

The Lectern in Liturgical Culture

The lectern, or ‘singing chair’ in the ancient Hungarian expression, has only recently become a subject of interest for Protestant scholars. Unfortunately, the English word ‘lectern’ is too closely associated with reading (*lectio*) but for the lack of a better term I will use it to designate the particular object I am about to analyse, albeit with a much wider signification (as we shall see later on). This piece of liturgical furniture is actually a neatly carved, painted wood stand for books or sheet music which used to stand in the middle of Protestant churches, or as they say, in the “marketplace of the church”, close to the pulpit and the communion table. This marked the position for the conducting cantor, and was a tangible proof of his important liturgical role. These lecterns were eventually moved up to the choir loft, next to the organ. The side facing the church was used to display the numbers of chants assigned for the liturgical service, and many times this was their only enduring function. In the end, the lecterns fell into almost complete disuse. Most of the surviving examples are found today in Transylvania; they are being systematically collected and studied, thanks to a well-coordinated and professional research-effort, but most especially, to the fact that these lecterns are now far more than museum pieces in the eyes of a new generation of church musicians, liturgists, and theologians: they are considered re-interpreters of the place of chant within the liturgy.

This presentation is meant contribute to this process by looking at the lectern as a real factor of liturgical history. In order to do that effectively we must go beyond the lecterns used within the context of Protestant worship and transcend both denominational and temporal boundaries. This effort can contribute to the on-going Protestant research insofar as it places the object of study within a wider context, enriching it with further significations. It is also my intention to direct the attention of liturgical scholars all over the world to a phenomenon whose last and most characteristic reminders are these Transylvanian lecterns. Hopefully, this will engender further research on the subject.

The word ‘lectern’, in Latin *pulpitum*, could signify various things depending on the time period or textual context in which it is used. The earliest one is the ambo which, insofar as its shape or location are concerned, has nothing to do with the ‘conference stands’ lately erected in Roman Catholic churches. The liturgical piece of furniture, originally called ambo, is actually a characteristic feature of the Old Latin liturgies. Its name is generally derived either from the double set of stairs leading up to it (*ambo* means ‘both’ in Latin), or from the Greek verb *anavenin*, meaning, ‘to go up’. I con-

sider the second opinion much more likely. In the classical Old Roman arrangement of sacred space, there are two ambos attached to the Southern and Northern sides of the wall surrounding the choir, thus their place is outside the actual sanctuary of the church. One is for the recitation of the Epistle, the other for the singing of the Gospel; both their shape and orientation are different, although they are both made of stone, have a set of stairs leading up to them, and are elevated way above the floor level. Having two ambos must have been a general feature of Roman basilicas, but today this arrangement can only be seen in a few ancient churches. In other Italian cities the Roman arrangement of building two ambos was not necessarily followed, and the structures do not necessarily correspond to the typical Roman examples, but there are certainly some common features: they all stand outside of the sanctuary, more or less in the middle of the nave, to the side, they are built of stone, and are elevated above the floor level. Since the word ‘ambo’ was most likely perceived by the Latin liturgists as a Greek word, its corresponding Latin designation was often *pulpitum*.

There are two ways one may approach the correlation between these lecterns and chant. The ambo was principally the place for the recitation of biblical Mass readings. The very existence of the ambo emphasizes, however, that the actual function of the Mass readings, which, of course, were always sung in recitative melodies, went beyond simple instruction and had their proper ritual logic within the ceremonial drama utilizing both sound and space. On the other hand, it was from here, or more accurately, from an appointed step of its stairs, that the psalmist sang the soloistic or responsorial chants of the Mass, namely, the Gradual, Tract, and Alleluia. These richly ornamented melodies were perceived as proper music even by that age when recitation was considered the natural method of “voicing” liturgical texts. The chants and the Mass readings were basically sung at the same place and almost in the same manner, thus their functions did not differ from each other essentially. This is diametrically opposed to the modern perception which views the liturgy as an alternating performance of text and music, prose and chant. This is the first principle we may define as a result of our study regarding the lectern.

The second significance of the *pulpitum* is tied to more Northern territories and to later centuries in the history of Europe. Today it is seen mostly in England, but originally in the Romanesque and Gothic churches it was general to separate the choir from the nave with a rood screen (also called chancel screen or choir screen) which in French, as well as English, terminology is often referred to as *jube* or *jubé* (derived from the initial words of the lector’s blessing: “Iube, domne, benedicere”), while in German it is called *Lettner* (based on the Latin *lectorium*, that is, ‘reading place’). In Latin the same is normally known as *pulpitum*. From the vernacular forms it is clear that the principal function of the rood screen was not seen in separation but

in allocating the place of recitation. While in Old Latin church architecture the chancel screen was between the sanctuary and the choir, and it was independent from the ambos, in the church architecture of Transalpine regions the wall separating the choir from the nave became the more emphatic structure. A balcony-type construction on the top of the screen was appointed for the ceremonial recitation of Mass readings, and so it can be stated with certainty that the rood screen is the functional equivalent of the ancient ambos. On the internal wall of certain rood screens, facing the sanctuary, we can sometimes see even the double flight of stairs, so characteristic of the Gospel ambos of ancient basilicas.

As far as the rood screen is concerned, chant and recitation were separated from each other because the melodic items of the Latin plainchant—as we shall see later—were not sung from here. At the same time both the structure and the function of the rood screen were eventually modified, and the examples still extant today reflect this already modified state. The rood screens from later medieval periods are usually wider, and pipe organs are built on their balcony-like vertex. We know that at times—thanks to the favourable acoustic conditions—even monophonic pieces were sung from the top of the rood screen. When polyphonic arrangements became dominant in Western church music, the chancel screen became even more important. The last step was abandoning a functionally divided liturgical space, and preferring church buildings with one single and undivided hall-like space. It is not hard to see that from a historical point of view the choir loft of modern churches is nothing but a rood screen which was attached to the internal wall of church facades. Thus the rood screen is originally the “barbarian”, that is, non-Italian equivalent of the ambos. In its later form, the chancel screen is the antecedent of the choir loft, and so it is also the symbol of the division or separation between professional church music (including the organ and polyphony) and monophonic liturgical chant. This aspect is also essential for understanding the phenomenon of the so-called *pulpitum*.

The word *pulpitum* is also used to designate those book and sheet music stands which stood in the axis of the choir in larger churches, in the middle of the so-called planum. Based on contemporary drawings and rubrical descriptions, it is clear that this axis was the proper place of the scholas and precentors for the performance of liturgical chant. Some larger cathedrals and monastery churches had several lecterns positioned on this axis. These were differentiated based on what exactly was recited or sung from them, or on what was the ceremony or the rank of the feast day at which they were used. Their common characteristic was that they stood outside of the sanctuary, yet they were all oriented towards the altar, so they were the very centre of liturgical functions performed outside of the chancel, in the very midst of the congregation participating *choraliter* at Mass or in the recitation of the Divine Office. This statement is then refined but not modified by the fact that in certain churches

two lecterns were used for the two precentors responsible for leading the two separate sides of the choir.

On pictures dating to the renaissance period or later the lecterns for precentors are not placed in the middle of the choir but somewhere on the sides. In part, this could be the consequence of contemporary architectural tastes, because they wanted to leave the axis of the church free. On the other hand, this could be the result of the same tendency we have identified in connection with the rood screen. The more professional church music becomes, the greater the distance is between the professional singer who is the “employee” of the congregation and the assistants who are more closely involved in liturgical ceremony. Obviously, the former would be hindered in his musical performance if he were positioned in the middle of the choir, farther away from the organ, being obliged to follow all the ceremonial gestures of the assistance. Furthermore, as the choirs became larger, the space assigned to them in the middle of the planum became too tight. The lecterns originally placed in the middle of Protestant churches are direct descendents of medieval lecterns, and, in fact, preserve an arrangement much more faithful to the ancient and medieval customs than their later Catholic relatives. The main characteristic of the lectern is that it is in the centre of the liturgical space outside of the chancel, and so it determines that chanting and recitation are the central feature of any liturgical function performed outside of the sanctuary, be that the Divine Office or the Mass of the catechumens. This may be considered our third principle conclusion.

The fourth and, from a modern point of view, most common understanding of *pulpitum* is what modern English calls the pulpit (from which sermons are delivered). Since this has no direct relationship to chant and it is only a secondary element of the liturgy, I will not treat it here. Only in the context of Protestant worship is it worthwhile to make a note. Wherever the medieval liturgical ethos is still alive, but as a result of a significant theological change the sacrificial liturgy disappears or it is radically reinterpreted, the triad of the pulpit, communion table, and lectern becomes the new liturgical centre.

Let us now take a look at the corresponding objects within Eastern Christianity! In this case, not the name but the function or the object itself will be in the focus of our investigation.

In the middle of Byzantine churches there is a circle-shaped space designated for this specific function, while in Eastern cathedral churches we find a podium which is at least two steps high. The function of this so-called *amvon* (certainly related to the word ‘ambo’) is not primarily that it should be the place for singing the Gospel. Some amvons are actually rather large, and they are connected to the outer sanctuary either directly, or by means of a narrow ‘liturgical corridor’, called *solea*. The larger they are, the more clearly they evoke the structure usually called *bima* which we find

in the centre of Sephardic Jewish synagogues (used for reading the Torah). According to some scholars, the bima was also a typical structure of the churches of Syrian Christianity.

During the actual recitation of biblical passages the lector does not simply step up onto the highest step of the amvon, but he also makes use of a foldable wooden book stand which laterally (from the side) has the shape of an X. Stretched between the upper horizontal bars of the stand there is a piece of cloth or skin which is usually covered with a nicely decorated veil of the proper liturgical colour. The books are placed on this piece of furniture which is called *analogion* or icon-holder because the same device is used in the East for displaying icons. The analogion is light and easily moveable, so it can be used not only on the amvon but also at other locations in the church. This provides the possibility of “voicing” the sacred texts and orienting them in many different ways, thus making full use of the symbolical richness of the arrangement of cultic space. The same object can also be seen on certain medieval Western illustrations; some more traditional Anglican congregations even use it today.

It is not from here, however—once again: I do not consider recitation chanting—that chants are sung. In cross-shaped Byzantine churches, the two ends of the cross-bar (cross-arm), sometimes two niches in the Southern and Northern walls, or only two lecterns on the two sides were the designated places for cantors. Independently of the actual form, this place is called *kliros*. An indispensable piece of furniture in these kliri was a wooden book stand which was immovable and larger than the analogion. The singers stand around it (just like in the case of Latin lecterns) and its position on the side does not mean that its function was peripheral in the liturgy. The existence of kliri originally presuppose alternatim singing, and the fact that there are two of them symmetrically positioned in relation to the axis of the church demonstrate that they form an organic part of liturgical space. Their position is clearly parallel with the ancient Latin double ambos or the later choir stalls, and they surround the most prominent place of the “voiced” or audible liturgy, that is, the amvon.

Although in several different variations but these parallels also exist in Oriental liturgies. The Syrian liturgy is organized around three lecterns. The lectern of the Gospel stands in the middle, in front of the curtain separating the elevated sanctuary from the choir. Several aspects (I have already discussed) are united in this object. The mounting on which it stands seems like an elongation of the sanctuary floor (like the solea), and on the sides there are steps leading up to it (as is the case with the ambos). This structure is made of wood, and the side facing the sanctuary is a book stand, while the other side (facing the nave) is actually and literally an analogion, as it is used for displaying the Gospel book as an icon. At the reading of the Gospel, the book is simply moved from one side to the other (from the side of the nave to the side of the sanctuary).

On the lower floor level of the choir, on the Southern and Northern sides there are two more stands, sometimes made of stone, on which the chant books are placed and around which the singers stand during the Divine Office. The Western Syrians do not always express this alternatim character, in simpler village or smaller city churches there is often only one such lectern, but always on the side and outside of the sanctuary.

The Coptic practice also makes use of double lecterns standing on the two sides outside of the sanctuary. In the middle, on the axis of the nave there is nothing, but on the sides there are double sets of lecterns. On the left, that is, on the Northern side there stands a lectern facing East, while on the right, namely, on the Southern side there is a lectern facing West, that is, facing the congregation. From the first, they sing the Coptic texts, from the latter the Arabic translations. Next to both of these lecterns, there are two more wide lecterns closer to the main central gate of the chancel screen (towards the axis of the nave). From these the Copts sing the Office, as well as all the chants that are sung alternatim. It is possible that these wider lecterns are the additions of later ages. Since I have not seen any older examples of these, and the Copts sometimes stand around the large chant books in the manner of the Syrians, I find it probable that originally—having fewer books—even the Copts used the same lectern for biblical readings and chanting. Be that as it may, in the present practice there are different places assigned for reading, soloistic singing and alternatim community chant.

In the Armenian church, as well as in the other variations of the rites mentioned above, the same arrangement and method of application are observable. The conclusion, especially in light of the Latin parallels, may be phrased the following way. In trying to assess the liturgical function of lecterns, it is not sufficient to focus on the objects themselves. It has to be taken into account what sort of liturgical texts were meant to be recited or sung from them. It must be considered if they are positioned in the middle or on the sides of the cultic space, and if the latter is the case, it has to be determined whether there is any relation between the symmetrically positioned two lecterns, or between the lecterns and the ambo in the middle. Finally, it is indispensable to establish the exact location of the lectern, whether it is in the chancel, on the border between the sanctuary and the choir, or in the choir proper.

My summary of the conclusions is that the main characteristic of the lectern—from a liturgical point of view—is not related to its actual shape, form, or ornamentation. Its real significance is that it designates the location of the cantor or the schola to an emphatic spot within the cultic space of a church. In other words, if the cantor or the schola take an emphatic position of the liturgical space, the lectern itself is not absolutely necessary. On the other hand, if the singers take their positions in a peripheral

place, it will make little or no difference whether they hold their books or sheet music on a stand or not.

Manifestly, in the Christian liturgies of Western origin today the latter is the case almost universally. It is not difficult to outline the course of events that led to this state of affairs. Due to the unprecedented development of European church music, from early on, the singing of certain liturgical genres was left to professional choirs or soloists. This process proved to be unstoppable, and it resulted in both favourable and regrettable developments. The favourable outcome is the marvellous repertory of European sacred music itself. The regrettable outcome is that liturgical chant became less and less of a “public property”, the rift between the performers and the audience widened even in the liturgy. Finally, when the economic and social foundations of religious institutions were severely shaken, the expert musical performance provided by professionals became unsustainable. By this time, however, the simpler musical alternatives were all but forgotten, and thus what remained was a mean, prosaic liturgy in which singing was only an atmospheric element to pass time, and not the natural mode of “voicing” sacred texts. Unless this state of affairs is amended, every reform plan will remain incomplete and, in the end, without real result. Low-quality chants can be exchanged with better ones, but this will not change substantially the opinion regarding liturgical singing itself. Liturgical chant, and indeed the whole of church music, can only find its true place, if it ceases to be chant or music, and it becomes absorbed by liturgical action.

In the final analysis, the lack or possible reintroduction of lecterns standing in the centre of cultic space proves to be a deciding factor in the liturgical life of the Church. If the chant is simply decoration, musical background, or a transition between “really important” ceremonial actions, the lectern is not necessary. But if chanting is a medium for communicating sacred texts and an independent liturgical function, there will eventually arise a need for a lectern, even in places where their memory is long gone.

This, however, has certain conditions. The first of these conditions is that even in civil life our relationship to singing must change. If singing is not the natural means of self-expression in a society, if on the most important feasts singing is left to paid professionals and electrical devices because the average man “does not have a voice”, then even the liturgical environment will be unable to preserve the memory of an earlier state of affairs. At the same time, it could be precisely the daily practice and dignity of liturgical singing which may sustain the inclination and capability of singing on a more general level of a society, even outside the Church. At least this is what can be experienced in contemporaneous Eastern and Oriental communities. The second condition is the restriction of “professional” music without, of course, violating high musical culture. By this I mean the avoidance of affected, arty mannerisms and a due

emphasis on the textual orientation of singing. And at last, the third condition is the elimination of simple prose-reading in the liturgy. I do not mean to imply that there should be no real difference between *accentus* and *concentus*, that is, recitative or monotone reading and decorative, melodic chant. This distinction, however, should not be conceived in terms of the difference between prose and song because it remains essentially within the category of musical performance. In reality, this is a question of various styles or modalities in chanting which underline the essentially musical qualities of the liturgical texts used in a ceremonial context. Only he who is aware of the various functions of all the different types of lecterns (*pulpita*) can acquire a real understanding of the “singing chair” proper.

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