



Seeking the Common within the Uncommon — Sacred Music in Transition

Philip V. Bohlman

When ethnomusicologists and scholars of sacred music gather, plurals customarily proliferate as the discussion turns to sacred musics, religious differences, or the multitude of repertoires and rituals. It was surely striking, then, that plurals retreated on October 20, 2006, when the Institute of Sacred Music hosted a symposium on “Sacred Music in Transition.” The scholars and musicians who gathered at the ISM and then moved to co-host Amherst College for a second day took the singularity of their theme, “in transition,” at syntactical face value, asking whether the very processes of transition provided a common field of inquiry. From the very outset of the symposium, the question, so basic in its singularity, that dominated papers and discussions alike was “Isn’t all sacred music always in transition?” Implicit in the question was the idea that sacred music did not sit on library shelves or in the sanctuary’s pews. Music might well become sacred by becoming itself, in other words, becoming something new and by changing. Sacred music undergoes transition because it unleashes transition. It does something for the worshipers, for ritual and religious musical specialists, for communities of faith who ask music to bring about transition in their lives and in the lives of others.

As the symposium unfolded, the common theme of transition drew the participants into discourse that became ever more unified by a common purpose of experiencing sacred music in the world no less than in world music. Experiences themselves were at once common and uncommon. The first speaker, Rabbi Jeffrey Summit (Tufts University), turned to the epic common texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Torah, or Five Books of Moses, and explored the exploding practices of learning cantillation from high-tech

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The Wesleyan Javanese Gadhon Gamelan Ensemble performed on Friday evening.

sources, such as CDs downloaded to the iPod. Technology, as paper after paper illustrated, has long been crucial to transition itself. As Mirjana Lausevic (Amherst College) illustrated with videos, technology transformed the Muslim genre of *ilahiya* for dissemination throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina during the Balkan wars of the 1990s, drawing Bosnians together. For the Trinidadian Full Gospel traditions given voice in Tim Rommen's (University of Pennsylvania) presentation, the transnational recording industry has been crucial, narrowing the space of transition between the Caribbean and North America. The televangelism studied by Stephen Marini (Wellesley College) used television to realize postmodern stagings of camp meetings and revivals. Tore Tvarnø Lind (University of Copenhagen) drew attention to technologized reform in the ancient-modern asceticism at the center of the Greek Orthodox Church on Mt. Athos in the Aegean.

The political dimensions of transition, particularly the ways in which the conflicts between past and present were reconciled, also provided a persistent leitmotif for the symposium. Transition drew sacred music into the realms of nationalism in several papers, for example, Jeffers Engelhardt's (Amherst College) entry into the reinvigorated rituals that make diverse forms of Orthodox Christianity meaningful for a diverse Estonian society in the twenty-first century, Philip Bohlman's (ISM) study of pilgrimage and popular song in the New Eastern Europe, and Sarah Weiss's (Yale Music Department) portrayal of the changing face of Javanese puppet theater in modern Indonesia. Richard Jankowsky (Tufts University) connected transition to trance in the ritual practices of sub-Saharan Africans in modern Tunisia. Musical transition opened the spaces between religions throughout the symposium, for example, in Indonesia, where Marzanna Poplawska (Wesleyan University) showed how Christian Javanese composers have forged a new hymn repertory using the modes and genres of the gamelan orchestra. Zoe Sherinian (University of Oklahoma) explored the ways in which Christian themes in South Indian music empowered the lower castes, liberating them theologically through sacred music in transition. The distinguished ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin (Wesleyan

University) assumed the daunting task of drawing the common threads together in his closing remarks.

In transition, the common is always uncommon, and this could not have been clearer in the two concerts that concluded both days of the symposium. At the Friday evening concert at Center Church on the Green, the ISM's James Taylor shaped a performance by the Yale Voxtet, and ISM student Becky Wexler gathered



Jewish klezmer musicians (top); Professor Margot Fassler with students (directly above); Mystical Sufi song performer Yusuf Gurtas (lower left).

friends to play Jewish klezmer music. Transitions were also realized musically by Hindu chant and the remembrance evoked by Yusuf Gurtas's performance of Muslim Sufi songs. The Wesleyan University gamelan journeyed to New Haven, and Sacred Harp Singers convened at Amherst on Saturday night, as the remarkable Tim Eriksen (Amherst College) gave New England sacred history new meaning. It was only fitting that sacred music itself brought the symposium to a close, for the performances succeeded brilliantly in drawing many voices into the single chorus of transition itself, symbolizing all that we share in the sacred music expressed through the sacred voice to which we attune our lives through common experience. That common experience of sacred music will remain in transition after the ISM symposium, for discussions are already underway to transform the concerted voices of the presentations into a book.

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Photos by Derek Greten-Harrison

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A Little Help from Our Friends

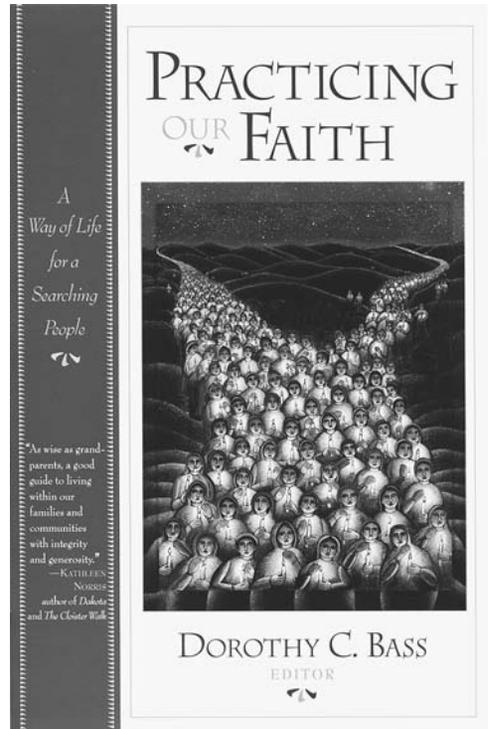
Fourth in a series of articles contributed by the Friends of the Institute, a group of talented professionals appointed by the director, who work in the various disciplines represented by the faculty and who serve to promote and advise on the programs, student recruitment, and activities of the Institute throughout the world.

Practical Theology

Dorothy C. Bass

My service as a Friend of the Institute of Sacred Music arose directly from another friendship, the one I shared with ISM director Martin Jean during the years when he was organist and professor of music at Valparaiso University. As a new member of the board of Friends, I am delighted to have the opportunity to engage with the people and programs of the Institute. I bring to this work a lifelong love for the music of the church, a love that is rekindled weekly as I listen and sing in the worshipping assembly.

I direct a Lilly Endowment project whose purpose is to help contemporary people live the Christian faith with vitality and integrity, a purpose we pursue chiefly by fostering reflection on Christian faith as a way of life shaped by participation in Christian practices. The project works in partnership with ministers, lay leaders, and theological educators across the nation (and occasionally internationally), including some at Yale Divinity School. Our work is ecumenical in orientation and appreciative of the legacies of a



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Bach, a Funeral and the Lamb of God: Notes on recent research

Markus Rathey

Johann Sebastian Bach's famous *Actus tragicus*, cantata No. 106 "Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit," is one of his most popular compositions. The dichotomy between old life in mortality and new life with Christ is translated into music in an expressive juxtaposition of old and new musical styles, of sharp chromaticism and soothing hymn tunes. The use of styles and genres (for example the fact that there are no modern arias) led Bach researchers to the assumption that the piece must have been composed for a funeral in Bach's early years, probably in Mühlhausen, where the young composer worked between 1707 and 1708. More is not known, since the earliest sources for the wonderful piece date from the late eighteenth century and provide no evidence for the dating of the cantata.

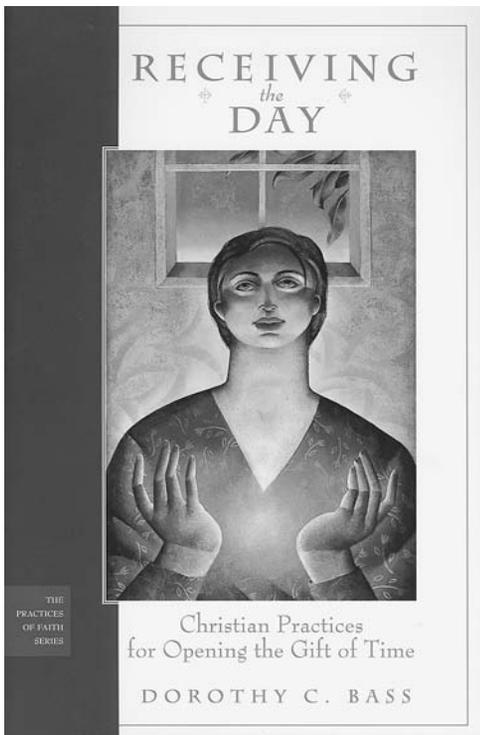
Several occasions have been suggested, e.g. the funeral for one of Bach's uncles, or the funeral for the sister of one of the pastors in Mühlhausen.

However, these datings are based only on the fact that Bach was somehow acquainted with the deceased; we do not have any supporting evidence.

Why is it important to know why and when Bach composed the piece? The cantata is one of Bach's earliest works, dating from a time when his style was in the course of rapid development. An exact dating of the piece would help us understand Bach's artistic development in his early twenties. Furthermore, knowing the actual context of the piece would lead us to a better understanding of the character and the shape of the composition.

The leading hypothesis for my own research on the piece was: If the *Actus tragicus* was composed for Mühlhausen, a study of the funeral sermons published between 1707 and 1709 could give a clue to the occasion for the composition of the piece.

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range of Christian traditions. More information, including a list of project publications, is available at www.practicingourfaith.org.

The Valparaiso Project’s mission of encouraging the faithfulness of contemporary Christians is grounded in a way of thinking best described as “practical theology.” Practical theology is a type of theology that takes the capacity of actual persons and communities to practice a life-giving way of life as its primary focus. Through theological engagement with specific and concrete dimensions of personal, social, and ecclesial existence, practical theology seeks to clarify and strengthen the shape of Christian living in and for the world.

In one sense, practical theology is a way of thinking intrinsic to the life of faith itself, one in which every community of believers engages in one way or another while wondering what it means to live in ways that respond to the mercy and freedom of God as they are made known in Jesus Christ. “How can, and how do, our lives and our life together participate in a way of life that reflects the Life of God, both when we are gathered as church and when we are dispersed into countless disparate circumstances?” Christians necessarily ask in every generation. “What is the shape of a contemporary way of life that truly is life-giving in and for the sake of the world? And how can the church foster such a way of life, for the good of all creation?”

“Practical theology” also refers to a disciplined and academically-formed way of thinking that emerges in the teaching, research, and ministry of certain theological educators and church leaders. This second version is closely related to the contextually alert and practice-shaping form of theological knowledge that is intrinsic to the life of

faith, but it is not exactly the same thing. Practical theology, in this more specific meaning, incorporates patterns of discipline, criticism, and scope that have been influenced by the norms of scholarly inquiry and the pedagogical needs of the church. This distinction does not detach academic practical theology from the life of faith, however. Instead it bestows on academic practical theologians a specific role within and on behalf of the way of life they share with other Christians—a role of leadership through teaching and research conducted in service to this way of life. Today interest in practical theology is growing rapidly among theological educators, both as a distinct discipline within the theological curriculum and as a possible dimension of every other theological discipline.

Because the practice of making music and the practice of scholarly inquiry are both highly prized at ISM, the Institute exists at an exceptionally generative intersection for practical theological research and education. As I begin my service as a Friend of ISM, I am intrigued by the capacity of the Institute to provide opportunities for rich mutual interplay among (1) embodied practice, (2) the knowledge that guides and arises from such practice, and (3) disciplined scholarly reflection on practice. I am also eager to learn how both artists and scholars assess the contributions of their teaching, performance, and research to fostering worthy ways of life in the twenty-first century. In the pluralistic contexts of the ISM and today’s world, all may not agree about the goals and contours of such ways of life. Even so, keeping this question in mind seems to me to be a valuable aspect of the academic, artistic, or theological vocation today.

DOROTHY C. BASS is director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith and editor of *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, which includes an essay on the practice of “singing our lives to God” by Don Saliers, a treasured friend of Dorothy’s and of ISM. Don and his daughter Emily Saliers, a member of the Grammy-award-winning folk-rock duo *The Indigo Girls*, have also coauthored a book about this practice, *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live: Music as Spiritual Practice*.

Peace on Earth: Advent Concert of Yale Camerata

Yale Camerata, conducted by Marguerite L. Brooks, will present its annual advent concert in New Haven on Saturday, December 2 at 8 pm in Battell Chapel (corner College and Elm). The program, with orchestral accompaniment, will include music of Sumaya, Flecha, Franco, J.S. Bach, Hassler, Pärt, and a rarely heard mass of Hans Seydelmann. The concert will conclude, in its annual tradition, with the Willcocks arrangement of Goss's *See, amid the Winter's Snow*, with the audience joining in.

Franz Seydelmann (1748-1806), *Kapellmeister* at the Saxon court in Dresden, composed thirty-six Masses for the court church. This performance of Mass No. 3 in C Minor is a North American premiere, and is likely the composition's first performance in any country since Seydelmann's death two hundred years ago.

Vocal soloists for the concert will be drawn from the Yale Voxtet, the students in the graduate voice program of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and Yale School of Music, advised by James Taylor. Olav van Hezewijk will be soloist in Bach's Concerto for oboe d'amore. The organist will be Martin Jean.

Founded in 1985 by its conductor, the Yale Camerata's approximately sixty singers are Yale graduate and undergraduate students, faculty, staff, and experienced singers from the New Haven community. The Camerata performs a widely varied spectrum of choral literature, with a special commitment to choral music of our time.



Franz Seydelmann. Kupferstich von Thoenert nach einem Gemälde von J. C. Berkenkamp (1782)

The advent concert, sponsored by the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, is free and open to the public. No tickets are required. For more information, call 203-432-5062 or visit www.yale.edu/ism.

J. E. S. 1748-1806
Offertorium Sctamini in Dec. e. c. *di Franz Seydelmann*
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Alto
Tenor
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Org.
Allegro Spiritoso

I was able to find a sermon that shows a strong connection with the text of the text of Cantata 106. In 1708 Adolph Strecker was elected burgomaster of Mühlhausen, but after a few months the old man got sicker and eventually died in September 1708. The funeral sermon points out that Strecker prepared himself for his death, reading religious literature about the Lutheran *ars moriendi*, the art of dying, which is the very type of literature the texts of the *Actus tragicus* are compiled from. Furthermore, Strecker asked his pastor to preach on Rom 8:18: “I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” The sermon, delivered by the Mühlhausen Superintendent Frohne, emphasizes in particular the tension between old life in mortality and new life with Christ, the very tension that also shapes the text of Bach’s *Actus tragicus*.

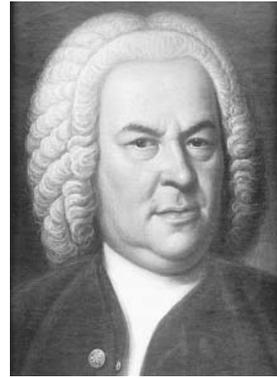
This juxtaposition is, of course, not unusual in a funeral context, but the connection goes beyond this general similarity. The first arioso of the tenor in BWV 106, “Lord, teach us to count our days” (Ps. 90:12) was interpreted by Johann Johann Olearius in his *Biblischen Erklärung* (Explanation of the Bible, 1678-1681), one of the most important Bible interpretations of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, with a reference to the text from Rom 8 Strecker had picked for his funeral. There was, obviously, a connection between the texts of Bach’s cantata and Strecker’s text in the practice of biblical interpretation of that time.

If Strecker was indeed the dedicatee for the *Actus tragicus*, this would explain the large-scaled dimensions of the cantata, which goes beyond the simple song-like pieces that were normally composed for funerals. Strecker was held in high esteem and was one of the leading politicians of the city. Bach had already composed his cantata BWV 71, “Gott ist mein König,” written for the introduction of the new town council in February 1708, as an homage to Strecker, who is mentioned in the text of the cantata several times. Since Strecker was lying on his deathbed for months before he died, Bach would have had the time and opportunity to prepare for the funeral and to compose a complex work like the *Actus tragicus*—time he would not have had if the piece had been intended for his uncle, who lived 35 miles away.

Bach left Mühlhausen in June 1708, but he stayed in contact with the city in the following years, composing the cantatas for the introduction of the town council in 1709 and supervising the renovation of the organ. These strong connections make it likely that he also provided the composition for the funeral of one of the most highly venerated politicians in the city. The *Actus tragicus* was, hence, most likely composed for September 16, 1708.

During my research on Bach’s time in Mühlhausen I stumbled upon another interesting source. The same superintendent Frohne who provided the funeral sermon for Strecker also published a small booklet early in 1708, containing descriptions of some extraordinary feast days in the city in 1708. Frohne lists a series of sermons given

by pastors from the suburbs in one of the city’s main churches (and it was Bach’s duty to play on these occasions); furthermore, he lists four days of repentance the churches of the city had to observe that year. Most of them are too late for a participation of Bach, but one is on Good Friday, 1708. Could Bach have composed or performed a special piece on that occasion? The liturgical laws in Mühlhausen were very strict and forbade vocal-instrumental pieces like a cantata. Only motet-like vocal pieces were allowed. But there is one piece that would fit perfectly into this context. Bach’s Kyrie in F major (BWV 233a), a small piece for choir, has a strange combination of musical material that has not yet been explained by musicologists. The text of the lower voices is based on the liturgical *Kyrie*, but the upper voice has the



text and the melody of the German *Agnus dei* “Christe, du Lamm Gottes” (Christ, lamb of God). Finally, the melody of the bass voice is a quotation from the Kyrie of the Lutheran *Litany*. If Bach tried to deliver a message by layering the three musical and textual quotations, so that this combination

of three layers is not merely haphazard or a game, Good Friday 1708 would be the perfect occasion for this layering. The *Kyrie* was part of the liturgy, the hymn “Christe, du Lamm Gottes” would reflect the fact of its being Good Friday, and the quotation of the *Litany*, the liturgical piece that was traditionally part of the repentance services in Mühlhausen, would then reflect the fact that it was a day of repentance. When we see how skillfully Bach layers hymns and biblical and liturgical texts in other compositions from his time in Mühlhausen (like in the abovementioned cantatas 106 and 71), and how he synthesizes a new meaning from this combination, then it is more than likely that the combination in the Kyrie in F major also has a meaning, and there is no other occasion in Bach’s early years where this meaning would fit better in a liturgical context than on Good Friday 1708. Indeed, this piece would work well in a Good Friday service today, with a sermon pointing out the intertwining of acclamation (*Kyrie*), supplication (*Litany*), and the adoration of the Lamb of God.

This short overview has focused on two of the several results of my research which were published recently in the German *Bach-Jahrbuch* (Vol. 92, p. 65–92). Other aspects of that article are the dating of cantatas 131 and 150, and some other possible occasions between 1707 and 1708 for which Bach might have composed pieces that are now lost.

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STUDENT, ALUMNI AND FACULTY NEWS

YALE SCHOLA CANTORUM and its director, **SIMON**

CARRINGTON, are the subject of an article by Malcolm Bruno in the current issue of *Choir and Organ* (November/December 2006, Vol. 14, No. 6, p 27ff).

Early Music New Haven will present 2 performances of the Christmas portion of Handel's *Messiah* at 5 pm on December 9 and 10 at Christ Church Episcopal in New Haven. Robert Lehman will conduct the Christ Church Choir and the Vespera Chamber Orchestra. The organist will be **THOMAS MURRAY**, professor of organ and artist-in-residence at Christ Church; he will also perform an organ concerto of Handel. The soloists will be **MELLISSA HUGHES** (MM '06), soprano; **IAN HOWELL** (MM '07), countertenor; **JAMES TAYLOR** (associate professor of voice), tenor; and **JOSHUA COPELAND** (MM '07), bass.

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Peace on Earth

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