

Are there Catholic Church's norms/requirements regarding Liturgical Music?

Please permit me, as your in-resident priest, to answer two liturgical questions on what the Roman Catholic Church has instructed the worldwide clergy and faithful (before and after the Second Vatican Council (SVC) (1963-1965)) on the subject of norms or requirements regarding Liturgical Music?

Reference documents include:

- the Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraphs 1156-1158);
- Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship (2007);
- Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963);
- Musicam sacram (Instruction on the Music in Liturgy (1967);
- Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963);
- Tra Le Sollecitudini (1903);
- General Instruction to the Roman Missal (GIRM) (paragraph 39ff) (2010);
- Music in Catholic Worship (1972); and
- De musica sacra et sacra liturgia (1958).

Since the SVC, the Church has taught and practiced that: (a) The organ is the first and foremost, liturgical musical instrument, if/when available; followed by the piano. (b) Other musical instruments (string instruments (like the guitar), wind instruments, etc.) support (i.e., are to aid and be in addition to) the organ or piano, but do not replace, overpower or superseded it. (c) Music is meant to be an invitation to and embracement of prayer, not a human performance [hence why applause during or at the end of Mass is strongly discouraged]. (d) Lastly, no individual (clergy or faithful) has any actual or inferred "right" to cantor the Church's rich and approved musical selections during the myriad of Catholic liturgies.

The primary music minister in the liturgy is the assembly. Yes, you heard that right! At certain times, the priest, the deacon, the choir, the musicians, the psalmist and the cantor have specific roles of their own. But there is no place in the liturgy for performances of art for art's sake or musical self-performances.

(Musicam sacram)

9. In selecting the kind of sacred music to be used, whether it be for the choir or for the people, the capacities of those who are to sing the music must be taken into account. No kind of sacred music is prohibited from liturgical actions by the Church, as long as it corresponds to the spirit of the liturgical celebration itself and the nature of its individual parts, and does not hinder the active participation of the people [in the liturgy].

13. Liturgical services are celebrations of the Church, that is, of the holy people [of God], united under and directed by the bishop or priest. ...

62. ... "The pipe organ is to be held in high esteem in the Latin [Rite] Church, since it is its traditional instrument, the sound of which can add a wonderful splendor to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lift up men's minds to God and higher things."

"The use of other instruments may also be admitted in divine worship, given the decision and consent of the competent territorial authority [i.e., bishop, celebrant priest], provided that the instruments are suitable for sacred use ..." (also SC, 120)

63. In permitting and using musical instruments, ... those instruments which are, by common opinion and use, suitable for secular music only [i.e., bango, electric guitar, harmonica, etc.), are to be altogether prohibited from every liturgical celebration and [even] from popular devotions.

64. The use of musical instruments to accompany the singing can act as a support to the voices, render easier participation, and achieve a deeper union in the assembly. However, their instrument sound *should not be so loud as so overwhelm* the voices [of the assembly] and make it difficult to clearly hear the text; and when some part is proclaimed aloud by the priest or a minister, they [the musical instruments] should be *silent* [i.e., the bishop, priest or deacon may not speak or chant prayers with musical accompaniment].

Celebrating the liturgy involves the *whole person*: intellect and will, emotions and senses, imagination, aesthetic sensibilities, memory, physical gestures, and powers of expression. Appropriate feeling is necessary for the communication and assimilation of religious truth. The Church's insistence on music of a unique sort is intended not merely to stimulate feelings in a general way, but to exemplify Christian truth and convey transcendent mysteries using an appropriate form of expression. As Pope Benedict XVI stated, sacred music: "*elevates the spirit precisely by wedding it to the senses, and it elevates the senses by uniting them with the spirit*" (cf: Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 150).

(Sing to the Lord)

The Organist and the Other Instrumentalists

41. The primary role of the organist, other instrumentalists or instrumental ensemble is to *lead and sustain* the singing [voice] of the assembly and of the choir, cantor, and psalmist, without dominating or overpowering them.

Musical Instruments

87. Among all other instruments which are suitable for divine worship, the organ is "accorded pride of place" because of its capacity to sustain the singing of a large gathered assembly, due to both its size and its ability to give "resonance to the fullness of human sentiments, from joy to sadness, from praise to lamentation." Likewise, "the manifold possibilities of the organ in some way remind us of the immensity and the magnificence of God."

89. However, from the days when the Ark of the Covenant was accompanied in procession by cymbals, harps, lyres and trumpets, God's people have, in various periods, used a variety of musical instruments to sing his praise. Each of these instruments, born of the culture and the traditions of a particular people, has given voice to a wide variety of forms and styles through which Christ's faithful continue to join their voices to his perfect song of praise upon the Cross.

90. Many other instruments also enrich the celebration of the Liturgy, such as wind, stringed, or percussion instruments "according to longstanding local usage [and permission by the local Ordinary (diocesan bishop)], provided they are truly apt for sacred use or can be rendered apt."

("The Guitar Mass")

Since the SVC, the U.S. Church has gone through periods of ebbs and flows regarding the appropriate scheduling or use of the "Guitar Mass". After the SVC, the U.S. Catholic Church encountered quite a bit of "experimentation" with liturgical norms – including music and the "Guitar Mass". At present, many within the ecclesiastical [Church] leadership and liturgists in the U.S. Church have come to recognize that a popular, contemporary musical style (i.e., the Guitar Mass) at times is inconsistent with the spirit of the Church's revered sacred liturgy. Perhaps an anchor for our reference could be the words of St. Paul: "*Do not model your behavior on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and mature*" (Romans 12:2).