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Place and Purpose of Vocal Ensembles in Liturgy

Over the centuries, the position of vocal ensembles has changed, as have their tasks. The changes that have taken place in recent decades as a result of the Second Vatican Council, as well as subsequent documents, demand a proper interpretation that cannot exist in isolation from earlier centuries. A correct understanding of the current regulations will be particularly helpful for those responsible for and singing during the liturgy. Therefore, in this article we would like to reflect on the place that singing ensembles should occupy – including their composition and tasks – while also noting the differences between a choir and a schola cantorum. In order to show these issues, we will use an analytical-synthetic and at the same time genetic-historical method.

1. Place of singing ensembles over the centuries

The first records of a singing ensemble in Rome – prepared for this purpose – the schola cantorum – date from the seventh century¹. In the years that followed, many schools were established on the model of Roman singers who made liturgical settings more attractive. This was followed by evolution of singing, as well as of church music in the broader sense. This led to the development of pieces that later became a part of Gregorian chant². In the Middle Ages, the singers who belonged to the schola cantorum were joined by the clergy. As time passed, they became its entire staff, while the laity formed the choir³.

¹ Cf. D. Hiley, *Gregorian chant*, Cambridge 2009, p. 92.

² Cf. J. Ścibor, *Schola*, w: *Wprowadzenie do liturgii*, red. F. Blachnicki, W. Schenk, R. Zielasko, Poznań–Warszawa–Lublin 1967, p. 182–183.

³ Cf. I. H. Siekierka, *Muzyka a liturgia. Zagadnienia wybrane*, Wrocław 2005, p. 26.

The singing ensemble was located for some time in the presbytery⁴, having its place close to the altar⁵, surrounding it from the side of the people, and even standing in front of the altar⁶; later it was placed against the walls, and in the 11th century it returned to its earlier positioning⁷. It is noteworthy, for example, that in the 12th century a special place was created for the schola cantorum in the nave in front of the altar in the Basilica of St Clement in Rome.

During the Baroque period, the place of the choir changed – it was placed in the gallery together with the organ or, for example, on multiple balconies⁸. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the singing ensemble was not located in the presbytery but in the gallery which eventually led to a situation where the liturgical assembly was separated from the outside⁹. The priest and those serving at the altar constituted one group, with the celebrant celebrating the liturgy; the other group consisted of the ensemble performing the music, while the faithful were listeners to the music and observers of the liturgical action. One can sometimes see, especially in older churches, relatively long presbyteries – this also encouraged the separation. In such a situation, the ensemble performing the music found its way to the organ gallery, and this also influenced the church architecture. Thus one could see the separation of the celebrant and the presbytery from the music ensemble and the faithful¹⁰.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the pieces performed at Mass were so long that the celebrants did not want to wait for them to end, therefore the texts of the rites were spoken in a low voice while the singing continued. This form of celebrating the liturgy became so widespread that the faithful became almost completely silent, looking at the altar and listening to the singing ensemble¹¹.

Nowadays, singing ensembles should occupy a place that makes their special participation in the liturgy visible¹², so this group of people should be in sight of the

⁴ Cf. W. Kałamarz, *Śpiewy religijne w liturgii Kościoła*, <http://spiewniksiedleckiego.pl/wp-content/uploads/spiewy-w-liturgii.pdf>, p. 8. (04.01.2023).

⁵ Cf. W. Kałamarz, *Śpiewy religijne w liturgii Kościoła*, <http://spiewniksiedleckiego.pl/wp-content/uploads/spiewy-w-liturgii.pdf>, p. 8 (04.01.2023).

⁶ Cf. *Ordo Romanus I*, in: A. J. Znak, *Historia liturgii*, Oleśnica 1993, p. 80.

⁷ Cf. I. H. Siekierka, *Muzyka a liturgia*, p. 27.

⁸ Cf. I. H. Siekierka, *Muzyka a liturgia*, p. 34; cf. I. Pawlak, *Muzyka liturgiczna po Soborze Watykańskim II w świetle dokumentów Kościoła*, Lublin 2001, p. 167.

⁹ Cf. W. Kałamarz, *Śpiewy religijne w liturgii Kościoła*, p. 8; cf. R. Tyrała, *Soborowa odnowa muzyki kościelnej w Polsce*, Kraków 2000, p. 45.

¹⁰ Cf. R. Tyrała, *Soborowa odnowa muzyki kościelnej w Polsce*, p. 49.

¹¹ Cf. I. H. Siekierka, *Muzyka a liturgia*, p. 94; cf. I. Pawlak, *Muzyka liturgiczna*, p. 250.

¹² *Musicam Sacram*, Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, 1967, 23, in: A. Filaber, *Prawodawstwo muzyki kościelnej*, Warszawa 2011, p. 48; cf. Kongregacja Kultu Bożego, *Ogólne wprowadzenie do Mszału Rzymskiego*, 25.02.2004, 312, Poznań 2006, p. 87.

faithful and not hidden from them¹³. Furthermore, their place should be where the experience of the liturgy is not hindered, so that the members of the singing ensembles can participate fully without difficulty¹⁴. It is important that the singing ensembles do not draw the eyes of the faithful too much¹⁵ – more than the celebrant, who represents Christ.

Thus, they should adopt a place that emphasises the task of the singing ensemble, i.e. visible to the faithful, but not obscuring the altar or focusing the eye. It is worth noting that prior to the conciliar reform, Church regulations provided for a more hidden, non-exposed place for the singing ensemble¹⁶. Problems in interpreting the rules today may be caused by the fact that those responsible for the conciliar changes probably no longer envisaged the occurrence in the liturgy of complex works whose performance would require large vocal-instrumental ensembles that could not actually be accommodated in the chancel without attracting the attention of the faithful.

2. The composition of the ensembles and their place in the church

When the singing ensemble is composed of men alone, such an ensemble may even be located in the presbytery. The problem arises if such an ensemble includes women – both before¹⁷ and after Vatican II¹⁸. The instruction *Musicam sacram* says: Taking into account the layout of each church, the choir should be placed in such a way:

a) That its nature should be clearly apparent—namely, that it is a part of the whole congregation, and that it fulfills a special role;

¹³ Cf. M. Kończal, *Zakres realizacji dokumentów dotyczących muzyki kościelnej w działalności chórów katedralnych w Polsce po Soborze Watykańskim II*, in: *Muzyka sakralna w wymiarze kulturowo-edukacyjnym*, red. J. Bramorski, Gdańsk 2013, p. 157; cf. Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja Konferencji Episkopatu Polski o muzyce kościelnej*, 14.10.2017, 11, „Anamnesis” 24 (2018) no. 1, p. 28.

¹⁴ Cf. M. Kończal, *Zakres realizacji dokumentów dotyczących muzyki kościelnej w działalności chórów katedralnych w Polsce po Soborze Watykańskim II*, p. 157; cf. Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja Konferencji Episkopatu Polski o muzyce kościelnej*, 11, „Anamnesis” 24 (2018) no. 1, p. 28.

¹⁵ Cf. Pius X, *Motu Proprio Inter pastoralis officii sollicitudines*, 22.11.1903, 14, in: A. Filaber, *Prawodawstwo muzyki kościelnej*, p. 14.

¹⁶ Cf. Pius X, *Motu Proprio Inter pastoralis officii sollicitudines*, 14.

¹⁷ Cf. Dekret Świętej Kongregacji Obrzędów, 3964; 4231, quoted after: Pius XII, Encyklika *Musicae sacrae disciplina* o muzyce kościelnej (25.12.1955), in: A. Filaber, *Prawodawstwo muzyki kościelnej*, p. 33.

¹⁸ Cf. *Musicam Sacram*, Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, 23, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_instr_19670305_musicam-sacram_en.html (28.08.2023).

- b) That it is easier for it to fulfil its liturgical function;
- c) That each of its members may be able to participate easily in the Mass, that is to say by sacramental participation.

Whenever the choir also includes women, it should be placed outside the sanctuary (presbyterium)¹⁹.

However, the question arises as to whether, these indications are still valid today, despite the fact that no post-1967 documents from the Holy See explicitly state that if a singing ensemble includes women, it may hold its ministry in the presbytery. So at first glance there should be no problems. Questions arise with the possibility for lay women to perform various functions (*munus*) at the altar, which was finally confirmed in the response of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of the Legal Texts²⁰, when it clarified the meaning of can. 230 § 2 by allowing both men and women to perform the functions listed in this canon, and furthermore in certain specific circumstances also to perform the acts listed in can. 230 § 3 in the place of ministers with the consent of the bishop. Noteworthy among those listed in can. 230 § 2 is the function of the cantor, which should be performed from the pulpit during the singing of the psalm²¹, and which is often located in the presbytery, as well as the fact that the canon of the Code of Canon Law that interests us does not explicitly list all functions, but states: “all lay persons can also perform the functions of commentator or cantor, or other functions, according to the norm of law”²². Furthermore, Pope Francis, in issuing an Apostolic Letter in the form of the Motu Proprio *Spiritus Domini*, allowed women in certain circumstances for the ministries (*ministeria*) of lector and acolyte. The question of the validity and legitimacy of the provision prohibiting a mixed or women-only ensembles from being in the presbytery should therefore be raised all the more, since the person exercising the ministry of acolyte (to which women are also admitted under certain conditions) is directly connected with the altar and the presbytery. In the territory of Poland, the problem seems to have been resolved in the

¹⁹ Cf. *Musicam Sacram*, Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, 23, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_instr_19670305_musicam-sacram_en.html (28.08.2023).

²⁰ Cf. Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, *Responsio ad propositum dubium*, 11.07.1992, „Acta Apostolicae Sedis” 86 (1994), p. 542; cf. Franciszek, Motu proprio *Spiritus Domini*, 10.01.2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/pl/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio_20210110_spiritus-domini.html (04.01.2023).

²¹ Kongregacja Kultu Bożego, *Ogólne wprowadzenie do Mszału Rzymskiego*, 61, p. 30.

²² *Code of Canon Law*, can. 230 §2, https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann208-329_en.html#TITLE_II (28.08.2023).

Indications of the Polish Bishops after the promulgation of the new edition of the GIRM in stating that: ‘All these functions [singing in the choir or schola] may be performed by both men and women, with the exception of those activities which are directly serving the priest at the altar and at the place of presiding’²³.

Even if a singing ensemble were located in the presbytery, this does not mean that it is an activity that is directly related to “serving the priest at the altar and at the place of presiding”²⁴, and in this situation, women should also be allowed to participate in singing ensembles located in the presbytery²⁵.

During the concerts in churches, each of the singers, even if they were men alone, should be outside the presbytery²⁶. The instruments needed by the singing ensembles should take a place that is most convenient for their contribution to the liturgical music, so as to best serve the singing ensembles and other faithful²⁷.

3. The nature of the composition of singing ensembles

To understand better the nature of a singing ensemble in terms of its composition, it is worth quoting the words of Pope Pius XII, who wrote:

Where it is impossible to have schools of singers or where there are not enough choir boys, it is allowed that “a group of men and women or girls, located in a place outside the sanctuary set apart for the exclusive use of this group, can sing the liturgical texts at Solemn Mass, as long as the men are completely separated from the women and girls and everything unbecoming is avoided. The Ordinary is bound in conscience in this matter”²⁸.

²³ Episkopat Polski, *Wskazania Episkopatu Polski po ogłoszeniu nowego wydania OWMR*, 25.02.2004, 53, in: A. Filaber, *Prawodawstwo muzyki kościelnej*, p. 110, tłum. własne.

²⁴ Episkopat Polski, *Wskazania Episkopatu Polski po ogłoszeniu nowego wydania OWMR*, 53, tłum. własne.

²⁵ Cf. Episkopat Polski, *Wskazania Episkopatu Polski po ogłoszeniu nowego wydania OWMR*, 52–53, p. 110.

²⁶ Cf. Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja Konferencji Episkopatu Polski o muzyce*, 45, p. 39; cf. Kongregacja Kultu Bożego, *O koncertach w kościołach*, 07.11.1987, in: A. Filaber, *Prawodawstwo muzyki*, p. 14.

²⁷ Cf. I. H. Siekierka, *Muzyka a liturgia*, p. 94.

²⁸ Decrees of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, 3964, 4201, 4231, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25121955_musicae-sacrae.html (28.08.2023).

Fr Józef Ścibor wrote: The trained, metallic voices of the boys, which can be likened to the high, bright voices in an organ, easily carry away the singing of the people and are able to enliven even the most lethargic collective singing²⁹.

Or the no longer fully up-to-date provision of Pius X (due to the admission of women to singing ensembles already by the Ruling of the Congregation of Sacred Rites of 17 January 1908³⁰):

It follows from the same principle that singers in the church have the true liturgical office and that therefore women, as being incapable of such an office, cannot be allowed to participate in the choir or the church band³¹.

And the post-conciliar Instruction *Musicam sacram* mentions:

The choir can consist, according to the customs of each country and other circumstances, of either men and boys, or men and boys only, or men and women, or even, where there is a genuine case for it, of women only³².

It is worth noting, therefore, the emphasis of Church documents, most of which have more or less radically distanced themselves from the presence of women in singing ensembles.

In every parish, even the smallest, and especially in larger parishes and cathedrals, choirs and schola cantorum should be present to add splendour to solemn celebrations to the best of their ability. The singing ensembles we are referring to should, of course, have the best possible composition in terms of personnel³³. Such groups do not have to consist of, for example, 100 people, it is enough if there is not much possibility that they will consist of, for example, 12 members, which will be understandable in a very small parish³⁴. At the same time there is the possibility and hope that the size of the composition of these ensembles will grow over time.

²⁹ J. Ścibor, *Schola*, p. 186–187.

³⁰ Cf. A. Filaber, *Prawodawstwo muzyki kościelnej*, p. 14.

³¹ Pius X, *Motu Proprio Inter pastoralis*, 13, p. 14. Translator's translation from the Polish version.

³² Cf. *Musicam Sacram*, Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, 22, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_instr_19670305_musicam-sacram_en.html (28.08.2023).

³³ Cf. R. Tyrała, *Soborowa odnowa*, s. 234; por. Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja Konferencji Episkopatu Polski o muzyce*, 63, p. 41.

³⁴ See *Musicam Sacram*, Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, 22, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_instr_19670305_musicam-sacram_en.html (28.08.2023).

4. The tasks of singing ensembles in the liturgy

In the case of singing ensemble formation, we are dealing with formation concerning the liturgy; it is the goal of this formation and a means of formation³⁵. *Therefore, singers should not be cut off from full participation in the liturgy*³⁶. After all, the main task of a singing ensemble is not to present its repertoire, but to participate in the sacred liturgy³⁷. Therefore, the current tasks of singing ensembles undoubtedly include supporting the singing of the faithful during the liturgy, rather than performing the songs themselves³⁸. Since the faithful usually have little musical training, they give their singing – due to various circumstances, such as the difficulty of performing a particular piece or the dignity and solemnity of the liturgy – to the choir or schola cantorum³⁹. The choir and schola cantorum then substitute for the people in performing this service⁴⁰, making the music even more beautiful. “They thus help the whole liturgical assembly to raise its soul more to God and immerse itself, as it were, in the heavenly liturgy”⁴¹. Singing ensembles help the people to elevate their thoughts towards God, while at the same time entering the people in a special way, ministering to God and the people⁴².

³⁵ Cf. G. Późniak, *Drogi formacji liturgicznych zespołów śpiewających na przykładzie diecezji opolskiej*, in: *Musica Sacra 3*, red. J. Krassowski i in., Gdańsk 2007, p. 68 (Prace Specjalne, 73).

³⁶ I. Pawlak, *Nowe zadania zespołów śpiewających*, „Homo Dei” 50 (1971), p. 38, quoted after: R. Tyrała, *Soborowa odnowa*, p. 142, translator’s note.

³⁷ Cf. M. Kwieciński, *Chór kościelny*, in: *Wprowadzenie do liturgii*, p. 193–194.

³⁸ Cf. R. Tyrała, *Soborowa odnowa*, p. 211; cf. Sobór Watykański II, Konstytucja o liturgii świętej *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 04.12.1963, 117–118, in: *Sobór Watykański II. Konstytucje, Dekrety, Deklaracje*, red. S. Jaworski, Poznań 1968, p. 66.

³⁹ Cf. Komisja Liturgiczna przy Komisji Kultu Bożego i Dyscypliny Sakramentów Konferencji Episkopatu Polski, *Ceremoniał Wspólnoty Parafialnej*, 2016, 55, http://ministranci.diecezja-pelplin.pl/images/formacja/dokumenty_kosciola/Ceremonia-wspolnoty-parafialnej-2016.pdf, p. 24 (04.01.2023); cf. Ph. Hornoncourt, *Gesang und Musik im Gottesdienst*, in: H. Schützeichel, *Die Messe. Ein kirchenmusikalisches Handbuch*, Düsseldorf 1991, 90–25, quote 17, quoted after: J. Ratzinger, *Nowa pieśń dla Pana*, Kraków 2005, p. 218.

⁴⁰ Cf. Komisja Liturgiczna przy Komisji Kultu Bożego i Dyscypliny Sakramentów Konferencji Episkopatu Polski, *Ceremoniał Wspólnoty*, 55, p. 24.

⁴¹ Cf. Komisja Liturgiczna przy Komisji Kultu Bożego i Dyscypliny Sakramentów Konferencji Episkopatu Polski, *Ceremoniał Wspólnoty*, 55, p. 24.

⁴² Cf. J. Bramorski, *Teologiczne kryteria doboru pieśni mszalnych*, in: *Muzyka sakralna w europejskim przekazie kulturowym historia – kryteria – współczesność*, red. J. Bramorski, Gdańsk 2012, p. 45; cf. J. Ścibor, *Schola*, p. 187; cf. Pius XII, Encyclical *Musicae sacrae*, p. 33; cf. Pius X, Motu Proprio *Inter pastoralis*, 13, p. 14; cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the sacred liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 112, p. 65; cf. Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Musica sacram*, Instruction on Sacred Music and the Sacred Liturgy, 19, 23, p. 47–48.

We may note a certain discrepancy between the concepts of *choir* and *schola cantorum*, the task and purpose and manner of their participation in the liturgy being different, nevertheless both groups in spiritual, interior terms ultimately have the same vocation: to help sanctify the faithful and worship God⁴³. The Second Vatican Council's Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* uses the term *singing ensembles*, but this statement refers to the choir⁴⁴. The Instruction *Musicam sacram*, on the other hand, mentions *the ensemble of singers*⁴⁵ in relation to the *schola cantorum*⁴⁶. The discrepancy between the *schola cantorum* and the choir is found in their tasks: the choir is a group of people who are to perform mainly polyphonic pieces, and may also perform unison pieces, provided that the choir is not accompanied by the singing of the faithful – however, when there is no schola cantorum during the liturgy, the choir should also fulfil its tasks. Furthermore, the choir always joins in the singing of the faithful⁴⁷ – as in contrast to the schola cantorum, whose task is to lead the singing. The schola cantorum, also has somewhat greater powers: it is mainly intended to perform the chant with the people, to sustain and lead the singing of the faithful. At the same time, the schola cantorum can perform the functions that the choir performs, i.e. to perform single and polyphonic works whose performance is not accompanied by the singing of the faithful. In the simplest terms, the fundamental difference between the two entities is as follows: the choir does not sing simultaneously with the people, and the main mission of the schola cantorum is precisely such singing. Singing ensembles – choir or schola cantorum, or preferably both groups – should take part in liturgical celebrations⁴⁸.

Over the centuries, the placement of singing ensembles during the liturgy has changed. Nowadays – taking into account their composition – they should occupy a place that reveals their functions and enables the singers to experience the Divine Mysteries in the best possible way. It should be mentioned that among the various tasks that a choir or schola cantorum should fulfil, the primary one is to give glory to God and to help enlighten the faithful. Music has been linked to religion since the beginning of mankind; in the case of Europe, as well as the rest of the world, where Catholic culture has made its mark, these ties have been very strong⁴⁹. Music sets out from such places where love or sorrow has occurred,

⁴³ Cf. R. Tyrała, *Soborowa odnowa*, p. 140.

⁴⁴ Cf. Constitution on the sacred liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 114, p. 66.

⁴⁵ Cf. Constitution on the sacred liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 114, p. 66.

⁴⁶ Cf. M. Kwieciński, *Chór kościelny*, p. 193–197.

⁴⁷ Cf. Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja Konferencji Episkopatu Polski o muzyce*, 10g, p. 28.

⁴⁸ Cf. R. Tyrała, *Soborowa odnowa*, p. 140–141; por. J. Ścibor, *Schola*, p. 182–185, 190.

⁴⁹ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Nowa pieśń*, p. 150.

or arises from the experience of the living God. It is this music that is born out of the latter mentioned event that can be called religious music⁵⁰. We can also hope that, just as the singing of the Church in the past contributed to the transformation of the hearts of those who wandered away⁵¹, so will this singing now also contribute to numerous conversions and to lifting the hearts and souls of those who already believe in God, to whom through this singing we will give glory.

Abstract

Place and Purpose of Vocal Ensembles in Liturgy

Over the centuries, singing ensembles have occupied assorted liturgical locations in church space. Nowadays – pursuant to music-related church laws – they ought to occupy a place duly highlighting their special participation and purpose in liturgy. Singing group placement shall take account of its composition as well. The placement and purpose of signing ensembles alike have to be viewed in the context of Church traditions and laws. In terms of the nature and tasks assigned to specific singing groups in liturgy, they may be classified as the *choir* and *schola cantorum*, respectively. A synthetic presentation of the topic will be particularly helpful to persons responsible for preparing solemn liturgical celebrations.

Keywords: Place of singing ensembles, tasks of singing ensembles, history of singing ensembles, liturgy, music, choir, schola cantorum

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⁵⁰ Cf. J. Bramorski, J. Ratzinger, *Benedykt XVI jako świadek tradycji we współczesności*, in: *Tradycja i współczesność w muzyce sakralnej*, red. J. Bramorski, Gdańsk 2015, p. 21; cf. Benedykt XVI, *Muzyka kościelna otwiera niebo*, „Niedziela” 29 (2015), p. 16–17.

⁵¹ Por. Pius XI, Konstytucja apostolska *Divini cultus* o coraz gorliwszym popieraniu liturgii, śpiewu gregoriańskiego i muzyki kościelnej, 20.12.1928, „Wiadomości Diecezjalne” 4 (1929) no. 3, p. 24–25.

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