

Singing Hymns to Mary

Musicians often feel a need, or receive requests from parishioners, to sing more hymns to Mary during the mass. The pressure can become intense particularly during the month of May, which is a month where we are encouraged in our devotion to Mary. One noted writer on Liturgy, Dr. Elaine Render, posed the question “What does Mary’s role in salvation history have to do with the month of May? Perhaps it’s the association of Mary with springtime and flowers.”¹ I’m not even sure about a biblical association of Mary with springtime and flowers. But written in the northern hemisphere, one could even ask about the association for us here in the southern hemisphere, where May is the last month of Autumn and we will soon head into winter. However, we have feast days that are scattered throughout the year on days that have a long tradition, even if there is often no obvious logic to them. So, for whatever reasons, this is when we look at increasing our devotions to Mary. It is a strange position, as May sits entirely with in the season of Easter.

The critical issue for those of us who play music for mass is not to conflate our devotion to Mary with what occurs in our Sunday Liturgy. First and foremost, our mass is a celebration of Christ’s dying and rising again - a little “Easter” each week. The emphasis of our eucharist reflects what Jesus said to us in John 6:53-54 “I tell you most solemnly, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day.”² So when we choose music for mass, we need to focus on three things:

The first is that celebration of death and resurrection described above.

The second is the structure of what do as the people of God - we gather as one, we praise, we receive the word of God and offer our gifts; then we receive the body & blood of Christ, we give thanks and go out, again singing songs of praise.

Finally, wherever possible, our hymns should be in tune with the readings. In general, the first reading, the psalm, and the gospel are closely related. Call that the primary focus. The second reading runs largely through the letters of Paul’s well as some of the other Letters, such as James, and may be on a totally different theme.

With the exception of a few Sundays, notably the 4th Sunday of Advent and especially in Cycles B and C, Mary does not appear in a prominent position. So how do we deal with Marian hymns? The first thing to do is to look at the hymn and decide if it is a devotional hymn or not. As an example, one well loved hymn is Hail Queen of Heaven, the Ocean Star.³ It is clearly sung to Mary, asking for her intercession. As such, it needs to be avoided as hymn inappropriate for the eucharist, although it is perfectly fine for a devotional device to Mary. Save other devotional hymns for a similar purpose.

So how do we fit Mary into our Mass? As Dr Rendler asks, what is her role in salvation? That too is perfectly clear - Mary said a resounding “yes” when asked to be the mother of God. As such, she is to be our model for worship, saying yes to God coming to us. So the best choice of music is to sing Mary’s own song of praise, that beautiful text known as the Magnificat: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit exults in God my saviour....” There are numerous good settings of this. My particular favourite is “Mary’s Song” by Fr. Michael Joncas, of his collection “On Eagle’s Wings, but there are many others, including No. 550 in Gather Australia.

There are a few other hymns that are about Mary, rather than particularly directly devotional to her. “There is Nothing Told”, Gather Australia No. 548, by Fr. Christopher Willcock has various verses that resonate with readings where she appears (eg, vs. 4 about her part at the marriage feast at Cana), or “The Visit” by Sister Miriam Therese Winter, which complements the Gospel well on the 4th Sunday of Advent, Cycle C. For those who want an “oldie but a goodie” consider “The Angel Gabriel”, also known as “Gabriel’s Message” - play up to verse 3 on the 4th Sunday of Advent (Years B & C) but leave the last verse and play the full hymn at Christmas. You’ll find it in the old Catholic Worship book, No. 815. [As an aside, I have used the same traditional melody to create a setting to the other important Mary in the life of Jesus, Mary of Magdala, who was among the first to find the empty tomb at Easter, and according to the Gospel of John, the first to see Christ after he had risen. If you are playing on Easter day, it is one way to reflect on the journey that started at Christmas which is our salvation, and I’m happy to share copies.]

References:

1. *This Is The Day*, Elaine Render, OCP Publications, 1995.
2. *The Jerusalem Bible*, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd. and Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1966, 1967 & 1968.
3. *Gather Australia*, no. 547, Text John Lingard, NLMC Publications/GIA Publications, 1995