

Angel Voices

by former Archbishop **Rowan Williams**,
former President of the RSCM

Parish A has a smallish robed choir, mostly female and over 55; they do a solid job in holding the singing together, and like to perform a small anthem or a faintly ambitious worship song during Holy Communion. Parish B has an active, skilled and enthusiastic music group, who will provide comprehensive wallpaper for any service you care to name. What they have in common is that it wouldn't occur to either of them to sing what used to be called the Ordinary of the Mass - the Gloria, Creed, Sanctus and Agnus. Parish A know that their congregation is seriously unadventurous in musical matters; and they don't much like the one or two settings they've heard at big diocesan events. Parish B, if the question ever arises, would think that singing the Sanctus was one of those odd high church thingies that put ordinary people off coming to worship.

The old-style Sung Eucharist - hymns plus [Merbecke](#) ([Martin Shaw](#) for the bold) was a fairly widespread phenomenon in the fifties and sixties; but its modern equivalent isn't all that easy to find. The shrinkage or demise of robed choirs, the extraordinary explosion of new 'worship resources' in music and the evolution of a new common language (ecumenical and cross-party) through choruses, the difficulty in finding a good musical vernacular for new translations (and, let's be candid, the lethally unmusical nature of a lot of the new standard texts for the Ordinary) - all these have combined to produce a situation where, in a lot of churches, you can be absolutely sure of never hearing a sung Sanctus. After what is still one of the most (properly) extravagant and imaginative passages in the liturgy, evoking heaven's outpourings of praise, we break into murmured and embarrassed prose. Shouldn't we find this a bit more strange than we do?

Well, there are ways of handling this and some suggestions that can be made. But I want to pause in order to make a general point. The Gloria and the Sanctus are expressions of simple and other-directed praise (the little penitential inserts into the Gloria don't change the sense and rhythm of the whole). What's more, they both allude to scriptural events in which the worship of heaven and the worship of earth come together - the angels of the nativity and the seraphs of Isaiah's vision. They are points at which that theme so dear to Eastern Orthodox Christians comes through in our more restrained Western style - that our worship, above all in the Eucharist, sets us in heavenly places, gives us a part in '[that celestial choir](#)' which John Mason writes about in a hymn that is, interestingly, finding a new popularity.

So they should be a reminder of the underlying fact of all worship: it takes place in Christ. We are enabled to occupy the same spiritual territory as Jesus, to pray with his words ('Our Father'); but in this transfiguring reality we also share the outpouring of creation's praise, channelled through Jesus and his sacrificial offering to God the Father. Something is missing if we let go of the allusions here. The angels singing to the shepherds are announcing the event that will open heaven for us. The seraphs in Isaiah are the instruments both of eternal praise and of earthly vocation: the vision of glory is what makes mission happen. Without this, our worship is actually secularised, however much we go on with words about the wonderfulness of God and how warmly we feel towards him. It becomes something we do in an effort to lift ourselves to God, not the expression of God's life lived in us, or of the overwhelming Godward 'tide' of all reality, visible and invisible, reflecting God's glory.

Now I know this is a long way from the parishes I started with and from the bread and butter decisions about music lists. But there are times when I sense that the decline in enthusiasm for singing the Ordinary mirrors uncomfortably a level of muddle or unconfidence about worship itself - almost a desire not to be interrupted too sharply by the stark facts of God's priority and the rather secondary character of what we might be feeling about him or ourselves when we stand in the fact of his active and overflowing glory.

There's a catch, of course. What kind of music could possibly be adequate to this? I don't know; but I have some sympathy with the instinct of [Ronald Knox](#), who wrote, decades ago, that the best register for the Sanctus at least was hushed amazement. Singing of God's glory needn't be an attempt to do the impossible and sound like angels (what do angels sound like, anyway?); we can only try to mark a pause, a moment that has some space around it. The three words dropping like stones, 'Holy: Holy: Holy' do their own work (God forgive the person who gave us the jolly little rhythm of 'Holy, holy,

holy Lord, God of power and might'; fine for 'Good King Wenceslas', but not here). The words themselves demand a slowing down, said or sung.

Said or sung; yes, of course we don't solve problems about our grasp of the essentials of worship just by singing rather than speaking. But the downgrading of the angels' songs by saying them and singing so many other things needs thinking about. These are the moments when we acknowledge that worship is not our achievement or our property; when we sing with the Church's voice (in earth and heaven) not just the voice of this group (or this music group).

What to do? My unreconstructed instincts say, 'Why not dust off [Merbecke](#) and [Shaw](#) once in a while?' I think it is a superstition that we shouldn't mix traditional and 'contemporary' language; and these two old faithfuls at least have proved themselves singable by ordinary congregations and offer what I called a 'vernacular' for the words. Everyone knows that you sing things you don't normally say - people know their musicals and their popular songs. And it is a bit odd to think that a modern chorus telling us to exalt and magnify the Lamb is any less peculiar to the person in the street than the Gloria of 1662 ... But I know this is in part nostalgia. I fully realise that we need to go on pressing for good and accessible fresh settings - though, as I have said, these are going to be hampered by the tinned quality of the official texts.

In which case - well, I think composers should be a bit freer with these official versions, and have a word with some people who can write better English. But there is another strategy which has some real virtue, and which is popular in a good few churches of very different traditions. This is to use metrical hymns or songs in place of the official versions. It is really to resurrect Luther's method of dealing with the Ordinary and the canticles; and a method that gave us *Grosser Gott, wir loben Dir* or *Wir glauben an der einen Gott* and *Dir Gott im Himmel Preis und Ehr* has quite a lot to be said for it. The danger is of plumping for hymns that have a mention of 'glory' or start with 'Holy', but don't have a lot else to do with the text (like the pleasant Latin American *Santo, Santo, Santo, mi corazon t'adora*, which is nice enough but is actually about how I feel rather than the seraphic vision). A good metrical selection of suitable verses and fresh compositions would be a great resource here.

But the main thing is to hang on to the conviction that some things in worship really need singing if only to recall us to the belief that we need to sing with the Church, with creation, visible and invisible, not just as ourselves, whether robed choir or music group. I can see the case for saying the creed, though I'd be very glad to argue against that case; and I wouldn't go to the stake for the Agnus. But the moments where we let ourselves open up to angel voices are the moments where we get to the heart of the matter, and we should take them as seriously - and as exhilaratedly, if that's a word - as we can.

from the December 2004 edition of Church Music Quarterly, the RSCM's magazine