Clergy and Musicians Creating Vibrant Worship Together: A Musician's Perspective

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One of the most spiritually satisfying and rewarding parts of my job as a church musician is the actually planning of music for liturgies. I am blessed to work with liturgists and other clergy who are sensitive to the importance of careful planning and coordination of the various liturgical components: readings, prayers, responses, sermons, and music. Liturgy is the "work of the people" and, by extension, the work of the clergy and church musicians on behalf of the people.

In today's church, we find a multiplicity of worship styles and tastes, and parishioners who respond to different styles of music and liturgy, even within the same parish. Conflict often occurs when church musicians and clergy are either unwilling to work together to find the best and most meaningful worship materials, or when church musicians are unwilling even to consider their congregation's musical wishes or tastes. The use of "praise music," or more contemporary forms of service music, is disturbing, or at least controversial, for church musicians who have not studied or experimented in this style, and who have little tolerance for anything other than the most traditional and historic styles of service music. I am convinced that there is music of integrity in almost all areas of the musical spectrum, even music for "contemporary" worship. I am not a proponent of "praise choruses"; I do believe that a congregation can be weaned away from this music toward music of a more global nature, i. e., "world music." Folk music from other cultures, which I am thankful to find in many modern hymnals and supplements, can be exciting and creative for both the congregation and the musician. In the informal worship service at St. Mark's, one of our favorite responses is "Haleluya Pelo tsa rona," an exciting South African folk song found in the Episcopal Hymnal Supplement Wonder, Love, and Praise, We accompany this song with piano and congas, and have even developed a "rota" of aspiring young conga players who take turns drumming on this response.

Worship is the center of the life of St. Mark's Cathedral. Two years ago St. Mark's produced a document entitled The Strategic Plan of St. Mark's Cathedral, a plan that outlines the goals of our cathedral for the next five to ten years and beyond. It is organized according to seven "Initiatives": Worship, The Arts, Faith Formation and Renewal, The Church in the World, Congregational Life and Pastoral Care, Our Cathedral—A Place for Ministry, and Governance.

The Worship Initiative states that

worship is central to our identity at St. Mark's Cathedral. Our liturgies are vehicles for the journey of faith and encountering the Divine, and offerings of beauty, revealing God's grace and hope. As a Cathedral, our liturgies must be as expansive and soaring as the space in which they are offered, always pointing to God through images of the heavenly banquet that invite and celebrate the incarnational nature of our faith in Christ.
Priorities within the "Worship" initiative are to

- strengthen our commitment to consistency in the quality of design, preparation, and execution of our varied liturgical offerings;
- commit to preaching that interprets the biblical story of God's invitation for our time and culture;
- maintain our commitment to proclaim the Gospel boldly and to encourage a deeper knowledge of God;
- create liturgies that employ ancient symbols and metaphors, to kindle appreciation for our faith traditions;
- promote liturgies, such as Compline, that reflect the richness of our liturgical heritage;
- support choirs and other musical assemblies that enhance our ability to offer diverse music and opportunities to participate;
- promote music, rich in substance and depth, that reflects both the experience of our time and that of previous eras, and that connects us to the worldwide Christian community, and especially to regions in which St. Mark's has partnerships (Russia, Nicaragua, Palestine, and South Africa).

As a musician working in an open environment, willing to spend the time and resources to provide liturgies and music of the highest standards, I have "codified" the following six goals for church musicians. I strive to abide by these goals in all my work as a church musician. A practical example for each goal is found in brackets.

The church musician must at all times endeavor

- to uphold a worshipful and spiritual approach to all tasks [What makes service music an offering and not a performance? Not only a worship-minded attitude of the church musician, but also careful liturgical planning so that each component of the service progresses logically. That is, the musical portions of a service must always fit the theme, mood, or general tone of the service in order not to protrude unduly and become separate, non-relational entities];
- to maintain the highest standards of excellence in all areas of the profession [Make use of your experience as a trained musician to seek the best music in all genres. Do not settle for inferior quality, but also realize that there is worthy music available in all styles];
- to discover & develop hidden resources within the congregation [Discover singers who may be reticent about joining a choir, instrumentalists who may be called upon occasionally, and pianists or choir directors who may be able to help lead or accompany auxiliary
choirs;

- to keep the music program varied, original, and creative [Don't find yourself in a stylistic rut; think "out of the box." At St. Mark's traditional service we present a choral mass once a month. In addition to the standard repertoire of masses by Lassus, Palestrina, Willan, Walton, Byrd, etc., we also occasionally sing masses from other cultures; e. g., the Congolese Missa Luba and the Hispanic Misa Criolla];

- to aim for total church involvement [Joining a choir or ensemble, singing lustily the congregational hymns and songs, or simply active listening and being uplifted by the musical offerings];

- to assist in the search for and realization of the Divine and to develop the skill of "creative compromise," being aware that each person's spiritual path and search is different [Although we do sing music associated with "contemporary" worship, we have replaced many musically and theologically out-of-date songs from the 60's and 70's with strong contemporary hymns while maintaining in our repertoire such congregational favorites as "On Eagle's Wings" and "Abba, Father"].

Worship should be a wholistic experience: environment, style, form, elements: music and spoken word need to enhance and illuminate each other. As Marion J. Hatchett states so eloquently in his book *A Guide to the Practice of Church Music*:

> From the early days of the church, music has been integral to the worship of God. Music gives solemnity, beauty, joy and enthusiasm to the worship of the community. It imparts a sense of unity and sets an appropriate tone for a particular celebration. It is an effective evangelistic tool. It nourishes and strengthens faith and assists worshipers in expressing and sharing their faith. It heightens texts so that they speak more fully and more cogently. It highlights the basic structure of the rites. It expresses and communicates feelings and meanings which cannot be put into words. As Messiaen expressed it: "The joy of music is that it can go beyond words—which are too precise. Music can express what there is in the soul." Music however must not dominate the liturgy; all elements of liturgy must work in harmony. Music, and the other arts, including speech, serve together in the liturgical action.

Music is not necessarily helpful in a service. It can, in fact, be destructive of a rite. This is the case when music is used for its own sake or only as a demonstration of the virtuosity of the performers, when it is beyond the abilities of the performers, when it interferes with the basic movement of the service, when it gives undue prominence to secondary elements in a service, or when the mood is out of keeping with the day or occasion.

Music should serve to set a tone, to convey texts, to highlight basic structures, to unify the congregation to express the highest possible excellence. An appreciation of the proper relation of music and of other arts to the liturgy must
be sought and developed if the church is to resume a major role as patron of the arts.¹

The first criterion for wholistic worship is having a sensitive church musician, as well as a sensitive minister, who understand the requirements for a co-ordinated and purposeful service. "Non-liturgical" services are sometimes more challenging to co-ordinate since they contain fewer fixed elements than services in more liturgical traditions. In either case, it is important to arrange regular meetings with clergy and church musician to plan worship.

Service planning is made easier if a common lectionary is used. Use of the lectionary helps co-ordinate prayers, psalms, hymns, readings, and anthems through a systematic use of Scripture. If a lectionary is not used, the musician must then gather information as far ahead as possible about future services, sermon topics, etc.

When planning special vocal music, i. e., choir anthems, solos, or ensemble music, the following six criteria may be used:

- lectionary: text of special music should reflect or illuminate the scripture/topic of the day as well as the liturgical season;
- accompanied or unaccompanied;
- variety in style (for contrast);
- key relationships, especially if two musical portions follow each other;
- difficulty; i. e., does the choir have time to prepare the work adequately?
- frequency with which a particular anthem has been sung in a service. When choosing service music, one might ask the following questions:
  - does the mood of the anthem fit the mood of the service?
  - is there sexist, racist, militaristic/imperialistic language?
  - is there a place for "familiar" music; e. g., hymn anthems, congregational participation, etc?
  - are all compositional styles represented in the choir's repertoire?
  - are both text and music of the highest quality?

In addition to the daily office of Evening Prayer, two weekday Eucharists, and a weekly Choral Evensong, the following Sunday worship services take place at St. Mark's Cathedral:

- 8:00 a. m. Rite II Eucharist with organ music and congregational hymns in the small chapel;
• 9:00 a.m. Rite II Eucharist: informal liturgy with folk, gospel, and world music. The St. Mark's Singers (small SATB choir) and Cathedral Choristers (children's choir) provide special music;

• 11:00 a.m. Rite II Eucharist: traditional liturgy with hymns; service music, anthems and motets sung by the Cathedral Choir. A choral mass is sung once a month;

• 7:00 p.m. Rite II Eucharist in the chapel with organ music and hymns;

• 9:30 p.m. Compline. The office of Compline, sung by the all-male Compline Choir, is a Seattle tradition that has taken place every Sunday night since 1954 (and is still under the direction of its founder, Dr. Peter Hallock). This service is broadcast on the local classical radio station, and to listeners throughout the world via the internet.

Within these five services a variety of musical offerings is present, from traditional organ hymns (8:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. services), to folk/Gospel/world music with a variety of instruments (9:00 a.m. service), to traditional anthems and motets (11:00 a.m. service), to ancient chants and psalms (9:30 p.m. office of Compline). In each of these musical genres the music and liturgy team of St. Mark's endeavors to research and present music of integrity to enhance the story of the Gospel for our time. Vibrant worship, with music and liturgy working closely together, is a goal for which we continually strive.

In closing, I offer the following four suggestions for church musicians:

• Realize that you must work with, not against, the clergy. Take the initiative to set up meetings to discuss your program and worship planning. Be a "people person"; enjoy interacting with clergy and staff and with parishioners. And, in the words of Alec Wyton: "A choirmaster should avoid at all costs being eccentric, unless of course he happens to be a genius." 

• Do not be discouraged or angry if you are called upon to provide music beyond your comfort zone. If you find yourself in a situation where "praise choruses" are expected, endeavor to move toward folk music of different cultures, more African-American spirituals and Gospel music, and contemporary music that has both musical and theological integrity. In time, your congregation will respond positively, and you will be able to enlarge your own musical horizons!

• Realize that change takes time. Do not attempt to make too many changes too quickly, especially in a new position; move your congregation along with you slowly and carefully, and in time you and your congregation will thrive.

• Music is worship. The vocation of church music is exciting and vital and filled with opportunities to practice our skills. It contains opportunities not only for service to others, but for satisfying musical outlets for
ourselves. Learn to enjoy the satisfaction that comes from not only performing music well, but also from a healthy, collegial relationship with your clergy and parishioners.

ENDNOTES


RECOMMENDED READING


Service Music Planning Resources


Barrett, James E. The Hymnary—A Table for Service Planning. The Hymnary Press, P. O. Box 5782, Missoula, MT 59806, 1987—looseleaf; provides hymn suggestions, psalm citations with antiphons for responsorial singing, alleluia verses, tracts, and verses for Lent, and brief summaries of appointed readings from the Lectionary.


Handbook to the Lutheran Book of Worship. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981—to be used as a guide and aid to the Lutheran hymnal.
Hatchett, Marion J. *A Guide to the Practice of Church Music*. New York: Church Publishing, 1989—a comprehensive guide for Episcopal musicians and clergy, but helpful for any denomination. Chapters on musical ministries, hymns, Psalms, service music, anthems, voluntaries, inspiring the congregation, etc.


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