

‘Let Them Hear...’ The Divine Substance of Music. A composer’s perspective on writing sacred music in the 21st Century

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The following paper is not an academic paper in the strict sense of the word. It is not a research exercise into a historical topic, nor a simple musicological analysis. It is a retrospective reflection based on personal experience, and poses more questions than it gives answers. I will thus humbly ask the reader’s forgiveness if at times my writing is unclear, contradictory, self-absorbed, or even misleading. By its very nature, the subject in question is elusive, and any comment is subjective, for how does one even start to comprehend, yet alone explain, the divine?

I am, spiritually and culturally, a Maltese Catholic. That is a statement I do not take lightly. It is a statement that bears heavily on my creative life, and brings with it a series of challenges and responsibilities. It both shapes my music and at the same time is shaped by it, engaged as it were, in a constant dialogue that reveals more questions than answers. Personally, music is ultimately an interrogative act borne from doubt, and thus provides no answers save for the comfort of uncertainty. It might seem strange to find comfort in uncertainty, especially in a contemporary world that thrives on facile aphorisms, simplistic ideologies, and the isolationist comforts of individualism.

And yet an admission of ignorance and limitation is a superbly liberating act. The fact that I am able to expand my knowledge, and yet never understand the totality of the universe, is a wonderful gift. That is the poetry of Genesis: humanity is endowed with curiosity and the capacity to ask questions, and crucially, the ability to err. Music is the means by which I am able to ask some of those questions, even if I may never arrive at an answer. Perhaps someone else listening to my question might one day come closer to an answer. Perhaps

I have also erred more than I thought, in which case may my errors be forgiven and serve as a cautionary tale for others to do better.

Nor do I seek spiritual detachment or ‘art for art’s sake’ – because even the greatest of hermits broke their isolation when occasion called it. If Saint Anthony Abbot could break his solitude when too many disciples gathered near his abode, or when he was called to Alexandria to refute Arius, then there is no reason that a simple musician should seek creative solitude. For if the actual creative act of writing music can be terrifyingly solitary, the path leading to that solitude and the aftermath of that creative act demand company. The act of listening is in and of itself a two-way act, one that presupposes an external event with which you engage, and faith, like music, is also an act of listening.

Thus the question ‘What is the divine substance of music?’ ceases to be simply a rhetorical question, and instead becomes a dialogue between what is human and what is divine. It is both an act of assertion and of submission. In a Catholic context it embodies the uniqueness and oneness of God, whilst embracing a plurality of expression to try and understand the nature of God. It is that plurality of expression that I shall explore, using my own music as an aural and spiritual diary to map out the journey so far, and the questions raised along the way.

What is ‘sacred music’?

The question of what constitutes ‘sacred music’ is one that defies definitions and categories, and I shall not attempt to give any definitive answer to it. Instead, I will limit my answer to what I consider to be ‘sacred music’ – i.e. music whose intended purpose is to elevate human thought towards the divine, whilst acknowledging that the definition of ‘divine’ is of itself subjective. It is also music that does not depend on the composer’s own convictions or experience, but rather transcends those human limitations to offer something greater and far more edifying.

There is a misconception that holy men produce great sacred art. Nothing could be further from the truth, not only because the gendering of art is a self-defeating exercise, but also because from my experience, great art is borne from human frailty and imperfection. In short, pious men make dull art. It is not the intensity of one’s faith that determines the sincerity of one’s art, but rather the level of certainty in one’s beliefs. The more one questions one’s own faith, the more sincere those questions are.

So can saints produce great art? Indubitably, and there are plenty of examples. Saint Hildegard of Bingen, one of the sharpest and most inquisitive minds of European history, wrote some of the most incredible music to have survived from the early Middle Ages. A few centuries later, Saint Francis of Assisi, whose personal journey is one of the great achievements of humanity, wrote some incredibly beautiful poetry that still has the power to move us today. Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Philip Neri, Saint Alphonsus de Liguori, Saint John Henry Newman, Saint Theresa of Avila, Saint John of God, et al – a long list of saints whose personal journeys full of trials and tribulations, produced creative expressions of the divine.

But even longer is the list of artists whose lives were not always great models of Christian virtue but nevertheless produced incredible sacred works that managed to strengthen the faith of generations long after they were made. Few would remain unmoved by Mozart's (1756–91) great setting of the Requiem Mass, but how to reconcile the profundity of that religious work with his very ribald letters and also some very scatological canons? Are Carlo Gesualdo's (1566–1613) Holy Week responsories any less moving knowing that he murdered his wife and her lover and got away with it by virtue of being an aristocrat? And are the sacred works of Thomas Weelkes (1576ca-1623) not sacred because he was a "noted and famed for a comon drunckard (*sic*) and notorious swearer & blasphemmer"?¹

One might argue that these composers lived at a time when Christianity still held sway over European cultural life, and that from the 19th-century onwards composers were less inclined to engage with it, especially mainstream composers. And yet, even a self-proclaimed atheist like Berlioz (1803–69), who stalked a woman only to end up in an abusive marriage with her, not only wrote the superb *Grande Messe des Morts*, but also considered it his most treasured and greatest work.² There are more examples from the 19th and 20th-century of composers who underwent profound spiritual transformations such as Liszt, Rachmaninoff, and Poulenc. And closer to our times the music of Arvo Pärt, James MacMillan, and Marco Frisina have all explored different facets of the divine in music.

1 Brown, David. *Thomas Weelkes: A Biographical and Critical Study* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969).

2 Hector Berlioz, *The Life of Hector Berlioz as Written by Himself in His Letters and Memoirs*, trans. Katharine F. Boulton (London: Macmillan and Co., 1884), 288.

The above list is a simple cursory glance at a long tradition of sacred music within a Catholic context, and written by composers of wildly differing backgrounds and religious convictions. To approach sacred music as a composer is to be aware of this long tradition, to challenge it, and to nurture it. Nor is this list exhaustive – it is but a very subjective (and also incomplete) list of musical works which have informed and shaped my own musical language.

Sacred Art in the Contemporary Catholic Church

It is also important to examine sacred music in the context of the contemporary world I operate in, especially within the Maltese context which continuously shapes my musical language. We are living in extraordinary times, where the tension between the old and the new is reaching a point of rupture. The Catholic Church is no exception to this tension. So how does one give expression to the sacred at a time when the Catholic Church herself is at the crossroads? What is more sacred, the neo-Baroque figures of Roberto Ferri's *Via Crucis* in Noto Cathedral, or the abstract reliquary for the Crown of Thorns designed by Sylvain Dubuisson for Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris? Once again, to take any one side is to diminish the possibilities of art.

I am also aware that these examples are taken from the world of visual sacred art, but the same parallels apply to sacred music. The question here becomes even more complicated because 'sacred' is not the same as 'liturgical.' Simply put, just because a song mentions 'Jesus,' it does not make it sacred. Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* repeats the word 'Hallelujah' 27 times, whilst the Easter Vigil Mass uses it around 6 times (around 12 if you consider musical repetitions). Only one of these examples is 'sacred.' Words alone are not a criteria for sanctity.

The matter of style and expression is also important. The post-conciliar liturgy has given rise to many varied forms of 'sacred' music, some of which I (along with many others) consider excessive, distracting, and more concerned with personal fulfilment than worship. Many traditionalists, and to a lesser extent even moderates, look upon these musical expressions with horror and disdain, considering them modern aberrations that have nothing to do with the liturgy. And yet, nostalgia makes for a terrible companion. Popular expressions of music have always found their way into the liturgy and/or popular devotions. The *lauda* from Renaissance and early Baroque Italy is a prime example. What differs is the approach – popular expression was not meant to replace more 'serious' liturgical music, and even so, 'serious' music could indulge in excesses that have periodically had to be reined in by ecclesiastical authorities.

It is worth looking at *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that emerged from the Second Vatican Council II.³ The Sixth Chapter is dedicated to sacred music and bestows upon music a value ‘greater even than that of any other art.’ Whilst it is true that it encourages congregational singing, it also promotes choral singing, musical instruction, and most importantly high quality music. It also confirms plainchant as the most appropriate form of sacred music, ‘but other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations, so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action.’ The exhortation to offer simpler music (and music instruction) to smaller churches and communities is not an act of musical iconoclasm, but simply a confirmation of what the Church had done for centuries: promoting various forms of musical expression in accordance with the liturgical or devotional action in question.

That this document should have been interpreted in such liberal ways as to allow all forms of excesses remains one of the greatest challenges of sacred music today. A viral clip of an Ash Wednesday Mass at Cologne Cathedral with wildly atonal singing encapsulates the worst of such excesses.⁴ The unforgiving arena that is social media has promoted many more such excesses involving sacred music borrowed from Evangelical mega-church culture, and secular popular culture. These are extreme examples, but unfortunately ones which endure in the popular imagination.

Although ordinary liturgies do not indulge in such excesses, I have personally experienced more than my fair share of terrible sacred music, ranging from the comic to the downright tragic. I have been to masses where the liturgical music was in the form of American country music worship songs. Other Masses have included terrible orchestral and choral renditions of bad 19th-century music, out of tune singing, and terrible guitar playing. Whatever the genre was, they all had one thing in common – poor quality. Whether it was in the craft of composition, the competence of the performers, the appropriateness of the text, or the sincerity of intention, they all lacked quality.

Why does this matter, especially to the composer? At the 6th edition of the *Concert with the Poor* at the Vatican on 6 December 2025, Pope Leo XIV

3 Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), December 4, 1963, chap. 6, accessed March 1, 2026, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

4 CatholicCheck (@catholiccheck) *New Sacred Music for Ash Wednesday*, accessed March, 1, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/reels/DT0j6XKiI6H/>

spoke at length on the divine beauty of music, and its role within the Church, describing it as “...a bridge that leads us to God...capable of transmitting feelings, emotions, even the deepest stirrings of the soul, lifting them up and transforming them into an imaginary stairway connecting earth and heaven.”⁵ This noble sentiment places a great burden on the composer of sacred music, as sacred music demands total commitment to divine beauty and artistic honesty. All of the above weighs heavily on my creative output. For the sake of clarity, I shall divide my ‘sacred’ output into three main categories: liturgical works, devotional works, and concert works with a sacred subject. I shall examine each one, and illustrate with examples of how musical gestures and techniques can help us to ask that initial question: ‘what is sacred music?’

Liturgical Music: *The Tenebrae Responsories*

The strictly liturgical output is perhaps the smallest one, simply because I have always resisted (for various personal reasons) any attachment to any one church. My approach to liturgical music has always been to put the liturgical needs before the artistic ones. That does not mean that new liturgical music has to succumb to pastiche or poor quality. Liturgical music can be accessible, well crafted, and above all, beautiful. I have always looked back at the long tradition of sacred music for inspiration. Plainchant, Renaissance polyphony, the Baroque idiom, and the harmonic language of more recent composers like Francis Poulenc and Arvo Pärt, have all been sources of inspiration.

I will cite as an example my *Tenebrae Responsories for Holy Thursday* (2023),⁶ written for the male choir *Cappella Sanctae Catharinae*⁷ and first performed at the Jesuits’ Church in Valletta in 2023. This work was written specifically as a liturgical piece, and follows the Tridentine Rite. It is a liturgy that is replete with meaning, with the slow descent into total darkness (with the exception of one candle symbolising Christ), being central. The responsories, sung after each of the nine readings, reflect on key passages of the Passion narrative. The approach to these responsories was influenced by Renaissance polyphony,

5 Linda Bordoni, “Pope Leo: ‘Music Is Like a Bridge That Leads Us to God,’” *Vatican News*, December 5, 2025, accessed 1 March, 2026, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-12/pope-leo-concert-with-poor-music-christmas-vatican.html>

6 Alexander Vella Gregory, *Tenebrae Responsories for Maundy Thursday*, United Music Publishing Ltd. 2023.

7 *Cappella Sanctae Catharinae*, Malta’s only all-male choir, was founded in 2009. I am proud to have been a founding member, as well as its Artistic Director.

with the text taking precedence over the music. The works of Da Victoria and Gesualdo, with which I was already familiar, provided a musical point of reference. The two most important elements taken from this type of polyphony are the musical gestures that enhance meaning (what is sometimes referred to as ‘word painting’) and the phrasal treatment of the text whereby each new phrase invites a new musical phrase.

The liturgical text, and underlying message, is highlighted through various musical means. The opening of the fifth responsory *Judas Mercator Pessimus* (Judas, the Most Vile Merchant) (Fig.1), which narrates the moment Judas betrays Christ with a kiss, makes use of a low pedal note on basses, with a semitonal figure treated in imitation in the other voices on the word ‘Judas.’ This builds up to an unexpected harmonic change (moving from the initial D minor to an E-flat minor chord) on the word ‘pessimus’ (most vile), and then rounded off with an angular unison phrase on ‘*osculo petiit Dominum*’ (‘he asked for the Lord with a kiss’). The opening phrase thus moves through three different textures: polyphony, homophony, and unison, whilst at the same time contains angular melodic lines and sudden harmonic shifts, reflecting the turbulent episode.

The image displays a musical score for the opening of *Judas Mercator Pessimus*. It consists of two systems of staves for Tenor (T.), Baritone (Bar.), and Bass (B.).

First System:

- Tempo:** $\text{♩} = 50$
- Lyrics:** Ju - das mer-ca-tor pes - si-mus,
- Annotations:**
 - Semitone Motif:** A box highlights the first two notes of the Baritone part.
 - Pedal Note:** A line under the Bass part indicates a sustained note.
 - Harmonic Change:** A line under the Bass part indicates a change in harmony.

Second System:

- Lyrics:** os - cu-lo pe-tiit Do - mi-num: il - le ut a-gnus in -
- Annotations:**
 - Unison Statement:** A box highlights the first four notes of the Tenor part.

Fig. 1: Opening of *Judas Mercator Pessimus*

The second example is the Responsory Verse of the 8th responsory *Una Hora* (One Hour) (Fig. 2). The verse opens with ‘*Quid dormitis?*’ (‘Why are you asleep?’), as Christ praying in the Garden of Olives senses the approach of Judas and the arresting party. Firstly, the musical motif used is an inversion of the opening motif of the responsory (not shown), which in turn is taken from a setting of the same text by Tomas Luis da Victoria. This is then countered with a rapid rhythmic rising phrase on ‘*surgite et orate*’ (‘wake up and pray’). This treatment of the words is closer to early Baroque polyphony, in particular Monteverdi. The rhythmic contrast between the two motifs helps to highlight the inherent tension in the narrative.

The musical score is for a Responsory Verse of *Una Hora*. It consists of three parts: T. (Tenor), Bar. (Baritone), and B. (Bass). The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The score begins at measure 44. The Tenor part (T.) has a 'Rhythmic Motif' highlighted in a box, consisting of a sequence of eighth notes: sur-gi-te, sur-gi-te, et. The Baritone part (Bar.) has an 'Inversion of Opening Motif' highlighted in a box, consisting of a sequence of eighth notes: sur-gi-te, sur-gi-te, et. The Bass part (B.) has a 'Rhythmic Motif' highlighted in a box, consisting of a sequence of eighth notes: Quid dor-mi-tis?. The lyrics for each part are: T. sur-gi-te, sur-gi-te, et o-ra-te. Quid dor-; Bar. sur-gi-te, sur-gi-te, et o-ra-te. sur-gi-te, sur-gi-te; B. Quid dor-mi-tis? sur-gi-te, sur-gi-te, et o-ra-te.

Fig. 2: Responsory Verse of *Una Hora*

Perhaps the question here is: why bother with such detail? Why not simply have a nice melody and a few simple chords? Well, precisely because ‘nice’ and ‘simple’ are not words one would use to contemplate the complexity of the Passion narrative. If the inherent message of the liturgy is profound, music needs to reflect that profundity. That is not to say that the listener is meant to analyse or even be aware of these details. What matters is the overall experience. A well written piece of liturgical music is the same as a good sacred icon, or a well designed church – it is a medium to facilitate and enhance the ritual.

Devotional Works: *Vita Beatae Mariae Virginis*

Devotional works are those that deal with a sacred subject, but are not for strict liturgical use (even if some of them, or parts thereof, can serve a liturgical purpose). These are works whose performance is still intended for sacred contexts and spaces, but can also be performed in non-sacred contexts. Because there are no liturgical requirements or restrictions, these are works that allow for greater musical flexibility, but always remain sensitive towards the underlying theology and any associated popular traditions.

One such work is the cantata *Vita Beatae Mariae Virginis* (The Life of the Blessed Virgin) (2023), for three sopranos and organ.⁸ This cantata was written for the inauguration of the restoration of the Oratory of the Onorati at the Jesuits’ Church in Valletta in 2024. This 17th-century Oratory is home to a cycle of seven large canvases showing the life of the Virgin Mary by Maltese painter Stefano

8 Alexander Vella Gregory, *Vita Beatae Mariae Virginis*, United Music Publishing Ltd. 2023.

Erardi. This pictorial cycle forms the basis for this cantata, which is divided into seven movements each reflecting on the seven narrative episodes (Fig.3). Each movement consists of the Antiphon to the Magnificat taken from the liturgy of the feasts represented in the paintings. The work can be performed as a whole, or individual antiphons can be used for the respective Marian feasts.

	Marian Feast	Antiphon
I	Immaculate Conception	<i>Hodie egressa est virga</i>
II	Nativity of the Virgin	<i>Nativitas tua Dei genitrix</i>
III	Presentation of the Virgin	<i>Beata Dei genitrix Maria</i>
IV	Annunciation	<i>Gabriel angelus locutus est</i>
V	Visitation	<i>Beatam me dicent omnes</i>
VI	Purification	<i>Hodie beata virgo Maria</i>
VII	Assumption	<i>Hodie Maria virgo caelos ascendit</i>

Fig. 3: Structure of *Vita Beatae Mariae Virginis*

Once more the work employs several musical gestures that help to give each movement structure and meaning. Chief among these is the prominent use of the melodic interval of a Perfect 5th in the vocal lines. This interval occupies a singular place in music history, forming the basis of many tuning and scale systems, as well as a foundational interval of medieval *organum*. Melodic intervals, particularly the ‘perfect’ intervals also held a special place in the concept of *musica mundana* where the planets moved in the same harmonic ratios as musical intervals. The use of this interval thus becomes an aural symbol of divine harmony, and indeed it opens the whole work (Fig. 4). The antiphon *Hodie Egressa Est Virga* (Today a Branch Has Come Forth), used for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, starts with a single pitch pedal point on the organ from which emerges an ascending Perfect 5th in the opening vocal line – a musical rendition of Mary’s ‘immaculate conception.’ This interval is used prominently elsewhere, including an inversion of this interval in the fourth antiphon *Gabriel Angelus* (The Angel Gabriel) (Fig. 5). This antiphon belongs to the feast of the Annunciation, and the use of a descending Perfect 5th symbolises the mystery of the incarnation through Gabriel’s message – God is descending on Earth through the Virgin Mary’s acceptance of her mission.

Alexander Vella Gregory

Andante libero
♩ = 60

Soprano I

Ho - di - e e - gres - - sa est

Perfect 5th Motif

Organ

Pedal Point

Fig. 4: Opening of *Hodie Egressa Est Virga*

Lento e molto libero
♩ = 40

Soprano I

Soprano III

Ga - - bri-el

Inverted Perfect 5th

Organ

Fig. 5: Opening of *Gabriel Angelus*

The use of various numerical devices to structure the antiphons is another way of expressing theological concepts. The Marian narrative presented by the

Church, and transmitted through countless works of art, is that of a divine plan, not a random series of acts. Thus structure becomes an integral part of the work's spiritual dimension. One of the numerical devices employed is that of the Fibonacci sequence. The structure of the first antiphon *Hodie Egressa Est Virga* follows the Fibonacci sequence in its arrangement of bars (Fig. 6). This sequence has been much debated, and there is a risk of mythologising the importance and function of this mathematical sequence (and the accompanying Golden Ratio) in works of art. Certainly, the original paintings make use of ratios in the composition that align with those of the Golden Ratio (Fig. 7). However, we are not to construe any form of mystical or even esoteric meaning. Whether they are in a musical or visual context, they serve only to reinforce the concept of divine harmony, and not to conceal any mystical meaning.

Bar No.	No. of Bars	Text
1	1 bar	(no text)
2	1 bar	Hodie
3	2 bars	Egressa est virga
5	3 bars	De radice
8	5 bars	Jesse
13	8 bars	Hodie sine ulla peccati labe Concepta est Maria
21	13 bars	Hodie contritum est ab ea Caput serpentis antiqui, Alleluia!
34	21 bars	Doxology

Fig. 6: Structure of *Hodie Egressa Est Virga*

