Paul Collins (ed.)

RENEWAL AND RESISTANCE

Catholic Church Music from the 1850s to Vatican II

FOREWORD BY THOMAS DAY

Peter Lang

THOMAS DAY

Foreword

All of the information on the following pages could be read as a collection of facts – various ideas, ecclesiastical decrees, people, attitudes, controversies, and events – pertaining to the Roman Catholic Church's efforts, during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, to cultivate a more appropriate liturgical music for its Latin Rite. Looking at those facts from the distance of time, however, there is also a temptation – a very alluring one – to see in that information a pattern that keeps repeating across the centuries, and the pattern is this: a continuing cycle of *action* followed by *reaction*. To put it another way: (1) a type of liturgical music becomes widely accepted; (2) there is a reaction to the perceived inadequacies in this music, which is then altered or replaced by an improvement. (Sometimes the improvement is supposed to be a return to an original purity that once existed.) The improvement, after first encountering resistance, becomes widely accepted, and eventually there is a reaction to its perceived inadequacies – and on the cycle goes.

It is true that sometimes human beings can easily deceive themselves by imagining all kinds of patterns and grand historical frameworks where there is only one event after another. But this book is about music, an art, and in the history of the arts in the West there is, indeed, a recurring pattern that has continued for more than a thousand years: 'the new' in Western art and music pushes aside 'the old', usually in the name of improvement. When 'the new' becomes old, the pattern is repeated. Compared to the arts in some other cultures, these shifts from old to new have been rather rapid. The art historian looking at ancient Egyptian and Chinese art over the centuries perhaps sees stylistic changes, but they are assimilated within a slow-moving continuity. The art historian looking at Western arts since the Middle Ages perhaps sees continuity and assimilation, but also a series of distinctive

stylistic shifts. Romanesque, Gothic (in various varieties), Renaissance, Mannerist, Baroque, Rococo, Neo-Classical, Romantic, Gothic Revival, Victorian, a large assortment of styles labelled 'Modern', and so forth, all started as improvements that contradicted an existing style and which were later eclipsed by improvements. It is an oddity of history that over the centuries, the Catholic Church in the West – which has always emphasized its unchanging character – went along with fashion and changed the art and architecture of its churches to fit into this pattern of improved styles replacing old styles, at least until the Modern style first arrived.

The history of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris provides a good visual example of the Catholic Church adapting to new styles. The original building, a Romanesque structure, was torn down to make way for architecture in the modern and daring Gothic style. Even before this building was finished, the architects modernized it further by adding features from newer versions of the Gothic style that were coming into fashion. Then Gothic went out of fashion and, as far as knowledgeable people were concerned, the cathedral was an embarrassment, a monstrosity put up by medieval barbarians (the Goths) who were ignorant of ancient Greek and Roman art. Tearing down the building and constructing something new was too expensive, so over the years, the old building was improved here and there. Stained glass windows were smashed and replaced by plain glass that let in more light. Decorations and furnishing in a Gothic style were also thrown out. Very large paintings were hung in the nave in order to edify the faithful but also to hide the barbaric-looking Gothic arches. For Napoleon's coronation in 1804 (as we know from Jacques-Louis David's painting of it) a kind of Neo-Classical theatre set was constructed inside the building; this interior facade in the modern style hid the building's Gothic features. Then, in the following decades, people once again began to see great beauty in the old Gothic cathedrals, and the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814–79) did his best to improve Notre Dame by restoring it to something close to its original glory.

Chant, like Notre Dame, had its own history of being battered by successive attempts to improve it. We can trace this pattern of improvements back to the eighth century when Pepin the Short and his son Charlemagne tried to abolish local liturgical rites and replace them with the rituals and

chants used in Rome. The complications of this story do not have to be recounted here. We should just note that these rulers justified their efforts as improvements: a replacement of the local chant with music that seemed to have the prestige of history behind it and the authority of the papacy. (The symbolism of an entire kingdom and, later, an empire united by the same liturgical music was another incentive for enforcing the change to the Roman chant.) The result of this encounter between Frankish and Roman traditions of liturgical music was Gregorian chant, and during the rest of the Middle Ages the reaction to this music (and perhaps its perceived inadequacies) was a series of improvements that could only be described as exuberant:

- Tropes (new words) were added to the chants. A liturgical drama could even be inserted into a liturgy for special occasions
- The old-fashioned melismatic Alleluia could be replaced with new sequences
- Music notation for chant began to replace an oral tradition
- Polyphony took the old chant melodies and simultaneously blended them with new melodies

All of these innovations first developed in the lands that were originally part of Charlemagne's empire (where the Gregorian tradition of chant first developed) and all of them are signs of a restless energy for improvement that continued across the centuries and still continues today. It could be argued that these well-meaning improvements contributed to the decline and disfigurement of Gregorian chant. When we listen to the slow pounding of the *Dies Irae* quoted in the last movement of the *Symphonie Fantastique* by Berlioz (the way he heard that music sung in his lifetime), we get some idea of how centuries of trying to improve chant nearly destroyed it.

Action and reaction: the chapters in this book, either directly or indirectly, pick up this recurring pattern at the point in history where Roman Catholicism reacted to the Enlightenment – and if that phenomenon in European history was about anything, it was improvement.

The typical college or university lecturer who has to provide a quick description of the Enlightenment usually begins with the reaction in Europe

to years of unrest and hideous warfare in the name of religion. The lecturer then explains that many Europeans, turning away from the authority of religion and received traditions, looked instead to the power of reason as their guide. At some point in this lecture, students will hastily scribble something like the following oversimplification in their notebooks (or type it into their laptops): 'The writings of enlightened thinkers like Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, Hume, and Kant will lead directly to freedom, democracy, religious tolerance, progress, technology, science, and everything good in the modern world.'

To enliven the class the lecturer might show a well-known visual representation of what the Enlightenment was trying to achieve: the frontispiece of the great French *Encyclopédie* (published mainly between 1751 and 1780). In this engraving, Truth, depicted as a beautiful woman, is radiant with light; next to her, Reason and Philosophy remove the veil from Truth's face; below them – in gloom and darkness – are faces of people looking upward at this luminous apparition. The allegory's message is clear: the intellect and reason will free the human race from ignorance and lead the way to greatness. There was also an implied message that many people at the time must have seen in this picture: down there in the deepest gloom of perpetual ignorance was the Catholic Church; for the sake of improvement and progress, it had to be either forced into subservience to the state or eradicated.

An entire lecture – perhaps an entire course – could be devoted just to the determined efforts of enlightened rulers in Catholic countries to weaken the Catholic Church. For the purposes of this book, what concerns us here is one aspect of this campaign against Roman Catholicism: the utter disdain for the contemplative life. The thinking behind the scorn went something like this: people in monasteries and cloistered convents did not do anything useful for society; they just wasted nearly all of their time every day on prayers and liturgy, which were sung, such behaviour being both preposterous and an impediment to progress.

Here is a small sample of how governments dealt with the perceived uselessness of the contemplative life. Between 1700 and 1768, the French monarchy closed 122 Benedictine houses. By 1792 the new revolutionary government had abolished all of the remaining Benedictine monasteries

in France, and when its troops conquered other countries, the government abolished monasteries there as well. In the name of enlightenment, the enormous monastery at Cluny was not only confiscated; most of it was also demolished and the rubble put up for sale. The Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II (1741–90) had no patience with the kind of holy life practiced by the contemplative orders; as part of his efforts to make the Catholic Church an efficient state agency under Hapsburg rule, he closed down 876 monasteries and convents.

Thomas Jefferson gives us a helpful insight about what was going on here. In a letter to Roger C. Weightman dated 24 June 1826, Jefferson described his hopes for the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Fifty years earlier, he had written the first draft of that statement about freedom and in this letter he predicted that the Declaration would eventually be 'the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves [...]' Note the way the word 'monkish' connects with 'ignorance and superstition' to form a coherent unit. Note the association with 'chains'. Anything 'monkish' was abhorrent to Jefferson, and that certainly must have included music or ritual that was reminiscent of a monastery.

Long before Jefferson was even born, the Catholic Church was dealing with critics who were attacking it for monkish backwardness. One way of responding was a tactic from the Counter-Reformation: the use of modern art to show that the church was a vibrant, forward-looking institution in the modern world. A famous example is the interior decoration of St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Using the language of contemporary art, this riot of baroque ornamentation energetically announced that the church had not just emerged from the challenge of Protestantism, it had triumphed. In the eighteenth century, Austrian and German Catholics (including monks) showed they were not afraid of modernity by building churches in the fashionable Rococo style.[1] The music of Mozart's Masses for Salzburg's cathedral, Haydn's Masses, and even Beethoven's *Mass in C*, communicated

1 I recall visiting one church whose interior was a delightful Rococo confection. Then I looked more closely and noticed traces of Gothic arches. It was really a medieval

in the language of a modern musical style that seems to proclaim faith in a God who is cheerful, benevolent, and un-monkish – the Enlightenment's idea of a perfectly acceptable sort of deity. (The aristocrats who commissioned such music wanted that.)

A general reaction to the cold certainties of the Enlightenment was well under way towards the end of the eighteenth century. We can see this in the *Sturm und Drang* movement in German literature during the late 1760s and into the early 1780s and then later, with a much more international scope and lasting impact, in Romanticism. The Romantics surrendered themselves to powerful emotions, feelings, and spiritual yearnings; to solitude; to the pagan power of nature; to the local folk culture. They wanted music that would help them to immerse themselves in that surrender. They also found much to admire in the Middle Ages – sometimes idealized as an era of chivalry and noble deeds from the pages of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), sometimes dramatized as the source of the 'Gothic', where mystery lurks in the darkness beneath every pointed arch.

The Catholic Church, consistent with its behaviour over the centuries, took what it found useful in modern art influenced by Romanticism. An example of this was the building of new churches in the old Romanesque and Gothic styles. This new-old architecture appealed to modern tastes and at the same time showed the world that, contrary to what was said during the Enlightenment, the church's cultural accomplishments in the Middle Ages were impressive. Architecture was easy enough, but adapting the music of Romanticism to the liturgical needs of the church was another matter. The musical language of Romanticism frequently demanded the attention of the listener with its overstretched emotions. That grand theatrical gesturing in so much Romantic music (even instrumental music) can be thrilling in the opera house and the concert hall, but could that musical style fit into the liturgical objectivity of the Roman Rite?

A large portion of *Renewal and Resistance* is about the answer to that question, or to put it another way, about the Catholic Church's reaction to liturgical music in a style influenced by Romanticism. For many Catholics

---

building that had been modernized during the eighteenth century by covering the interior with thick layers of, as it were, whipped-cream and cake-icing decorations.

of the Latin Rite, that reaction was favourable, even enthusiastic; they saw nothing wrong with beautiful modern music that was also uplifting. Songs by Rossini and Mercadante, and elaborate Masses by Gounod, Franck, Cherubini and others sounded 'normal' – contemporary music that people could 'understand'. It was also art that met the highest standards of excellence and for that reason, was appropriate as liturgical music. At the same time, however, such music was too difficult for the great majority of choirs, so an assortment of minor composers (extremely minor) produced abundant quantities of easier liturgical compositions that approximated Romantic grandeur. It did not matter if this music mangled the Latin text or reminded the faithful of opera and operetta. According to a way of thinking that had prevailed perhaps since the seventeenth century, liturgical music only provided a background enhancement; the priest, by reciting the required words, took care of the complete liturgical text by himself.

By the middle of the nineteenth century a reaction against Romantic music in church emerged in the Cecilian movement. The Cecilians, mostly Catholics who spoke German, thought of themselves as reformers who were going to lead the faithful away from error (liturgical music that merely entertained during Mass) and back to truth (liturgical music that was an integral part of worship and prayer). They found their source of pure liturgical music, untouched by worldly associations, in the late sixteenth-century music of Palestrina and other composers of the Roman school.[2] They also extolled the virtues of Gregorian chant.

The efforts of these Cecilian reformers have been criticized: for disfiguring Renaissance music and chant with interpretative nuances that were more appropriate for nineteenth-century Romantic music; for using a faulty edition of chant published in Regensburg; and for devoting so much of their energies to mediocre neo-Renaissance music by contemporary composers. With all that said, the Cecilians were nevertheless right about so many things, including two somewhat radical propositions for the nineteenth century: (1) a wonderful unity between liturgical music

2 More information about this glorification of Palestrina can be found in James Garratt's excellent *Palestrina and the German Romantic Imagination: Interpreting Historicism in Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

and liturgy had existed in the past and it needed to be brought back to the modern world; (2) modern congregations were quite capable of liking liturgical music from the past, and even intensely identified with it as an extension of their own inner prayer.

Restoration – bringing back music of the past – had a central place in the Cecilian movement's agenda. Restoration – returning to correct and wholesome practices after years of disorder and confusion – is a constantly recurring theme in *Renewal and Resistance*. Replacing the bad (or at least the misguided) with the good from the past might look like a simple proposition, but it is not so simple. Sometimes it can set off another reaction, an especially destructive one if the restoring process is handled badly. An explanation of that statement requires a lengthy digression.

After Napoleon was exiled to St Helena, the Catholic Church in Europe began what could be called a restoration campaign. There was much to be restored. Monks and nuns moved back into empty monasteries and convents that had been taken from them and they restored the contemplative communities that had once existed in those places. The Jesuits were restored as a religious order. The First Vatican Council restored, reaffirmed, and strengthened the primacy of the pope. Leo XIII promoted a restoration of scholastic philosophy, with an emphasis on St Thomas Aquinas. The papacy recovered territory it had lost to the French.[3] These territories were lost again, this time to the new Kingdom of Italy. The popes never did regain control of the Papal States, but in 1929 a financial settlement and sovereignty over the Vatican and some other properties amounted to a reasonable form of restoration.

Very soon after becoming pope in 1903, Pius X proclaimed the following in the fourth paragraph of his first encyclical, *E Supremi*, promulgated on 4 October: 'We have no other programme in the Supreme Pontificate but that "of restoring all things in Christ" (Ephesians 1:10), so that "Christ may be all and in all" (Colossians 3:2).'[4] He followed that statement with

3 In 1809 the Vatican's archives, on the Emperor Napoleon's orders, were confiscated and sent to Paris. The archives were returned after Napoleon's exile, but some items disappeared in transit.

4 See <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_04101903_e-supremi_en.html>, accessed 26 June 2009. 'On the Restoration of

his *motu proprio* on liturgical music, *Tra le sollecitudini* (22 November 1903), which is essentially about restorations: bringing back the traditional wisdom that liturgical music functioned as a part of a liturgy rather than as a decorative parallel to it; bringing back a restored version of Gregorian chant; and encouraging the use of old polyphony.[5] This would be followed by what amounted to the pope's official recognition of the scholarly work done at Solesmes Abbey on the restoration of Gregorian chant to something closer to its original sound. Later, Pius X would launch a project to publish an improved edition of the Vulgate (Latin) Bible, the church's official Bible – an immense scholarly undertaking that was really about restoring this text of this Bible to its original Latin form. A reorganization of canon law, the Vatican bureaucracy, and the Vatican's official journal for publishing its decrees (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*) – projects he initiated – could all be described as efforts to restore order where there had once been insufficient order.

The campaign of Pius X to restore was not motivated just by a determination to tidy up disorder or to improve liturgical music; rather, as *E Supremi* makes clear, the new pope was reacting to a modern world that horrified him: 'We were terrified beyond all else by the disastrous state of human society today. For who can fail to see that society is at the present time, more than in any past age, suffering from a terrible and deep[-]rooted malady which, developing every day and eating into its inmost being, is dragging it to destruction?' This disease was the 'apostasy from God' that leads to ruin. 'We must hasten to find a remedy for this great evil, considering as

---

All Things in Christ' is in the title of this encyclical, and some version of the word 'restore' ('restored', 'restoration' or 'restoring') occurs ten times in the document, including the title.

5 At the conclave that elected him pope in 1903, Giuseppe Sarto, the future Pius X, wept when it looked certain that the cardinals were going to choose him. He begged them to find someone else. Perhaps one reason he wept was because he knew that, like two of his predecessors (and two of his successors), he would be the Prisoner of the Vatican – trapped inside the walls of the Vatican because of feuding with the Italian Government. Perhaps he also wept because he knew that once inside the Vatican, he would have to endure appallingly bad liturgical singing. (For an example of the Sistine Chapel's singing in 1902 and 1904 and also a castrato voice, consult *Alessandro Moreschi: The Complete Recordings* (Opal CD 9823, 1987)).

addressed to Us that Divine command: "Lo, I have set thee this day over the nations and over kingdoms, to root up, and to pull down, and to waste, and to destroy, and to build, and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:10)'.[6]

What could be called the pope's agenda for liturgical music – *Tra le sollecitudini* and the publication of a restored Gregorian chant – produced reactions that went in two main directions. One direction was a series of restorations that produced good results. Monks, nuns, and seminarians majestically sang Gregorian chant in the restored Solesmes version, while visitors who heard them were deeply impressed not just by the art and beauty of this old music but also by the deep piety that this music could express. The sound of chant and a few items of Renaissance polyphony inspired Catholics at congresses and conferences and in some parishes and cathedrals. Catholics who spoke German, Polish, and various other European languages maintained their vigorous tradition of singing vernacular songs during the Low Mass and took that same vigour into their choral singing for the High Mass in Latin. Above all, the sung liturgical texts were once again restored to their place as essential parts of a liturgy rather than background decorations.

Then there were the countless churches and chapels that went in another direction – but what word could describe it? Perhaps 'anger'. There was good reason for the anger, considering what was going on in many choir lofts, mostly in Italy and English-speaking countries: the singing of operatic favourites, like the sextet from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and the quartet from Verdi's *Rigoletto*, refitted with Latin words; the neglect of chant; the sacred music in a flimsy contemporary style that imitated opera and operetta, and so forth.[7] The result of all this anger was timid choral

6 As n.4, paragraph 3.

7 In 1922 the Society of St Gregory of America published *The Black List: Disapproved Music*, a list of works that were 'not in accordance with the MOTU PROPRIO' and 'clearly antagonistic to the principles enunciated in the document issued by Pope Pius X' (see <http://www.musicasacra.com/pdf/blacklist.pdf>, accessed 26 June 2009). The publication lists some masterpieces by Mozart, Rossini, Schubert, and other famous composers, but mostly contains forgettable atrocities by contemporary composers. The St Gregory Society, which made valiant efforts to improve

music that suggested fear and trembling. All 'unliturgical' music may have been expelled from the church, but so had anything that symbolized the devotion and best efforts of a community. To be fair, many choirs were just too intimidated by the challenge of singing the music of the Latin High Mass according to the uncompromising liturgical standards.

In the nineteenth century there were all kinds of efforts to restore sacred music to a golden age that had once existed. In the middle of the twentieth century, especially after the Second Vatican Council, there was a reaction to this restoration: a yearning to restore liturgical music to an even older golden age, when congregations (not choirs) filled the churches with their singing of psalms, antiphons, responses, litanies, and so forth. Once again, this was a reaction that went in two directions: (1) congregations welcomed the opportunities to participate and liturgical rigidities were relaxed; (2) not just anger but fury. That righteous indignation of some liturgists! Those denunciations of old sacred music! Those demands of contemporary composers that all previous liturgical music be swept away (and replaced with theirs)! In the name of participation, everything in church music would have to change. The old regimentation of the past (for example, priests, seminarians, nuns, and novices chanting their way through Vespers and Compline, with the precision of soldiers in a marching drill) would now be replaced with the new regimentation – congregations force-marched through four hymns at every Mass.

The next reaction has already begun. Pray that it will not be angry.

Renewal and Resistance contains selected scenes and episodes from this unending story of imperfect human beings trying to express in their music the perfection of God. The task is impossible and endless, but must be done.

---

the liturgical music of Catholics in the United States, also published a *White List*, containing 'approved and recommended' music (see <http://www.musicasacra.com/pdf/whitelist1947.pdf>, accessed 26 June 2009). While chant and polyphony of the late Renaissance feature in the *White List*, the St Gregory Society, like the Cecilians of the nineteenth century, mostly endorsed easier sacred music that was by approved contemporary composers.