

Selecting suitable wedding music enhances celebration

By Father Ronald F. Krisman
By NC News Service

While serving for four years as music director in a New England parish, I found my most serious occupational hazard was dealing with the anger sometimes generated over the selection of music for weddings.

But from such situations I developed a certain amount of compassion, especially for frazzled mothers of the bride.

Before the Rite of Marriage was revised in 1969, church musicians often had a number of set pieces from which wedding selections were made. The couple might include a song or organ selection outside the standard repertoire if the piece was considered appropriate and could be learned without too much effort.

But if the selection happened to be a popular song or something from grand opera, the response was invariably "no way."

"Blacklists" and "whitelists" formerly provided great assistance for pastoral musicians. One could simply state, "The church forbids that piece."

Today a great deal of church music is being written; no list could possibly include everything which is appropriate.

So, when questions about wedding music surface in premarital counseling sessions, the priest or premarriage counselor often refers couples to the church organist or music director, who must shoulder all the responsibility — and ire — over the selections.

A particular difficulty is the fact that not everyone fully appreciates the Catholic marriage liturgy. The Rite of Marriage is always celebrated with a Liturgy of the Word preceding the sacrament of matrimony. The Eucharist often follows the exchange of marital consent.

As such, the liturgy contains communal and personal elements. When personal choices in the ceremony are made with no regard for the liturgical rite or the Christian understanding of marriage, the wedding celebration can lose its proper sacramental dimension.

The style of music chosen is one way to personalize the ceremony. To some couples a piece by Handel would be as incongruous as grandmother's fine crystal at a July 4 picnic. So, in addition to the church's treasury of music tested over many centuries, liturgical celebrations today may use vernacular hymns, folk music, jazz and music employing the wide range of contemporary compositional techniques.

Still, church legislation on wedding music requires that all selections be well-crafted. Music to be sung must be appropriate for a Christian wedding, expressive of the church's faith and that of the people who will be present.

General liturgical principles also come into play. Music to be sung should encourage participation by the assembly. This isn't easy when the people come from many different parishes and different parts of the country.

Accordingly, couples need to give their first consideration to music which is, or can easily become, the assembly's sung prayer: the opening hymn, sung either during the procession of ministers — including the bride and groom — to the altar or immediately afterward as a "gathering song" to unite the assembly; the responsorial psalm and gospel acclamation during the Liturgy of the Word; and, if the Eucharist is to be celebrated, the acclamations during the Eucharist Prayer (the Holy, Holy, Holy; memorial acclamation; and the Great Amen); and the communion song.

A cantor, rather than a "soloist," will be needed to provide leadership for the assembly's song. Other music choices, whether performed on musical instruments or sung alone by a choir or cantor, are secondary considerations.

Musical selections should fit the celebration's ritual requirements. Thus, the Lord's Prayer is a prayer to be sung or recited by the entire assembly, not by a soloist.

Finally couples should be assisted to select music which reflects their creativity. Even some "popular songs" are suitable if they express a Christian understanding of love and marriage.

More and more church musicians are well versed in liturgy and are able to point out what principles couples need to keep in mind for their weddings. These musicians see this work as a true ministry in the church. While assuming their responsibility as professionals, they also try to be responsive to the needs of those they serve.

It might seem a nice personal touch to ask a family friend to sing at one's wedding. But such a decision often overlooks the musical and liturgical training required for pastoral musicians.

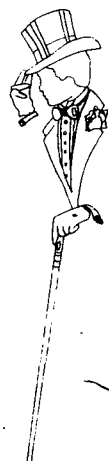
One would never dream of asking inexperienced musicians to play in the band at the reception dance.

And so the added expense of providing good music at weddings can be a wise investment.

Excellent background for a couple planning their wedding can come through the experience of other Catholic marriage celebrations which are prayerful and which provide the worshiping assembly and the marrying couple an opportunity to express their faith and joy. These experiences make the pastoral musician's task that much easier.



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