

Function and Training: Historical Models of the Church Musician

By László Dobszay

The history of Christian church music – with regard to its key-personnel – can be divided into five chronological „models”. Neither these models nor the related historical periods can be, of course, separated by sharp borderlines. Some of the models might survive in individual communities through a very long time, while other models became typical in other communities. One model might survive alongside another one, or even become modified and merge into a subsequent model. Sometimes the characteristics of two models might be mixed together. Even so, I think we can see many things more clearly if we try to make a distinction and give names to them.

1. The first is the **psaltes model**. In the first centuries of Christian liturgy church music in a strict sense did not exist. The function of the chant is described by E. Jammers this way:

“Die Wort Gottes – und der Psalter, das muß sofort und nachdrücklich festgestellt werden, ist für den Gläubigen mehr als eine Sammlung schöner, frommer, und sangbarer Poesie: auch er ist Gotteswort, göttliche Offenbarung; er ist es insbesondere für den Christen jener Zeit, als der Choral entstand... Aber: das Wort Gottes ‚vertont‘, so wie etwa Goethe vertont wird? – ist das wirklich das Wesen des Chorals? Ist es nicht vielmehr ein Sakrileg, ein Zeichen verringerter Gläubigkeit, das Wort Gottes, die Offenbarung Gottes, das Heilige, das dem Menschen anvertraut ist, zum Stoff menschlicher Kunst zu machen, zum Text von Kompositionen, wo als die menschliche Leistung neben die herablassende unverdiente Gnade tritt? ...Die Antwort kann nur lauten: eine bewußte ‚Vertonung‘ ist als Choral undenkbar, ist als opus dei unmöglich... Es setzt eine ‚Musik‘ voraus, die völlig verschieden ist von dem, was man heute Musik nennt, es wird eine ‚Music‘ verlangt, die gar keine Musik ist. Man ‚vertont‘ also das Gotteswort nicht, man spricht es vielmehr aus; aber man spricht es beim Gottesdienste nicht in der Marktsprache, sondern mit der feierlichen Singstimme.“ (The first thing we should emphatically state, is that the Psalter for the faithful, and still more for Christians of the time when the Chant originated, is not a collection of nice, pious poems to be sung,

but the word of God... But, is the essence of the chant, God's word set in music – similar to, for example, a poem by Goethe in a music composition? It would be a sacrilege, a sign of reduced belief, if God's word, God's revelation, the Holy entrusted to the mankind were transformed to be a raw-material for humanly artistry, a text for a composition, and so the human effort were made a partner of the Grace which descended from God, what man never can deserve... The answer must sound: No! A fabricated musical setting can never be a true liturgical music, never be an *opus Dei*. This presupposes a "music" which is totally different from what we call today "music"; it requires a music which is, in last resort, even no music. One does not set the word of God in music, rather he pronounces it. And when pronouncing it during a worship, it should be done not in the language of markets, but in the solemn sound of chant. (E. Jammers: Music in Byzanz, im im päpstlichen Rom und im Frankenreich. Heidelberg Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1962:15-16.)

That means, the liturgy was manifested in a way, that produced a well-formed entity which we name today 'music'. The music in this case is no more than the chanted liturgy itself. Such entity was, first of all, the delivery of the sacred text in a well-audible and articulated voice, effective in great halls with the impression of sacred solemnity. This performance made it felt that this was not a private communication; what was announced this way was something that pertained to the „res publica” in the field of religion. This proclamation of the text was, however, of different kinds, and so distributed among genres according to the nature of the liturgy. There is a particular manner for simply reading sacred texts, dialogues, litany-like supplication, and different from this was the various forms of psalmody or chants accompanying an action, e.g. communion. In one group of these genres the text might be sounded in an elevated way with the purpose of affecting the listeners. But beyond the different moods of transmitting the text the rite opened space also for the melismatic chant with its pneumatic expression, yet this style could be combined with the textual genres. These forms can be analyzed from the repertory of Gregorian chant, but they are still more manifest in the rites of great oral tradition, like in the Eastern church or the Hebrew liturgy. Not only its musical effects are suitable for study today, but also its sociological dimensions.

The key-person in this liturgical chant culture was the singer of psalm, the *psaltes*, the only one in environment who can be called a professional musician, at least in the sense, as they are present with their special knowledge in the living oral traditions. The memory of the psaltes was the storehouse of the repertory, not only as a fixed music material, but also as one element of an overall liturgical custom. He was the trustee of the communal memory, the keeper of the tradition of the community. But the way as he used this communal knowledge, adapted the rigorously set elements in the improvisation or ornate performance was, at the same time, very individual; it was an artistic production appreciated in the community. This twofold common and individual aspect of this activity is manifest, e.g. in the cantor-artistry in Jewish synagogues. The psaltes took his knowledge from another psaltes; from childhood or youth he was the apprentice of a great master, who passed on to him his repertory, his methods, the rules of adaptation and introduced his successor into his function. The psaltes was a liturgical person, who entered in his office blessed by the bishop. Much of his knowledge still lives – transformed, of course, over time – in the Gregorian chant as responsorial psalmody, the chant of tract and graduale and the rich formulary of recitations.

The assembly had its role in this liturgy, but in quite another way from what it has today. They participated in a lively dialogue of responses and psalmic refrains which pervaded the whole liturgical process. The psaltes proper chant was inserted in this continuum as a particular musical highpoint of it. The dialogue structure of the liturgy can be well studied in the ceremonies of the Byzantine rite.

The heyday of the psaltes singers lasted from the 3rd or 4th centuries until appr. the 6th and 7th centuries. But I think it was he who also maintained liturgical singing in the simple churches later, when the large ones had gone over to the period of the second model.

2. This period can be called the age of the **schola model**. It probably happened already in the first period that experienced master-psaltes gathered disciples around them, since their knowledge could be transmitted most efficiently in this form. It might also occur that these young people rehearsed jointly, or now and then they sang something together in the service, though we have no proof of it. This may have gone with some

difficulty, because in the absence of musical notation only the recurring items could have a fixed note-by-note shape. The opinion of most scholars is that the foundation of the scholae in the papal basilicas took place in the 7th century. I think the roots stem from a more ancient time, in the period of the psaltes-model, that is, a period when the scholae as institutions were still not installed. The foundation meant that these groups received for their activity a stable financial and infrastructural base (house, subsistence, organisation), and the members of the scholae acquired a permanent and appreciated place in the church hierarchy.

This provision had a decisive impact on the whole of music history. A body emerged which had regular liturgical singing as the main task. The singers lived together, had stable leaders appointed by the highest authorities, the daily agenda was determined by their musical obligations. They could rehearse chant for many hours of the day, and their achievements set up a new kind of artistic norm. When they sang, improvisation had to be excluded, if not from the whole liturgy, at least from what they sang together. It was not enough to learn formulas and methods from the masters, they had to acquire a specific repertory. Some scholars think the organisation of the liturgical year and the Mass repertory of the yearly round is the outcome of the schola as a permanent institution. The difficulty in learning the introits, offertories or communions was caused not by the melismatic style of these genres (the ancient interlectionary chants were also similar), but because of the individuality of the pieces (even if they had traditional figures). The procedure might be of a mutual nature: the life of the schola made it possible to produce and learn individual pieces, but the same possibility fostered the ambitions of the singers and leaders to produce them. One can say that liturgical chant made its first step towards the creation of an Opus-music, and common rehearsal might have compensated the absence of musical notation.

To sing in a schola was a way of life. The boys educated here could have a great ecclesiastical career. This is the time when the first germ of a musician's self-awareness came up (we read complaints of the deacons trilling all the day). Though the repertory was closely fitted to the course of the liturgy, it became still more canonized when the proper of the *anni circulus* was finished, and that was the time when liturgical music became an aggregate of pieces for the liturgy rather than the chanted liturgy itself. This

was no more than a first experiment. But later, when development became faster, it served as the model for a new approach: to augment the repertory by new pieces by a creative power. Figuratively we may say: the way led from the tract to the offertory, from there to the trope, then further to the organum, and to the motetum. The schola was a liturgical body, it sang the liturgy amidst very strict confines, but step-by-step it came to dominate the music heard in the liturgy.

The papal scholae were an example for the whole of Rome, then for Latium, then Italia and all the churches of Latin Europe. When the *ritus et cantus Romanus* crossed over the Alps and penetrated the Northern region, churches started to imitate also this Roman institution. The imitation was successful, first of all, in the enclosed communities of the monasteries. Meanwhile, the cathedrals and their connected parish churches proceeded towards another model.

3. The third period is stamped by the **model of the liturgical choir**. Though the cathedrals of the North relied on the monastic communities their population was much bigger and more varied, than that of a monastery. The bishop was surrounded by his confidential priests (their name is later canons), many kinds of priests with many duties, others responsible for the liturgy, literate ones in clerical status but delegated to secular jobs. A special importance among the changes was attached to the order of Charlemagne, who made all bishops obliged to maintain a school. The Carolingian type of school was built on two basic subjects: *lectura* and *cantura*. The former is the art of correct understanding and use of words; the *ars dicendi, legendi, scribendi* and made it possible for the ecclesiastical and secular services to be run by intellectually well-trained men. The *cantura* was supported by theoretical knowledge, but had, primarily a practical destination: to prepare the boys for the chant in the liturgy. The pupils participated in the daily liturgy and were trained in classes for it. As a late charter expressed: the named young people lived their days *in choro et schola commorentes* staying in the choir and school. This is, however, not the old school of the Roman basilicas, a workshop of specialized singers. Rather it gathered all future literates, those who exercised later different jobs. And what is the chorus mentioned earlier? Not, of course, what we call today a singing choir. All priests busy around the bishops and the eminent prelates as

well as the simple clerics, the intellectuals, the schoolboys and young who participated in the liturgy: all were called the liturgical choir. It tells us much that in the late Middle Ages, the chapter when sending a school-boy to represent them in a legal procedure qualify him to the task with this: “because he is a member of our choir”. As if today in the local councils somebody would be authorized to sign a document because he can sing a canon by Mozart along with the other clerks... This structure worked perfectly in the cathedrals, but was also imitated in all parish churches, in proportion, of course.

The liturgical choir and its musical life was a well-articulated entity. It had the deputed leader, vice-leaders and other members responsible for the order of service. The leader of the choir selected the functionaries of the single services from different orders of the choir, according to the rank of the day. He wrote on the blackboard the members of liturgical assistance and the different roles in the chant. There were some items to be chanted by the whole community, i.e. the full choir, there were also individual roles: those who performed readings verses of responsories and tropes. One cannot neglect the job of children either, in communal singing as well as in small groups, or as individuals. All was defined partly in the consuetudinaries, ordinary books, partly by the responsible persons from case to case. At any rate, the music of the liturgy was a matter for the whole choir in its totality, and everybody took part in it in sometimes in an active way, at other times as an appreciative audience.

The core of the sung repertory was the Graduale and Antiphonale inherited from Rome, containing thousands of pieces and dispersed among different genres. This repertory grew quickly. The new feasts, the votive masses, the secondary celebrations all needed new compositions all the time. Also the canonized chant repertory had been augmented by attached tropes, or pieces sung „binatim”. From the 12th or 13th centuries on new tasks had been brought in when some pieces were sung with organa, and later the elaborate polyphony was introduced. This was by then not the task of the full choir, but of small groups selected from the choir. These small groups played still greater roles in the so-called endowment Masses and in royal or aristocratic private chapels.

And so in the womb of the liturgical choir emerged the model of the following period: the *cantoratus*, Kantorei.

4. The peculiarity of the fourth period is the **Cantoratus**, the Kantorei.

In the late Middle Ages the rich churches of cities or the chapels of princes started to found ensembles composed of professional singers for the sake of ordinary worship or polyphony. The function of the liturgical choir had not ceased by then, since the major part of the liturgy was still performed further with Gregorian melodies. The leading role, however, passed over to the musicians, who were appreciated because of their higher erudition and the great reputation of the modern repertory sung by them. To sing in such an ensemble promised a career and subsistence for a whole life. A discanting boy, getting many years of experience, could transfer to the body of adult singers and after learning music theory and perhaps also an instrument he might become the leader of an ensemble and with great probability a respected composer.

After the late Gothic repertory came the great polyphony of the Renaissance, and during the 17th century in many churches there appeared vocal-instrumental church music, from the 18th century on also the Mass ordinary and motets accompanied by a *Kirchentrio* or its larger form, expanded with other instruments, in the Lutheran church the different layers and genres of the new baroque music or Viennese classicism. The ensemble, (which had singers trained many times also in instruments) can be called *cantoratus*, or in German *Kantorei*. Having this regular staff of professional, paid musicians it was easy to let them sing also the Gregorian chant.

Their contact with the liturgy in this disposition became, of course, rather problematic. Earlier the singers if they had to serve in the Mass, should know at least five ordinary and five ever-changing items for all celebration; and the proper chants were strictly defined. Such a close adaptation to the liturgy was hindered partly because the lack of such a huge repertory of contemporary music, and partly because to prepare them for the day would have taken much more time. The problem could be solved in one of two ways: they might concentrate on the ordinary, which could be programmed with great freedom. The second way was to insert selected pieces into the programme, linked much more loosely, of course, to the daily liturgy. It was a very rich city and church that could commission a new composition for all the Sundays and feasts of the year, proper to the liturgy of the day. In other words: the order of chant defined by the liturgy had become an order defined by the musicians.

This divergence of the liturgy and music was manifest in Central Europe also in the placement of the musicians: they left the older choir in front of the sanctuary and moved up to the gallery.

The cantoratus could work in most places having not more than two or three singers in a part. Their leader is the *regens chori*, another person is the organist (or organists), but in smaller churches the two functions (or three along with being the school-master) was united in the same person. The system, on the one hand, offered the musicians a standard walk of life, on the other, made possible the implementation of a high quality art music in churches, equal with or better than the secular music. It was inspiring also to the composers, who were often in one person also the leaders of the cantoratus. The tradition of this model survived the longest time, up until today in the English cathedral and college choirs.

The model was realised very differently in different ages, regions, type of churches. But principally it can be said that the maintenance of the ensemble, the salary of the singers and instrumentalists, the purchase of music and instruments required considerable financial resources. Neither was it possible in all churches or in all services of the very same church to pay for church music of this quality. They might employ a reduced ensemble (as the rotation system among the Leipzig churches in Bach's time shows). The subsidiary services, the church music of smaller towns and villages should be furnished in some way. A possible method would have been to maintain the medieval liturgical choir based on the schools, and then involve the full assembly in singing to the service. That was not what happened. For these churches and services a new repertory was made by reshaping the contemporary secular or semi-secular song, making it suitable for ecclesiastical use and for the participation of the congregation. Another kind of musician was required to lead this type of church music. The new model, the cantor-organist appeared parallel with the Kantorei, but outlasted it by several centuries.

5. The fifth model is the **cantor-organist**.

His main task was to lead the congregation with his voice in singing the hymns and to accompany them on the organ. This was completed by three additional functions. The first was to play preludia, sometimes also interludia to these hymns. The second was to

nourish the faithful's devotion with instrumental pieces performed before or after the service, even between its parts or on special occasions (e.g. Orgel-Vesper). We may say, doing so a single person could make up the lack of more expensive forms of art music. All this does not mean that choral music was alien to this model. From the 19th century on the large mixed choir was present in many churches, which was like an enlarged descendant of the Kantorei, but more often a voluntary amateur ensemble gathered from members of the congregation with musical inclinations. Beyond the musical assistance the choir had also functions of a religious or social nature. In most cases the cantor-organist was the director also of this choir.

It is clear that music had to become still more an insertion. The close relationship between the daily liturgy and the chant, which was normal in the fixed Roman rite, could not be achieved by congregational hymns. The maximum that could be arrived at was the well-ordered assignment of chorales in some Lutheran churches of Bach's time. This discipline could not, however, be maintained over a long time. In the organ music it was the cantus firmus taken from the chorale or from the Gregorian melodies which could symbolize the liturgical character, but as time went on, the organist selected pieces with a growing freedom. The choirs, mainly the amateur mixed choirs could work only with a limited repertory. Neither the working discipline nor the individual preparedness usual for the Kantorei could be expected from the volunteers of those. Consequently, they either had to reduce the amount of the singing, or repeat again and again items from their repertory, large or small according their capacities. In other words: they sang a given piece not when it was prescribed by the liturgy, but when they could learn it.

In one respect this model was the realistic: for making the music continuous in the church, only one trained person need be paid. Furthermore, in recent decades the smaller churches were satisfied even with untrained organist-cantors if they were able to accompany the hymns without upsetting the congregation.

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Arriving at the end of our survey we may ask: which was the best of the five models. The answer is, of course, not easy. The **psaltes**-model was the most fitting in the liturgy, the **schola** could guarantee the best the institutional maintenance of a liturgical chant culture. The **liturgical choir** was a good representative of liturgical culture – in more or

less the strict sense of the word – influential in the widest sphere. The **cantoratus** performed and inspired artistic church music at the highest level. The **cantor-organist** could assure in one person the continuity of church music, he was a professional musician in close contact with the congregation, somebody who could be found and paid even in the reduced conditions of church life.

The question could be put otherwise, too: Which is the most suitable model for running an ideal church music today? The answer depends, of course, what is regarded „ideal church music” in a given church or denomination; and depends also on the personal and financial conditions of the given church. As for myself I think it ideal if the monophonic, strictly fixed liturgical chant (Gregorian or some similar music for worship) is the skeleton of church music. In the main service of bigger churches the **schola**, in all other cases the **psaltes** (i.e. the cantor coming down from the gallery and standing in front of the congregation) would be the best expert and director of this music. Under their direction the whole congregation could grow up onto the level of a **liturgical choir**. The role of polyphony depends on local conditions. A professional **cantoratus**, paid for the services could do the most for art music adapted to liturgical requirements. If the basic structure of the liturgy appears in the monophonic chant, the insertions performed by the amateur mixed choir could also be received happily. The liturgy defines the places where the congregational hymns are appropriate. These should be accompanied, of course, by the **organist**, who in one person can enrich the service with his artistic instrumentalism on points conceded by the liturgy, and also outside the worship.

In such an up-to-date form of church music no model should be excluded, but the roles must be ordered in a well-structured organism. This would be the sixth model.