

Join New Advent's Catholic mailing list! Start your FREE subscription today.

Visit [Catholic Freebies](#) to get free stuff for Catholics. [Click here.](#)

## Musical Instruments in Church Services

For almost a thousand years Gregorian chant, without any instrumental or harmonic addition, was the only music used in connection with the liturgy. The organ, in its primitive and rude form, was the first, and for a long time the sole, instrument used to accompany the chant. It gave the pitch to the singers and added brilliancy and sonority. In secular music, however, instruments played an important role at an early date. It may be said that instrumental music developed simultaneously with the secular music itself. The troubadours, trouveres, and jongleurs (who flourished in France, Italy, and Spain from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries inclusive), and their English contemporaries, the minstrels or wayfarers, as well as the minnesingers in Germany during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, accompanied their chants and lyric improvisations on instruments. Among these were a diminutive harp, which was laid on the table while being played, the fiddle, also called *vielle* or *viola* (prototypes of our violin), the very ancient *crwth*, *crowd* or *chrotta* (an instrument having originally three, but later five strings, now obsolete), and the hurdy-gurdy. The last two were more especially in use in Great Britain. Wind instruments, such as the flute in several forms, the trumpet, horn, sackbut (forerunner of our trombone), and others now obsolete were common with the wayfaring musicians. Instrumental music as an art, however, failed for a long time to gain the recognition of the educated and upper classes, chiefly because it served the purpose of the dance and mere entertainment almost exclusively, and also on account of the more or less vagabond character of most of its votaries. There was, nevertheless, constant progress both in the construction of the instruments and in a more and more widely-extended and skillful use of them. Princess maintained bands of musicians at their courts for their entertainments, and for giving zest and splendour to public festivities. Some of these early orchestras numbered as many as thirty or forty musicians. While it is certain that as early as the fifteenth century instruments besides the organ were used in connection with polyphonic liturgical compositions, it has not been definitely ascertained to what extent such was the case, what passages were played by the instruments alone, and where they simply reinforced the voices. The difficulty in determining the precise nature of instrumental co-operation with the voices is increased by the fact that in those days the text was applied by the composer to only one voice -- generally the *cantus*, or upper voice. In accordance with this model, the singers themselves applied the text to the other voices as they proceeded. At all events the instruments served at best only as a reinforcement or as substitute for the human voices and had no independent function in our modern sense. Furthermore, they were employed with sole reference to their pitch and not to their timbre, or tone quality. Thus, instruments of the violin family and flutes would play with the high voices, sopranos and altos, whereas horns and trombones were assigned to the tenor and bass parts. It was with the advent of monody (see Harmony) that the use of instruments in connection with the voices received a great impetus. The closely-knit, compact polyphonic structure which had predominated up to this time, needed no extraneous aid for its effectiveness and sonority. This was not the case with the new style of composition rapidly superseding the old school. It depended to a great extent for its tonal body and

### Cantate et Iubilate Deo

A Devotional and Liturgical Hymnal



#### [Cantate et Iubilate Deo: A Devotional and Liturgical Hymnal](#) Edited by Rev.

*James Socias*. This superb hymnal includes more than 80 musical pieces, both in English and Latin, from nearly every century of the Church's history. [More....](#)

artistic existence on the aid of instruments. The great perfection reached in the construction of stringed instruments in the sixteenth century was both a manifestation of, and an aid to the growing tendency; virtuosity, not only on stringed, but also on wind instruments was a common accomplishment. The character and individuality of the instruments, so to speak, were being made available as means of expression for the subjective moods, dramatic feelings, and conceptions of the composer.

While all this development had, up to the first half of the sixteenth century, served mainly secular purposes, it was through Ludovico Grossi da Viadana (1564-1627) that the use of instruments became more common in churches. While choirmaster in Mantua and in Venice, this master published his "Cento concerti ecclesiastici", compositions to sacred texts, for one or more voices and *basso continuo*, or figured bass played on the organ and supplemented by violins, bass viols, and wind instruments, a species of composition in vogue before his time. A contemporary of Viadana, Giovanni Gabrieli (1557-1612), choirmaster of St. Mark's, Venice, went a considerable step farther than any one before him. He wrote not only numerous works for voices and instruments, but created works for instruments alone, and discovered the principle of modern orchestration by doubling the voices in octaves and applying the same process to the organ and other instruments. Another event which was destined to exercise a momentous influence, not only on the growth of the use of instruments but also on the future development of liturgical music itself, was the birth of opera with the first performance (1594) of Jacopo Peri's "Dafne" in Florence. This new art form, originating as it did with the humanistic spirit of the time and being a return to the musical and literary ideals of antiquity which enthralled the cultivated classes of the day, soon gained an enormous popularity and completely overshadowed all previously accepted ideals in popular favour. It was but a short time before the spirit and forms of the theatre, instruments and all, found their way into the Church. While formerly the spirit and form of church music dominated secular music (mostly early secular melodies which have come down to us belonging to one or the other of the Gregorian modes) it was now the spirit, taste, and passions of the world as expressed in opera which were in the ascendancy and began to dominate the compositions to liturgical texts. It was natural that the people should like to hear in church the forms of composition which delighted them so much in the theatre. The severe simplicity of liturgical chant was set aside; polyphony was considered too formal and artificial. The spirit of universality animating them had to yield to the new style expressions of individual feelings enhanced by the sensuous charm of the instruments. That which was in accordance with the prevailing and growing taste of the generality was, if not desired, at least tolerated by those in authority, and there was no hindrance to the triumphal conquest by instrumental music which we have witnesses since.

New purely instrumental forms were developed and cultivated in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth in Italy, France, and especially in Germany, the most fruitful soil of all, until the symphony was evolved, through which the composer gives utterance to all the accompaniment of his first opera, "Dafne", used but a few instruments, namely, a harpsichord (one of the predecessors of our modern pianoforte), a lute, a *viola da gamba* (forerunner of our violoncello), an archlute, or lute of a larger size, and a triple flute, while Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) employed in his opera "Orfeo" the formidable number of thirty-six instruments, as follows: two *clavicembali* (another primitive form of the *pianoforte*), two *contrabassi*, ten *viola da brazza* (violins), one double harp, two *violini piccolini alla Raanese* (violins), two *organi di legno* (a sort of violin played or struck with the wood of the bow), three *bassi da gamba (celli)* four trombones, one *regale* (a portable organ with only one or two stops or registers), two *cornetti*, one *flautino* (small flute), one *clarino* (trumpet) and three *trombe sordine* (muted trumpets). While this was a formidable sonorous body, orchestration in our

present day sense, that is, the utilization of various instruments in accordance with their combination, with a view to the greatest variety of tone colour and sonority, was yet to be evolved. While Giovanni Carissimi (1604-74) in his oratorios, employs the instruments with more appreciation of their individuality than was manifested before him, it remained for his gifted pupil Alessandro Scarlatti (1657-1725), founder of the Neapolitan school, to establish the norm for the use of instruments, which remained unchanged for more than a hundred years. Scarlatti's orchestra for his oratorios and operas consisted of first and second violins, violas, violoncellos, basses, two oboes (from *hautbois*, "High wood" developed from the ancient *calamus*, "reed"; French, *chalmes*; German, *schalmey*), two bassoons (corresponding to the oboes in the lower octaves), and two horns. This combination of instruments was still in vogue in the time of [Haydn](#) and [Mozart](#), and was used in most of their works for the Church except that they sometimes added two flutes, two clarinets (woodwind instrument of ancient origin, so called on account of the resemblance of its tones to the high tones of the *clarino*, or trumpet), and two trumpets. In their operas and oratorios these and contemporary masters added *tympani* (kettledrums) and three trombones.

The instrumental idea gained such a firm hold that a very large proportion of all the music written for the Church was with orchestral accompaniment. At cathedral and other churches large orchestras were permanently endowed, many of which survive today, notably in Dresden, Breslau, Freiburg-in Baden, Munich, and Vienna. In innumerable other places, the world over, the orchestra, without being always present, would be called into service on festival occasions. Up to the middle of the nineteenth century it was considered by composers practically impossible to interpret musically the text of the Mass or requiem without calling to their aid all the resources and means of expression afforded by a complete orchestra. While [Beethoven](#), in his "Mass in C" and "Missa solemnis", as well as Cherubini in his numerous works to liturgical texts, does not go beyond the so-called classical orchestra, that is, first and second violins, violas, cellos, basses, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trumpets, trombones, and kettle-drums, Liszt and [Gounod](#) in addition to these also employed the *piccolo* (small flute), *contrafagotto*, or bassoon bass, the harp, cymbals, and *tuba* (a brass instrument serving as a bass to the trombone family). The extreme limit in instrumental tone display in modern times was reached, however, in Hector Berlioz's "Requiem Mass", performed (1837) for the first time in Notre Dame, Paris. In this work all previous efforts in the way of tonal manifestation are far surpassed. Besides an orchestra of one hundred and thirty instruments, including sixteen kettle-drums, the author employs in the "Tuba mirum" four separate groups of brass instruments, typifying the trumpets calling from the four corners of the earth on the day of the Last Judgment. With this work, the last word of a mind and age, which still believe but no longer adore, subjectivism finds its supreme manifestation, and the orchestra its most potent means of expression. The Church has never encouraged, and at most only tolerated, the use of instruments. She enjoins in the "Cæremoniale Episcoporum" that permission for their use should first be obtained from the ordinary. She holds up as her ideal the unaccompanied chant and polyphonic, *a capella*, style. The Sistine Chapel has not even an organ.

From time to time regulations have been issued governing the use of instruments and condemning existing abuses. In 1728 Benedict XII rebuked a community of Benedictine nuns in Milan for using other instruments than the organ during high Mass and Vespers. He also forbade the Franciscans to use any other instrument than the organ in their conventual churches. Benedict XIV in his encyclical "Annus qui nunc vertentem" (19 February, 1749) tolerates only the organ, stringed instruments, and bassoons. Kettle-drums, horns, trombones, oboes, flutes, pianos, and mandolins are prohibited. In

the "Regolamento" of 1884, flutes, trombones, and kettle-drums are permitted on account of the improved manner in which they are now used as compared with former times. In the name of Gregory XVI, the Cardinal-Vicar of Rome, Patrizi, prohibited (1842) the use of instruments in the Roman churches, with the exception of a few to be used in a becoming manner in accompanying the singing, and then only after permission had been secured from the proper authority. This order was renewed in 1856 by the same cardinal in the name of [Pius IX](#). [Pius X](#), in his "Motu proprio" on church music (22 November, 1903) in paragraph IV, says, "Although the music proper to the Church is purely vocal music, music with the accompaniment of the organ is also permitted. In some special cases, within due limits and with the proper regards other instruments may be allowed, but never without the special license of the ordinary, according to the prescription of the 'Cæremoniale Episcoporum'. As the chant should always have the first place, the organ or instruments should merely sustain and never suppress it. It is not permitted to have the chant preceded by long preludes, or to have it interrupted with intermezzo pieces", etc. Among those who have recently written, within the prescribed limits, works for voices and instruments for liturgical, are, I. Mitterer, G.J.E. Stehle, M. Brosig, Max Filke, George Zeller, L. Bonvin, S.J., C. Greith, F.X. Witt, P. Griesbacher, J.G. Meurerer, and J. Rheinberger. The present trend is, however, decidedly away from the instrumental idea and back to the purely vocal style. And it is recognized, and in many places acted upon, that the new version of the liturgical chant, proposed to the Catholic world by [Pius X](#), gains its full beauty and effectiveness only when sung without instrumental accompaniment of any kind.

Drutschek, *Die Kirchenmusic nach dem Willen der Kirche* (Ratisbon, 1897); Riemann, *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte*, II, pt. I (Leipzig, 1907); Jungmann, *Aesthetik* (Frieburg, 1886); Neff, *Geschichte der deutschen Instrumentalmusik* (Leipzig, 1902); Wooldridge, *The Oxford History of Music*, II (1905); Gietmann, *Musik-Aesthetik* (Frieburg, 1900).

JOSEPH OTTEN

Transcribed by Ferruccio Germani

*The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume X*  
 Copyright © 1911 by Robert Appleton Company  
 Online Edition Copyright © 1999 by Kevin Knight  
*Nihil Obstat, October 1, 1911.* Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor  
*Imprimatur.* +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York