

# Environment for Catholic Worship

## Part 9 Place for Pastoral Musicians

We live in a culture where communal singing is reserved for very few events—birthdays, the national anthem at sporting events and moments of tragedy or loss. Yet since ancient times singing or chanting has been a part of most faith traditions in the world. Perhaps that is because singing involves so much more of one's body and breath than speech. There is a depth of meaning, emotion and conviction conveyed in singing that spoken words alone rarely match. St Augustine expressed it best when he claimed that those who sing pray twice.

Jesus was well acquainted with the hymns and psalms of the Jewish tradition.

On the night before he died, at the end of his last meal with the twelve disciples, Jesus and his disciples sang a psalm before going out to the Mount of Olives. Even on the cross, Jesus utters the first phrase of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

The reforms of the liturgy at the Second Vatican Council ask that we recover an early tradition of singing by the entire assembly, a tradition that had been lost. For centuries, the assembly's sung voice was rarely heard in Catholic liturgy. Singing was reserved to choirs (generally men and/or boys) and in remote places (generally rear galleries). Now we speak of musical liturgy as the

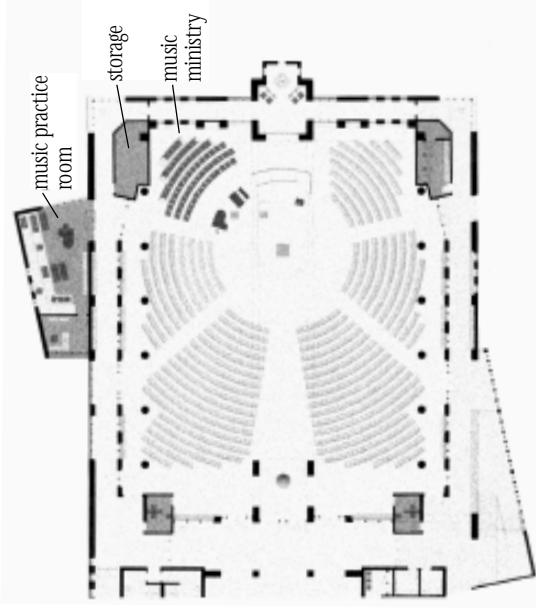
norm, where choirs or cantors and instrumentalists encourage and lead their assemblies in the singing of hymns, acclamations and responses.

When considering the requirements that liturgical music

places on a space for worship, we must start with the room itself. In order for it to support the song of the assembly, there must be enough hard (reflective) surfaces to keep the sound alive for a few moments. When the room is too absorbent because of wall-to-wall carpeting, seat cushions and porous wall and ceiling surfaces, the assembly's singing and spoken responses are seriously handicapped. Careful attention to the design of the space will encourage the assembly's singing while allowing speech to be heard and understood clearly.

The pastoral musicians who serve the liturgy are also members of the assembly and should be seen as such, and be able to participate fully in the rites. The place for the cantor should be visible, though not as prominent as the ambo. Careful placement of the choir will allow its voice to be heard clearly throughout the worship space and yet not create a visual distraction.

The musicians must be able to interact and, therefore, be in close proximity with each other and the source of the sound of the accompanying instruments. Sufficient space should be considered and planned for the addition of regular or occasional instrumentalists, and for the possibility of a pipe organ. A music rehearsal room nearby is also frequently considered in a new or renovated space.



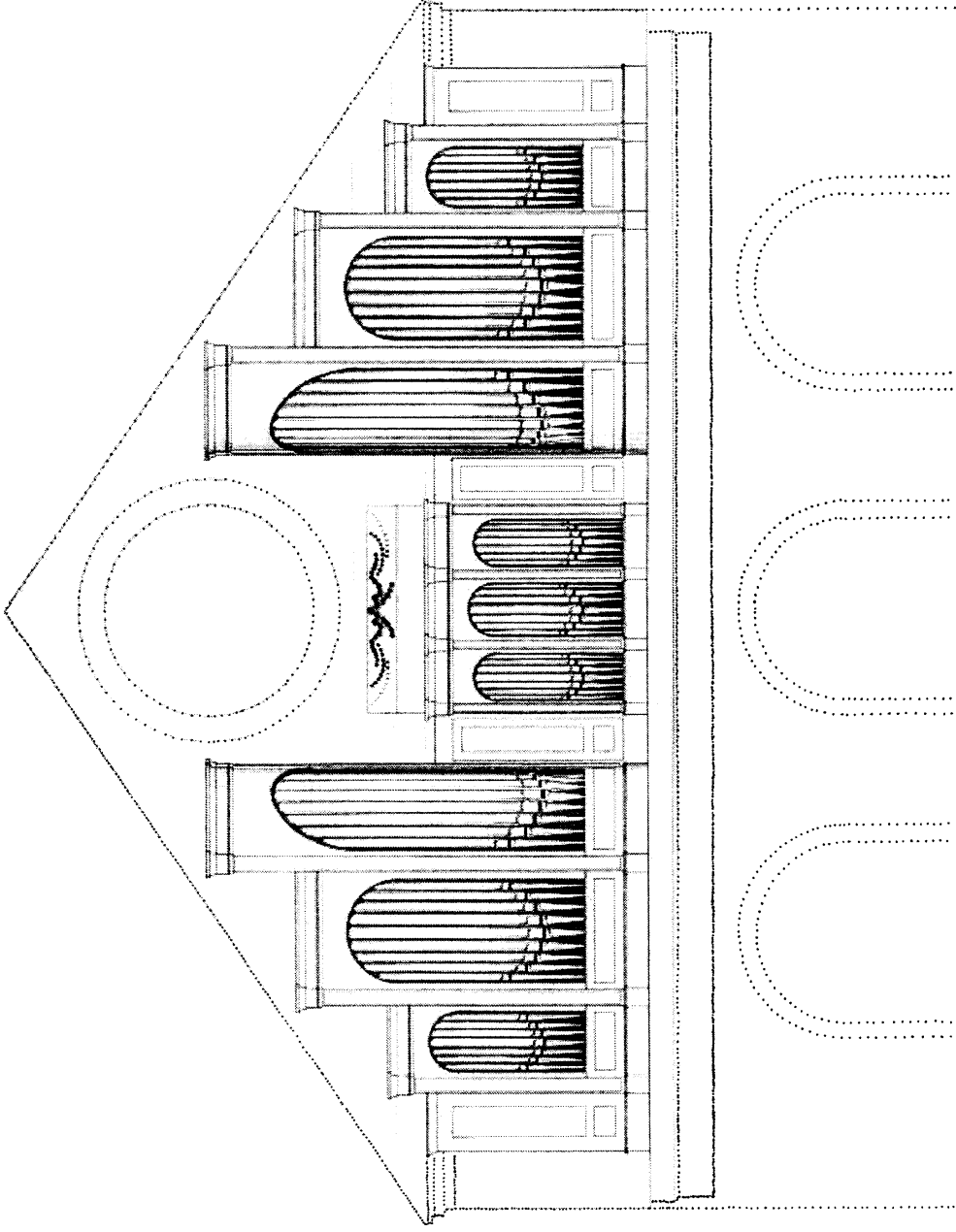
Space for the music ministry, practice room and storage. St John the Apostle, Leesburg, VA (Proposed) Morgan Gick and Associates, Architect

## Excerpts from Built of Living Stones

Music is integral to the liturgy. It unifies those gathered to worship; supports the song of the congregation, highlights significant parts of the liturgical action, and helps to set the tone for each celebration. (MCW 232, GIRM 103) [88]

It is important to recognize that the building must support the music and song of the entire worshipping assembly. In addition, "some members of the community [have] special gifts [for] leading the [assembly in] musical praise and thanksgiving." (LMT 63) The skills and talents of these pastoral musicians, choirs, and instrumentalists are especially valued by the Church. Because the roles of the choirs and cantors are exercised within the liturgical community, the space chosen for the musicians should clearly express that they are part of the assembly of worshipers. (GRM 294) In addition, cantors and song leaders need visual contact with the music director while they themselves are visible to the rest of the congregation. (cf MCW 33-38) Apart from the singing of the Responsorial Psalm, which normally occurs at the ambo, the stand for the cantor or song leader is distinct from the ambo, which is reserved for the proclamation of the word of God. [89]

The placement and prayerful decorum of the choir members can help the rest of the community to focus on the liturgical action taking place at the ambo, the altar, and the chair. The ministers of music are most appropriately located in a place where they can be part of the assembly and have the ability to be heard. Occasions or physical situations may necessitate that the choir be placed in or near the sanctuary. In such circumstances, the placement of the choir should never crowd or overshadow the other ministers in the sanctuary nor should it distract from the liturgical action. [90]



Pipe Organ, Our Lady of Mercy Church, Potomac, MD.  
Guilbault-Therrien, organbuilders, St Hyacinthe, Quebec