming Minds and Hearts Through Music

Cathedral High School is a Catholic high school of the Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter. As such, the privileged place of music in the curriculum is a particular gift of the patrimony of a rich English tradition: the monastery or Cathedral as the center of the intellectual and artistic life of the community. Here, all students participate in a choral-based music program. Everyone sings. Of all the instruments, the human voice is “the most privileged and fundamental.”¹ The principal focus is sacred music

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (USCCB, 2008), 1.

for the celebration of daily Mass and for choral Evensong. Students deepen their understanding of the rudiments of music theory, the context of music history, and vocal technique, and explore a variety of choral literature from both the treasury of the Roman Rite as well as the English tradition.

Cathedral High School's curriculum description reads: "Sacred Music is an integral part of the Christian life and singing is a central expression of faith and culture. As a privileged means of ordering the mind and emotions, Sacred Music is critical to forming each student in the language of the Church through developing the student's vocal expression, listening, and understanding of the heart."² The image of the heart is essential here. *Cor ad cor loquitur* (heart speaks unto heart) is the famous motto of the school's patron, St. John Henry Newman. The soaring, Gothic-inspired architecture of the school building boldly proclaims this phrase etched into the stone archway under which students walk to and from Mass each day.

The heart is vital for the musician. The "ear of the heart" is a common metaphor in Scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers. We hear in Psalm 45: "Hear, O daughter, consider, and incline your ear." In the opening words of his *Rule*, St. Benedict offers: "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart."³ The heart is often depicted through the image of a stringed instrument—a cithara, lyre, or psaltery, for example—whose strings are tuned to the Word that is heard. This is a metaphor we use today; "tugging on someone's heartstrings" is an appeal to emotion! The verb *psallo*, to praise, is also the origin of the genre of the Psalms. So, the stringed instrument of the heart (the "psaltery") plays the heart's praise.⁴ This calls to mind the familiar words of the psalmist: "I will go unto the altar of God, to God the joy of my youth; and I will praise thee upon the harp, O God, my God" (Ps 43:4).⁵

The centrality of music in the life of a school is not unique to the Ordinariate. Music is a gift of God that transforms the hearts

² Cathedral High School, "Curriculum," <https://cathedral-hs.org/curriculum>.

³ St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (Liturgical Press, 2018), 15.

⁴ See Everett Ferguson, *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, 4th ed. (Desert Willow, 2013), 9–10.

⁵ This translation of Ps 43 (Vulgate Ps 42) is taken from: Hugo H. Hoever, ed., *St. Joseph Daily Missal* (B. Herder, 1957).

of young people throughout the whole Church; and it can do so in every Catholic school. Countless examples of other schools could be offered where students are encountering the rich treasury of the Church's tradition of sacred music, a "treasure of inestimable value."⁶ Young people everywhere can have the opportunity to explore the place of music in the liturgy, participate fully in it, and be invited to contemplate music's role in that eternal liturgy in heaven.

Music in the Life of the School

Why is music so essential to the life of the Catholic school? First, music immerses the student in Christian culture, forming the young person in the liturgical life of faith. The liturgy is, in fact, the primary locus of formation in the Catholic school—not the classroom! This is not to place the liturgy in opposition to a rigorous intellectual formation. The liturgy is, however, the culmination of this formation—the summit of the Christian life. Music is understood as integral to the liturgy, as a highly significant sacramental sign. Think of how folk songs of various cultures hand on the stories of that culture. Music is a very human act, a marker of our relationships in community. Even today (though many have replaced gathering around the family piano with various individual streaming platforms), we still get together and sing to mark celebrations. We don't simply speak "Happy Birthday"; we sing it! When we sing at Mass, we express not only the nature of the gathered community but the voice of the Mystical Body of Christ gathered in worship. At the same time, music also forms our faith.

Liturgical theologian David Fagerberg describes the liturgy as *theologia prima*, the first teacher of the faith and about God.⁷ Even a young child is molded by the Word of God and by the sacraments. The liturgy should be the compass for sacred music in the Catholic school. Though it may include other elements (e.g., theory, history, instruments) the school's music program should primarily be liturgical. The music program misses the mark when it ignores one of the primary means of participation in the liturgy. We are all called to participation in that foretaste of the eternal banquet: the one choir in which we hope to sing forever.

⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 112.

⁷ See David W. Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What Is Liturgical Theology?* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2012).

The second reason for music's importance in the Catholic school curriculum is that it provides those moments of integration with other disciplines of study. Music communicates a sacramental worldview: the tangible signs around us in the world point to the truth in God. The classical music teacher draws connections between music and math, science, history, and art. Like so many great ancient thinkers, Pythagoras was a philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer—and one of our first music theorists. Students who love mathematics but dread worksheets on musical intervals can be fascinated by the proportions of a string divided into simple fractions. Not only does this topic make for a great lesson plan, it delights the imagination.

A third reason for music's importance is that it challenges the worldly narrative of individualism and selfishness. Through learning music literacy, a child can be guided to learn to truly listen. It is

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essential that students learn to *listen*, rather than to *like*. After a young person hears a new piece of music, the first question we ask them should not be, "Did you like it?" but rather, "What did you hear?" Taste should not be the arbiter for music selection in the Catholic

school or in the liturgy. Students can learn excellence in music as well as in algebra or penmanship. Through choral singing, students learn teamwork, what it means to be a part of a whole, to contribute to something they would not be able to accomplish on their own. There is a great joy to be found here, expressed so beautifully in the image concluding the preface before the *sanctus*: "Therefore, overcome with paschal joy, every land, every people exults in your praise and even the heavenly Powers, with the angelic hosts, sing together the unending hymn of your glory, as they acclaim: Holy, holy holy . . ." ⁸

⁸ Preface I of Easter, in *The Roman Missal*, 3rd typical ed., (USCCB, 2010), p. 558 (§ 45).

Practical Strategies for Sacred Music Education

To conclude, I would like to offer a few suggestions for teachers and pastors seeking to amplify the musical and liturgical life of their Catholic school. First, singing the Mass is different from singing *at* Mass. Learn to sing the simple dialogues found in the Roman Missal. These humble melodies can be taught to the youngest of children, who learn by example. The sung dialogues elevate the Mass out of the realm of the ordinary and mundane. In them we speak in a hieratic way that we call “cantillation,” which establishes the tone for the rest of the Mass. The rich scriptural texts found in the propers of the Mass (for instance, the entrance and communion antiphons) are available in many settings, with easily singable yet fitting melodies suited to the dignity of the liturgy. Today, there is a plethora of accessible audio and visual examples and practice tracks online to help anyone learn this music. Theologically rich hymnody and choral works for all ages can supplement the simple, dignified melodies of the Church’s musical treasury.

Additionally, the classroom music teacher and choir director benefits from a solid liturgical formation. While a principal or pastor may think this type of music teacher sounds like a unicorn, opportunities for further formation are available through the efforts of many universities, seminaries, music associations, and schools of Gregorian chant.

Finally, choose great music. Students are starving for real food. Teach the great Marian antiphons. Learn high quality hymns. Listen to examples of well-trained choirs. The music teacher is a guide on this journey. The repertoire chosen both for Mass and for the classroom or choral festival should edify and build up the young person in their life of faith.

Learning to Listen for Life

Music in the Catholic school holds an essential place in the liturgy and in the formation of our youth. Through sacred music, students learn to open their hearts to the encounter with God’s Word so that they may hear it and be formed in his image. Whether a school is small or large, in a rural place or a major metropolitan area, even simple, beautiful melodies can form the hearts and minds of

children from the very youngest age. Every child can and should experience the offering of music “to God who brings joy to my youth” (Ps 43:4).

St. Basil the Great fittingly deserves the last word on this matter. In his homily on Psalm 1, he commends music’s power in the formation of the soul, especially the soul of the young person. He writes,

When, indeed, the Holy Spirit saw that the human race was guided only with difficulty toward virtue, and that because of our inclination toward pleasure, we were neglectful of an upright life, what did He do? The delight of melody He mingled with the doctrines so that by the pleasantness and softness of the sound heard we might receive without perceiving the benefit of the words, just as wise physicians who, when giving the fastidious rather bitter drugs to drink, frequently smear the cup with honey. Therefore, He devised for us these harmonious melodies of the psalms, that they who are children in age or, even those who are youthful in disposition might to all appearances chant but, in reality, *become trained in soul.*⁹

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⁹ St. Basil the Great, Homily on Psalm 1, in Exegetic Homilies, trans. Agnes Clare Way, *Fathers of the Church* 46 (Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 152 (emphasis added).