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Between heaven and earth: Beauty in Orthodox sacred music

James Chater
jmchater@gmail.com

Abstract

Orthodoxy has always been a theology of beauty. Human creativity is a response to the divine beauty manifested above all in the creation, which God declared "good," as it inspires us with awe and invites a eucharistic response. Creating beauty is part of our imitation of Christ. In liturgical services, the conjunction of music and text form an indissoluble and equal partnership serving the unfolding Logos. The kind of beauty that leads to prayer and transcendence is brought about by (among other things) silence (understood as *hesychia* or inner tranquility), correct breathing and frisson, understood as a physical reaction triggered by a sense of wonder similar to that experienced by the crowds who heard Christ's teaching.

Keywords

Beauty, Creation, Logos, silence, breath, frisson

Beauty of holiness

Orthodoxy has always been a theology of beauty. This motif runs like a golden thread through Judeo-Christian tradition, starting in scripture and continuing with the Church fathers and later with theologians, artists and intellectuals. The psalmist bids us to "worship the Lord in the beauty (or splendour) of holiness."[1] Likewise, when the ambassadors sent by St Vladimir, Prince of Kyiv, attended a service in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, they wrote:

1 Psalm 96:9. Bible quotations in this paper follow the King James Version. Many modern translations translate the Hebrew word *hadarah* as "splendour." The Septuagint version (Psalm 95:9) is rendered into English as: "Do obeisance to the Lord in his holy court." See, Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

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> We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendour or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty.[2]

God with us! Though unschooled in Christian doctrine, the witnesses present a powerful testimony of God's immanence.

Until recently, beauty in the context of Orthodox worship was discussed more extensively with regard to icons than music,[3] but this gap is now being rapidly filled.[4] In this paper I will try to say some more about what kind of beauty we should seek to achieve in sacred and liturgical music and how this can be done.

Given the relationship between beauty and creativity, the creation serves as a good point of departure. After each day, God looked on his creative act and pronounced it to be "good" and "very good."[5] The Septuagint uses the word *kalos*, which can be translated as "beautiful" or "good." Indeed, before the Fall, there is no distinction between beauty, goodness and truth. The primary response of creation, with humanity as its steward, is awe and wonder leading to gratitude. "How manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all," we sing at Vespers.[6] For Socrates, "wonder is only the beginning of philosophy."[7] But wonder is also the beginning of theology, the arts and sciences, and the more we advance in these fields, the greater our sense of wonder. Our "fear of the Lord," including our wonder and reverence, is the beginning of the wisdom we need to undertake any creative work.[8]

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2 Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 264. Original text found in the Russian Primary Chronicle.

3 Among the many writings concerning iconography, see especially Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. Steven Bigham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1996); Aidan Hart, *Beauty, Spirit, Matter: Icons in the Modern World* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2014); Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, trans. Anthony Gythiel and Elizabeth Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992).

4 The most substantial discussion of music styles of Orthodox sacred music is Nicolas Lossky, *Essai sur une théologie de la musique liturgique: perspective Orthodoxe* (Paris: Cerf, 2003), which can be read alongside the essays by Lossky's musical mentor, Maxime Kovalevsky, in *Retrouver la source oubliée: paroles sur la liturgie d'un homme qui chante Dieu* (Paris: Editions "Présence Orthodoxe," 1984). Other recent contributions include Ivan Moody, "Music, beauty and prayer," *JISOCM* 2 (2016): 51–6; Moody, "The Seraphim above: some perspectives on the theology of Orthodox church music," *Religions* 6 (2015): 350–64; Thomas Hopko, "Creativity and ascetiscism," *Psalm* 9, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 1–5; Damaskinos Olkinuora, "Orthodox chanters as divine instruments: Pseudo-Dionysios and beyond," in *Musikk og religion: Tekster om musikk i religion og religion i musikk*, eds. H. Holm and Ø. Varkøy (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2022), 183–200; Seppälä, *The Song of Fire and Clay: Perspectives of Understanding Orthodox Church Singing*, trans. Maria Takala-Roszczenko (University of Joensuu, 2005). Fr Michele Fortounatto's *Cours de Musicologie*, cited in Moody, "The Seraphim above," is not available at the time of writing, but see the website dedicated to Fortounatto's work, https://www.londonliturgy.com.

5 Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25. The Hebrew words are *tov* ("good") and *meod tov* ("very good"). In the Septuagint, the Greek word for "good," *kalos*, can also be translated as "beautiful".

6 Psalm 104:24.

7 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b: "It is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize."

8 One cannot consider creativity, and hence beauty, apart from wisdom, *Sophia*: Isaac Skidmore, "Beauty will save the Church," *In Communion* 60 (Spring 2011).

As many writers have already noted,[9] to worship God is to mystically join ourselves with the unseen spiritual orders (angels, cherubim, seraphim) in the unceasing worship round the throne of God, to capture in our music the reflection of his splendour and to offer it back to him in so far as we are able. The veil of the material world, which conceals the divine essences and shields us from the uncreated light, is also the instrument with which we can create the prayers and praises that reflect the divine beauty back to God. Because of the Fall we are unable to bear the uncreated light, which is why Isaiah was overwhelmed by his vision of God seated on the throne,[10] and why the apostles who accompanied Christ to the top of Mount Tabor fell to the ground at the moment of the Transfiguration.[11] Likewise, Moses was granted to see the glory of God passing by, but could see only his back, not his face.[12] To console us for not being able to behold him directly, God provides the sacraments and the beauty of the material world. The latter reflect God's grandeur and beauty in a filtered way that we are able to bear. We are called to lead creation in its eucharistic response to God's outpouring of energy and love, to be priests and creators. To imitate Christ, the creator of all things, is to follow the example of his creative acts.[13]

The Fall complicates this creative task. It brings compromise, dichotomies (whether true or false), divisions and trade-offs. At times, the Church has been confused about the nature of Christ, the material world he created, and therefore about beauty and creativity. The iconoclastic aberrations of the eighth and ninth centuries were repeated by the Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Beauty may be a name of God, but we fear it, sometimes too much. We are understandably wary, because we know that evil can take on an attractive form and deceive or tempt us, and that beauty can be exploited for commercial gain.[14] In the context of our liturgical services, we are often obliged to make trade-offs between beauty and pastoral considerations, such as the musicians' skills or congregational participation. If the musicians are unskilled, we can become discouraged, and many church musicians have developed a kind of learnt helplessness, whereby the aim of beauty is lost sight of, and the goal is simply to get through the services as efficiently as possible.

Also, we are not always in agreement about what beauty is or what kind of beauty we should aim to achieve. This can cause tensions, but there is a positive side to this, because it shows that beauty is an interactive principle. The vibrations of the divine beauty touch what is beautiful within us and cause it to reverberate in sympathy. Also, the beauty which we create will

9 Ivan Moody, "The Seraphim above," 355–6; David Melling, "The heavenly liturgy: our participation with the angels," *Sourozh* no. 102 (November 2005): 4–18. On the singing of the angels, see Seppälä, *The Song of Fire and Clay*, 27–61.
10 Isaiah 6.
11 Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36.
12 Exodus 33:18–23.
13 Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald Lowrie (San Rafael CA: Semantron, 2009). See esp. chapter 10, 225–50.
14 Anthony Bloom, *Beauty and Meaning* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2023), 36–7.

similarly touch those around us and solicit a sympathetic response. In other words, beauty is collaborative and relational, requires our participation, so really *does* exist in the eye—and ear—of the beholder.[15] God is the divine wooer, serenading us with his song.[16] Just as Orpheus allays the cruelty of Cerberus with his music before he can rescue his beloved Eurydice from the underworld,[17] God's beauty tames us more effectively than coercion or moralistic finger-wagging. To respond, we need to acquire purity of heart through ascesis even as we can address the aesthetics of liturgical arts. We can then respond as a community, achieving *religio*, a closer bond with God and with each other. This communion reflects the communion, the harmony, within the Holy Trinity.

Icons and music

Since the theology of beauty is relatively developed with respect to icons compared with music, it is useful to consider both what hymnography and icons have in common and how they differ. First, the similarities. Both not only are prayer but also provide an image of and a space for prayer and act as a window or ladder joining earth to heaven. This ladder, referred to in the Gospel reading for the Sunday of Orthodoxy, when icons are blessed, is Jacob's ladder,[18] symbolizing the connection between heaven and earth, which takes the form of descent (incarnation, kenosis) and ascent (theosis). Both icons and hymnography participate symbolically in the divine energy, whereby the invisible is made visible and the ineffable finds utterance, using respectively light and sound (both vibrations that convey energy) to allow the reality of God's kingdom to seep into the created world. By addressing the eye and the ear respectively, they allow us to pray not only with our mind but also with our spirit and body. And just as icons are integrated into the church architecture and furnishings in very specific ways, so the words and their musical settings are regulated in the various cycles comprising the ordo.

The main differences have to do with the fact that a musical piece is not an "object" in the same way an icon is. It is a blueprint in the mind of the composer, transmitted through the performer to the listener, and capable of being copied or performed repeatedly. A good piece of music can receive a bad performance, and vice versa, which complicates any discussion of musical beauty.

15 Ibid., 52ff.

16 Zephaniah 3:17: "He will exult over you with singing."

17 Already in the early Church, Orpheus the shepherd–musician was represented as a symbol of Christ, who descended into the realm of the dead to rescue his beloved. Although in the original classical myth Orpheus fails to rescue Euridice, later versions (notably Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo*, 1608) change the story to a happy ending, in which Orpheus saves Eurydice just as Christ saves humankind. See Simon Collier, "An exploration into the reception of Orpheus in the early Christian period and the Christian Middle Ages" (BA thesis, University of Warwick, 2014).

18 John 1:43–51. Cf. verse 51, "Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man," with Genesis 28:12.

Moreover, hymnography is an event-based, temporal phenomenon. Unfolding as it does in time, it has a special relationship with salvation history, with the drama of our fall, the advent of Christ, his crucifixion and resurrection. Its repeatability mirrors the cycle of the Church year, in which events like the nativity and the resurrection are made present at each iteration, for instance in those hymns that start with the word "today."

This temporal character also means that at times our liturgical texts can assume a dramatic character, for instance the priest's knocking on the door of the church during the Easter vigil, and the dialogue between the angel Gabriel and the Mother of God in the canon of the vigil of the Annunciation. But even the Cherubic Hymn describes an unfolding event: We lay aside our earthly cares to prepare ourselves to receive Christ in the form of the Eucharist; in performance this progression is often underlined by a quickening of the tempo in the final section. To be a disciple of Christ means changing into his likeness, and it is the *dynamos* of theosis that the temporal character of hymnography is especially equipped to express.

Music, words and the Word

Icons represent people and events—albeit in a stylized and abstract way—whereas the musical component—the melodies and harmonies—of our hymnography does not represent anything, or rather does this only indirectly through being coupled with a text. Indeed, of all the liturgical arts, the union between text and music in hymnography is especially close. Given the importance of the liturgical texts, it is tempting to arrive at the simplistic notion that, in the liturgical services, the music is more important than the words.[19] This notion not only implies an inappropriately competitive relationship between text and musical setting, but it also obscures the fact that the two elements form an indissoluble whole. If this were not the case, why have music at all?

It is true that at certain liturgical moments, the text seems to predominate over the musical setting. For example, when multiple strophes are being recited in the same tone, time considerations and human limitations require that the music be kept simple in order for the text to delivered in a clear and timely fashion. On the other hand, certain recurring texts (e.g., the Cherubic Hymn or the Evening Hymn), as also certain chants sung at feasts or during Holy Week, invite a variety of musical readings and open up a musical space that can lead to greater depth of prayer and contemplation. It is important to remember that, in this latter type of text, music often covers areas of feeling that are barely hinted at in the text. When St Paul speaks of our prayers being assisted by intercessions of the Holy Spirit in the form of "groanings which cannot be uttered,"[20] he is referring to a realm of unmediated emotion, cries and sighing that music can often capture better than words on their own.

19 For instance, Michael Varlamos, "Music and Orthodoxy," *New Byzantium Publications* (website), accessed August 7, 2024, https://newbyz.weebly.com/uploads/1/4/7/1/147110798/music_and_orthodoxy.pdf.
20 Romans 8:26.

But although liturgical music can express and trigger powerful human emotions, its primary function in the service is to attune our mind and senses to the mystery of the Logos unfolding in the liturgy.

If music were merely the handmaiden of the text, our musical outcomes would be very different from what they are; indeed, they would sometimes be way off the mark. Take for example the ending of the Anaphora: "We hymn Thee, we bless Thee, we give thanks to Thee and we pray to Thee, our God." If we were to follow the example of Roman Catholic composers setting a similar passage from the 'Gloria' of the Ordinary of the mass, this would be the occasion of a grand climax similar to the musical treatment customarily given to the ending of the first section: "We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we worship Thee, we glorify Thee, we give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory." But an Orthodox church musician knows this is the moment of the epiclesis, the transformation of the holy gifts into the body and blood of Christ, so the appropriate way of setting and singing this music is with hushed awe. No, music is *not* the handmaiden of the text; rather it is the music and the text *working together* that are handmaidens of the unfolding Logos.

So, more than any of the other ecclesial arts, words and music form a tandem, a two-in-one. This means that there is a complete interchange and interpenetration of the function of each: The music amplifies and intensifies the music latent in the texts, while the words aspire to the proclamatory character of music. In Nicolas Lossky's brilliant phrase, "the word sings, and the music proclaims."[21]

One can discuss and analyse a text or a melody or contemplate the distinct contribution of each of them, but both are two sides of the same coin, achieving their *raison d'être* only in their union. The original texts were conceived from the outset to be sung, and it is even possible that in some cases the melodies existed before the texts, as in the case of certain psalms. At the very least, the original Greek texts came into being at the same time as the melody, and both may have been composed by the same person. At the very least, the musical setting preserves the integrity of the text and unites it to a self-purposed melody. So, the text-music tandem joins together two elements, words and musical notes, without confusion and without separation; in this sense, it can be regarded as a symbol of the two natures of Christ.

Any consideration of beauty in the context of liturgical music must be related back to the question posed by St Gregory Palamas: How can a transcendent God make himself known to us? Or more specifically, how in our music can we perceive, express, imitate and reflect back the beauty of God's holiness?

21 Lossky, *Essai*, 58.

Transcendent beauty

The various attributes of beauty—symmetry, proportion, variety, unity and so on—are important, but do not in themselves leads to transcendence or prayer (as John Tavener puts it).[22] Beauty rests on certain "canons" or criteria but cannot be reduced to them. So instead, I wish to consider three elements that have a bearing on the question of how transcendent beauty can be achieved in music. They are, in order: silence, breathing and frisson.

First, silence. How can our sacred music reflect *hesychia*, the stilling of the soul evoked at the beginning of the Cherubic Hymn for Holy Saturday: "Let all mortal flesh keep silence"? To begin to answer this question, we may turn again to John Tavener (whose music is indubitably sacred in the Orthodox sense, even though it is rarely used in Orthodox services), who warns of the limitations of an art that is purely "self-referential."[23] Sacred art always points beyond itself, beyond human categories, thoughts and emotions, and in doing so transcends the rational to reach, through symbol, mystery and paradox, towards the eternal. Whereas Richard Wagner stated that he wrote his music with exclamation marks, Orthodox composers would more often wish to write their music with question marks. Christian hymnography evokes the theosis of humankind and the kenosis of God and the "bright sorrow" of Christ's sacrificial intervention in the world ("We venerate Thy Passion, O Christ. Show us also Thy glorious Resurrection"[24]).

On the level of musical technique, the cracks that "let the light in," to quote a song by Leonard Cohen,[25] can be achieved in a variety of ways which is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss. At the risk of generalizing, suffice it to say that musical forms adopted in Orthodox church music arise from a certain reticence: They tend to avoid linear, narrative, dramatic or teleological forms such as sonata or concerto, preferring circularity that arises from the verset structure of chant itself, often a simple $a_1a_2a_3$… form, in which the variants arise from variations in the rhythm or intonation of the words, or a rondo form with a refrain such as "Alleluia."

Among other things, silence is the recognition of the limitations of both words and music, the awareness of the gap between the energies represented by human art and the essence of God. This is why for certain words, such as "Amen," "Alleluia," and "Kyrie eleison," no adequate translations exist. Sometimes, at the "Alleluia" or the prokeimena in the

22 "I never understood that with Stockhausen: why it didn't end in silence. Perhaps it will. [...] I think it must end in silence, and go on to prayer, which is a higher form of creativity." Interview with Tavener in Paul Griffiths, *New Sounds, New Personalities: British Composers of the 1980s* (London: Faber, 1985), 111. My thanks to Fr Ivan Moody for this reference. For his critique of these words, see his article "Orthodox aesthetics and contemporary art," unpublished paper read at the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies Summer School, University of Cambridge, July 2005: "The problem with viewing the question in these terms is that it confuses what is essentially a monastic vision of creativity with the position of an artist living in the world – though whether prayer is a form of creativity in precisely the way Tavener means here must be seriously questioned, bring into play as it does the use of the imagination in prayer…"

23 John Tavener and Mother Thekla, *Ikons: Meditations in Words and Music* (London: Fount, 1994), xi.

24 15th Antiphon of the Matins of Holy Friday.

25 Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," *The Future*, Columbia, 1992.

Divine Liturgy, the music becomes more elaborate, with ornate melismata. The phenomenon of *terirem* or meaningless syllables in Greek chant also serves as a reminder that language can fall short.[26] As for music, often what it is not is as important as what it is. In all music that "speaks," pauses, whether notated or marked by sustained notes or chords, are an especially effective means of evoking the transcendent. By suspending the regular beat or metre (if there is one), we stand for a moment outside time, so that our music is as it were bathed in the light of eternity, offered up to the one who created time.

The second element, breathing, is a factor behind which a whole theology lies waiting to be explored.[27] Just as we represent the cherubim in the services, so our breath represents the Holy Spirit. By singing we draw in breath, allow it to nourish our blood stream, and then pour it out again, in an action embodying the gift of life and our eucharistic response to it. If, as Nicolas Lossky wrote, the liturgy is the breath of the Church,[28] our singing is the *sound* of the Church breathing.

Just as breathing is essential to life and health, so singing is an effective means for promoting mental health and spiritual well-being. A whole discipline, music therapy, is based on the healing power of music. Many defects in our singing are related to an inability to breathe correctly, to build a secure foundation in our diaphragm. There is a clear parallel between breath and biological life on the one hand, and the Holy Spirit and our salvation on the other. This is well understood by church choirs that begin rehearsals by singing the prayer to the Holy Spirit, "O heavenly King."

From the Latin word meaning "breath" is derived the word "inspiration." This leads us to creativity and to the question of how much room there is for the creation of free adaptations or new settings as opposed to the strict adaptation of music composed long ago, which still predominates our services. Whether we are adapting older melodies or creating new ones, there are certain moments of our services which provide more opportunities for creativity than others, especially in recurring texts, where it is desirable to achieve some variety.

The third and last element, frisson, is one of several physical reactions music can trigger, another one being tears. Both bear witness to the relational and incarnational nature of beauty and art. Frisson denotes a shudder or tingling that can be pleasant or unpleasant, depending on the circumstances. This frisson, or "goosebumps," takes the form of small bumps on the skin and our hair standing on end. Musicologists, psychologists, and neurologists have attempted various explanations for this.[29] One way of viewing the phenomenon is that it occurs just after we

26 Lossky, *Essai*, 105.

27 The significance of breath is discussed in Seppälä, *The Song of Fire*, 73–6.

28 Lossky, *Essai*, 47.

29 For instance, David Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Sam Gilberg, "This 715-song playlist is scientifically verified to give you the chills, thanks to 'frisson,'" *Big Think*, August 22, 2023, https://bigthink.com/neuropsych/frisson-song-

have been surprised, at the moment when our mind, after registering that this surprise is not a threat requiring a fight-or-flight response, starts to interpret the surprising event in a way that gives rise to a wide range of emotions between pleasure and horror. Quite how or when this occurs depends on the individual; there is no formula for this deeply personal response. We all have our favourite moments, be it a certain chord progression or cadence, an opening up to a higher register, a pause.

What seems to be happening during these moments is that the fabric of the orderly unfolding of the music is breached by the incursion of a higher-order reality. The relatively conventional or predictable gives way to a deeper logic, a higher sense, fulfilling a higher law. Perhaps all beautiful music is made up a hierarchy of layers of norms or conventions that are constantly jostling and rubbing against each other, sometimes colluding, sometimes colliding. For example, there are moments when the laws of harmony give way before the higher claims of melodic line, as when false relations occur. But over and above this disruption, the background order of structural consonance is re-asserted in due course. It is this multilayering which gives the music its muscle, its depth.

This irruption of a higher sense into a lower one can be found not only in art, but also in science and in the gospels. Thus Albert Einstein's discovery of the space-time continuum reveals and fulfils the deep sense of Newton's findings on gravity, opening up new dimensions and showing that, in the words of Shakespeare, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy."[30] In the same way, the New Testament fulfils and reveals the deep, hidden sense of the Old Testament. The new breaks into the old, illuminating and transfiguring it. In the gospels we read how Christ's teaching (not to mention his miracles) often turned the tables, upending human wisdom, introducing paradox, reformulating questions and changing the terms of the debate, so that people "marvelled" at his sayings and his opponents were reduced to silence. Then there is the encounter between Christ and two travellers on the road to Emmaus.[31] The two men had witnessed the events in Jerusalem but could not make head or tail of them. But Christ unlocks the true meaning of the scriptures, before revealing himself in the breaking of bread. Then the two men recall how their hearts burnt within them as they listened to Christ. It can be plausibly surmised that they also felt a frisson.

So, physical reactions such as frisson are not mere icing on the cake, or something to feel guilty about (though of course composers should never stuff their music with effects without causes). Rather, they are an image of the encounter with the divine love, of an epiphany, a call to illumination and theosis. And although such moments can often be difficult to achieve in our services, we should never lose sight of our vision of the beauty of

playlist/?utm_term=Autofeed&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR2181sNgkrkLd-ppIz4_jtE2d9mgvBbkiLKY6pZp_MQ5r74V-rpXRe8X84#Echobox=1684522003.

30 Hamlet addressing the rationalist Horatio in act 1, sc. 5 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

31 Luke 24:13–23.

holiness, which is to be seen, heard—and tasted—as an indispensable aspect of liturgical worship.

What conclusions can we draw about the nature of beauty in the context of liturgical and sacred music? Beauty starts with God's glory and splendour, which seeps into the material world through his grace. Our creative acts are a eucharistic response to this divine beauty, born of wonder and gratitude. This sense of wonder is expressed not only in art but in any creative act that bears witness to God's glory. Beauty occurs whenever a person or thing fulfils its God-given logos. In the words of the British iconographer, Aidan Hart, beauty lies in the "sense of movement in the proper direction, of a thing's orientation towards its divinely intended goal."[32] May the Holy Spirit guide us in our work to achieve this in our services, allowing us to glorify God and at the same time nourish the souls of the faithful through the equal and indissoluble partnership of words and music.

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32 Hart, *Beauty, Spirit, Matter*, 118.

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