

# Attendance or Tradition: Who Is Interested in Church Music Today

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Religious practices in general, but primarily Christian ones, are undergoing major changes in the modern world, which is rapidly changing day by day. One of the most revealing manifestations of these changes is liturgical music, which has always been considered “traditional”, whereas the boundaries of the tradition have been subject to sharp disputes between those responsible for the church ritual and its accessories. The palette of the musical environment of modern church in terms of attendance and congregational acceptability in its sustainable development is addressed in the article based on recent research, in particular, several related studies by A. Rosenblatt, who over the past two decades has explored different aspects of church music heard in the field and presented in various hymnal books. Summary of this review allows us to consider a tangle of reasons to the preference for this or that musical style, which often completely excludes purely musical tastes and preferences.

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## When and How the Dilemma Arose

Up until the 20th century, the question of church attendance may have been unrelated to issues other than theological, that is, how to treat the New Bible figures, their family and predecessors, and the stories of the Old Bible as part of the Christian agenda. However, the Church in the West had always expressed this or that social and political agenda, agreement with which was one of the considerations (along with geographical proximity), according to which people made a decision about attending a particular church. Music was part of the church service, combining both traditional and contemporary styles.

It is difficult to determine exactly when the dilemma of the relationship between attendance and adherence to the musical tradition characteristic of a particular denomination arose, but most likely this began around the beginning of the 20th century, which, unlike the previous six centuries, was not particularly favorable for composers who wanted to write church music. Rosenblatt (2019) formulates the problem as follows:

By the end of the nineteenth century, liturgical music in the Western church had already seriously influenced the duration of church service, sometimes turning liturgical worship into a kind of concert in which there was no room for a spoken (not a sung) word. (Rosenblatt, 2019, p. 76)

The primary sources of the period unveil several trends that, although aimed at achieving the same goal, clearly contradict each other, and sometimes even themselves. Thus, the instructions given in 1903 by Pope Pius X to the world Catholic community regarding sacred music claim that

[...] Gregorian Chant has always been regarded as the supreme model for sacred music, so that it is fully legitimate to lay down the following rule: the more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savor the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple. (Pope Pius X, 1903)

The Catholic Encyclopedia in English, published a decade later, is much more unapologetic and clearly disdainful regarding the place of music in the high mass, defining the latter as the makeup of the ministers rather than a certain type of music associated with it: “[T]he essence of high Mass is not the music but the deacon and subdeacon” (Fortesque, 1913, p. 799).

A quarter century later, an Introduction to the Canadian Anglican hymnbook of the late 1930s, explaining the Protestant, and in particular the Anglican view of the subject, reads: “Each generation, with its problems and outlook, must ever seek ways of expressing its ideas and aspirations” (*The Book of Common Praise*, 1938, p. iii). This concept is already quite different from the Catholic position of the pre-WWI period. The Catholic Church would change its stance on music other than Gregorian chant, as well as congregational singing, only after the Second Vatican Council (1965), which encouraged congregational singing during Mass in vernacular languages, rather than singing the traditional Latin texts of the Eucharist. The English-speaking Catholic world accepted this directive as legitimizing the inclusion of hymns in books intended for congregational use, thereby ushering in the era of hymnals in Catholic churches. To date, four editions of the American Catholic hymnbook, *Worship*, have been published, the most recent being published in 2011. This edition includes hymns and songs in Spanish “to recognize, in a small way, the increasingly multicultural nature of many assemblies” (*Worship*, 2011, p. ii).

What these so different expressions regarding church music had in common was, apparently, the understanding that only modal and tonal music (of one style or another) could work in a church environment, and not experiments with atonality and other forms of musical modernism and avant-garde, which the 20th century was so rich in. In the late 1980s, Clarke, retrospectively discussing the musical aspects of the Canadian hymnbook of the early 1970s, concludes that “twentieth-century ‘art-music’ idioms are not generally understood or liked in church congregations. It is doubtful that congregations would ever try to sing atonal hymn tunes” (Clarke, 1987, p. 153).

So, what actually caused the Protestant and then the Catholic churches, over the course of about half a century, to form a fairly uniform position regarding the music that should be performed during services and sung by parishioners? As Rosenblatt (2018a) makes clear,

For various reasons, the missionary work, and then the post-missionary reconfiguration of churches and local parishes—all this spiritual, educational and organizational enterprise was possible only thanks to the ecumenical position of missionaries and local clergy. In the same way, the non-dogmatic character of the hymn allowed the joint committees to abstain from doctrinal or theological differences between churches and to produce hymnbooks, shared by several denominations and therefore perceived as rather national collections of church music. (Rosenblatt, 2018a, p. 25)

What has been said thus far is in fact what the Protestant and Catholic churches offer to their ministers and parishioners, chiefly through hymnbooks, regarding the music recommended for church services. Life, as everyone knows, does not always follow the established rules. Instead, it defines new rules from time to time. So, what does a researcher discover when entering different churches in different places?

### What’s in the Field

Here we enter the world of “ethnography” for the first time. If you enter a concert hall where, for example, Gabriel Faure’s (1845-1924) *Requiem* is being performed, you are a “listener”, whether you are asked to pay to

listen or not. If you attend your church and Faure's *Requiem* is suddenly performed, you are still a "congregant". However, if you go into a church that is not quite "yours" (in terms of denomination or location) in order to document (in some way) the music of the service, and that same *Requiem* is being performed, then you are an "ethnographer". This is not about role-playing games, but rather about the place given to music in different sociocultural formats.

While ethnography is a type of social research concerned with the study of specific behaviors of participants and the various accessories that accompany such behavior in a given social situation, it is inseparable from understanding the group members' own interpretation of such behavior. Based on this, participant observation came to be considered the prerogative of anthropologists. The emergence of ethnography as a field of academic study is directly associated with a work (caused by rather circumstances) of the British anthropologist of Polish origin Bronisław Malinowski in 1914. Malinowski implemented the method of participant-observation, which was different from earlier observers, because getting to know the life of the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands was not associated with his administrative or other duties (for example, officer or missionary), but this was his main goal. "At the outbreak of WWI", Ugwu (2017) states,

[...] Malinowski was in Australia to attend a conference with his supervisor, C. G. Seligman. Being from Poland, he was therefore an Austrian subject and so was on enemy territory because Australia was a British colony at the time, and Britain and Austria were in opposing alliances. Short of being taken prisoner, his suggestion to be allowed to go and take up his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands was granted by the authorities. (Ugwu, 2017, p. 79)

In recent decades, especially in the 2010s, the increasing availability of digital equipment and communication technologies has led to phenomena previously unknown to ethnographers. On the one hand, self-documentation of former "groups under study" is increasingly disseminated through Internet resources and social groups. This documentation, being rather a form of group communication, is however, a kind of ethnography that does not require an ethnographer. Another phenomenon of this kind is the documentation of various ethnographic events by tourists who share such materials through these same resources. Records of travels to remote tribes have existed before, but the form of video documentation gives today's travelogues the status of "open-source ethnographic material".

Rosenblatt (2021) reveals one more aspect of the problem of authenticity in modern ethnography in the following way:

The presence of digitized historical ethnography, collected by the first generations of ethnographers at a time when the tradition was truly original, is of great interest to ethnographers today, who can then trace the dynamics of the tradition. However, such accessibility for representatives of the communities themselves serves as a reference to tradition in its classical, crystallized form, which in itself affects the possible development, which otherwise could have gone a different way. (Rosenblatt, 2021, p. 219)

And now, after this necessary, in our opinion, digression, we return to what today's ethnographer expects and hears when entering any Catholic or Protestant church. A board with that day's hymn numbers is the first clue as to what will be sung. A leaflet with tunes not included in the hymnal is the second such clue. Finally, hymn books in the pew are the primary evidence of a church's official commitment to a particular movement in the musical aspect of worship. Well, how about the line: "A praise song will be sung" or something similar?

Here we enter the whole world of worship songs, an area that emerged in the early 1960s and almost replaced the hymnody, at least in the Anglican and Episcopal churches. A Preface to the Canadian hymnbook of the early

1970s states: “Young people especially wish to sing hymns cast in the style of the twentieth century” (Anglican Church of Canada, United Church of Canada, 1971, p. iv). Style of these early worship songs is more like the popular musical culture of the period, that is songs associated with pre-rock youth music culture—a style known as “happy-clappy”, a term that many consider quite pejorative. However, the term covers a group of musical styles characterized by syncopated rhythm, upbeat (the pickup notes leading into beat one), and predictable harmony. Such are shake, twist, and few other pre-rock and early rock styles. We can still find them printed in the hymnbooks of the late 1990s (such as *Common Praise*, 1998) and even until the early 2010s (as, for example *Worship*, 2011).

However, since the 1980s, the style of worship songs (or praise songs) has sounded like what can be defined as a church rock style, a term that has become increasingly popular in recent times. The most popular songs of this kind were recently arranged and released in a sheet music collection dedicated exclusively to this style of church music (Tornquist, 2012). A modern Mass in Protestant churches may include two such songs at the beginning, and sometimes another one or two towards the end.

Now, what does the current situation look like in churches that, on the one hand, are authentic to the region, and on the other hand, find themselves under the auspices of a larger Church? An example of such a church is the Maronite Church, one of the largest Eastern Rite communities associated with the Roman Catholic Church, which has its origins in the 5th century Christians who lived in what is now Syria and are currently found in Lebanon, Israel, and Western countries—USA, Canada, and Australia. Rosenblatt recently studied the music of this church in its original, Middle Eastern location (compared to how it sounded on several audio recordings made 40 to 50 years ago in the same places in which he made new recordings on the same day of the church calendar) and how it is represented in North American and Australian communities. At the level of the current musical environment, the Western Maronite communities have re-arranged the set of traditional Syriac chants, presenting them in conventional Western semitone scales accompanied by Western-style harmony. The researcher found that

[...] each of the communities is consistent in preserving its own (and at the same time joint) heritage. Yet, in the Eastern model, the trend is to preserve the legacy as is, i.e. in a local setting, whereas in the Western model, an attempt is being made to preserve the legacy in a global setting, adapting the originally microtone monophony to the Western (harmonic) tonality. Comparing Maronite music at home and in the West, one can see a pattern of global change where local culture “acculturates” itself voluntarily, according to the new local conditions. (Rosenblatt, 2018b, p. 210)

Similar context changes were found in some other Middle-Eastern Christian communities originating from the 19th century missionary activity, such as Anglican churches in Israel, where the missionary heritage is juxtaposed with motifs borrowed from other local churches and modern praise songs, both in the Western church-rock style and in the local, mainly Egyptian style of Arab-Christian church rock that has been developing in the last two decades.

The Arab-Anglican churches in Israel today are not bound by their location in Israel or even in the Middle East and therefore adhere to different theological tendencies within the contemporary global Anglican tradition or Anglicanism. The Church of England has been perennially divided along the lines of Catholic and Protestant tendencies, mirroring a conservative/liberal divide expressed in clashing positions towards issues such as the ordination of women and [...] liturgical music. Such tendencies are expressed in particular in the ritual and liturgical music choices of each congregation. Thus, each Arab-Anglican congregation in Israel adopts some ritual variant that emanates from one or another tendency. (Rosenblatt, 2012, pp. 109-110)

### **Who Else Cares About Church Music**

Another aspect of the problem is whether anyone other than the clergymen cares about the quality and style of church music in their community, denomination, or even country. It turns out that authoritarian/totalitarian societies, which follow certain rules in the religious, cultural, and political spheres and tend to have little tolerance for other views and practices, can be very obsessed with the rituals and accessories of church service, including music, especially if the ruling ideology is atheism, leaving almost no room for religion to exist. Soviet Union and, above all, Russian Federation as its central republic appeared to be such a country.

As emerging from studies on this subject from the beginning of the century until very recently (Froese, 2004; Rosenblatt, 2022; Ritzarev, 2023), during the more than 70 years of the history of the Soviet Union, there were periods when the Soviet authorities persecuted religions, including Christianity, to varying degrees, according to the interests of the state. The Soviet leadership consistently advocated the control, suppression, and ultimately eradication of religious beliefs, while actively encouraging the spread of Marxist-Leninist atheism in the Soviet Union. Although most religions were never officially banned, the state advocated the abolition of religion and to achieve this goal, officially declared religious beliefs as superstitious and backward. Many churches, synagogues, and mosques have been destroyed or turned into museums of atheism, a vivid example of which was until recently the Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg.

However, religious beliefs and practices persisted among the majority of the population in the domestic and private spheres, as well as in those public places that the state allowed to exist, thereby recognizing its inability to eradicate religion (Froese, 2004). Although, at the level of music, “[i]t is taken for granted that the golden-era Russian music of the last two centuries is all secular, while Russian sacred music of the same period had a humiliatingly low profile” (Ritzarev, 2023, p. 68), during the Soviet period of Russian history and music, no works by Soviet composers were created in any of the church genres, not at all. The situation began to change closer to the 1980s, the last decade of Soviet power.

[I]n the 1980s, the very last decade of Soviet history, the authorities gradually ceased banning the composition of sacred music. Yet, there were no rules for writing church music in a country that adhered to an atheistic ideology for decades, so Soviet composers who wanted to work with Christian texts had to choose between traditional and modern musical styles, based only on personal aesthetic preferences. (Rosenblatt, 2022, p. 544)

As Rosenblatt (2022) shows, the sacred works of late Soviet composers belong to various forms of Christian music of both Western and Orthodox styles. Depending on the circumstances that prompted certain composers to write sacred works, their belonging to the ethnocultural heritage, and the place where they grew up, the results turned out to be completely different. Moreover, for some of these creative people, the passion for religion becomes a part of life. The study revealed different, often contradictory, approaches of composers to sacred texts and their “embedding” into musical works. The variety of means of musical language included modern compositional techniques, minimalism, the use of elements of medieval style, and a fusion of all of the above.

### **Conclusions: Where Is Church Music Heading**

The findings of this study point to different ways in which contemporary church music has developed.

The first such point is the use of the interconfessional, multifaceted, and multi-style heritage of church music of many centuries. That is, what was exclusively part of Catholic worship can be heard today at least in some Protestant churches and vice versa.

The second point is the wider involvement of parishioners in singing during services, thanks to which both the church choir and parishioners alternately take part in the singing of various parts of service music.

This leads to the third point: attention to the aesthetic needs of the young part of the parishioners, that is, the timely inclusion of modern styles in tune with the younger generation in the singing repertoire approved by the church leadership.

Those congregations whose leaders adhere to these points retain their congregations, while churches whose ministers adhere to the doctrine of previous decades lose attendance to the point of closing churches. Today's parishioners prefer not only churches that follow certain social trends, but also those whose music meets the tastes and expectations of the modern believer.

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