

Sacred and secular

There is often great difficulty in choosing suitable pieces of music for a wedding. Often, too facile a distinction is made between “sacred” and “secular” music, leaving no one satisfied. The distinction between secular and sacred is not a clear one. There are very deeply religious songs with a “secular” origin, while many so-called “religious” songs are simply trashy and sentimental. But, what must be brought to expression in a wedding liturgy is the mystery of human love as a covenant relationship.

Many songs mention “love.” We must ask what is meant by “love” in a song before choosing it. Songs that express the religious dimension of love explicitly have pride of choice. Songs that imply this religious dimension are also suitable. But, a song which denies this dimension either explicitly or implicitly must be avoided at all costs for it belies the mystery: it is a falsehood in liturgy.

What is stated here about choice of music applies not only to the words of a song, but to its melody. We are, in fact, more easily influenced by melody than by words, for that influence is unconscious. Melodies that have their origin in stage or screen insidiously subverts the Christian mystery of love. Merely to change the words of a song is not sufficient to make it suitable. (Such songs are appropriately left to the wedding banquet and other such gatherings.)

Choosing the music for a wedding is an opportunity for deepening our appreciation of the mystery. The influence of music for good or ill is greater than might appear on the surface. Choosing suitable pieces requires prudence, sensitivity and openness to God’s word. The time and effort that pastors and liturgical committees devote to this task, in conjunction with the spouses and families, is well spent.

Choosing Wedding Music

Checklist

A checklist of the music for a wedding, in the order that it is sung, is set out below. The items that are in boldface are the ones that should be attended to first. The others may be sung if desired. The ones marked with an asterisk (*) may be sung by the whole congregation or by the choir alone.

Entrance Hymn

Lord, have mercy
[Glory to God*]

Responsorial Psalm

Gospel acclamation

Song during the preparation of the gifts*

Holy, holy, holy Lord

Memorial acclamation

Great Amen

Lord’s prayer

Lamb of God*

Communion hymn (sung during the communion procession)

[Psalm or hymn of praise after Communion]

Hymn or music during the signing of the register*

Recessional hymn or music*

...as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Eph 5.19-20)

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MUSIC AT YOUR WEDDING

Prayer of a couple
Prayer of the Church

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Music for Worship

As for any worship service, wedding music is chosen with care according to sound liturgical principles. A wedding is first of all a worship service. It is worship of God. At weddings this is all too easily forgotten, for we are more influenced by a disbelieving culture than we would like to admit. Much of modern “love” music is expressive of worship, to be sure, but it is worship of love itself (often of its physical aspects) or worship of the people who fall in love or worship of the object of one’s love. Music in Catholic worship must express the worship of God for the mystery of love he created and transforms in this sacrament.

It is the Church assembly that worships at a wedding. This event is a celebration of the believing community; it expresses the faith and worship of the universal Church. A wedding is not a private or family affair. The selection, arrangement and the execution of all the music must respect the primary rights of the assembly.

The music chosen for the wedding liturgy should be familiar to the people of the church where the celebration takes place. If the music is mostly new, or beyond the ability of the local congregation, it will limit their participation, and hamper the community’s worship.

Cantor

The Catholic liturgy upholds the role of the cantor or psalmist, a minister who leads the assembled worshippers in singing the responsorial psalm and the gospel acclamation. Our tradition does not encourage the use of a soloist at other parts of the wedding liturgy.

Singing groups

Groups or choirs who sing at weddings are to be aware of the difference between singing at worship and singing on the stage:

On the stage, the musicians and singers dominate the action; others follow their words, rhythm and actions. They and their music are at the centre of what is happening: **they are** what is happening.

In liturgy, however, the musicians are ministers, servants. Their role is subservient to the worship of the community and must help the people to give God greater praise. The ministers of music are there to intensify the spirit of prayer and worship, not to entertain the people. Their music is to fit into the mood and action of the various parts of the rite, and is to help its progress.

Aids to participation

In order to help the members of the assembly take a fuller part in the singing, a parish community needs to make sure that all have the words to be sung, if these have not been committed to memory. The pew edition of *Catholic Book of Worship* provides an adequate selection of music for the people, while the choir edition provides accompaniment, guidelines, and harmony as well. When words or music are duplicated, care must be taken. **Copyright** is a matter both of civil and moral law; it must be respected.

Place of Music in the Rite

Music has an important place in the celebration of marriage. All the places where it may be used are mentioned here, in order of importance, along with possible options and alternatives. The actual choice of music is discussed under “Choosing wedding music” below.

Responsorial psalm

The cantor leads this with the people joining in the singing of the refrain. It is not omitted or replaced by a hymn.

Acclamations

Particular effort should be made to sing these during the Mass:

Gospel acclamation. Sung before the reading of the gospel. If not sung, it is omitted.

Holy, holy, holy Lord. Comes at the end of the preface of the Eucharistic prayer.

Memorial acclamation. After the narrative of institution in the Eucharistic prayer.

Great Amen: Concluding and sealing the praise offered in the Eucharistic prayer.

Our Father

The Lord’s prayer begins the communion rite. It may be sung when all present are familiar with the setting and able to participate.

Common chants

Other chants are sung during the Mass. These include several that the choir may sing alone: *Glory to God; Lamb of God;* during the preparation of the gifts; and during the signing of the marriage register. If the *Lord, have mercy* is sung, choir and people may alternate.

Processional songs

There are three processions in the Mass: at the entrance, Communion and recessional. The song of the assembly properly accompanies these. During the preparation of the gifts, the choir may sing while the assembly listens. It is preferred to have the assembly sing during the entrance procession than to have only organ music.

Prelude and postlude

Before the service begins, the organist may play quietly to set an appropriate atmosphere of prayer and reverence for the celebration. Similarly, a postlude may be played after the service is over, until all the people have left.