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*Music and Movement, Part I*

Ask another Episcopalian from the Diocese of Chicago what they think of when they think of Atonement, and they will likely say something like, “Oh! That’s the Anglo-Catholic parish with the high liturgy and the great music!” In my meditation for this week, I explore what it means for us to be a parish that places music, particularly the choral Mass, at the heart of worship. How do these choral settings of the Mass shape our experiences of God and of God’s beloved community? How do they challenge us, comfort, and support us? What do our other liturgies, which are spoken or sung congregationally, reveal to us about our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ? As Episcopalians, we understand deeply that the way that we worship matters; in this article I invite us to think about how our particular style (or styles) of worship help to form us into the Body of Christ.

My first experience with choral settings of the Mass came in my college choir. I had grown up as a Christian Scientist and had no experience at all with the liturgical Church; I hardly knew what “the Mass” was, let alone the *Kyrie eleison* or the *Agnus Dei*. The conductor of my college choir introduced us to all the staples of the choral repertoire from the earliest medieval Masses to contemporary masterpieces. He loved these works and poured them out for us like fine wine, inviting us to savor the way the music and the text mingled on our tongues. As a young singer, I could hardly comprehend the depths of the musical world I was entering. I knew the translation of the text and understood the stylistic differences between musical periods, but I had no idea how this music was steeped in the holiness of thousands of years of worship. I couldn’t imagine these Masses “at home” – sung where and how they were intended. In so many ways, I had no idea what I was singing, but I sang anyway, and I adored it.

It’s true that the great masterworks of liturgical choral repertoire are captivating even when they are heard outside of their original context. (I could hear the Byrd *Mass for Four Voices* sung in a subway station and still be transported.) It’s also true that, in time, the genre of “the Mass” came to transcend its liturgical context, lending its name to works that were intended for the concert stage and not the cathedral. (May we ever give thanks that the Beethoven *Missa Solemnis* was not written for a Sunday morning – what a long service that would be!) But most of the Mass settings that have been handed down to us throughout the centuries were intended for liturgical use. The church musician who assembled these particular sounds and carefully paired them with these particular words did so not just that they might be heard and enjoyed but also that they might be *used*. These choral settings of the Mass were meant to be used, employed as tools for prayer.

Here at Atonement we continue to use these Masses as tools for prayer, week after week. Each week during the program year at the 11:00 Solemn High Mass, the Atonement choirs offer a different composer's ideas about the great, foundational prayers of the Church: the *Kyrie eleison*, *Gloria*, *Sanctus and Benedictus*, and *Agnus Dei*. Each week we hear a different perspective on these prayers; each week we are invited to hear new things in the words that the Church has been praying for thousands of years. This is a rare and wonderful thing, and one that marks us as a congregation with unique gifts to offer the world.

In order to really use this gift, though, we have to retrain our brains so that we can fully inhabit the context we're actually in. Usually when we're listening to a choir, the context is a concert. We're sitting in a chair (more on "sitting" next week), and the choir is giving something to us – a Bach cantata, a Mendelssohn oratorio, a motet by Gabriel Jackson. We are consumers, and as consumers our job is to allow the choir to offer us what they've prepared and then to enjoy or critique the sounds that they are offering. The context of a Sunday morning Mass, though, is quite different. In the Mass, we are invited to reach around the concert context to something much more ancient and fundamental: the context of communal worship. In worship, we are not consumers but pray-ers. Our job is to pray the prayers of the Mass together, as a community gathered in Christ. In worship, instead of allowing the choir to give us something, *we invite the choir to sing in our stead*. We invite these talented and faithful people to offer our prayers with their mouths, because they have skills for this kind of musical prayer that most of us do not. In other words, in worship, when the choir sings, we sing too, with our hearts and our minds if not with our lips.

Even with as many years as Atonement has been offering choral Masses on this corner of Kenmore and Ardmore, this shift in context is not automatic, and it is not always easy. There are times when all of us find the music just washing over us as we wonder if we remembered to turn off the coffee pot. To help us find a deeper connection to these prayers, here are some helpful hints:

- Make good use of the translation in the leaflet. Atonement always provides the English translation of the Mass parts for those of us who aren't fluent in ecclesiastical Latin. Follow along with the words so that you know what the choir is singing on our behalf.
- Pay attention to certain musical moments to hear how the composer imagined them. When the name of Jesus is prayed in the *Gloria*, how does it sound? Does the music slow down or stop? Is it louder or more hushed? How does the composer paint the image of the heavenly choir singing the *Sanctus*? Do their words sound triumphant or mysterious? Then – and this is important – ask yourself what these artistic interpretations reveal about God and about us as God's beloved children?

- Use your body to help you pray. Stand or kneel or bow or cross yourself as a way of connecting your body and spirit to what you are hearing with your ears. (Next week I'll write more about how to think about liturgical posture – stay tuned!)

Many of you have your own profoundly beautiful ways to pray along with the choir, and I hope that you'll share them with me and with each other. For when we are able to hear and pray this music in the right context, the result is nothing less than transformation. As someone whose experience singing in a professional church choir led to my baptism and eventually to my ordination, I can earnestly and joyfully attest to the power of this liturgical expression.

This kind of musical prayer is not everyone's cup of tea, of course, and that's just fine. There is something wonderful, to be sure, about singing these prayers together as a congregation, just as there is something wonderful about singing the same music week after week until it becomes as comfortable as your own skin. For example, the congregation at the 9:00 Mass sings these Mass parts in familiar settings every week, using the repetition of the words and the music to help draw them deeply into the liturgy. And of course many of our Masses are sung, not said, allowing the words themselves to be offered simply and humbly.

How blessed we are at Atonement to be able to pray in such diverse ways and to use the great gifts of music and text and movement and symbol to help us see more of the God who loves us. May we all find ourselves more moved in worship, more present in prayer, and ever more transformed in our communal life in Christ.

Yours in Christ,

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