

## **Performing Sacred Music Today: Context and Culture**

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Some years ago, I was lucky enough to be able to view the full collection of Russian and Greek icons held by the National Gallery of Ireland. The collection is very seldom on show in its entirety, although there are usually one or two examples on display. I recall being struck by the contrast between these luminous, transfigured spiritual portraits, generally kept hidden away, and the confident bravura of the “secular” portraiture readily to be seen elsewhere in the gallery. I was also struck by the idea that their transcendent qualities would be even more meaningfully perceived were the icons to be found in the religious buildings originally intended to house them, and fulfilling their role within liturgy. If viewed merely as works of art, it seemed to me they could not be fully understood, for their purpose was transcendent, not just to be representations of holy personages but to partake of that holiness, offering to the beholder a mystical connection with the divine. Regardless of belief, experience of an Orthodox icon must surely be enhanced when that icon is encountered in its original environment.

Not long after my encounter with the National Gallery icons, I attended a concert in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, in which an excellent visiting chamber choir performed a Tudor anthem that the Cathedral’s resident choir had, merely a couple of hours before, sung during the office of evensong. The respective choirs were quite similar in character and the two performances on a par in terms of musical quality, but of course so much else was different: the earlier performance took place before a small congregation, the latter a large paying audience; the evensong congregants (or at least most of them) probably had not come especially to hear the

choir or the particular music scheduled, whilst the concert's audience members had come for that express purpose; the service performance took place within the intimacy of the quire, the concert in the more spacious public arena of the nave; for the service the singers were dressed in a habit of ancient origin, for the concert semi-formal modern apparel; and while the congregation at the service was expected to stand, sit and kneel at the appropriate moments as well as join in singing and speaking at certain times, the audience at the concert was of course not encouraged so to do.

The most intriguing part for me of that evening's musical coincidence was thinking about the role of context in determining the experience of the listener. Albert Blackwell's assertion that 'sacred music defined by its liturgical purpose increases in holiness to the degree that it is intimately linked with liturgical action' (Blackwell 1999, 15) raises pertinent questions. Could an anthem written for performance within an act of worship exist outside of that act and still retain its "holiness"? Is an awareness of theological intent essential for the proper appreciation of such a piece? Indeed, was there originally any theological intent at all? How important was the composer's religious belief, or lack thereof? What about historical background, and the ever-present influence of church history and politics? For those of us involved in presenting the great sacred works of the Renaissance and Baroque periods in concert, these are fascinating questions, especially as the tension between sacred and secular becomes ever more complex in our world, and religious musical expression more polarised between what one might broadly characterise as the classical tradition, and the modern inclusive and charismatic movements (which are not always the same thing).

### **Sacred Composition and Liturgical Context**

Composers of contemporary art music rarely work in a liturgical milieu. The Scottish James MacMillan (one of the few who does so) has commented that 'embracing spirituality is now one

of the most radical and countercultural moves a musician can make' (Arnold 2014, 12). But centuries ago, religiosity was not countercultural but commonplace amongst composers, and not just because belief and churchgoing were universal. Most composers, until the eighteenth century and the rise of the concert hall, were employed directly by the church, or by wealthy patrons with private chapels, to compose and perform music for liturgical use. They were skilled in negotiating many extra-musical constraints, from writing in the vernacular to a new set of rules (as the Reformation composers had to do), to composing elaborate polyphony based on prescribed plainsong or a cantata based on the chorale of the day, or perhaps tailoring the length of a piece of music to fit a ritual action or procession. Whatever the manner of their own belief, they were fully engaged in the liturgical environment, and the tension between ritual requirement and musical inspiration was generally a creative one. Furthermore, they had to understand biblical and liturgical texts in order to give them musical expression. Of course, composers of any age setting a text must respond to the challenge of expressing its meaning. Those writing sacred music in the Renaissance and Baroque periods did so in a manner that not only expressed an obvious meaning, but delved beneath to an inner truth, perhaps a metaphysical insight, or a particular theology or doctrine.

Thomas Tallis's *Loquebantur variis linguis* is a splendid seven-part motet demonstrating many of the points just made. The plainsong Matins responsory around which Tallis constructs his motet is one of those set for Whitsunday, or Pentecost, and speaks of the events of that first Pentecost, fifty days after Christ's resurrection, when the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in many tongues of the wonders of God. Tallis follows the strict framework of the responsory, an ABCB form, and embeds the plainsong melody amidst the polyphony in long notes in the tenor part, as well as leaving it unadorned, perhaps to be sung by

a single voice, in section C and in the closing *Gloria Patri*. The plainsong also provides the material for the various motifs and points of imitation throughout the polyphonic sections. As a purely sonic experience this motet is thrilling: sonorous yet energetic. One cannot fail to be entranced by the dancing counterpoint and the daring and joyous dissonances. But appreciation is considerably heightened if one considers the text it sets, the feast for which it was written and the original event which it recalls. The counterpoint becomes a colourful symbol of the apostles' speaking in tongues, each exuberant line dancing around the *cantus firmus* as if explicating its truth in a mosaic of language. It is further heightened by awareness of the liturgical context, in particular the original plainsong respond and its place within the office of Matins. The tension between ritual requirement and musical inspiration is here at its most creative, and the impact of this setting in the context of the monodic morning office in the Chapel Royal must have been electrifying. And perhaps it is not too fanciful to think that Tallis is responding to the latest political upheaval and the restoration of the Roman Catholic rites under Queen Mary with particular enthusiasm. Indeed in the four short and turbulent years of Mary's reign, Tallis produced some of his most startling and ambitious works.

The listener in a concert performance of this respond can of course know this "backstory", and engage with the work all the more, but its "holiness" (to use Blackwell's term), out of its liturgical context, is a much harder thing to grasp. Within an act of worship it not only provides a powerful musical metaphor for the Pentecost event, but energises the believer's response to that event. The music not only describes the actions of the divine, but becomes its agency: the music intoxicates us just as the Spirit-filled apostles were intoxicated. The music is thus functioning in the manner of the icons mentioned earlier; in art historian Elizabeth Langmuir's words, it 'partakes of some of the qualities of the original it represents, so that the

devout Christian venerates the original through its representation' (Brown and Loades 1995, 163). This functional iconic aspect is an integral part of what Tallis wrote, a *sine qua non* that we in our time analyse and describe thus, but in Tallis's time was an unconscious act when composing for the liturgy. The work only comes fully to life when it is performing this function within a service—and not just for the believer. Encountering a work of art performing its intended function allows appreciation of all its dimensions, regardless of personal faith. Non-musical examples serve to make the point: a liturgical item in a museum (for example a Botticini tabernacle, a Fra Angelico altarpiece, the Ardagh Chalice in Ireland's National Museum), a cathedral no longer used for services (for example the great medieval churches of the Netherlands, such as Amsterdam's Nieuwe Kerk): each of these may inspire awe in the beholder and admiration of the skill and craft that created it, but the experience will be two-dimensional, missing the essential functionality which shaped that creation so profoundly. Encountered in their original context, as elements enabling and enhancing ritual, or indeed the physical environment which houses and shapes that ritual, the third dimension comes alive for us. We experience more vividly the tension between form and function, and wonder at the alchemy whereby that tension becomes the crucible for creativity.

Of course, concert performances of sacred music are here to stay (although I would at this point make a plea to experience such music wherever possible in liturgical setting). So how can such performances better lead the listener to as full an experience as possible of the music? Cultural context is an important factor. One does not need to know the context of a Beethoven symphony's conception and initial performance in order to appreciate and enjoy the genius of the work when hearing it in a modern concert hall. The same could be said for the great sacred works of the Renaissance and Baroque eras: it is perfectly possible to enjoy a William Byrd mass

in a concert setting simply because it is a wonderful piece of music. However there is a difference: generally the circumstances surrounding a modern concert hall performance of a Beethoven symphony are not that dissimilar to those of its first performance, whilst the same could not be said of a Byrd mass, written to be sung in the context of a service conducted in a domestic space. The Beethoven symphony was always a public work of art, to be heard by those attending for that express purpose; the Byrd mass was a private, functional piece of music, the servant of the liturgy for which it was written. To fully appreciate the carefully balanced expressivity woven into the counterpoint, one needs to be aware not just of its liturgical origins, but of the emotional intensity of its genesis, written in for a small hidden community worshipping in secret, fearful of religious persecution and yearning for the lost faith (as they perceived it) of the nation. In the way one programmes and introduces it, it is possible to create a “backstory” to the mass that provides information and increases the audience’s appreciation. This is not just a matter of well-informed programme notes, but of imaginative placing with other works that either contrast or complement the character of the mass. The manner of performance is also vital to the audience’s full appreciation of the mass—ideally by a small choir and in a formation that allows some kind of close relationship with the audience. It is not music to be heard ethereally, in a great resonant space, but to be experienced viscerally, close at hand.

### **The “*A Cappella*” Choir**

The type of singers used and the disposition of the choir are important considerations in presenting this music with the necessary vocal colour to give full rein to its expressive qualities. The modern soprano-alto-tenor-bass choir with its standardised disposition is a relatively recent invention in this regard. The singers of the Renaissance and Baroque were probably in many respects quite different to those of modern choirs. Of course they were invariably male. However

the real difference does not lie in the gender of those singing the top line(s), but rather of those singing what we now call the alto parts, and the type of production used. If a modern choir tackles complex English renaissance polyphony, female altos or male falsettists will often struggle to manage adequate tone on the low (and often divided) “alto” parts. In the concerted music of the French Baroque, the difficulties will lie in the high tenor (*haute-contre*) parts which one finds instead of alto parts—too high for most tenors and too low for most altos. In the absence of countertenors, or even better, *hautes-contre*, solutions to managing such parts may involve part-swapping, doubling, and in some cases transposition to more comfortable keys with reallocation of parts. The crucial consideration here is the texture that results from all parts (apart from the basses) singing high in their range. Features of this texture are the colour and expressivity possible on intricate inner parts, and the wealth of upper partials present, enabling the singers to sing more easily with good intonation. When voices in the middle of the texture are singing very low in their range, this texture inevitably changes, with some loss of expressive range and naturally tight tuning.

Many today might consider that the sound of an unaccompanied choir singing Renaissance polyphony in a resonant building is the ideal “sacred” sound that perhaps brings us closest to the experience of the time. However the ubiquitous *a cappella* model of today is, like the SATB choir, a relatively recent invention. Unaccompanied singing during the Renaissance was relatively rare, merely one of the many performing options available to musicians at the time. Much of the early repertoire that is still considered *a cappella* (a much-misused term) would most likely have had instrumental doubling of the vocal lines. In the establishments where most of the great composers of sacred music worked and particularly in the court chapels of Europe, an ensemble of musicians was retained, including not just singers and organists but often

other instrumentalists too, depending on the wealth of the establishment. Our modern notion of choir and instrumentalists forming two distinct ensembles did not exist: players and singers were usually regarded as one entity, with the musical material often shared out equally, interchangeably and unspecifically between them.

If a modern performance can avail of instrumental resource, then a wealth of possibilities opens up in repertoire hitherto considered to be part of the *a cappella* tradition. This resource can be of any size, the principle being that instruments and voices are equal and that a mere single vocal line can be replaced with an instrument. The crucial considerations are balance and tone quality, and the use of instruments of suitable timbre, whether bowed, blown, plucked or played with a keyboard. By careful grouping of instrumental choirs, choices regarding doubling or replacing of vocal lines, deployment of different continuo teams, and so on, it is possible to bring the texts into sharper focus: the music can be “orchestrated” to provide a context in which the meaning is made clearer, or a deeper significance illuminated.

### **Voices and Instruments in Music by Lassus**

The music of Orlandus Lassus (1532–94) provides a prime example of vocal-instrumental collaborative possibilities, with pieces from a recent Resurgam project fresh in the mind.<sup>1</sup> The music at the court in Munich, where Lassus worked for most of his life, flourished under the generous endowment of Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria, with a full complement of instrumentalists and singers. The late motet *In hora ultima* speaks of how, at the last hour, all things shall perish: trumpets, pipes, lyre, jesting, laughter, dancing, song, and descant. The use of the actual instruments mentioned in the text might seem a rather obvious thing to do, but the musical

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<sup>1</sup> Resurgam is a professional choral ensemble based in Ireland, founded and directed by the author. In 2015, the choir presented a concert series entitled ‘The Divine Orlando: an Orlando di Lasso retrospective’, using voices and instruments in the manner discussed.



writing seems to suggest the use of wind and strings in certain passages, with appropriate assignment of figurations and motivic devices. But more than that, an “orchestration” of the motet illuminates not just the meaning of the text in this obvious sense, but heightens the contrast between the figurative *concertato* elements and sonorous *stile antico* passages, with each taking on an added significance: one suggesting things earthly and the other things eternal. The instruments provide the added dimension that brings this duality into sharper focus.

The remarkably original *Cum essem parvulus* of 1582 sets a well-known passage from St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: ‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, [...] now I am a man, I have put the ways of childhood behind me’. Lassus accentuates this dialogue between the child and the adult with two high voices alternating with four lower voices, and these two characters—the young and the mature self—can be portrayed vividly with instrumental doubling of the voices, and the use of different timbres for each “choir” accordingly. Another similarly scored work, *In Deo salutare meum*, from the notable *Patrocinium musices* publication of 1573, appears at first glance to be a six-part motet with the polyphonic writing distributed more or less evenly between the voices and the musical material shared equally. But the duet at the opening between the two soprano parts is a clue to a more nuanced reading of this piece. If these two parts are assigned to voices and the four lower parts to instruments, then the text (‘In God is my salvation and my glory’, from Psalm 62) takes on a more personal and compelling character, with of course a strongly feminine dynamic. Such a scoring illuminates the text’s foreshadowing of the New Testament canticle *Magnificat*. The motet can thus be experienced as a kind of typology, linking a New Testament event—Mary’s outburst of praise at her cousin Elizabeth’s news—with an Old Testament text.

The use of instruments in these extraordinary works brings a dimension to concert performance that not only gives an aural taste of the sound world of the era in question, but which can also direct us to the deeper meaning lying beneath the surface and illuminate the profound and productive relationship that existed between music and theology at the time. Thus the original context is made more alive to us, despite the lack of a liturgical situation.

### **Sacred Music and the Performance Environment**

The nature of the physical performing environment is relevant in designing the concert presentation of religious music from previous centuries. Contrary to what many might think, a significant proportion of religious music was not written for the disembodied, cavernous spaces of large churches with their generous reverberations, but for quite intimate settings: court chapels, cathedral chancels and quires enclosed by screens, and small and even hidden domestic spaces in the case of English recusant communities following the Reformation. Examples of such places and the composers who worked in them might include the English Chapels Royal (Byrd and Tallis), the court chapels of Munich and Dresden (Lassus and Heinrich Schütz respectively), the Papal Chapel and the Cappella Giulia in Rome (Palestrina), the tiny conventual chapel of the Monastery of Las Descalzas Reales in Madrid (Tomás Luis de Victoria), and Ingatestone Hall in England, home of the recusant Petre family and where Byrd lived towards the end of his life. It is probable that Byrd wrote his three great mass settings and also the *Gradualia* motets for domestic performance there. In such places there would have been an immediacy to the worship, in which the congregation would have had a close spatial relationship with the musicians. This is an experience that can still be had, in the Anglican tradition, in the college chapels of Oxford and Cambridge, and in many cathedrals where the congregation at evensong sits up in the quire around the singing choir. When the music written for such environments is transferred to a

concert situation, the relationship becomes different. The performers face the listeners, perhaps at some distance and in a greater formality, rather than being placed in their midst. From the performer's point of view the music is directed towards the audience, whereas in the original liturgical environment it is "directed at God", insofar as the music is an offering of prayer and praise by all present (regardless of whether they are active participants in the singing).

In my own performance context of Ireland, there are a surprising number of venues that allow for such an experience, either through flexibility of the performing space or conversely the retention of original fittings and furnishings. We are fortunate that in many Georgian churches the interiors never received a later Tractarian makeover (due in equal part perhaps to lack of funds and theological outlook). Examples that come to mind are Dublin's St Werburgh's Church, the Chapel of Trinity College, and one of my personal favourites, the little Anglican church in Collon, Co Louth (a perfectly preserved Tudor-Gothick interior with collegiate seating). Others include the great rotunda of Dublin's City Hall, the Chapel Royal of Dublin Castle, and around the country the many ancient cathedrals that can be found in isolated and sometimes dilapidated glory, examples being the cathedrals of Lismore, Down, Killala and Kilfenora. In these types of spaces the relationship between performers and listeners can be intimate whilst the overall setting remains one of splendour and the atmosphere suitably religious. The acoustics tend to be clear rather than resonant, and whilst the seating is not always the most comfortable, the experience of hearing sacred music in these settings may be closer to that of previous centuries than that afforded by more opulent and user-friendly venues.

In Galway in 2012, Resurgam performed J. S. Bach's *St Matthew Passion* on Good Friday in the city's ancient Collegiate Church of St Nicholas. There was to have been a large stage erected at the west end of the nave for the occasion, but at the last minute, for various

reasons, this was not possible. Literally on the day of the performance, we decided to place ourselves in the middle of the nave facing sideways, with the two choral groupings (within which were the aria soloists) on each side of rather than behind the orchestra. The *ripieno* (larger) choir was placed behind, together with those singing the roles of the Evangelist and Jesus raised on small platforms, and the audience arranged all around on three sides. It was a sprawling, unorthodox arrangement and looked quite unworkable, but in the event turned out to be perhaps the most important factor in what was for everyone involved an extraordinary experience. No member of the audience was very far away from the musicians, and the soloists in particular were able to engage very directly with the listeners, who became part of the drama in a manner impossible with a large raised stage and conventional concert formation. We were fortunate in that the flexibility of the church seating allowed for such last-minute creativity.

Of course, Bach's musicians in the Thomaskirche in Leipzig on Good Friday would have been positioned aloft in the galleries that can still be seen in the church, at some distance from the congregation. But this would not have been a handicap to the latter's involvement. Pietistic Lutherans in Bach's time would have easily identified with the theological relationships at the heart of the Passion. The arias and chorales, interwoven with the events of the Gospel narrative, are the responses of the believer whose sin caused Christ's suffering but whose redemption was won by Him on the cross. A lack of proximity to the musicians would not have inhibited a Thomaskirche congregant's sense of personal involvement in the drama. Pietistic Galwegians, on the other hand, are somewhat thin on the ground; however, serendipity enabled a close physical relationship between performers and listeners in our contemporary performance in St Nicholas's, and in this propinquity we were able to recreate a tangible echo of that original congregational dynamic. The narrative unfolded somewhat at a distance, but the response to the narrative, in the

form of the arias and chorales, seemed to come from the very midst of the entire gathering. This was neither service nor concert but something in-between, and the experience of the *St Matthew Passion* was greatly enriched thereby.

In conclusion then, it is in these “grey zones” that the divide between sacred origin and secular performance is rendered porous and where we can come closer to what liturgical music of previous centuries has to say to us today. Performers must look for ways in which concerts of sacred music can enable this encounter for modern audiences. This can involve the manner of performance: the size and type of ensemble, editorial decisions about scoring and pitch, positioning of players, singers, and audience, and choice of performing venue. It might even involve simply choosing works that suit a given group without losing any of their potential to transmit meaning and theological intent—in other words, works that can function as fully as possible in the iconic manner discussed earlier, retaining an essence of what they describe or portray. Above all, we, as directors and performers, must aim not merely to inspire admiration of both a wonderful piece of music and the skill of those presenting it: we must create performing contexts in which admiration becomes wonder, wonder at the alchemy whereby function has been so utterly transformed in art.

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