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Mystic Modern

The Music, Thought, and Legacy of Charles Tournemire

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The Organ as Liturgical Commentator—Some Thoughts, Magisterial and Otherwise

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The commemoration this year of the twentieth anniversary of the death of Olivier Messiaen (10 December 1908–27 April 1992) prompts for me a very distinct personal memory of an experience of his playing. One evening in the mid-eighties, I was walking past the Church of La Trinité in Paris when I noticed a board advertising "Messe basse avec la participation de Monsieur Messiaen," a Low Mass with Olivier Messiaen improvising at the organ. This was clearly an opportunity not to be missed, the chance of hearing one of the greatest twentieth-century composers composing live (as it were) at the organ in a liturgical context.

I presented myself in the church at the appointed hour and the Mass was preceded, or so I thought, by a magisterial improvisation on a plainsong motif (*Veni Creator*). The hour for the Mass arrived, the bell sounded, the celebrant emerged from the sacristy and processed to the altar. It is what happened next that is forever burned into my memory. The improvisation was still in progress, it had not reached its conclusion—and as authentically composed music rather than something that might more accurately be described as improvised musical "fill," it might have been considered an act of supreme barbarism to curtail it. The celebrant patiently waited at the altar, for some minutes, until the improvisation calmly and perfectly reached its conclusion. Obviously, I am not proposing this as a model of good practice—we generally expect that liturgical improvisation will be adapted to the liturgical action and such delays thereby rendered unnecessary. It does frame, however, the rather tantalizing question as to the relationship between such improvisation and formally composed music in a more standard format.

In turning our attention to Tournemire, a composer whose improvisations have been communicated to us in recordings and Duruflé's transcriptions, and whose compositions in *L'Orgue mystique* seem to seek to accomplish a similar effect to that of a skilled improvisation,[1] perhaps it helps to begin immediately by recognizing the authentic practice of considering the organ itself as liturgical commentator, a notion which certainly has its roots in both our liturgical and musical tradition.

The Apostolic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

paragraph 120 states that "The pipe organ should be held in great honor in the Latin Church, in that it is the traditional musical instrument whose sounds can add a remarkable dignity to the ceremonies of the church and powerfully raise minds and hearts to God and to things above."[2] Obviously this is a generic statement and as such covers the various ways in which the organ may be used in liturgical worship. In a tantalizing way, it also consciously echoes the traditional catechism definition of prayer as "the raising of the heart and the mind to God."[3]

For several centuries, the tradition of organ playing—not only as an accompaniment for liturgical chant but essentially also as a commentary on the liturgical action and based on the chants and texts which accompany that action—has been highly developed, particularly through the work of French organists and composers. One only has to think of a composer such as François Couperin (1668–1733) and his *Messe pour les Couvents* and *Messe pour les Paroisses* as significant early examples of the form. Later developments, running parallel to and nourished by something of a renewed interest in and a recovery of Gregorian chant, show an even greater tendency towards this quality of organ as commentator, establishing an essential link between the liturgical texts of the Mass and the chants that arise from them alongside organ improvisation (whether spontaneous or transcribed) in the context of liturgical celebration.

Clearly not everyone was equally seized by such a liturgical spirit and it was often necessary, on the part of the Church, to legislate in attempt to limit the abuse of the inclusion in the liturgy of organ music that is not motivated by a liturgical spirit and that detracts from the primary purpose of liturgical music in helping those present to raise their hearts and minds to God. An instruction of Cardinal Carlo Odaleschi, Archpriest of the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome in 1835, captures this mood well:

> During Sung Mass [. . .] organists are not allowed to execute on the organ any pieces of music from the theater, or any others which have a profane character. Such pieces seek to excite the emotions, instead of fostering recollection. The purpose of music is to aid worship, and this is the only reason that music is allowed in the Church.[4]

As an edict, this is admirably clear, although finding the authentic path it proposes is far less easy, as we see suggested in an instruction of the Congregation of Sacred Rites in 1884:

> 13. Improvisation, a *fantasia*, on the organ is forbidden to those who cannot do it fittingly, i.e., in a manner which re-

> spects, not only the rules of art, but the piety and recollection of the faithful.[5]

Improvisation is not expressly forbidden but there is the clear recognition that few organists have the gift sufficiently developed to ensure the desired effect. What happens next is of major significance—the rediscovery of chant through the Ratisbon and Solesmes editions and the liturgical reforms of Pope St. Pius X. At this point, the papal magisterium confirms something of the earlier intuition:

> 18. The music of the organ in the accompaniment, preludes, interludes, and so on must be played not only according to the proper character of the instrument, but also according to all the rules of real sacred music [. . .][6]

What follows is the development of the tradition that we are now considering—the French School of organ improvisation and composition that is itself essentially a commentary on the liturgical action, rooted in chant motifs that are intrinsic to that action. Such an art is evident in the compositions of Franck, Widor, Tournemire, Dupré, Messiaen, and so many more since their time, as it was evident in their improvisations which were not subsequently recorded or transcribed for posterity.

It is very interesting to compare Messiaen and Tournemire—the former celebrated by the wider musical world, the latter remaining in comparative obscurity. Many of Messiaen's ideas (such as the use of birdsong for instance) are also developed by Tournemire but perhaps in a somewhat less ostentatious way. In Tournemire's music, they occur naturally as part of his musical thought process, they become something that gives his music its power. It is as if Tournemire was in some mystical trance-like condition when he composed and improvised, and the result, I think, is to draw the listener to the contemplative goal of the liturgy in question, rather than to draw attention to the musical language itself (which might be considered to be more obviously the case in the music of someone like Messiaen).

The development of this quality is clearly noted, at a magisterial level, in the 1958 document *De musica sacra et sacra liturgia*, promulgated by the Sacred Congregation for Rites:

> 61. The classic or pipe organ has been and remains the principal solemn liturgical instrument of the Latin Church.
>
> 65. The players of the musical instruments must be sufficiently skilled in their task, whether for accompanying sacred chant or

> choral music, or for merely playing the organ. Also, since it is often necessary to play "ex tempore" something appropriate to the different phases of liturgical functions, they should have knowledge and experience of the rules which govern the organ and sacred music.

Exactly what constitutes "merely playing the organ" is obviously subject to considerable conjecture, but beyond the infelicity of such an expression, we find here the first and clearest acknowledgment in the papal magisterium of this role of the organ as commentator on the Sacred Liturgy. The instruction goes on to state that:

> 66. The playing of the organ, whether to accompany liturgical functions or pious exercises, should be adapted with diligent care to the liturgical character of the season or the day, to the nature of the rites and exercises, as well as to their specific parts.[7]

By the time we arrive at Vatican II, the centrality of the organ in our liturgical music is assured (at least in terms of the magisterium, if regrettably not in the experience of all our parishes!) but interestingly the Church articulates a concern and a requirement that must still govern our assessment of what is deemed appropriate in the musical elements of our liturgical celebration:

> 121. Composers, animated by the Christian spirit, should accept that it pertains to their vocation to cultivate sacred music and increase its store of treasures. Let them produce compositions which have the qualities proper to genuine sacred music [. . .][8]

We tend to think of such aspirations as being directed primarily towards composition in the strict sense. Could we not also equally apply them to that spontaneous composition which is in fact improvisation? Fifteen years ago, I was chaplain to the Royal Academy of Music in London, an institution at which I had myself been a graduate student some fifteen years before that. Given that performance opportunities abound in such a conservatoire, I struggled to identify liturgical forms that would engage the students and possibly provide useful opportunities for them to showcase their gifts. One such initiative was to celebrate a Mass which was essentially a Low Mass but with four organists improvising at the introit, the offertory, the communion, and the recessional. Each was given a short plainsong theme which served as the basis of the improvisation.

These Masses were popular and I like to think that young organists were thereby encouraged to hone their skills in this very particular respect.

If this great tradition, represented at its pinnacle by the works of Charles Tournemire, is to continue to flourish in the Church, there will have to be a constituency for it. It is not sufficient for organists who are technically competent solely to play the transcribed improvisations of others. Ideally, they themselves should be practitioners of the art of liturgical improvisation and we should have opportunities where their art can be practiced and thereby enrich the prayer of our worshipping community. We all understand that to sing the Mass should be considered normative, but clearly there are many opportunities when this is neither possible nor even desirable, to say nothing of those moments within a sung Mass when organ commentary is most properly heard and greatly appreciated. I personally pray for a flowering of the sort of liturgical culture that will engender this, both as a skill to be nurtured and a tradition to be received and cherished.

There is something about the sound of the organ—its ability to produce every dynamic level (from inaudible to deafening), and every frequency (from too low to hear to too high to hear)—which gives it something of a cosmic character, and it is only really improvisation that can explore to the full the dimensions available in a particular space and for a particular liturgical moment. Such music is being created specifically for that space, that organ, and that liturgy in real time. An improvisation at the end of Mass in particular can be seen as offering a response to the liturgy on behalf of the people—a huge wordless but musical *Deo gratias*. Such moments, in the hands of a really good player, can give the organ a sort of oratorical power—in a very real sense, it can be said to preach to the people.

If the works of composers such as Tournemire inspire us—and they do—should we not see in them a model to be adopted, a pattern to be followed, and a tradition to be maintained? In this way, we recognize, in complete accordance with *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, that the organ is "the traditional musical instrument whose sounds can add a remarkable dignity to the ceremonies of the church and powerfully raise minds and hearts to God and to things above." ❖

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