

Music from before the dawn of time

It would seem that there is an innate human instinct to put the most important aspects of life to song. Every religion and culture has always enshrined its fundamental truths and vision in poetry which, nearly always, was likewise sung. And so, Homer gave us his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as Virgil (in imitation of his Greek forerunner) gave us his *Aeneid*. That tradition was carried on in the Christian era as well with The *Divine Comedy* of Italy, the *Chanson de Roland* of France, *El Cid* of Spain, and *Beowulf* of England. If any African out there has samples of poetry or sung versions of tales and sagas from their local traditions, please feel free to share them.

As 21st century, cosmopolitan, young professional, Catholic Christians in contemporary Africa, this might be a good time to ask ourselves some pertinent questions about our current cultural situation: Which cultural roots do we subscribe to? Are we aware of and proud of our local languages or the cultural backgrounds we hail from? What is our attitude towards ancient musical traditions that arose before we were born? In the global world we are currently immersed in, is there a type of music we can identify that transcends our cultural boundaries; e.g. one that would appeal equally to a young person in Nairobi, Tokyo, Oslo, New York and Ouagadougou? Is there in other words, a type of music we could tap into that, so to speak, ‘arose before the Dawn of Time’? What is that category of music that some people have come to call ‘World Music’ and if it is a genuine category, what is its connection to the music of the Universal Church? What ingredients go into making up ‘universal music’?

In his 1995 book *A New Song for the Lord*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (future Pope Benedict XVI) describes the splitting of music culture in the modern age and where he sees church music in the midst of it:

“The difficulties that art has gotten into through the complete secularization of culture are becoming particularly clear in the area of music. Like any other cultural expression, music always had different levels, from the unsophisticated singing of simple people, which is nevertheless genuine in itself, to the highest artistic perfection. But now something completely new has occurred. Music has split into two worlds that hardly have anything to do with each other anymore. On the one hand there is the music of the masses, which, with the label “pop” or popular music, would like to portray itself as the music of the people. Here music has become a product that can be industrially manufactured and is evaluated by how well it sells. On the other hand, there is a rationally construed, artificial music with the highest technical requirements which is hardly capable of reaching out beyond a small, elite circle. In the middle between these two extremes we find music that is capable of staying at home in the familiar music that preceded such divisions; music that has touched the person as a whole and is still capable of doing this even today. It is

understandable that church music mostly settles in this middle ground. But since the Church, after all, is living in this age it was inevitable that she also try her hand at the two opposing spheres of today's cultural schizophrenia."

Ratzinger rightly sees pop music as "industrially manufactured," and driven primarily by sale potential. He adds that church music, rightly understood, should be neither pop nor elite. A more familiar term that has traditionally been used to describe this "middle ground" kind of music is "folk". Church music, at its very organic base, is folk music. Perhaps the first impression that may cross the mind of a typical Kenyan who hears word "folk" is that genre of music we have come to refer to – in Kenya at least – as *Zilizopendwa* and that has come to be popularized by choral groups like *Kayamba Africa* and *Kenya Boys Choir*. At any rate, the term folk music generally refers to the music "of the people"; *kawaida* guys e.g. the people in the pew. Folk music is "kawa" music; accessible, cultural and participatory.

The season of Lent calls us to spiritual renewal. We could also add that as a season, Lent could also be the most favorable time to ask ourselves whether or not music plays a role in this process of self-renewal—as individuals and as a culture. The word Lent itself comes from the Middle English word *lente*, meaning "springtime," which is itself descended from the Old English *lencten*. In Latin, the word for Lent is *Quadragesima*, which means "Fortieth". Quadragesima makes reference to the 40 days Jesus spent fasting in the desert and enduring temptation by Satan. The Swahili word *Kwaresima* is based on this Latin root.

During this penitential season, the Catholic Church, for some strange reason tends to typically fall back on ancient songs—on songs that seem to have been composed from "before the dawn of time". We sing simple yet enchanting songs like *Attende Domine, Media Vita, Vexilla Regis, Stabat Mater* and many others based originally on monastic hymns or melodies from ordinary folk. There is something ancient and folkloric about the season of Lent itself—something the modern world is either unaware of or allergic to, or both. During Lent, we do away with embellishment and embroidery. We strip not only our altars but our bodies back to their bare-bone basics. During Lent, we seek to reconnect with God and deepen our faith through self-examination, prayer and intentional reading of scripture. Lenten music seeks to do the same when it reconnects us with the ancient music of the church through plainsong, or plainchant.

Most ancient songs are typically plainchant or what we commonly call "Gregorian chant". In reality, Gregorian chant is anything but plain, except in the sense that its beautiful melodies are meant to be sung unaccompanied and unharmonized, as befits the ancient monastic culture out of which they sprang. What we call Gregorian chant is one of the richest and most subtle art forms in Western music—indeed, in the music of any culture. The tradition of chanting Scripture, a practice

known as *cantillation*, began at least 1,000 years before the birth of Christ. Various Old Testament books, especially the Psalms and the Chronicles, testify to the central function of music in temple worship. Some Gregorian melodies still in use are remarkably close to Hebrew synagogue melodies.

Chants focus more on the meaning of words and their corresponding melody than on their rhythm and harmony. The foundation of the chant was the daily *lectio divina* reading of Holy Scripture, which was an intrinsic part of the religious life. The purpose was not to read at length, but in depth.

A short passage is selected, often from the Psalms or the Gospel. The practice may be done alone or with a group. At first it is necessary to read the chosen lines slowly and carefully a number of times. If this is done silently, the words are repeated to oneself almost syllable by syllable ... interpretations and applications arise in the mind, and are then either spoken aloud or reflected upon inwardly. As familiarity with the passage increases, the reader is led, more and more, to an experience of prayer... the reading begins to affect the heart, the deepest seat of the emotions. It takes on more of the quality of a direct encounter with God or Christ.

Katharine Le Mee; *Chant, The Way Chant is Sung*.

For those who seek to sing God's praises, the *self* must be set aside in order to create a space for God—the Wholly Other. This becomes very difficult in a culture which sets such a high value on creativity (understood narrowly here as an exercise in *self-expression*), individuality, and originality, particularly when it comes to music. Whenever liturgical music becomes an extension of the *self*—whether as an expression of personal taste or a demonstration of virtuosic talent—it ceases to serve its higher purpose.

Pop music is not folk music. In its original sense, folk music was the musical expression of a clearly defined community held together by its language, history and way of life, which assimilates and shapes its experiences in song—the experience of God, of love and sorrow, or birth and death, of communion with nature, etc. The music that tops the charts on Spotify or on our social media feeds is completely different from the music of that community bound together for life which produced folk music in the old and original sense. The masses as such do not know experiences first-hand; they only know reproduced and standardized experiences. Mass culture is geared to quantity, production and success; not transcendence or the worship of the Wholly Other.

To quote Ratzinger one last time, “Only when one sets aside personal tastes and desires for self-expression or recognition does one gain the authentic freedom necessary to ‘uncover the song that lies at the base of all things’”. Music does indeed play a role in our self-renewal. It does this by uncovering the buried way to the heart; to the core of our being, where it touches the being of the Creator who lives beyond time. Whenever this is achieved, e.g. during a well-lived season of Lent, music becomes the road that leads to Jesus, *The Way* on which God reveals his salvation.