Writing Well, Getting Published

One hopeful sign that the liturgical renewal is alive and well can be seen in the number of parish musicians who are creating ritual music for the worship of their own communities. Many of these ministers labor quietly and with little encouragement or reward, seeking only to deepen and enrich their parish eucharistic celebrations.

Often composers ask me to evaluate their efforts, to offer advice and criticism, or they inquire about ways in which they might be able to catch the eye or ear of a publisher. "Writing well" is the first step; we want our compositions to be as strong and beautiful and helpful as possible. It is also a prerequisite to "getting published" for, while writing well will not guarantee publication, music that is not written well will almost certainly not be published.

Writing Well

In his book, *From Sacred Song to Ritual Music*[1], Jan Michael Joncas analyzes the major liturgical documents of the 20th century Roman Catholic Church to delineate an understanding of how "ritual music" differs from "sacred song." This article will be limited to addressing the composition of ritual music, music that is intended to be at the service of Word and Sacrament, prayer-song for the assembly's voice. The varieties of sacred song (which might include everything from Handel's *Messiah* to the latest contemporary Christian ballad) have their own rules, rules too diverse and distinct from ritual prayer to address here.

Here are ten suggestions for those who would seek to craft ritual music that is faithful and prophetic, engaging and enduring.

1) Educate yourself about the liturgy. Often when musicians show me their music, it is apparent that they have written more from a personal faith experience rather than from a true understanding of the history and structure of the liturgy. They have written a sacred song rather than a piece of ritual music.

Ritual music is always at the service of the liturgical structure. All the various musical elements of a composition—its form (strophic hymn, song with refrain, antiphonal, mantra, ostinado, call and response), tempo, length, and melody—are subject to the demands of the Rite. You will not

[1] Jan Michael Joncas, *From Sacred Song to Ritual Music/Twentieth-Century Understandings of Roman Catholic Worship Music*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1997.

be able to craft a well-informed and useful *Kyrie* or eucharistic acclamations until you know how and why they were introduced into the liturgy, and the reason for their evolution over time.

2) Immerse yourself in the Lectionary. Ritual music is always at the service of the Word as it is proclaimed from week to week, from season to season. The liturgical composer must not only be familiar with the scripture texts of the Lectionary, s/he must take time to pray over them, read commentaries and learn to see the larger patterns of the Lectionary—how the various scriptures connect from Sunday to Sunday or through a season. Only then can s/he create compositions that will truly support and complement the spoken scripture that is the true focus of the Liturgy of the Word.

Scripture courses and Biblical commentaries can help us better understand the varieties of literary forms contained within the Bible—poetry, narrative, parable, letter, prophecy. Knowing the difference between these forms will help us write with more sensitivity to the text. Commentaries can also provide valuable information about the origins of the passage, its context in history and the intent of the writer(s).

Composers shouldn't construct a song from a single verse of scripture without careful studying the verses that surround it. The Word does not exist for us to edit it; it exists for us to proclaim it in its entirety.

3) Always begin with the text. Because ritual music is at the service of Word and Sacrament, composers should begin with the text, whether it is a scripture reading for the celebration or one of the common liturgical texts. Let the text shape the melody and the rhythm just as the ritual action shapes the musical form. Beginning with the melody or a harmonic pattern may result in a composition in which the text is weakened or distorted through poor word stress or alteration.

One example: consider how the meaning of this phrase from Psalm 91 changes when a particular melody creates stress on these various syllables:

"**Be** with me, Lord"
"Be **with** me, Lord"
"Be with **me**, Lord"

4) Try to write something every day. Composing is as much discipline as inspiration. If you are serious about creating music for worship, you must approach it with the same commitment that you would approach any craft. By trying to write every day (even if you do not retain a single note) you are better able to develop an understanding of and appreciation for the craft of composing.

I have to travel a great deal in my work and I find it difficult to write while I am on the road. When I return home from a trip, I generally experience several unproductive writing periods before I can get “back in the groove.” I have learned to see these dry periods as necessary and helpful times in which I move back into the rhythm and discipline of writing.

If your life seems too full for daily writing, try to take at least fifteen minutes. Sitting down to write at the same time every day also helps in developing the discipline of composing.

5) Work at constructing or finishing melodies away from an instrument, using the voice to determine the melody. The voice, especially the congregation’s voice, is the primary instrument within worship. When you think that you have created your final inspired musical setting, take it for a run or walk, singing it through away from any instrument. Your own voice will tell you where the melody wants to go, and you will very likely return home with a changed (and improved) melody.

6) Never presume that music is suitable for the assembly until your assembly has sung it several times. Teach the song to your community *a capella* and listen carefully to their response. Their confidence or hesitancy will help you hear the flaws and mis-steps in your writing. Ask the members of the community to give you their feedback—Could they sing it easily? Could they remember it after singing it? Were there places where they wanted to sing a different melody or a different rhythm?

7) Continually revise. Throw away more than you keep. Every potter, every painter, every sculptor revises and rejects parts of their work. In fact, we very often learn more from mistakes than from the times we “get it right.” The composer who cannot accept criticism or start over will never grow or develop. As you write over a period of years you will develop the ability to recognize and reject earlier on in the creative process; initially, be prepared to write much more than you will keep.

8) Remember that listening is the basis for hearing, and that listening to the world is the way in which the musician's vocabulary is expanded and renewed. Listen to all kinds of music, but also listen to the sounds of the natural world. Teach yourself to listen more actively, to the conversations around you, the rise and fall of the human voice in speech, how vocal pitch changes with a person’s energy or tiredness, how consonants and vowels give impetus to sound. Be an aural sponge, taking in and storing sounds that will enrich your sonic palette.

9) You are an instrument, you are not an icon. I have always been hesitant to apply the label “composer” to those of us who create liturgical music. We should see ourselves more like the

skilled craftsperson, such as a potter or furniture maker, who seeks to make beautiful but functional art. In almost every case, our compositions are neither inspired and error-less. They will only be as good as our own understanding, training, practice and commitment.

10) Christian churches do not depend either on the hierarchy or the composers for survival. The Spirit blows where it will. The people of God will survive our efforts. We must not take ourselves seriously, but for the sake of our own souls, we must take our craft seriously. Always begin and end the practice of writing with prayer, asking the Spirit to guide us and to remind us that we (like the music we make) are at the service of God's Word and God's people.

Getting Published

While liturgical composers, like anyone who creates, appreciate and thrive on recognition, we should not belittle the value of music that is created and used by only one small community. Composers who write for their own communities are in a unique position to provide a prophetic, supportive and faithful voice that speaks directly to and for the life of their community. Ironically, much of the music of mine that has found the widest use was written and intended for a single community (including the *Mass of Creation* and *Holden Evening Prayer*).

I first had my music published in 1978. At that time there were not nearly as many musicians writing for the liturgy and there were significant gaps in the repertoires of many communities (e.g. few collections of Lectionary-based psalms, no "cross-over settings of the Mass for various instruments, little music for Rites of Initiation, and so on).

Today it is a different world. The catalog of any publisher of liturgical music includes many composers writing in a wide variety of styles, and more new published music each year than a community can (or should) learn in a decade.

Knowing the difficulty of actually getting published, if you want truly want to go through the gauntlet of careful preparation, endless waiting for a response, repeated rejections (I used to keep a drawer set aside for rejections notes from publishers), and the possibility of never seeing a single piece in print, here are a few tips:

1) Study music theory & composition. If you are writing for your own parish community, you will learn first-hand about crafting a melody, harmonization and part writing. If you write poorly, your congregation will let you know, either by telling you or by their faltering and weak response. However, if you want to be taken seriously by a publisher, you will need to demonstrate from the beginning that you understand the craft of theory and composition. While publishers may be willing to offer simple musical suggestions for songs that they truly want, they will not be

interested in taking on someone whose works will need considerable re-writing and arranging before publication.

When you submit music, include as full an arrangement as the song may require for use in a variety of communities. This means (at a minimum) melody, keyboard accompaniment and (if applicable) guitar chords. Vocal harmonies and obbligato instrumental parts also give the publisher an idea of both the flexibility of a song and the composer's ability.

Send in a clear and clean manuscript. It does not have to be done with a computer engraving program, but it needs to appear well thought-out and carefully written. A recording is generally not important; it certainly won't determine whether or not you get published.

2) Send only a few of your best pieces. Publishers are normally deluged by submissions, and generally do not have time to go through song after song from one composer. If you send a complete mass setting and 12 psalms, they may pick up one of your weaker pieces first and never get beyond that. Choose one or two of your strongest pieces or ask friends and colleagues (see #5 below) for advice.

3) Look for the holes in the repertoire. If a major publisher gets a setting of the mass or Psalm 23 from you and from an established composer, which composer do you think will get published (even if yours is better)? When you decide to write music for the larger Christian world, first ask yourself where there are musical needs in Christian prayer that the currently published music repertoire does not address. Even if you have the best setting of the *Gloria* ever written, you might be better served sending in a text for a Gospel reading that has not been set by anyone else. Get your foot in the door by sending the publishers something that will make them say, "This is something that no one has set before" and "Why didn't we think of that?" Then, once you're published, send them your *Gloria*.

Here are a couple of ideas of things that might be attractive to publishers:

Hymns or songs that focus on Lectionary texts that have not been set. Compare the scripture index of a hymnal with the up-coming Lectionary readings and set the texts that you can't find a setting for. A warning: they won't be the "easy" texts (e.g. "God is love.")

Very simple (possibly repeatable) refrains for communion processions. Catholic churches will continue to have communion processions every Sunday, and they will always be a place for another "Eat This Bread." A warning: if it were easy to write a refrain that simple and enduring, there would be a thousand of them out there.

4) Study the "standard" repertoire for insight. Look at the published pieces that have best stood the test of time and ask yourself, "What need did this composition fulfill? Is there still a

need for similar compositions or should I find a different need?" Analyze the various musical elements of the pieces you admire and analyze them thoroughly. Look at the musical form, the way the melody was shaped to support the text, the harmonization, the tempo and range.

5) Consider forming a composer group. Sharing music with other composers will improve everyone's writing and it will give you an on-going source of feedback and support. A group that jointly sends the best of its efforts to a publisher will also stand a better chance of getting published (the St. Thomas More Group being an obvious example).