

WHAT IS “CLASSICAL MUSIC?”

Some answers I have heard include the following: music played by an orchestra, sung in another language, played or sung in a concert hall, music that sounds complicated, music in an un-familiar idiom...yet, for each of these, there is an example which proves them invalid.

Strictly speaking, “classical music” refers to the period of Mozart and Haydn, that is to say the 18th, and the early part of the 19th, centuries. Some of Beethoven’s early symphonies are termed “Classical,” while others (No. 6 and No. 9) seem to belong to a later period, the so-called “Romantic.”

In church music, the classical distinction properly belongs to the great period of writing for the church: from Palestrina in the 16th century, through Bach and Handel in the 18th century, Mendelssohn and Brahms in the 19th century, and finally ending with Ralph Vaughn-Williams and his generation in the 20th century. After these, the church began to fall into disarray in its theology and its music, in the name of some trends (and fads) brought about in the 60's. Protestant, as well as Catholic, liturgy and music were particularly affected by the Second Vatican Council and the changes it brought about.

Music in the 60's church resulted from a knee-jerk reaction to the radical changes in society. The classic and enduring hymns of the church, which have carried countless generations through crisis, were discarded in favor of inferior ones like those written by Avery and Marsh, a Presbyterian minister and his music director. They wrote faux folk hymns which caught on quickly and were copied by others. Some of them were simply awful. And once lost, the classic hymns are difficult to re-introduce, as the Roman Catholic church has discovered.

These days, the term “classical music” refers to a fluid category, into which a style of music cycles when it is no longer *au courant*. Jazz was once the popular music, but is no longer, and so it is referred to as “America’s Classical Music.” It is even taught at conservatory, just as the music of composers past and present is taught. There are whole departments of Jazz Studies. But only a small population really listens to jazz. Jonathan Schwartz, the host of National Public Radio’s American Songbook, refers to the American song, as composed by Irving Berlin, Arthur Schwartz, Jerome Kern, and others, as the “new American classical music.” Again, only a small but avid audience listens to those songs. But they certainly are classic and enduring, unlike some more recent examples.

What the church needs is to gather to itself the *best* of all styles and traditions of music, to keep the classic canon of hymns and liturgy while seeking the best which the present has to offer. Relegating any music to a category, and then deciding not to use “*that*” music, is counterproductive. In order to grow in a healthy way, as a faith community, we need the best of all of it!

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