

Has Jazz a Place in the Church?

“WHY DO WE despise the things which are of our own time?” queried the Reverend Norman O’Connor, the Paulist priest whose remarkably successful WCBS-TV show, *Dial M for Music*, has now entered its second season. The question was inspired by pronouncements from Rome concerning Catholic liturgy. A Vatican spokesman, limiting the role of popular music in the mass, reported that until it took on a sacred nature, it could never be acceptable to the church. “But,” Father O’Connor added, “the possibility that this could be achieved was not ruled out.”

There is nothing new in contention over what is profane. “What music is religious? What music is not?” wrote Gabriel Fauré in 1922. “Because the text of the ‘Agnus Dei’ inspired Gounod to accents of ineffable tenderness, can one say he profaned the text? In the realm of truly musical works it is almost impossible to draw a line of demarcation between those which are religious and those that ‘savor of heresy.’”

“No mention of jazz,” Father O’Connor stated, “was made during that interview in Rome. The discussion revolved around what was meant by profane. I think a theological distinction is made here which is not based on reality, because everything relates to God, one way or another. And we don’t arbitrarily divide everything in our lives into categories. Things intertwine and relate. How, for instance, do you establish that in folk masses guitars are acceptable—but amplified guitars are not?”

Sentiment of this nature existed years ago concerning the use of electrified organs. Respectable churches used only pipe or reed organs. But eventually the Hammond was permitted, and today several types of inexpensive electronically amplified organs are heard. Many churches cannot afford the bigger ones, and the smaller kind are, in any case, appropriate for small churches. Generally speaking, people no longer recognize the difference; and, possibly, if an electric saxophone were played at the back of a church, few would be aware the sound did not come from the organ.

“Apart from the so-called profanity of certain instruments,” continued Father O’Connor, “there exists . . . in people’s minds a profanity by association. We may consider music profane because we are accustomed to hearing it in theaters or on TV. We think it inappropriate in church. Consider Gounod’s ‘Ave Maria.’

People were shocked at first to hear it in church because this was popular music. Yet it is commonplace now.”

If usage can undermine artificial barriers, then perhaps the trend today indicates that jazz masses, religious compositions by jazz composers, and jazz renditions of sacred music may not offend, shock, or even surprise much longer. A considerable amount of jazz-oriented music has already been written for the church. On records there have been Lalo Schiffrin’s *Jazz Suite on the Mass Texts* (RCA Victor LSP-3414;



Gene Krupa with Father O’Connor—“profanity by association.”

LPM 3414), the Joe Masters *Mass*, with liner notes by Father O’Connor (Columbia CS-9398; CL-2598), and, preceding these, Father Clarence Rivers’s *American Mass Program*, rooted in gospel music and featuring attractive themes—notably, the beautiful “God Is Love.” As early as 1964, innovator Mary Lou Williams’s *Hymn to St. Martin de Porres* (Folkways FS-32843; F-2843) was presented to an audience of several thousand at a Catholic Youth Organization festival in Pittsburgh.

Missa Hodierna, by Eddie Bonnemere, successfully accompanied the celebration of mass at the St. Charles Bor-

romeo Church in Harlem, and was part of a scheduled program at Town Hall which also featured Howard McGhee’s worship service, *Bless You*. A series of evening services, featuring contributions by jazz musicians, has been presented by Lutheran pastor John Gensel, who invited the Joe Newman Quartet, the Roland Kirk Quintet, the Dollar Brand Trio, and others to perform for his congregation. In Puerto Rico’s Union Church, on New Year’s Eve this year, a jazz vespers service which featured local musicians drew record crowds.

Duke Ellington’s *Sacred Concert* has inspired more comment and speculation than anything he has accomplished in a very long time. Ellington, who has a pronounced religious bias, considers this offering the most important thing he has done. It was first performed in San Francisco’s Episcopal Grace Cathedral in 1965 and then presented in New York’s Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. It has since been heard at Harvard University and in Coventry Cathedral, England, as well as in Great St. Mary’s, Cambridge.

BUT in Father O’Connor’s view, the *Sacred Concert* is not the answer to what ails religion today. What the churches seek desperately is participation on the part of the laity, a truer involvement. The search is for ways of putting religion back into people’s lives. “Perhaps jazz could effect this, but how long might it take to overcome existing barriers?” Father O’Connor asked. “. . . America contends with Puritanism. And there are our English traditions.”

Between the liturgy and life there is a gap to be bridged. People are urged to sing, to experience a sense of unity and identification in the mass. But how can they identify with a liturgy which relates so little to everyday existence? In a survey recently completed by *Ave Maria*, published by the Holy Cross Fathers of the University of Notre Dame, the consensus of 5,000 priests polled was that the question uppermost in people’s minds was how great a connection there is between religion and the lives people lead today.

“Despising ourselves and current modes is anti-Christian,” Father O’Connor stated. “Let’s not worship the past. Or scorn the present. The day-to-day can provide lots of beauty. Practicing religion and doing whatever is natural ought to equate if we are to preserve prayer as an important element in our lives.”

One of our problems is the old notion that, of all the arts, music comes closest to godliness and, as a consequence, has to show a purity and exaltation which takes it out of the sphere of the ordinary. This is not what music has been historically. On the contrary, it has been rich with folk traditions and the ways of

people. But for some time popular sentiment has agreed that, so far as religion is concerned, enjoyment would somehow be incompatible with loving God.

"Don't we kneel till it hurts?" Father O'Connor queried dryly. Pursuing the idea of involvement, he continued, "How can you accomplish this unless you prescribe things with which people relate? You can't involve human beings with things they don't do. They only commit themselves in areas natural to them. The liturgy should serve the community. Not vice versa."

The director of the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Diocesan Musical Commission said recently that "for the most part, musicians and composers have failed to provide meaningful musical expression for the man in the pew. True liturgy," he added, "has got to be an expression of the people in terms of their understanding and their aspirations."

"Duke Ellington," Father O'Connor mused, "might be able to produce the mass that is needed, if he put his mind to it. There would be problems, of course. He would have to consider that his themes might be sung by congregations numbering over a thousand—people generally deficient in musical education. He would need to familiarize himself with the mass act by act, scene by scene, in a sense. Preparation here, exaltation there, reverence and joy. It is just possible, I think, that his genius could fill the void."

The Constitution on the Liturgy which resulted from the Second Vatican Council contained recommendations that each section of the world create its own liturgical commission to make relevant decisions about practices appropriate to native cultures.

"Isn't jazz more native to America than any other music?" asked Father O'Connor. "There may be some who might feel rhythm ties up with an ethnic background with which they cannot identify. But, realistically speaking, who do we know today who has not been listening to syncopated music in the movies and on the air for most of his life? If this isn't American music, what is?"

"There is nothing irreligious in rhythm, nothing particularly ethnic. It's a gift from God, like everything else. It's enjoyed by people all over the world, an integral part of folk music which in the past has been a source of inspiration for some of our greatest composers."

Rhythm, as a lively element, has served Negro religion to good purpose. Significantly, too, religion has not failed Negroes in the same proportion as it seems to have failed whites. "There is," Father O'Connor pointed out, "a noticeable difference in the religious attitudes of Negro and white musicians." While the whites tend to adopt a humanistic viewpoint, crediting their talents, for

instance, to personal perseverance or parental supervision, Negroes are thoroughly aware of their relationship to God and almost frighteningly honest about the source of their gifts.

Dizzy Gillespie served as an example for Father O'Connor. "He is perfectly frank about recognizing God as the Being responsible for his inspiration. He welcomes this. Joe Williams is another. He once quoted me that phrase of John Kennedy's, 'We must be about God's task,' to explain how he felt about his voice and the job of communicating with people in a blues fashion. And behind quixotic Duke there is that tremendous spiritual bulwark which seems to give him so much confidence."

Father O'Connor recalled musician after musician whose makeup was influenced by a religious disposition. In many cases strong roots were there, and to this was added the gospel and church feel-

ing from which even the blues derive.

"Belief," Father O'Connor stated, "comes up in the most unexpected places. Even LeRoi Jones, as bitter as he gets, as sarcastic as he is about a white God, or lots of Gods, nevertheless talks in religious terms. So do Archie Shepp and Albert Ayler. I'm not referring necessarily to the way they address themselves to problems, but to their motivation and the strong religious traces they show. Take even Mingus. Speaking privately, he confesses religion to be the biggest thing in his life, something he can't escape."

In Father O'Connor's view, this is what is lacking in religion today—this sense of immediacy. "Perhaps jazz," he suggested, "could invest the liturgy with such elements of excitement and beauty that people's basic needs would be fulfilled. They might rediscover God."

—HELEN DANCE.

More Piper's Tunes

Over Here. Irish songs by Bernadette Greevy. Argo stereo, ZRG 5459, \$5.79; mono, RG 459, \$5.79.

I Must Be Talking to My Friends. Micheál MacLiammóir. Argo, mono only, RG 493, \$5.79.

FIFTEEN IRISH songs sung by Bernadette Greevy grace Argo's latest musical release from the Emerald Isle. The titles tell the story pretty well: "Wee Hughie," "She Moved Throu' the Fair," "The Ninepenny Fiddle," "Over Here," "By the Short Cut to the Rosses," "O Men From the Fields," "A Ballynure Ballad," "Cartan Mother's Lullaby," and "Sea Wrack." Some are lilting or sad; others done in

man of the house is dead. The words for this one are by Padraic Colum and the music is pure Irish lament. Another song absolutely first class is "Wee Hughie," about a small child going to school for the first time, the last stanza of which goes:

I followed to the turnin'
When they passed it by,
God help him he was cryin',
And, maybe, so was I.

On the whole this is an excellent recording if you like your Irish sentiment with all stops out. Miss Greevy's lyrical voice is perfect for this sort of thing.

The other Argo recording has no music in it at all, unless you can call prose by James Joyce and poetry by William Butler Yeats music, which they may well be. This one is a parade of breathless though not deathless words spoken by Micheál MacLiammóir, an actor and playwright known by now on both sides of the Atlantic. If Mr. MacLiammóir's quavering voice and intensely emotional rendering occasionally leaves its moorings, it is suited to the recitation of Yeats's lovely poetry and that marvelous section from *Ulysses* when Leopold Bloom contemplates with lust young Gertie MacDowell during a fireworks display, and she reciprocates and then hobbles away, lame, leaving Ulysses ashamed. When Mr. MacLiammóir is being too too self-consciously Irish you can have him, but the best readings in this unusual recording, *I Must Be Talking to My Friends*, easily outweigh the emoting.

—RICHARD L. TOBIN.



6/8 jig time. Some are accompanied on piano, some on harp, others by a small string background.

All of them are intensely Irish with not a touch of Americanization, thank goodness. Two of them, "The Lover's Curse" and "I Will Walk With My Love," reveal Irish hate at its most spiteful. The best of the lot, for me, is "O Men From the Fields," a plaintive ballad asking field hands to walk softly and come into the sod house gently for the