

Essay No. 2

MUSIC OF WELCOME

The Song's the Thing!

Imagine this: It is a Sunday morning in summer. You have parked and are walking into your parish church. You know what to expect. Sure enough, the Organist is playing what you are learning to call, an "Instrumental Invitatory."

You seat yourself. The music is mellow, not loud, very listenable. It fits the bright morning and the coolness of the church's interior. The pews are comfortable; only recently padded just thick enough to render them more comfortable.

On your way in, you had grabbed the week's bulletin. Seated, listening, you open the bulletin to find out what the Organist is playing. The highlighted article of liturgical information for that Sunday indicates that he is playing, "Blessed Jesus, We Are Here" from the "Little Organ Book" of – by Johann Sebastian Bach, no less! A surprise. You have always thought of Bach's music as complex, inaccessible. This is straightforward, cool headed, just right for before Mass. It really does *sound* prayerful. You've come to look forward to these "invitations" each Sunday. They set the tone just before Mass.

The Lector comes out to the ambo, greets everyone, invites all to sing. She indicates that the lyrics of the Opening Hymn will appear on the large screen off to the side of the Sanctuary, easily seen by all.

The Organist starts his "intro" to the hymntune. Uh oh: It's a tune you do not recognize. Will the Congregation be able to sing

that? You glance to your right and through the open side door you see the priest and servers marching briskly around the outside to get to the vestibule in time for the Procession. Then you realize that the Lector and Organist have begun a little earlier than usual, and the Organist seems to be playing the opening tune completely through, maybe to remind the Congregation how this new tune goes.

You glance backward and see that all are lined up in the Vestibule at the entrance door to the nave of the Church, ready to process in. And now, on cue, the Cantrice (this church uses the feminine form of “cantor” as a compliment) begins the hymn with the People. The screen is pointing words with a little bouncing ball so they know exactly which syllable to sing, with the ball bouncing slightly upward when the tune goes up, and downward when the melody goes downward. Great idea. You have been away on business and that manner of projecting the words of the hymn rather than using hymnals, is new to the parish. It is a new tune to the Congregation, but they must have heard it before because they are singing though carefully and not with vigor. It is not a dynamic beginning, but yet it seems OK.

Wait! They are already louder with Verse Two. They’ve sung it before. They just had to be reminded. Well, during Ordinary Time an Introit doesn’t have to be “super dynamic,” and they *are* gradually opening their voices on one very good hymntune. The bulletin says the hymntune name is “Hyfrydol,” that it is of Welsh origin. Its steady melody has a self-confident shape. Yes, this Entrance Hymn is very satisfactory for a regular Sunday of the year.

This Mass has the Parish Choir. It's a custom of the Congregation to give the third verse of a hymn to the choir. The Organist begins verse three with softer stops and all listen to the harmonies of the Choir. Then, a rousing fourth verse. This was a very successful Entrance Song and beginning for the Mass.

During the fourth verse, the priest, who has already revered the Altar and has been singing along while standing at his Presidential Chair, now finds himself looking around the Congregation, smiling indeed, and just for the moment enjoying the full house that the Parish now has for this very musical of its Sunday Masses. And as the Organist delineates it chord by slightly slower note and chord, the Congregation, Choir and Cantricle end their singing of the Opening Hymn with a beautiful Rallentando sing very much together.

Boy, has this parish improved since only a few years ago the singing was always soft and even seemed half-hearted. The new Director of Liturgical Music and new professional Organist have made the difference. The Opening of this Mass certainly had a "group feeling." It was even a "growing together as a group" feeling, insofar as the hymntune was a new already-well-liked addition to the Parish's hymnal repertoire. You glance around and see people standing comfortably, many of them smiling. They have just concluded singing, "Church of God, Elect and Glorious," to a strikingly beautiful tune harmonized by the Parish Choir, accompanied by a capable organist and guided by the well-trained choir member who is the Cantricle for this particular Mass.

The Pastor opens the Mass by chanting, "The Lord be with you," and the Congregation answers *a cappella* - no organ needed,

“And with your spirit,” echoing the same notes. He then describes the scriptural theme he will highlight in his homily. The Organist plays the Intro to the Congregational and Cantoral Kyrie and Gloria. It was a wonderful beginning to the Mass.

This was also a realistic beginning. Recently you have read about the trend in Liturgical Music at this time, to replace even the best of the opening hymntunes with English versions of the even-better Antiphons that still appear at the beginning of the Proper of the Mass in the Altar Missal. You have read that it was the hope of the capitulants of the Second Vatican Council that those wonderful Introits of the Tridentine Mass – now called the “Extraordinary Form” would be rendered Congregational in modern languages and sung regularly once again. This would of course provide still further resources for excellent opening music for the Mass. You reflect is that, if a parish can be as eager to learn and use fine new hymns as your parish is, then these parishioners will be all the more delighted to help restore the traditional Introits to their proper place as worldwide entrance antiphons. You have heard about the new “books of introits” being available, and you are intrigued with the prospect that even the best-achieved openings of the Mass in our Modern Liturgy will take an even further giant step toward achieving the goals and hopes of those whose hard work has brought this far into revitalized Liturgical Prayer.

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