

When In Our Music God Is Glorified

II Chronicles 7:5b,6,8-11

When I began my career 30+ years ago, the music ministry at my first pastorate, Tabernacle Baptist Church in Schenectady, New York, was not exactly what I hoped for or imagined it might be. Being a preacher's kid in a musical family, I had been reared in churches where the choir lofts were full and the organists were always above average. From my earliest childhood memories, the happiest times of my life involved music as a vocalist, as a musician, or as a composer.

To give you some sense of this, when I was three years old, my brothers and I sang together and won first place in our townwide talent show (of course, this was in Milo, Maine, where the runner-up was a yodeling cow!). By five, I was taking piano lessons, by seven, I had taught myself guitar; the year I turned eight, I declared my intentions to join the Vienna Boys Choir, after seeing them in concert. By the time puberty squashed that dream, I already had my eyes set on becoming a rock-and-roll star—maybe even one with a TV show, like Mickey Dolenz and the Monkees (remember them?).

During high school, I vacillated between listening to Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd and Bob Dylan and James Taylor, while at the same time I purchased season tickets for the cheap seats at the Portland Symphony. During college, I was trained in sophisticated choral works for a touring *a cappella* choir, while even taking a stab at organ lessons for the fun of it. In other words, I was so completely immersed in music of one type or another that if you listened to my heart beat, it would count out in 4/4 time.

So when I had my first professional encounter with a ministry of music, I was a little underwhelmed. The old Service Hymnal used at Tabernacle had more “blood” in the hymn texts than the local Red Cross stored in their banks. Every one of their favorite hymns had Jesus’ blood flowing endlessly everywhere, such as, *There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel’s veins; and sinners, plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains...* It was nauseating—worse than a Quentin Tarantino film! The organist, Dallas Rogers, a sweetheart of a person, played them all slow with dirge-like melodrama, jacking up the tremolo on the Vox Celeste to give each hymn its most sentimental presentation, enough to cause tears to form in the eyes of singers who had long memorized each blessed line.

The choir in this church consisted of one single person—at least initially. Ethel Osterberg, a 93-year-old one-time soprano, who even possessed 78-rpm recordings of herself singing beautifully in the early 1940s, by this time was barely warbling out a note within an octave’s reach of the composer’s score. Yet, she stood up in the choir loft each Sunday dressed in her purple choir robe, covering the portion of the service reserved for “anthem.” She was never rivaled until a year into my ministry, when Ada Vegalahn, who at 89 considered herself much younger and more competent than Ethel, joined her in the choir loft, where for the next 18 months, the two of them battled it out over descants they could not sing, all in an effort to add beauty to the worship of our Lord. Eventually, both Ethel and Ada died within weeks of each other (I presume out of sheer exhaustion over the demands of competition), leaving the morning

worship at Tabernacle at a loss over what to do about a ministry that had no music.

Now you might wonder, with my musical interests and background, why I didn't offer to pitch in, or at least try to assemble a choir? I did sing on occasion, but for the most part, I chose not to. For one thing, my sermons and pastoral prayers back then were so atrocious that I was afraid to invite any more criticism of my youthful incompetence. But aside from that, in my heart, I realized that music in the church doesn't always have to be pitch perfect or at concert standards; if people who are imperfect give it their best effort, it often has a spirit about it and a beauty imbedded within that cannot be improved upon. Music from the heart has a way of bringing honor to God in a time of worship with a measure of sincerity that far exceeds anyone's right and ability to criticize or ridicule because the divine and human spirits transcend the moment with love. As long as I have lived in this imperfect world, you simply cannot improve on the spirit of love. Songs expressed with sincerity from human hearts are truly filled with "grace notes."

Sometimes we're not mindful of this when we gather in a sanctuary. We often view music in the church as the offering of a talented few. Or we limit our acceptance of what music we consider worshipful or worthy of the setting. This is understandable to a degree. The heritage of Christendom is such that church sanctuaries have been the setting and inspiration for some of the greatest music ever composed in human civilization. The classic works of the masters were often the means through which adoration and praise, lamentation and sorrows could be poured out from within us to the

God who transcends us. Mixed with liturgy, choral and instrumental music have been the means to lift us above the mundane and profane norms of the everyday world, creating spaces deemed sacred enough to exclude what might be construed as common, impious, or substandard.

There are reasons for doing this that seem justified, insofar as we should want to bring our very best before God; hence, we seek out talent and skills and disciplines that are the best we can offer or afford. Yet, sometimes we forget that God is always with us regardless of where we are, in the ordinary and the uncommon, in beautiful, sacred settings and in the profane impiety of daily life.

Hence, there is no music that isn't actually in the presence of God, so the ordinary is no less extraordinary to God just because it is outside of a worshipful setting. A song that emanates from our hearts in the privacy of our homes, or sung with deep feeling in school chorus or at a local bar on karaoke night, is no less meaningful to God than if we stand up among the best voices in a choir loft. Worship of a type consists of our entire lives; hence, what we enjoy in our daily world has as much validity in worshipful expression as do the hymns and pieces contained in the vast libraries of sacred music.

There was a time when this was more apparent. Tradition tells us that at various times throughout history (and still true in certain regions around the world), Christian music has borrowed popular tunes from the local culture and replaced the lyrics with a religious text. Years ago, when I traveled to parts of Russia and Eastern Europe, the music of the churches I visited were often Christianized versions of popular culture. The hymnbooks rarely had musical

scores and often were comprised of lyrics alone with a reference to what tunes could be used for singing. The sophistication and artistry varied, to be sure, from congregational singing of popular tunes in neighborhood house churches to the old state churches with paid choirs, where hushed parishioners would be lifted to musical heights listening to the remarkable power of harmony and sound blended in song.

I would often leave each setting wondering which was more spiritually powerful and memorable. I never could quite decide, since the atmosphere was so different between each setting and each one delivered a spiritual power of its own, since what was lacking in musical quality in some settings was always made up by the spirit of love between us and the people who gathered there. I realized then in my travels something I still hold as true: that it does not matter how the quality and sophistication and artistry compare when in our music God is glorified.

In the years I have been here in Noank, I have always appreciated the openness to and variety of music we experience here in this church. Some of it comes with a long heritage of favorite hymns and choral numbers; some of it is new to us, perhaps even a stretch if it's outside of our personal range of musical tastes. Bach, Handel and Mozart have all been well represented, as have Hopson, Rutter, and Pote. Beyond the classics, we've sung songs from all types of genres: Gospel, spirituals, Taize, folk, Country Western, Latin American, African, Asian, Caribbean, and the like. We've been accompanied by the organ and piano, by strings and brass, wind instruments and percussion, by handbells, guitar, bass fiddle, and

even accordion! We've tried our hand in a variety of styles to expand our experience with music and to appreciate the great diversity of musical expression there is within Christianity. We've incorporated music from other faith traditions as well, along with songs one might have first heard on the radio. Though it's not always a style that speaks to each and every person, I cannot recall a time when it hasn't been worshipful in spirit or expressive of divine or human love.

In the decade or so that I've been here, Linda Lozis has been the principal orchestrator behind much of it, both the traditional music we've enjoyed and the more experimental offerings. Linda's ministry here since 1999 (I would extrapolate that out to include all of her positions in Mystic, Scarsdale, and Fort Dodge, Iowa) has been a true labor of love through a sincere desire to lead her choirs to express a love of God, for the benefit of participants and listeners alike. If you stay for the reception after this worship, you will hear comments about her leadership here at the church, including the legacy of biannual Messiah concerts, as well as in the American Guild of Organists, Mystic Area Ecumenical Choir Festival, Pine Point School, and in a variety of other settings where she has lent the talent and skill she was blessed with to promote music education and choral development. Her sense of humor has added lightness to the occasional drudgery of learning difficult parts and her pastoral heart (remember, she is an ordained minister and served in three churches as an Associate Pastor) has helped her soften the proverbial musician's artistic orneriness into her own encouraging, and endlessly forgiving, nature.

People will miss Linda more than they realize as she steps from this stage into a warmer climate, closer to her buds in the Southern Baptist Convention. This move will change her as well, I'm sure, as she may have to get used to playing all those "ol'-timey" Gospel tunes she loves so much in order to secure a paycheck in Florida!

Today is our opportunity to express gratitude to her and to send her on to the next chapter of her life with our best wishes and prayers for wellbeing. Linda has helped us in being a worshipful congregation in her sixteen years of service to this church. Through her efforts, we have had a music program of high quality, with impressive diversity and a spirit that revealed to us all, divine love to imperfect people. When in our music God is glorified, then Linda's service to this ministry has been remarkably productive, successful, and faithful. For that, we are blessed.

Much like those who gathered in ancient Israel at the dedication of the first temple—an elaborate and impressive edifice built to impress both heaven and earth, we who gather in this relatively modest Meetinghouse worship the same God with what we can offer—glorifying the One who inspires human creativity and love. Though thousands of years separate us from those who made festive with song and dance in Jerusalem, God is still blessed by the same expressions of joyful song and good spirit in us. That is what a ministry of music is for—to aid us in our worship of God and to serve as a manifestation of divine and human love that never ceases to amaze us.

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