

Why we need new music: the demonic inspiration for On Eagle's Wings

As parishes across the country adjust to the new translation of the Roman Missal – with, it must be admitted, reactions ranging from relief and even disappointment on one end to loathing and active resistance on the other – it is time to acknowledge that the new translation is only one of three parts of a larger reform program which bishops, priests, architects, liturgical consultants, publishers and musicians must undertake with great care and yet with all deliberate speed. The two remaining parts of the reform are the reform of music intended for Mass and the reform of architecture. Independent of the truly uninspiring melodies which exist in the repertoire composed for the reformed liturgy, and the styles of music which remind one more of revivals, camp fires and sing-alongs than of suitable means to worship the Eternal God, we must acknowledge the *inspiration* of this music to be unsuited for the worship of Almighty God and refuse to cooperate any longer with the disfiguring immolation of the Mass and the resulting denigration of our Catholic identity. A fitting complement to the new translation, with sacral language restored, is music which represents the mind of the Church and – at long last – approaches the purpose which the Second Vatican Council decreed was the role of music: the worship of God and the sanctification of the people. First among the pieces which must go is one by Michael Joncas, called On Eagle's Wings, which clearly shows demonic inspiration – a fact which makes it utterly unworthy for use in the Sacred Liturgy.

The text of the song is, at least in theory, taken from the Holy Scriptures, and shows up in two specific places: in the psalter, since it is an adaptation of Psalm 90, (or 91, in the new reckoning) and in Satan's reference to this same psalm when he tempts Jesus in the desert immediately after the latter's baptism. These two texts appear together in Lent, thus appearing

to beg for the use of Joncas' song. To use it, however, is to denude the text of its strength and disguise or misunderstand the purpose for which the Church includes this text in the Liturgy. Rather than a proper use of the psalm, Joncas' song illustrates perfectly what happens when the Devil inspires us to be misled by Holy Writ. Satan dares Jesus to throw himself off the parapet of the temple because "He [God the Father] has given his angels charge over thee, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone". The music does precisely this: it dares us to throw ourselves over the parapet of the temple, and it inspires us to settle for a deformed understanding of Scripture.

Far from being the wild, unsubstantiated claims more suited to the rambling editorial pages of opinion magazines, the case here is intentionally *not* built on opinion. Many people adore the song, and will hear nothing other than adulation of it. Others loathe it unreasoningly. A student of music theory since his high school days, the author proposes that the musical composition itself and therefore the use to which the composer puts the Sacred Scripture are defective.

The song is in the key of D major. This being the case, the weakest pitch in the scale, C#, is the half-step below D, and is known in traditional theory as the "leading" tone, precisely because it leads back to the tonic, the D in this case. It has no strength by itself, but only in that to which it leads. (Perhaps the analogy to Saint John the Baptist is apt: it is strong because it leads to the right place, not because it is, by itself, the stopping place.) Joncas, rather than respecting this reality, makes the leading tone lead *away* from the tonic on 4 of the 5 times the pitch occurs, on accented beats, in the verses. In only one of the five cases, the last one, does the leading downward come to a place of rest, and this is the only case in which the leading

tone is on a weak beat, allowing the resolution to occur on a strong beat, returning to the tonic from the leading tone. In the other four cases the pitch leads down, but not to a place of rest or even relative rest. One reason we have the Lord's Day is so that we can indeed have a day of rest – and yet the verses of this piece encourage our ear, and thus our soul, not to rest. The refrain does come, finally, to a place of rest, but this rest is more like the rest of exhaustion, of the inability to endure anything further, not the rest of recuperation.

In fairness, there is one sense in which this C#, the leading tone, does “resolve” properly, does have the possibility of bringing the ear (and thus the soul) to a place of rest. If the C# is seen as a suspended note, such that the tri-tone (G to C# in the accompaniment) on the downbeat is the result of a kind of “stretching”, then the proper resolution is downward, from C# to B. Unfortunately, however, the suspension is not prepared properly, which means that although there is a dissonance which resolves, the dissonance itself comes, *ex nihilo*, without any warning or consonant interval prior to it. (By way of analogy, consider someone asking you if you would like some *more*: if you already know from context what is being offered, you can intelligently answer the question without further explanation, but absent knowledge of the substance of what you might get, you might be rightly reticent to answer affirmatively). Tri-tones and suspensions can move a piece effectively, even beautifully, forward, but only when they are used judiciously. By any reasonable measure, the beginning of a melody on a suspension is arguably suited for a Broadway musical, but not for service to the Most Holy Trinity.

One of the purposes of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council was to encourage the "full, conscious, active participation" of the faithful in the Mass. Congregations – at least

Catholic ones – aren't known for their abilities to sing complicated melodies or ones which are excessively high or low. Such melodies would tend, therefore, to discourage congregational singing. Since participation is more than merely *external*, but internal also, those who can't sing the song can still "participate" by absorbing it, and trying to make it their own prayer, worshiping God through it. Being able to make the music a prayer without singing it personally would ordinarily be a good thing, unless the message being absorbed is harmful. Faith comes through *hearing*, and so if what we hear represents something foreign to the faith, we can – indeed we are so disposed to – accept falsehood and that which is displeasing to God, that which leads us away from Him.

The melody of On Eagle's Wings begins on an intentionally dissonant pitch, and gives great emphasis to that high dissonant pitch through repeated iterations. It then descends, only to leap up again. Trained singers can accomplish a leap of an octave well, simply by changing registers, but most of the assembled lay faithful, and a fair number of volunteer cantors, aren't trained musicians. As verse gives way to refrain, the full range of the piece becomes evident: we must sing an octave and a fourth, the distance of thirteen pitches, from the A below middle C to the D an octave above this same middle C. While this is a smaller range than the American national anthem, most people don't make a beautiful noise to the Lord while singing that piece, and with good reasons: most people can't sing that breadth well without at least some training; large leaps contribute to missed intervals. The octave leap which greets the singer in each verse is the same size as the last iteration of "Happy Birthday", which many singers only approximate. The seventh (a dissonant interval) which members of the faithful are invited to navigate from the end of the refrain to the beginning of the next verse -- with no melodic

preparation, either in something sung by the faithful or in something hinted at by the accompaniment – returns us to the uncomfortable upper register.

The melodic structure of each verse descends from on high, just as one might imagine one descending from the parapet of the temple, and then leaps back up to the higher register. If the intended audience were a bird, soaring on the thermal air currents, this might have some merit – and it is perhaps the intent of the composer to make the melody sound like a swooping bird – but given that the psalm itself in no wise presents this as a logical conclusion, the next most reasonable conclusion, Scripturally speaking, is that of one diving from the temple, which was the Devil's temptation: prove you're who you say you are by throwing yourself off the temple. Christ rejected the temptation and, for that reason, surely the follower of Christ should follow His example.

It is worth noting, although a fuller treatment of the question would require significant space, that another of Joncas' songs, I have loved you with an everlasting love suffers from the same defect: rather than sounding like the text of Jeremiah the prophet, which it claims to be, it uses a great descending line to traverse the distance of more than an octave in a scant five notes, giving the impression of a swooning lover in some sort of harlequin romance. The purely erotic love which is so characteristic of these novels has no place at Mass. Besides, here, too, he emphasizes the leading tone.

How else does Joncas construe (or misconstrue) the text of the psalm? The psalm shows the Church Militant, acting fearlessly not because of Her own strength, but because of the Lord, Whom the psalmist first refers to as "my protector". Thousands fall, or ten thousand fall, *in battle*. This aspect of the text is effaced to the point of invisibility. To say that Joncas

renders the psalm text effeminate is to insult women everywhere, so perhaps it is better to say that he emasculates the text. Instead of teaching us to rely on God (which the text of the psalm does) or preserving our awareness of the war we are in ("His truth shall compass thee with a shield"), Joncas advances the idea of being raised on eagle's wings – which is, for what it's worth, missing completely from the psalm. The refrain, the idea to which he returns, is being raised up on metaphorical eagle's wings, but in the raising of the music on these wings, he introduces an idea foreign to the psalm itself. Why would he introduce an eagle? That's simple: it serves the purpose of the musical composition, to focus not on Christ Who overcomes temptation, but on the tantalizing idea that if we throw ourselves off the parapet of a proverbial temple, God has promised to rescue us. We are repeatedly reminded, after all, of the fact that "he [sic] will raise *you* up [*italics added*]". Either we are singing to each other, or someone is whispering in our ear that we should tempt God. In either case, the inspiration is from the Devil. For us to focus on ourselves and our worthiness or security at Mass is to fall prey to the trap of believing that Mass is about us. The only answer that needs to be given to the urge to "tempt God" is that with which Christ Himself returned Satan's challenge: "Thou shalt not put the Lord thy God to the test."

A song which has words must be understood as the combination of the words and the music, and neither can nor should be understood apart from that reality. The words inform the music and the music reflects the text. It would be possible, for example, to sing the words to the famous text "Amazing Grace" to the tune for the television program *Gilligan's Island*, but the pairing would be, at best, infelicitous, unless the incongruity were intentionally amusing. Joncas has modified the text of Psalm 90 to fit his inspired tune, but this raises two questions:

should one modify Holy Writ, even metrically, to make it singable; and does the Church have some obligation to admit any such piece to her treasury of Sacred Music? To the former question, one can answer assuredly that it *can* be done, not that it must be done, but the second question must receive a negative answer. Certainly, many composers in times long past used secular melodies as the basis for sacred works, but they changed them, making them suitable for the work they were to undertake. They did not adapt the text to fit some musical style merely for the purpose of injecting the profane into the sacred. When Pope Pius X wrote his amazingly brief letter on liturgical reform in 1903 he insisted that nothing profane be admitted to the Church's worship, especially not if that profane thing retained its profane character. Might there be Broadway crooners in heaven? Certainly there might.

Nevertheless, nothing less than perfect can enter the presence of God, and so the Mass, as our taste of Heaven while still on earth, can not and should not tolerate the intentionally profane.

Starting in Advent of 2011, parishes which celebrate Mass in the vernacular have the great blessing of a translation which is sacral, drawing us closer to God. With what Fr. John Zuhlsdorf called the "Lame duck" translation, which is now obsolete, it is possible to believe that we save ourselves through our own action, and On Eagle's wings fits perfectly within that milieu. On the other hand, when we focus on God, when we listen to Him, when we talk to Him as the little children we are, we won't use songs like On Eagle's wings, precisely because these are going in the wrong direction, taking us away from God, focusing on ourselves and each other, and treating God as a "fall-back" option: don't worry, but instead do whatever you want, since God will rescue you. This isn't the message of Psalm 90 or the Gospel, but it is the message of On Eagle's wings, as it mimics the Devil's invitation. This is why we need new music.