

## A Philosophy of Church Music

- Frank Martignetti

I have been a church musician all my life—a volunteer since age five, and a professional since age fifteen. I have had the great privilege of serving the people of God by leading their sung prayer as they gather around font, pulpit, and table. Through my work, I have ministered to people in every conceivable emotional place and at every point along life's journey.

As a church musician, I work hard to practice my craft as organist, pianist, singer and choir director. However, the very center of church music is the selection and leading of the people's song. When we sing together, we can produce a result far more powerful than that which any of us can accomplish alone. Everything I do is geared towards nourishing congregational singing. When Christians gather to worship, we offer our praise to God—our natural response to God's amazing grace. We must present no less than our best to the greater glory of God. In the words of theologian Marva Dawn, God must remain both the subject and object of our worship—our worship is about God, and God is the audience for our worship. Those who evaluate worship thinking primarily about what they personally "get out of it" are misguided.

However, what we "get out of it", both individually and communally, does matter. The texts and music chosen for worship exert a powerful effect on people's faith. If, for example, our worship idolizes one particular style of music, or excludes any music from cultures foreign to our own, our faith and worldview will remain narrow. If our songs and hymns do not reflect the full gamut of human experience and emotion, we fail to reach many people. John Bell puts it well, saying "...if we are not enabled to cry, 'How long?' we may never be able to shout 'Hallelujah'." The music of the church has to embrace and express our whole emotional and spiritual spectrum." Finally, if our worship confuses engagement with entertainment, and seeks, consciously or unconsciously, to manipulate people on a crude emotional level, our faith will remain adolescent at best. Marva Dawn states it well and bluntly: "Shallow music forms shallow people."

Depth is not limited to one historical era or musical style, but quality of craftsmanship and appropriateness for corporate worship are real and valid concerns. Materials used for worship should have substance, reaching both head and heart, and challenging as well as comforting us. After all, that is what Scripture does! If someone goes to church regularly, and is never challenged or even made a bit uncomfortable by anything they hear from the pulpit, either that person is not listening, or the complete word of God is not being proclaimed.

Now is an exciting time to be a church musician serving a community which values vibrant worship. We are blest to inherit the best musical expressions of faith gathered through centuries past. We are also blest with a global explosion of creative hymn-writing, hearing voices from other cultures that would never have reached us a generation ago. The amount of quality music readily available for worship has never been greater. At the same time, we struggle against certain negative aspects of contemporary American culture: rampant individualism, desire for instant gratification, the failure to look beyond the utilitarian, the transformation of so much of our public discourse into "infotainment" resulting in an overemphasis on emotional reaction—*if something makes me feel good, it doesn't matter whether it is true, or good for me*. People need good spiritual nourishment now more than ever.

In this exciting yet challenging time, I believe that our churches need musical leadership unafraid of what Paul Westermeyer calls their "prophetic vocation." For me, this means serving my community well by meeting them where they are, but pushing them, ever so gently, beyond complacency, and allowing church music to become neither museum nor shopping mall.

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