Practicing the Faith: When in our Music . . .

Sermon preached to the First Presbyterian Church of Wilmette, Illinois, November 2, 1997

Wesley D. Avram

My life flows on in endless song
above earth’s lamentations;
I hear the real through far off hymn
that hails a new creation.
No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that rock I’m clinging;
while love is Lord o’er heaven and earth
how can I keep from singing?

— traditional Quaker hymn

The ancient theologian and one of the fathers of the church, St. Augustine, once wrote that “whoever sings, prays twice.” The contemporary theologian and father of one of The Indigo Girls, Don Saliers, has written that Christians sing to find a “natural language of praise” (Practicing Our Faith, 179). Even the contemporary non-theologian Elton John once said (in an interview with David Frost), “when in doubt, write a hymn.”

Music is one of those basic human activities to which theory seems to be always trying to catch up. You can get an academic degree in music theory, and some you have such degrees (to your credit indeed). But as it is with ministry, those of you trained in music theory know well that the thing you are attempting to interpret is always escaping your grasp. The actual making of music, in all its expressions, uses, and forms, seems to move and change faster than anyone can write about it or figure it out. And so it is for music in the church. Music is a thing done before it is an idea thought. And like other forms of art, it is most often in the practicing, performing, and enjoying that the creative process happens. As I can testify from the process of creation in this odd art form called preaching, you often don’t discover new inspiration until you dive into it. Thinking and learning the philosophies feeds the bank of creative resources, but it’s enactment that makes it so, and enactment that keeps the thinking faithful.

Christian faith is music like that. It’s done, not just thought.

In the New Testament, as in the Hebrew Scriptures, it appears that the oldest texts we have are songs— here verses of hymns of praise to Jesus as Lord used during first-century Christian worship. By invoking these familiar hymns, the Epistles often remind their audience of its centermost purpose for being. The Gospel of Luke can barely get through two chapters before bursting into song four times: Mary magnifies the Lord in song, Zechariah proclaims a psalm of blessing to the Lord of Israel, angels sing glory to God, and Simeon sings a song of peace in farewell and thanksgiving while holding the infant Jesus in the Temple. In the Gospel of Mark we are told that Jesus and his disciples concluded their Passover meal, which we recollect in the sacrament of Communion, with a hymn. Paul says to the Colossians that singing “hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs” is part of living toward Christ. In Christian experience, without music there would be no theology.

Music knits the church together into praise and thanksgiving. It knits mourners and searchers for peace. At the grave, for example, the singing, however faltering, recalls us to a grace that holds us and reminds us that the line between sorrow and joy is not always sharply drawn in the presence of God. Music also knits us together in times of danger and striving. How can one forget the power of Kate Smith singing “God Bless America” during the Second World War? How can one not be stirred by the memories of “We Shall Overcome” or

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“Lift Every Voice and Sing” as songs forged into tools of faith-ful struggle by the Black Church and the Civil Rights Movement? How can one fail to appreciate the songs of protest that galvanized opposition to the War in Southeast Asia some thirty years ago? Today the tradition of making music, as opposed to playing it over a loudspeaker, is falling into decline. And yet even now, music powerfully creates community both inside and outside the church, and it remains somehow special in the church. Of course I don’t see everything, but I know of no recent example of renewal and growth in a church where music has not played a major and vital role.

Now it would be irresponsible to ignore the fact that music can also knit folks together into less than healthy pursuits; it can express destructive feelings and fuel forms of rebellion and emotion that don’t move toward goodness. And even when music is innocuous, differences in musical experiences and tastes can still divide us deeply despite our good intentions. That is because music is not mere gloss on the more important stuff; it’s part and parcel of what makes human experience, and most especially, is the experience of worship. But those matters require far more give and take to discern than a brief, one-way sermon can offer. So the focus here is toward the whole-making, life-making, church-making, better sort of work that music makes in our lives.

Let’s consider the way in which music knits us together as church.

That same ancient theologian, Augustine, who said that “whoever sings, prays twice” also described the importance of music to the Christian worship of his day: “Apart from the Lord in the Psalms, given within familiar forms. And metaphors can’t always be predicted. Sometimes they happen by surprise: happy . . . heart. New metaphors knit us together when Luther converts a bar tune into a hymn of praise; or Bach writes a fugue for the cathedral; or Tallis writes a canon; or the captain of a slave ship is converted to Christ, repents of his sinful work, and pens a poem that is later set to music: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. . . .”; or John Coltrane performs an avant-garde jazz expression of praise to God; or Amy Grant, Twyla Paris, or Ce Ce Winans offer up another pop or gospel song for Christian radio; or the Iona community in Scotland prepares another book of multicultural worship music as a gift to the unity of the worldwide church; or Brian Wren publishes a new hymn.

I may not like them all. They may not all fit the kind of musical tastes that my parents, or my peers, or my colleagues, or my own piety or personality would tend to prescribe. But with all due respect to those arbiters of taste, music in the church is about a different business than meeting defined standards alone. We don’t perform our music to please or stir an audience—though I hope it will be stirring and pleasing sometimes. And we don’t make our music solely to feel the old feelings again, or find comfort in the church—though I hope we will. Our standards of excellence are internal to the life of the church, and find their substance in the work of worship and spiritual formation. They begin there, and they end there.

For you see again, we sing, we play, we compose, we listen, we find unison as well as harmony, we make joyful mistakes, and we discover this noise in order to find ourselves in the metaphor. We make this noise to discover, or rediscover, ourselves in the chorus of praise to God—and to bring others in. Whether we sing here in public, alone in the shower, or only listen for the song with open hearts, we are part of a chorus that includes not only the angels, but also the communion of all the saints who have sung before us and the many cultures, age groups, levels of skill and appreciation that fill the church. There’s a rhythm to all of this which, when it is allowed to beat in our hearts, has a way of bringing us all along.

Friends, this is exciting stuff. And it is no coincidence that I preach about it on a Sunday that is both Communion Sunday and All Saints Day. And it is no accident that I add to this sermon a plea:

Please, oh please, do not let music separate us. Let it inspire our renewal, as do the songs of scripture—ever new. Let music do its work. Give yourselves to it. Enjoy it . . .by which I mean, invest it with joy—whether its tones touch your sorrow or your happiness.

We’ll continue to do traditional European and American church music—both some of the anthems that it takes a gifted and practiced choir to do, and some of the great old hymns that have formed the memories and feelings of two or three generations of pew singers. We’ll also do Shaker tunes, Wesleyan hymns, and other music of the church. We’ll do

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Ortel Organ Dedication

On Saturday, April 27, the ISM formally dedicated the organ in the new Organ Studio, the gift to Yale of Loyde and William Ortel. The occasion was marked by two joint recitals by Thomas Murray and Martin Jean on the instrument, and a luncheon for Mr. and Mrs. Ortel and their guests in the Great Hall.

The organ was custom-built for the Ortels by the firm of Kirk Flentrop of Zandaam, Holland in 1960 (their opus 568). It consists of nine registers and ten ranks, and served well as a practice instrument for Mrs. Ortel, who studied organ at Yale with the late Professor H. Frank Bozyan. First located in New York City, the organ was moved to the Ortels’ home in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1991. A “farewell” recital in Stockbridge was played on the organ by Professor Emeritus Charles Krigbaum on August 9, 2000. It was relocated here in January of 2002 by the firm of Czelusniak et Dugal of Northampton, Massachusetts.

“Over the years,” Mrs. Ortel writes, “I have derived great pleasure and satisfaction from ownership and use of my Flentrop organ. I feel that Yale is a particularly suitable place for this instrument: it was at Yale that I studied, and it was Professor Bozyan here who particularly encouraged me to acquire the Flentrop, and who was closely involved with its selection and design. As University Organist during his 45-year tenure at Yale, Professor Bozyan was of great influence in stimulating interest in tracker-action organs. And, in fact, Mr. Bozyan visited the Flentrop workshop and had occasion to play this organ before it was shipped to me.

It is good to know that Yale provides a home where my organ will continue to be played, maintained, and enjoyed.”

The faculty, administration, and students of the Yale School of Music, Institute of Sacred Music, Yale Divinity School, and the University at large are most grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Ortel for the gift of this charming studio instrument.

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traditional gospel, and traditional psalm singing. And we’ll also find our own expressions within the wonderful, and I believe God-given, explosion of newer music.

No matter what the style of composition — whether it be in the form of new organ pieces that blend styles, or the revivals of chant and polyphony coming from the Taize community in France, or some of the notable new music coming from the Roman Catholic liturgical renewal, or the hymns and spiritual songs now coming to us from places like South Africa or South America, or the new words being written for old tunes, such as those of Jane Parker Huber, or new material for classic liturgies, such as that given to the church by John Rutter or Ralph Vaughn Williams, or even some simpler tunes that can be sung so our whole bodies can move with them — we will find our way within a rich repertoire of possibilities.

And no matter what the style of performance — whether well-rehearsed, or offered up on the spot in spontaneous response to prayer; whether given by a soloist, or by one a choir; whether a cappella or accompanied; whether rung on the bells or played on the guitar, beat gently on a drum, blown from a horn, or offered from a pipe organ — we are imagining a music that is both led by an able and trusted professional staff and organic to the life of the church.

We are imagining music that is made, not simply provided. And we are imagining an approach that always asks how all of us who would make worshipful music can, within reason, be helped to do just that—stretching and inspiring. And we are imagining a kind of experience of music that embodies a theology of the church—more than one generation, more than one cultural background, more than one denominational background, yet still interpreted through our own tradition of worship, and centered, always centered, by a living Christ.

It won’t always happen on Sunday mornings. It may happen in homes on Friday evenings, or before committee meetings on Monday evenings, or during healing or praise services on Saturday evenings, or in our hearts all day, every day. And it needn’t be chaotic—don’t worry. You see, if we let it, this kind of praise can take us deeper than we ever imagined. For whoever sings, prays twice.

Amen.


Wesley D. Avram is Stephen Merrell Clement-E. William Muehl Assistant Professor of Communications. His interests integrate rhetoric and philosophical theology with preaching and ministry. Articles have appeared in venues as varied as The Journal of Religious Ethics, New Oxford Review, and Sojourners. Professor Avram has received preaching prizes from The Christian Century Foundation and Princeton Seminary and research grants from Princeton Seminary, the N.E.H., and The Louisville Institute.
Postcards from St. Paul’s Cathedral

In April, a group of singers from Yale Camerata spent a week in London at the invitation of St. Paul’s Cathedral to serve as choir-in-residence there, joining the ranks of choirs of international reputation who have been granted this rare privilege.

Singing under the direction of Marguerite Brooks and ISM/YSM student conductors Garmon Ashby and Patrick Quigley, the group’s duties as choir-in-residence consisted of leading the traditional service of choral Evensong as celebrated at St. Paul’s on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of Easter week. Yale University organist Thomas Murray and ISM/YSM student Jared Johnson accompanied the choir on the Cathedral’s historic organ. In addition to leading the liturgy for the Cathedral’s daily office, those who participated became versed in the finer points of singing Anglican chant, and also had the opportunity to perform contemporary works by American composers, including ISM/YSM student Daniel Kellogg.

On Thursday, May 2, the sixteen students in the course “Text, Memory and Performance” used the ISM Great Hall to give an interpretive reading, from memory, of the Gospel of Mark in New Revised Standard Version. With a “reader” situated in the center of the stage, the performance of the Gospel played out around him, as if in his readerly imagination. The text was divided by the class into themes and repeated motifs, which were then apportioned among the students for memorization, interpretation, and recitation. Performers moved around the stage, addressed each other and the audience, threw coins, broke bread, scattered seeds across the stage and abroad into the congregation, carried a platter with an imagined head of John the Baptist, and reveled in the sometimes surprising humor of Mark.

“The class was as much about process as product,” said ISM faculty member Wes Avram, who co-taught the course with YDS New Testament teacher Allen Hilton, “but when it came time to deliver the message, everyone did wonderfully, and the audience loved it. We all learned a great deal.”

The Gospel of Mark comes alive in the Great Hall.

Thomas Murray

Contributed, with photos, by Christopher Cloudus

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Our Great Great Hall

The new ISM Great Hall was designed to be a center of the life of the Institute: a well-appointed and beautiful lecture hall, of course; an acoustically-engineered performance space for music, sacred and secular, and for live theater; a space of high technological capability, for the showing of films and slides and multimedia presentations, and for the recording of all these events on video and audio media, analog and digital; as well as a gracious space where we joyously entertain our guests. During its first semester of life, the Great Hall has been inaugurated in all these capacities, living up to the great expectations of it, from the very first class held there on January 14th, right up through the final Colloquium.

The Great Hall was christened as a music hall on January 26th by a flute and piano duo from Argentina (in a program entitled “Tangos and Fugues”), at which the acoustics were highly praised by the musicians. (The Great Hall has since been used for several recording sessions by School of Music students.) It was christened as a venue for a multimedia presentation by a guest lecturer with “No Exit: Constructions of Dante’s Inferno” on April 16th by artist Robert Clifton, whose work was on exhibit in the gallery space outside the Great Hall. The Great Hall was the scene of a reception for 250 at the gala multimedia open house in February, and of a catered luncheon for 60 at the organ dedication in April (see article, page 3). It debuted as a theater space with the dramatic presentation of two gospels: first the Gospel of John, and more recently the Gospel of Mark (see article, page 4). The Great Hall has also been used for non-ISM events, including a two-day Gospel Workshop in April.

When you visit the Institute, you will see that the Great Hall is indeed the center of activity representing the diversity that the ISM embodies. With its professional acoustic and lighting design (including mounted stage lights), and its sophisticated AV capabilities, the Great Hall is state-of-the-art for all the arts. It is a beautiful classroom to boot. Do stop by; there’s always something going on!

Photo courtesy of Carl Grindley
PlacEMent LiStings

Connecticut

Avon Congregational Church, 6 West Main St, Avon 06001. 860-678-0488; www.avon-church.org. Choir Director for adult choir and hand bell choir, approximately 15 hours/week. One Sunday service and 2 weeknight rehearsals, September through 3rd week of June. Salary is listed up to $10,000, depending on experience and qualifications. Contact Sue Smith, Church Organist, at 860-297-0035 with your questions.

First Congregational Church, 1009 Main St, Branford 06405. 203-453-3372. Organist/Choir Director to plan and implement music program for 20-member adult choir and 12-member chamber choir, with Thursday evening rehearsals. Two Sunday services, one choral. Two-manual Flentrop Tracker in balcony of church, along with an electronic keyboard, used mostly for accompanying choir. Generous “music only” endowment fund permits varied use of outside artists for special programming. Will consider organist only but prefer conducting skills as well. Competitive salary and benefits. Begins September 2002. Contact Bill Gassman, 203-453-3372; e-mail, William.Gassman@snet.net.

First Congregational Church, 993 Main St, PO Box 165, South Windsor 06074. 860-528-7992. Organist/Choir Director for one Sunday service, beginning June 16. Adult and youth choirs. Hook & Hastings Tracker Organ, 98-years-old. Salary negotiable on a 12-month basis. Contact Beverly Nielsen, Search Chair, at 860-289-8606.

New Haven Chorale, 78 Greenway St, Hamden 06517. 203-248-9760, e-mail: business@newhavenchorale.org; website: www.newhavenchorale.org. 90-member auditioned chorus seeks experienced choral conductor for position of Music Director/Conductor to begin July 1, 2003. Candidates need broad knowledge of choral repertoire and experience in conducting large choral groups with orchestra; advanced choral degree desirable. Duties include programming and conducting three to four concerts per season, hiring guest musicians as needed, and working with Board of Directors on artistic and audience development. For more information, contact the Chorale via telephone or website. Send resume to Search Committee at the above address or by e-mail to business@newhavenchorale.org.

New Haven Community Chorus, c/o Jill Savitt, 203-624-1979. Conductor for a non-auditioned chorus which has two performances (December and May/June) each year. The SATB chorus performs classical and non-secular music and averages about 70 singers. Thursday evening rehearsals are held from 7:30 – 10 pm at Pratt Hall, 311 Temple Street. The position is part-time and paid. For information please call Jill Savitt.

Out-of-State

Christ Episcopal Church, 17 Sagamore Rd, Bronxville, NY 10708-1599. 914-337-3544. Full time Director of Music to begin August, 2002 (28 minutes from Midtown, Manhattan). 3-manual, 68-rank organ designed by Robert Owen and built by G. Donald Harrison. Adult choir, two children’s choirs and two hand bell choirs. Excellent acoustics. Two Sunday services: a choral 10 am Eucharist and an informal 5 pm service with organ accompaniment. Annual music budget of $100,000 (includes 4 paid section leaders). Salary commensurate with experience; full benefits package, including medical insurance and pension. Resumes due by May 24, 2002.

Grace Lutheran Church, N. Queen and James Sts, Lancaster, PA 17601. 717-397-2748. Half-time position as Organist/Music Director to replace retiring LTS ’61 Alum, Dr. Karl E. Moyer. Three weekend services. Adult choir and children’s choirs to be scheduled and organized by successful candidate. Benefits plus teaching opportunities included in position. III/54 Schlicker with new Great principal chorus; 18th-century French style tracker in chapel. Excellent tradition in liturgy and music. See: www.GraceLutheranChurch.com for information.

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, 4801 France Ave So, Minneapolis, MN 55410. 612-927-8849; website: www.lcogs.org; e-mail: legs@tcinternet.net. Full-time Director of Music Ministries to plan and implement an overall music program in consultation with the Senior Pastor. Responsibilities include 2 Sunday services and seasonal services, direct adult choir, upper elementary children’s choir and hand bell choir, provide leadership and support for part-time music staff, and work collegially in planning services. Reuter 52-rank organ, new Kawai piano, 4 octaves Schulmerich hand bells, 3-octave White Chapel hand bells, wide range of percussion instruments. Excellent salary and benefits; start date flexible. Send resume and cover letter to Pastor Paul Monson at the church address.

New Jersey Symphony Orchestra Community Chorus, 2 Central Ave, Newark, NJ 07102-3173. 973-624-3713, www.njsymphony.org. The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra is currently recruiting for the position of Choral Conductor for its community chorus. The position is available immediately. The chorus rehearses in Newark on Wednesday evenings at the North Star Academy from 7–9 p.m. It performs 2-4 programs a year. Successful candidate must have professional experience in both traditional choral and African American repertoire, and have a strong commitment to classical music in an urban setting. The chorus is the diversity outreach program of the orchestra. The choral conductor will be paid per rehearsal. For more information contact Theresa M. Cilluffo, Manager of Education and Outreach.

Our Lady of Good Hope Church & Bishop Leibold School, 6 S. Third St, Miamiusburg, OH 45342. Full time position as Director of Music Ministries and Music Teacher. Church responsibilities include Wednesday Mass, three weekend Masses, and other seasonal responsibilities. 32-member adult choir and children’s choir; Allen organ and Kawai piano. School has a _time music teacher position for grades K-6. State of Ohio teacher certification is preferred, but not necessary. Please feel free to call Father Bernard Bruening at the rectory with questions, 937-866-1432.

St. John’s Episcopal Church, 191 County Road, Barrington, RI 02806, 401-245-4065, Fax 401-245-0518. Half-time Director of Music. Burgeoning parish with 1,500+ members. Three Sunday services. Director would serve as organist for all 3 Sunday services and direct the adult-mixed choir at the late service. Responsibilities also include planning and assisting in the execution of the liturgies; as well as helping develop the parish music program to
Candids from St. Paul’s

Top left: Organist Jared Johnson relaxes; Above: Michael Diorio on the steps of St. Paul’s; Center: Marguerite Brooks with an English host; Right: Charles Burks gets ready.

STUDENT NEWS
Paul Jacobs ’02 was the featured performer on the Sunday, May 5 edition of PIPEDREAMS, broadcasted by National Public Radio. This particular episode was entitled “Attuned to Messiaen”.

FACULTY NEWS

ISM
Samuel Springer ’95 reports a change of address: 4111 Woodlea Ave, Baltimore MD 21206, 410-483-0808; e-mail: widor1@yahoo.com. Sam continues to teach at Morgan State University.

UTS
Lois I. Worrel Humbert died on April 12th from pancreatic cancer in Eureka, Illinois. Condolences may be sent to her daughter, Carol K. Bruley, 18290 Ritchie Road, Rochelle, IL 61068.

Placement Listings continued

grow with the congregation. The parish currently has a 3-manual Rogers organ. Please contact Reverend C. Neal Goldsborough at the church.

Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, 135 NE Randolph Ave, Peoria, IL 61606. 309-676-4509. Organist/Choir Director for 1100-member congregation with full-time Cantor, adult choir, children’s choirs and a hand bell choir. Woodwind and brass ensembles, small orchestra. 3-manual, 42-rank Schlicker pipe organ. Two Sunday services, one Saturday evening service. Please call Pastor Ron Moritz.

Useful websites for job hunters:
http://www.experiencingworship.com/jobs
http://www.anglicanmusicians.org/
http://www.agohq.org
http://jobs.chronicle.com/jobs

Upcoming Events

June 16 - 21 Yale Organ Week
June 16 Experience Three Yale Organs, starting at 8 pm at Dwight Chapel, proceeding on foot to Battell Chapel (8:45) and then to Woolsey (9:30). Thomas Murray and MartinJean perform.
June 17 & 19 Visiting Artists Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra, Haskell Thomson, and Christopher Young in recital. 8 pm, venues TBA.
June 20 & 21 Student Recitals by participants in the Yale Organ Week program. 8 pm, venues TBA.

Continuing Events

through June 14
Exhibition: The Florence Portfolio, weekdays 9 AM - 4 PM
More Postcards from St. Paul’s

Photos by Chris Clowdus