

Targeting the papal iPod

Gregory Ruehlmann | Aug. 20, 2008

Much has been made of Pope John Paul II's role in inspiring the music of the new evangelization. But what of the man who has led the Catholic church since 2005?

According to Fr. J. Michael Joncas, Pope Benedict XVI's thoughts on liturgical music have never been presented in a systematic fashion. But some of his opinions can be gleaned from books like *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, which compiles his writings on the subject. They reveal an abiding respect for traditional sacred music, and greater uncertainty about more modern styles.

When Benedict XVI came to Washington and New York to celebrate his first U.S. Masses in April, the visit triggered more contentious debate about music in the liturgy. Traditionalists in particular were confident that this pope would share their tastes, if not their convictions.

The music chosen for the Mass programs in the two cities formed a contrast. In New York, the Masses at St. Patrick's Cathedral and Yankee Stadium favored what Joncas characterized as a "more substantial use of chant" and choral singing without congregational vocal participation.

At the earlier liturgy at Nationals Park in Washington, however, the emphasis was on Catholic multiculturalism; planners incorporated Spanish-language pieces, jazzy African-American-style arrangements, and Marty Haugen's post-Vatican II "Mass of Creation" for the eucharistic acclamations.

The D.C. program was roundly criticized by liturgical traditionalists such as Stanford's Dr. William Mahrt, who found it too anthropocentric. "The music seems to have been chosen to represent the diversity of the congregation, but I would say that the music for the liturgy should unite the congregation, and it should represent the purposes of the liturgy: the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful." Mahrt pointed to the applause that erupted after Placido Domingo's rendition of "Panis Angelicus" at the end of Communion. "Evidence, he believes, that the music failed to create the proper tenor for a papal Mass.

Joncas defended the Mass programs, saying they conformed to the demands of both the General Instruction of the Roman Missal and the document "Sing to the Lord" from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "I think the two [programs] represent not so much differing conceptions of the role of music in Catholic worship as differing prudential judgments about what would be 'hospitable,'" Joncas said. "The Washington program tried to be hospitable to the varying ethnicities making up this unique liturgical gathering; the New York programs tried to be hospitable to the Holy Father by programming music familiar to his European liturgical experience and about which he has written with affection and approval."

Whatever was intended by the musical choices at the three Masses, the outcome seems to underscore that when it comes to Catholic music, you can't make everyone agree.

In the meantime, though they know they can't please everybody, contemporary musicians like Matt Maher hope at least to receive the blessing of the current pope, as they believe they did from his predecessor.

"I know the Holy Father doesn't personally like rock music," Maher said. "But one of these days I hope that something I'd write would shift his thinking a little."

That might be wishful thinking. It's hard to envision Benedict XVI, a classically trained musician himself, finding a place on the papal iPod for praise and worship music. But Maher seems content to dream.

On the Web

Back to the main story [Rockers moving to the beat of a new evangelization](#) [1].

Listen to songs by Matt Maher at [spiritandsong.com](#) [2]

Support independent reporting on important issues.



Source URL (retrieved on 07/23/2017 - 14:05): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/targeting-papal-ipod>

Links:

[1] <http://ncronline3.org/drupal/?q=node/1656>

[2] <http://www.spiritandsong.com/store/music/12915>

[3] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>