

New Music in the Liturgy

Lately I've been considering the following question: "Does our music look and sound not only like the people in our pews, but the breadth of all who make up the Catholic Church?" When evaluating the repertoire of music that is traditionally used in our Church, the most familiar and used songs are composed predominately by white males.

Selecting music for liturgies is a long and prayerful process for me. Many months in advance, I take time to read, pray, meditate, and contemplate (Lectio Divina) the readings for the Mass. I note songs that come to mind during this process, but we will revisit the readings and selections many times before 'finalizing' the music choices. I then spend time researching 'new' music that hasn't been sung during my time at Ascension and pray for God to guide me in the most appropriate selections to help draw the assembly closer to God in prayer and worship. Since becoming the music director at Ascension, over the past year I have tried to find the balance in programming music that is familiar while introducing new music. When introducing new music, I consider the text (is it related to the readings and theme of the liturgy?) and the style of music (traditional, contemporary, gospel, etc.), the culture (does the music include languages or musical styles from other cultures), but also the composer and how they help to represent the Catholic Church. Since my time as music director, I have introduced to Ascension music from various female composers as well as diverse composers from all around the world in various genres and styles.

Although we stand at a difficult crossroads in our ministry, I wonder if we could start to rethink something. God is doing something in this time. Circumstances have caused everyone to sit down and be still. We cannot continue doing things the way we always have. We in the Catholic Church have gone to great lengths to de-emphasize the focus on the cantor. Might it be that we've gone too far with that? For, look - in this moment, in many places, the cantor's voice is the only safe one allowed. Kind of ironic, isn't it? To be clear, I'm not contradicting the importance of the voice of the assembly. With so much attention being drawn to the increased risks of singing, we at Ascension have tried to find a balance. Providing the opening and closing song, along with the responsorial Psalm and Mass parts, you have the choice to participate how you feel comfortable.

Perhaps though, this is just the time for new music. Let our cantors introduce you to music as a Prelude, or during the Preparation of Gifts and Communion. Music that helps draw us closer to God and deeper in our Faith. Music for this time, music for this season. Music that speaks to our physical, social and human condition. Music that lifts up the plight of the oppressed ("He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly – Luke 1:52") and speaks to what we stand in need of, right now. Perhaps now is just the time for us to give utterance to what God has placed on our hearts. We have but to listen to God's voice, and then speak.

As we move forward, my goal is to represent more Catholic composers of various backgrounds and introduce you to their music. Let us embrace a new song, a new voice, a new style, a new language, use a song we haven't done in a while; think about our community... who can we better represent in our music? Suggestions? I love to learn and discover new music, please feel free to share with me new music: hsmith@ascension-parish.com