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This year marks the 25th anniversary of the death of one of my heroes – Jacques Berthier. Jacques who? His name is unfamiliar in English-speaking countries, and even too little-known in his native country of France. Yet countless people to whom this man's name means nothing have nevertheless been blessed by his music. Although he was never a member of the Taizé community in France, we still sing almost 100 Taizé chants that he composed: *Ubi caritas, Veni Sancte Spiritus, Wait for the Lord, Nada te turbe, Laudate omnes gentes, Magnificat, Eat this bread, De nocte, Bless the Lord, Bleibet hier, Dans nos obscurités, Singt dem Herrn*, and many more. Millions of pilgrims who have travelled to Taizé over the decades have returned home to their far-flung countries, carrying Berthier's hymns on their lips – and in their hearts.

Jacques Berthier was born in Auxerre in Burgundy on 27 June 1923. Both his parents were musicians, and they taught their young child to play the piano and organ, as well as teaching him harmony and composition. His father Paul was chief organist and choir director at the Cathedral of Auxerre. His mother Geneviève played the choir organ at the same cathedral and helped her husband Paul direct the choir. At the time, the pipe organ of the Cathedral was an Anneessens organ with 47 stops and three keyboards. From the age of 3, Jacques was brought up the stairs of the cathedral to the organ, where he enjoyed watching his father sitting at the console, playing the keyboards, and moving his feet along the pedals below. He later described his childhood as being 'bathed' in music. He developed a great love for the pipe organ as well as the piano. Playing such an instrument is like driving a Rolls Royce: feeling the invigorating sound of air rushing through the pipes and hearing its magnificent sound filling an entire cathedral is immeasurably more satisfying than playing a cheap electronic organ.

At the end of World War II, Berthier became a student at the César-Franck School in Paris, which had been founded in 1935 by the French composer Guy de Lioncourt. Like Berthier's own

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father, Guy de Lioncourt loved sacred music. Berthier married Lioncourt's daughter Germaine. In 1953 Berthier succeeded his father Paul as organist of Auxerre Cathedral, a position he held until 1960.

I had the privilege of living in community with Joseph Gelineau, the French Jesuit who gave Berthier his first official commission. In 1954 Gelineau composed a number of antiphons and psalms for a new psalter in French. Soon Gelineau decided to publish a sequel, and asked Berthier to contribute 51 antiphons. This was the first time Berthier was officially commissioned to compose liturgical music.

In 1961 Berthier became the chief organist at the Jesuit church of Saint Ignace in Paris, where he had a superb 19th-century Cavaillé-Coll organ at his disposal. Berthier held his position of titular organist at Saint Ignace for 33 years, until his death on his 71st birthday on 27 June 1994.

In the early 1970s, the Taizé community asked for Berthier's help. Many young people from different countries in Europe were visiting the monastery, especially during the summer months. The monks were faced with the challenge of finding appropriate hymns that could be sung by everyone. Brother Robert Giscard, who directed me many years later when I volunteered for the choir in Taizé, came up with the idea of short chants, made up of simple biblical phrases, that could be repeated over and over again, and which would be relatively easy to learn.

The decision to approach Berthier (who had already composed some music for them in the 1950s) was inspired. It is extremely difficult to compose music with emotional impact that at the same time does not overwhelm listeners. It is a huge challenge to compose music that everyone can sing without degenerating into crowd-pleasing songs that have the beauty boiled out of them. And one of the most difficult things of all is to compose simple music without succumbing to banality. Yet Berthier had the brilliance to overcome these seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

An excellent example of Berthier's genius is *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, a sublime Taizé chant whose melody is made up of only 2 notes! The bass line has even less: a single note repeated over and over again. Berthier was truly able to make the most out of the least. And yet despite this simplicity, the chant manages to evoke Pentecost: the various pitches dovetail perfectly, the verses for soloists are in multiple languages, and all the while the choir and congregation incessantly call upon the Holy Spirit to descend.

Berthier effectively created a new genre of sacred music that has become known as the music of Taizé. He composed chants that are generally in four parts. He added accompaniments for

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various instruments. And he showed an unerring ability to place the musical emphasis on the right words, even in languages that were not his own.

TAIZÉ MUSIC

One of the distinctive features of Taizé music may just have its origins in Berthier's childhood experience of being in the organ loft of Auxerre Cathedral. He used to enjoy listening to the interaction between, on the one hand, his father's pipe organ, and on the other, his mother's choir organ and the singers. Those who took part in singing and playing were in the same large space – the cathedral, but not in the same precise place within the cathedral. In Taizé music, something similar unfolds. The main congregation sings the chants. A small choir sings the bass, tenor, alto and soprano lines, a soloist sings the verses, and instruments play variations on the main tune. It's not a matter of everyone singing the same thing but neither is it a matter of everyone doing their own thing. There are different roles, but an underlying unity.

Another characteristic feature of Taizé music is repetition, a feature that entails the risk of boring listeners. Berthier avoids this pitfall by constantly introducing subtle variations (the soloists sing slightly different verses each time, the different instruments play different variations, etc.), even as essentially the same melody is repeated over and over again, though even the melody varies by rising and falling. The very sameness is subtly and significantly different each time. Taizé music also has a refreshing flexibility and suppleness: it doesn't necessarily following a predetermined order, unlike most other congregational singing. Depending on the ambience, a chant can be sung for as little as 3 minutes or as long as 12 minutes.

A third key element in Taizé music is the unique manner in which it combines the group and the individual. An entire group sustains the singing so that an individual is free to stop singing for a period of time, and re-enter the flow of music later. Individuals may stop singing for various reasons – they may start thinking about something in their lives or they may enter into a contemplative space that draws them into silence. Whatever the reason, the important thing is that each individual has the freedom to sing or be silent.

This brings us to a *fourth feature* of Taizé music: the interweaving of music and silence. The primary purpose of Taizé chants is to lead people into prayer. The reiteration of a short musical phrase is reminiscent of the treasured prayer of Orthodox spirituality, the

Jesus Prayer – ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner’; and like the Jesus prayer, the Taizé chant seeps into the heart through repetition, ushering people into their own interiority. Additionally, Berthier’s music isn’t full of itself, and that is why it readily leads to silence and to adoration.

A *fifth feature* is its Pentecost-like quality. The chants are in many different languages; yet singers who lack familiarity with another language find themselves able to sing a Taizé chant in a language that is not their mother tongue. And even those who do not linguistically grasp a chant such as *Bleibet hier* can nevertheless find themselves profoundly moved by it. The diversity of languages, which is usually a barrier to unity, paradoxically becomes an avenue toward communion.

In terms of influences upon Berthier, he himself was a great devotee of Gregorian chant, so much so that he requested that only Gregorian chant be sung at his Funeral Mass, and stipulated that above all none of his own hymns should be sung. His wishes were respected – at least until the final blessing, after which the organist launched into a medley of Berthier’s hymns!

While he continued composing Taizé chants for the remainder of his career, Berthier also composed liturgical music for many other groups. He provided music for a number of monastic communities. He composed cantatas, motets, a Requiem and even the musical score for a film. He set to music a special Mass to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the birth of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. And the final Mass he composed was the *Missa pro Europa* for a huge gathering of European scouts. In fact, over the course of his life, he composed more than 1,500 pieces of music.

In June 1977 Berthier made the front page of France’s prestigious national newspaper *Le Monde*. Taking the 1977 Congress of Sacred Music in Paris as its point of departure, *Le Monde* asked if the Catholic Church in France could develop liturgical music that would appeal to the people of today without falling victim to childish naïveté, emotional blandness, and commercial mediocrity. It was thanks to Berthier that the musical critic of *Le Monde* was confident enough to claim that France had found composers who were up to this challenge. He highlighted Berthier’s hymn *Fais paraître ton jour* (Make your day appear), which he called “the superb whirling litany of Jacques Berthier”. It is a stirring hymn with lyrics by the French Jesuit Didier Rimaud, who had a long and fruitful collaboration with Berthier. Along with many of Berthier’s other highly popular hymns, such as *Que tes oeuvres sont belles* and *Jésus, berger de toute humanité*, it is really worth listening to on YouTube.

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THE PERSON

As a person, Berthier was a man of service, humble and discreet, always using his immense talent in a way that didn't draw attention to himself but built up others instead. He never put himself forward as the composer of Taizé music, and never sought any recognition for his enormous contribution to the global appeal of Taizé. He gave countless hours to composing music for monastic communities such as the Abbey of Notre Dame de la Grâce-Dieu near Besançon, the Abbey of Notre Dame de Bonne Espérance near Bordeaux, the Trappist sisters of Chambarand near Grenoble, the Benedictine Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Montmartre, Paris, and many others. He was extraordinarily patient and gracious toward monks and nuns whose knowledge of music, harmony and composition paled in comparison with his own. He gave them time, and this time also gave him time for God, because before composing hymns, antiphons, and litanies for these communities, he liked to stay several days with them, immersing himself in their lives of prayer and contemplation.

There was a tremendous spiritual depth to the man. One particular Sunday in November, he played the organ at Mass in an ice-cold abbey church. At the end he improvised on a theme, but it was so chilly that the congregation quickly dispersed. Seated in the organ loft as though he had lost all track of time and had forgotten about the freezing cold, Berthier continued to play music of ravishing beauty for a practically empty church. Only his wife and a religious sister were still present. His wife turned to the nun, sighing in admiration. "Ah," Germaine said, "he is alone with God".

Apart from being a friend of God and a stellar composer, he was also an exceptional organist, and performed excellent improvisations. While he was still the organist at Auxerre, the famous French composer Olivier Messiaen happened to be passing through, and came to Mass. Messiaen was taken by the quality of the piece that was played after the sermon, and approached Berthier, asking who had composed it. Berthier explained that he had been improvising. In fact every Sunday at the Church of Saint Ignace in Paris he had the habit of playing something that evoked what had just been said during the homily. One person used to travel from the other side of Paris each Sunday, not so much to hear the sermon itself, but to listen to Berthier's improvisation upon it. One particular Sunday, a visiting Brazilian priest gave an impassioned homily espousing the theology of liberation. Afterwards, Berthier, who also had a delightful sense of humour,

played a clever improvisation of the famous left-wing anthem, 'The Internationale'!

Berthier's music has stood the test of time: a quarter of a century after his death, his music still has not grown old. One quality that stands out for me in his music is its charm: it has a sheer likability, a capacity to delight, fascinate, and inspire devotion. His music awakens deep feelings, yet at the same time doesn't manipulate our emotions. There is nothing forced or fake about it.

Why is Jacques Berthier a hero for me? Not only because his music has touched me more deeply than any other music, Christian or otherwise, but also because he successfully combined deep friendship with God and true service to others. Moreover, I am in awe of the tremendous humility of this exceptionally talented man.

During the final year of Berthier's life I was living in the Jesuit community attached to the Church of Saint Ignace in Paris. Several times I had the privilege of hearing him play the organ at Sunday Mass, and I always meant to thank him for the gift of his music and for the untold blessings I experienced through it. One of the big regrets of my life is that I never took the opportunity to express my gratitude to this wonderful human being and remarkable composer. The present article is one way of making up for this failure.

Jacques Berthier's Funeral Mass was held on July 1st 1994 in the second largest church in Paris, the Church of Saint-Sulpice, only marginally smaller than the Cathedral of Notre Dame. It was a fitting location for the funeral of such an accomplished organist: the Great Organ of Saint Sulpice is regarded as the finest Cavallé-Coll organ ever fashioned. Berthier's good friend Joseph Gelineau SJ gave the homily, finishing with these words: "Be without fear now: He knows your music, through his Holy Spirit. The angels know your melodies by heart. You are already at home up there. And at the same time you remain with us. Never an hour nor a minute goes by but somewhere in the world, your hymns resound. And thanks be to you for having done all of this SOLI DEO GLORIA."¹

1 It was a beautiful touch on the part of Gelineau to finish his funeral sermon with this Latin phrase. First, it was an acknowledgement of Berthier's love for the Latin language. Second, it was a tribute to his ecumenical contribution, especially through his Taizé music, since this Latin phrase is one of the Five Solae or core principles of the Protestant Reformation. Third, and most importantly, it placed Berthier among the pantheon of great religious composers like Johann Sebastian Bach who wrote their music for "the glory of God alone". The latter made sure to add the initials S.D.G. at the end of all his religious compositions.