

Discernment

Paul Westermeyer

*For the Biennial Conference of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians
Seattle, Washington, July 31–August 3, 2011.*

What Music Should We Choose?

The question here is what music we should choose for worship.¹ Over the last couple decades I have discussed this question directly and indirectly, explicitly and implicitly, from various vantage points, in differing contexts, and in response to numerous requests.² That suggests its complexity, though doing what it entails (which still takes work) is less complicated than thinking it out. If you want to cut to the chase, go directly to the end of the article. For perspective and context, read on. What I say here expands what I have said before, addressed this time to a specifically Lutheran gathering of musicians pondering Lutheran responsibilities and contributions to the church as a whole.

At the Conference of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians in Milwaukee in 2009, Marshall Bowen asked about discernment in relation to the Conference scheduled for Seattle in 2011. “We all seem to agree,” he said, “that we have access to an abundance of music for worship, that a host of ideas attend it, and that it is not all good. The question for the church musician,” he continued—and the one the committee planning the 2011 Conference was considering—“is how to choose what to use, how to choose what is good.”

I suggested that Samuel Torvend’s address in 2009³ invited the question and that the two conferences could be connected by spinning an article from it. Marshall asked if I would write such an article which could be published in *CrossAccent* before the 2011 Conference and used in an online forum and then in a panel discussion at the Conference itself. This article is a response to that request.

Formation

Torvend addressed the church musician’s role in formation. He said that faith as understood in the Lutheran reform (I would say in the church catholic, though this was perverted at least perceptually in the medieval period) is not about propositions, but about trust. He suggested that church musicians participate in faith formation and quoted Luther. “The fathers and the prophets,” wrote Luther, “wanted nothing else to be associated as closely with the Word of God as music. Therefore we have so many hymns and Psalms where message and music join to move the listener’s soul.”⁴ This, said Torvend,

is an astonishing claim. To move, to shape, to form the living soul of the assembly—certainly this is the work of the Spirit—a work yet in which musicians may actively participate. Yes, the musician may serve the demands of technical skill and artistry but more than this, *in the church*, the musician also serves the formation of faith and its many relationships. The selection of text and tune, the playing of organ, flute, piano, violin, or bell, the rehearsal of the assembly and the choir—all these are ordinary means, living gifts, through which the Spirit awakens faith in the Holy Three and love for the neighbor in need.⁵

Several salient issues are packed into Luther’s claim and Torvend’s assertions about it. 1) This is the work of the Spirit. 2) Musicians actively participate in it. 3) Faith in the Holy Three and love for the neighbor are awakened.

Assertions 1 and 2 (The Holy Spirit and the Musician)

At Paul Manz's funeral service on November 8, 2009, Pastor Kristine Carlson said that there are people in this earthly life who through the Holy Spirit's work bring us into the presence of union with Christ and that Manz was one of these people. I noted that similar things have been said about another cantor, J. S. Bach, who has been called "the fifth evangelist."⁶ Manz made a comment about music—the substance of the vocation of these and other church musicians—in the Foreword he wrote to Joy Lawrence's and John Ferguson's *A Musician's Guide to Church Music*. There he said, "The music may woo the people, but it is the Word who will win them."⁷

Luther, Torvend, Carlson, and Manz are getting at something profound about music in the life of the church. A characteristic Lutheran way of formulating it is that music is part of the church's proclamatory activity. Music relates to faith formation as the work of the Spirit, says Carlson, or the Word through the Spirit in Manz's formulation. Musicians participate in it, says Torvend, relying on Luther. This can be profoundly misunderstood if the cues of our culture are in control. They say something quite different. In our culture, super-saturated with selling as the measure of all things, music is a means to propel advertising and to get people to buy a product. When run through the culture's grid what Luther, Torvend, Carlson, and Manz are getting at can be taken to mean that music is a lure to sell some version of Christianity. Selling Christianity is then presumed to be about faith formation, especially if many buyers and consumers are momentarily attracted.

(The recent surprisingly honest spoof called "Sunday's Coming' Movie Trailer,"⁸ similar spoofs in other musical styles, and the church's euphemistic use of the word "mission" tell us all we need to know about why the church is not taken seriously. We have created a phony church which does not tell the truth as it is called to do and adds itself to the list of dishonest sales venues. Like the rest of them, it may temporarily attract large crowds by these means, but over the long haul it gives people no reason to trust us and drives them away.)

Such a misunderstanding may reflect the world's propaganda in the service of excessive

profit and numbers, but it does not reflect faith formation. And it has nothing to do with what we're getting at here. As a matter of fact, it is a central temptation of church musicians, namely, that they are sales persons who manipulate people with music as the tool. This temptation is sometimes a goal of those in the church who want to use music as a means to fill empty pews. They seek to deploy church staffs for this purpose and pressure musicians to do the kind of music they think will attract customers. In our culture the musician is in fact often the sales person who sings and plays the jingles that sell things. This reality has been pushed to dangerous and even demonic levels when music has been co-opted for the propaganda of the state, as in Hitler's Germany.

Music has been used positively, of course, to oppose such propaganda, though the opposition is sometimes skillfully hidden in dictatorial contexts like the ones Hugo Distler and Dmitri Shostakovich faced. Music has also been used in movements for justice, as against the Holocaust or for Women's suffrage and civil rights. There, as always, the danger of manipulation presents itself. Since motives are never pure, it is a tricky business to know when a negative line has been crossed even for positive causes like justice and peace. But the distinctions are quite clear. Music for an individual's agenda or for the propaganda of state or group control is qualitatively distinct from music disciplined by a community under God with a concern for the common good. It is with the latter under the grace of God that emotions and expressivity can be freely released. Absence of manipulative intent does not withdraw music's emotional weight and power. It frees them to be genuine.

Music is also used seriously and constructively for purely intrinsic reasons. The gods of profit allied to individual stardom, however, pose substantial obstacles to any musician who seeks to perform music for its intrinsic value. The church musician can fall prey to the same gods and has a hard time resisting the culture's manipulative addictions, especially when groups in the church or leaders in the church are in the grasp of those same gods and addictions.

The church, when it is healthy, respects the attachment of music to just causes and the intrinsic value of music, but views it more

We have created a phony church which does not tell the truth as it is called to do and adds itself to the list of dishonest sales venues. Like the rest of them, it may temporarily attract large crowds by these means, but over the long haul it gives people no reason to trust us and drives them away.

profoundly as a gift of God in the creation and in the new creation. Following Paul in Colossians 3:16 and leaders in the church from Basil to Augustine to Hildegard to Calvin to Bach to John Mason Neale to Pius X, the church sees that music is fundamentally for the glory of God and the edification of the neighbor, not for selling or self-aggrandizement or manipulative purposes of any kind. The Christian gospel frees us from the tyranny of all manipulative techniques, musical and otherwise; allows us to relate to one another forthrightly under God's grace; and releases music to be its essential self as God's gracious gift.

Though musicians can be snared by cultural addictions, pastors in our culture can be even more controlled by them since they, like CEOs, are often held responsible for the bottom line. They are often expected therefore not to be concerned about their ordination promises to preach the Word and administer the sacraments, but are viewed rather as motivators. Motivational techniques become their tools with sermons and pep rally presiding as parts of their arsenal. When they realize that music is a more powerful tool than anything they can say or do, they become impresarios and seek to assert their control over music. If the musicians who work with them realize, as Manz and Luther knew, that the Word will do it, and if they are trying to face down the cultural addictions and temptations, conflicts are likely. If the positions are reversed and the clergy know about the Word and stand against the culture, there will also be conflicts. But there is a big difference in how the conflicts will play out since musicians seldom have the power of the clergy. Musicians who see themselves as sales people are likely to be reined in by clergy who resist that mindset, whereas clergy who see themselves and their churches as sales agencies simply fire musicians who do not agree with them.

Assertion 3 (The Holy Three and the Neighbor)

Torvend's third assertion is that the work of the Spirit in which musicians actively participate awakens faith in the Holy Three and love for the neighbor. This assertion is close to the church's view of music as for the glory of God and the edification of the neighbor. But proximity is only the beginning. A network of relationships is present here.

Music is about relationships among

- vibrations;
- timbres;
- dynamic levels;
- notes;
- phrases;
- contrapuntal and harmonic organizations;
- voices;
- instruments;
- voices and instruments;
- voices and instruments in various combinations and configurations;
- the above in an "objective" sense of "time" and a "subjective" sense of the times of our lives, individually and communally;
- the above in the contexts of associations and experiential conditioning; and
- the above in space with acoustical properties that influence them.

These relationships derive from the amazing gift of music in the raw materials of the creation, but, when a composer like J. S. Bach takes these raw materials and shapes them skillfully, like Luther⁹ one is lost in wonder.

The *liturgy* is about relationships among

- those who make the space ready;
- the whole assembly;
- greeters;
- ushers;
- the presider;
- the preacher;
- lectors;
- the assisting minister;
- the cantor;
- the choir;
- the singers in the choir;
- the singers in the assembly;
- instrumentalists;
- time "objectively" and "subjectively" before, during, and after worship;
- spaces and their configurations before, during, and after worship;
- architecture and art in the various spaces;
- movement;
- gesture; and
- the world around the worship locally and globally.

The liturgy and its relationships take place in time just as music does. Music bears an especially close relation to the liturgy therefore and articulates its flow around Word, font, and table. The liturgy is directly related to the world

The Christian gospel frees us from the tyranny of all manipulative techniques, musical and otherwise; allows us to relate to one another forthrightly under God's grace; and releases music to be its essential self as God's gracious gift.

and leads the church there. *Ite missa est*—Go, the mass is ended—is what gives the mass its name. “Go in peace, serve the Lord” is one of our versions of the same thing. Being the body of Christ in the world grows out of what we do at worship. Mission, care for the neighbor and the creation, work for social justice, evangelism, and hospitality all find their source in the grace of God we receive in Word and sacraments. The whole cluster is related to faith, which as Torvend said, is not about propositions but about living relationships to God and to one another.

The music at our worship is profoundly related to this whole. The assumption that we should not spend time and energy on music at worship so that we can spend time and energy on work in the world poses a false dichotomy. If our worship and its music are slovenly, our work in the world will be the same. The church’s music is the sound of the body of Christ. If we don’t care for its relationships, we are not likely to care for the other relationships we as Christ’s body have with the creation, our neighbors, and the societal structures in which we live. An ecology of grace here issues from the gifts of God’s creation and new creation. It is the work of the Spirit, but clergy, musicians, and the whole church participate in it by preaching the Word, administering the sacraments, singing around Word, font, and table, and then going into the world as Christ’s body to embody the new creation.

Worship as Alternative Environment

What this means is that Christian worship is an alternative environment. This is not an alternative worship service, alternative to whatever is called the traditional worship service. It is about the worship of the church, wherever and however it has taken place and takes place, in all its broken forms and shapes. It is about Word and sacrament, prayer and song in a new and hospitable environment. Our temptation is to think we can create that environment on our own by our virtuosic skills. The liturgy protects us from that delusion and tells us that we are wise to heed the liturgical checks and balances the church has discovered. If we don’t, we are likely to destroy one another with religious tools (even well-meaning ones) as weapons.

What is this alternative formative and hospitable environment? Walter Brueggemann says that the worship of a people is “world-

making.” He does not mean that “words and acts in cult ... form rocks and rivers and minerals.” He means that they impose “order, shape, sequence, pattern, and meaning on already existing elements which are disordered and chaotic until acted upon,”¹⁰ and he says that God has authorized this activity and is known to be present in it.¹¹

Music is the cultic language by which this order takes shape.¹² It is the lyrical, imaginative, evocative structural substance to which Brueggemann so eloquently draws our attention. It points to the liturgy and the clergy’s role as “agents in the liturgical drama,”¹³ to music and church musicians, to the architecture and furnishings of our worship spaces, and to the whole body who gathers in them.

This alternative world of formation is the world of hospitality and the true environment. It is of the Spirit’s making, but we get to participate in it. We do not get to participate in it as if we could make it or control it. It is not about the obligatory modulation, calculated to get an emotional response. It is not about preachers’ rhetorical devices, calculated for effect. Modulations and rhetoric are there with all their cultural gifts, but they are broken in community to another reality than ours. They are in the service of God about whom this whole enterprise revolves.

That makes us nervous if we are worried about perpetuating establishments. We are nervous because the praise of God brings with it grappling with a presence that will not fit cultural and worldly categories. It is potent and cannot be controlled. As Brueggemann says, “Israel’s [and our] most powerful praise lives closest to the reality of God’s inbreaking actions.”¹⁴ Our worship is full of memory of what God has done and does; friendly beyond our comprehension, but friendly from God’s side; open to the future from God’s side; and potent with promise and prophetic power from God’s side.

Further Perspectives and Contexts The Body

We could now adduce implications about musical choices, but probing further perspectives and contexts will serve us well before we do that. Thomas Long’s recent book about funerals¹⁵ provides one of these perspectives. Long’s thesis is that Christian funerals have been about the completion

of baptism to the “place” of union with God through the resurrection of Christ, often with a Eucharist at the church or the grave. This has been carried out in a three-part pattern: the body was prepared, a procession of the body moved to the grave, and the body was buried. Long discovered that this pattern developed in the early church and persisted thereafter through cultural and theological changes. Since the nineteenth century he sees a shift in which a Platonic division of soul and body has turned the dead person into a spiritual memory, removed the body from the funeral (actually or wishfully), and made the funeral into a private and customized psycho-drama in which liturgy is abandoned so that the living can focus on themselves to move from sorrow to stability. Three Christian affirmations are denied: death with a small d, the cosmic victory of God in Christ over Death with a large D, and death in Christ (to resurrection).

Long may not have intended it, but his book has implications well beyond funerals. He points to a lack of nerve on the part of the Christian community which has allowed it to be collapsed into a Platonic or Gnostic culture where the incarnational reality (the body) of the Christian faith is denied. For music this means a focus on our emotive states and how music makes us feel. Long notes that when Chrysostom asks why Christians sing psalms and hymns (to accompany the body of the dead in procession—with the joy of human voices and not the dirges of flute players), he answers to praise God for crowning the departed, freeing the departed from suffering, and bringing the person to be with God.¹⁶ That’s praise of God and joyful, but not directed at the selves of the worshipers. Our post-eighteenth century obsession focuses on ourselves with music as a central tool, wallows in our emotions, and sells a denuded version of Christianity which is another product—packaged, branded, marketed, and “positioned” for sale on the shelf of religious wares. Even if we say we are praising God, the god we praise doesn’t do anything like go to the cross and swallow up death; the focus is curved in on us and how we feel.

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty

One way the church has kept its focus on God rather than us has been by means of the “transcendentals” of truth, goodness, and

beauty. We have tended to avoid these in discussions of music. Our avoidance is partly explained by the temptation to identify them too easily with specific styles or genres that are related to discrete places and times—like the East or the West, a period such as medieval or Renaissance, or an ethnicity such as Italian, German, or French usually with reference to a certain period like the Baroque. We are also tempted to regard them as elitist and to identify them with nineteenth-century conceptions that require certain resources like large and larger choirs, orchestras, and congregations. These temptations have taught us that we perceive truth, goodness, and beauty through cultural prisms which are finite and proximate. To regard the broken prisms of our perception as yielding the whole of meaning is idolatrous. As Martin Marty says, “awe is portable.”¹⁷ It is not limited to one time or place or set of resources. It is there wherever two or three are gathered together in Jesus’ name, as are truth, goodness, and beauty.

These are valuable lessons, but when they lead to the avoidance of truth, goodness, and beauty in relation to music, the result is to make music “instrumental.” I do not have in mind here that we have utilized musical instruments to exclude the church’s vocal center, though that is true. I mean rather that we have made music “instrumental” in the word’s pragmatic sense so that it becomes solely functional and stripped of any other character. Music is functional, but it is not only functional. It embodies beauty. (Some nineteenth-century currents wanted to emphasize beauty to the exclusion of function. The church wants to say both, not one or the other.) Robert Jenson gives us some helpful clues about this.

Jenson argues that God the Three is “roomy” and in creation opens the room to include us,¹⁸ that God has a body “born of Mary and risen into the church and its sacraments,”¹⁹ and that we join the truth of God’s discourse there. This discourse has a moral content so that we delight in the goodness of Torah. When he comes to beauty Jenson follows Jonathan Edwards, ranks beauty first among the transcendentals, and says that God is so roomy as to be a great capacious fugue.²⁰ And he says this.

Correspondingly, our enjoyment of God is that we are taken into the Triune singing. Perhaps we may say we are

Craft and proportion matter in our music and are not merely instrumental in the sense of purely pragmatic entities. Craft and proportion relate to truth, goodness, and beauty, which is to say they relate to God, which is to say we have to take them into account when choosing music for worship.

allowed to double the parts. And here too we must insist on concreteness. That the proclamation and prayer of the church regularly bursts into beauty, indeed seems to insist on music and choreography and setting, is not an adventitious hankering to decorate. A congregation singing a hymn of praise to the Father is doubling the Son's praise, and the surge of rhythm and melody is the surge of the Spirit's glorification of the Father and the Son.²¹

Like Long, Jenson points to the concreteness of the Christian faith and the body. The incarnation means we have to do with physical stuff—a body born of Mary on a cross, baptized bodies, sacraments, movement, and physical settings. Music is part of this physical stuff with vibrating bodies. Like all the rest it has shape and form, though for music the primary relationship is to time rather than space. This means that craft and proportion matter in our music and are not merely instrumental in the sense of purely pragmatic entities. Craft and proportion relate to truth, goodness, and beauty, which is to say they relate to God, which is to say we have to take them into account when choosing music for worship.

Spatial Form and Movement

Form and movement have a bearing on music and musical choices. The clearest demonstration of this is sixteenth-century Zurich where, under Ulrich Zwingli's influence, the Grossmünster was whitewashed and the people were restricted to their pews so that movement could be avoided. Singing and musical activity of any kind were abandoned altogether.

Few worshiping assemblies in our time take such a radical position for music, but the relationship of space and time still pertains. Gesture (ceremonial), garments (vestments), and art (icons, stained glass, and sculpture) sustain action across space while music sustains it across time. If the spatial elements are removed, music is left to bear all the freight. The result is to focus more easily on the music rather than what it proclaims. When the spatial elements are present, a wider palette of musical choices is present because the proceedings do not have to stop for music but continue to be sustained visually. Music, like its spatial

counterparts, can then be more attuned to Word, font, and table—and to the Holy Three who stands behind them.

Change

It is often suggested that the root cause of whatever problems we may have about music is resistance to change. Resistance to change is always present. It lurks behind all of our curved-in tendencies to make what we know or love—like a musical style—the measure of all things. “Change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better,” said Richard Hooker.²² But choices continually have to be made. They concern change because every instant of our lives is about change. The reason we can talk about what we call Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Classic, Romantic, and Modern music is because of change. Change is an ever-present reality of existence. It requires pastoral care, but it is not the fundamental issue. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that making it the fundamental issue succumbs to death in our curved-in selves. What choices we make, how we make them, and what leaders we choose to follow are the critical issues that face us. They are not so much about change as about the wisdom of Psalm 1 and life that delights in the law of the Lord.

The Church

The church is the body of the baptized among whom the Word is preached and the sacraments are celebrated. This impels teaching, pastoral care, proclamation, care for the neighbor, work for justice and peace, song, and being in but not of the world. It impels the work of the church in its members' various vocations as the church gathered and scattered. Since we have this message in earthen vessels, the work is messy. It proceeds not by force but by grace. There are no silver bullets for it, and success as the world measures success in numbers is not its concern. The church's being does not impel hand wringing about the many spiritual options that vie for attention in our world, whining about a church that appears to have no cultural authority, monkeying with worship which is a clever ploy to avoid our responsibility to the world, or getting stuck in a mindless rut of what is mistakenly called liturgical. It does not impel shaming the church because the whole world is not in it or trying

When the spatial elements are present, a wider palette of musical choices is present because the proceedings do not have to stop for music but continue to be sustained visually. Music, like its spatial counterparts, can then be more attuned to Word, font, and table—and to the Holy Three who stands behind them.

to force pastors' sermons to be its primary discourse. These are the world's measures and bespeak an unfaithful church.

In but not of the World

The move from analog to digital has the effect of undermining linearity—linear thinking and even identity. We can splice, remix, and reprocess anything in “an ever changing (dynamic) pastiche.”²³ We can seem to make ourselves into anything we choose to be and even presume to control time. This is celebrated by some as humanity's most revolutionary progress toward utopia, bemoaned by others as a sign of doom toward dystopia, and regarded by still others as something between these two extremes. However one regards it, utopian hopes inevitably flounder on human finitude and the broken condition Christians call sin. We cannot reverse time (in spite of Einstein's insights), we live in a world governed by the harmonic series and the sun and moon with their seasons, the daily news reflects the condition of our brokenness which is far more profound than just doing bad things, and the Christian confesses a linear human trajectory which moves from creation to consummation.

Serious music and the other arts since the late nineteenth century have been grappling with experiments related to linearity's absence in a genuine engagement with the culture.²⁴ Some of the church's composers and musicians have joined this engagement, more than we usually acknowledge, among them members of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians and composers like Olivier Messiaen outside the Lutheran heritage. They have tried to live out in sound the church's responsibility to be *in* but *not of* the world, that is, to be responsive both to cultural fissures in linearity and to the Christian linear trajectory.

Their work is often submerged. What is more often publicized is the avoidance of this responsibility by camps labeled “traditional” and “contemporary.” Neither is what it calls itself. “Traditional” is a euphemism for collapsing into the parody of a past culture, and “contemporary” is a euphemism for collapsing into a superficially popular slice of a current culture soon to be or already past.²⁵ Both avoid the call to be in but not of the world. Future generations are likely to fault us forcefully for this avoidance.

The Lutheran heritage teaches us a better way, where traditions of integrity stimulate one another. For example, in choral music Heinrich Schütz showed how a set of influences from one culture (Italian) could be creatively woven into another one (German). In the congregation's music Melchior Vulpius folded currents from the dance into hymn tunes. In both cases a confluence provided the means to craft something worthwhile which engaged the cultures of their times and places and, because of that, gave it the possibility of engaging later ones as well. This happened not by creating superficial shadow streams and arguing about them, but by the creative crafting of juxtaposed integrity. It assumes the integrity of worthy styles in their ongoing performance practice, resists blending them into a vanilla mush, and allows the two to stimulate a new thing with its own spine and integrity.

The Soul

Technology provides us with a host of splendid ventures, aptly summarized in a recent issue of *Word & World*. For example, it stimulates social networking,²⁶ the Web makes new possibilities for evangelism,²⁷ technology gives to learning more collaborative possibilities,²⁸ video games can build new relationships,²⁹ and Facebook creates delights.³⁰ But Facebook also presents hazards;³¹ in spite of all the promise it holds the digital age poses challenges as it redefines identity;³² and a dose of Christian realism is in order that says trust in our technology as the brave new world is an illusion.³³

In spite of what “experts” tell us, that the church is out of touch with its surroundings, the real problem as always is that the church is too tempted to succumb to them. Most of the criticisms of the church have been and still are not about the essence of the church itself, but about its too easy alliance with the empire around it. That is our danger too. Our presupposition that we with our technological and consumerist “advances” are qualitatively different from and better than everyone and everything else that have gone before us is arrogant and superficial silliness. We are one small speck in a long historical progression (see Psalm 90). Like all the rest of it we too will die and be perceived by our successors the way we perceive those who have gone before us. William Cavanaugh's analysis suggests

“Traditional” is a euphemism for collapsing into the parody of a past culture, and “contemporary” is a euphemism for collapsing into a superficially popular slice of a current culture soon to be or already past.

that our consumerist society yields fakes and detachment with desire kept on the move by what General Motors called “the organized creation of dissatisfaction.”³⁴ Our circumstance is not only, as Long says, that we have lost our bodies. It is also that we may have lost our souls. Anton Armstrong, quoting Helen Kemp who was quoting Tom Brokaw, reminds us that “in this high-tech world it is not enough to wire the world [or make it wireless] if we short circuit the soul.”³⁵

What Music Should We Choose? The Landscape

As Marshall Bowen indicated, we have an embarrassment of riches from which to choose. The church has twenty centuries of texts it has sung. It sings Old Testament texts from multiple centuries before that. The music we use reaches back across many of these centuries. (To give just one example of the extent of our heritage, Philip Schaff said that there were a hundred thousand hymns in German alone at the end of the nineteenth century.³⁶) Michael Hawn organizes some of our current resources into seven streams.³⁷ The historical stretch of the church’s song and lists like Hawn’s give us a sense of the scope of our resources. We need to begin by being realistic. We cannot sing everything. We are finite, we live in finite communities, and we need to figure out what we ought to sing in the span of our brief lives in our communities as our responsibility to God, ourselves, the whole church, and the world around us. What will we choose?

Texts

Choosing music for worship, like worship planning generally, works out from Word and sacraments. It begins with Biblical readings for specific services, usually for Lutherans organized across the church year in a lectionary. It does not begin with extrinsic factors like musical styles or favorite pieces. Music in worship grows intrinsically out of the church’s communal essence around Word and sacraments. It is not a superimposition or an agenda.

A fundamental insight for Lutherans is that what the church sings follows the Bible’s lead and proclaims in song what God has done.³⁸ Biblical texts which were sung—like the songs

of Miriam and Hannah, the Psalms, and the New Testaments canticles—do this. They join praise to proclamation, prayer, and lament. They voice the story of God’s mighty deeds and the whole of life before God. In order to remember the whole, the church has gravitated to the church year and its lectionary. These call into play a full spectrum of Christian themes and protect us from riding our favorite hobby horses.

In every generation, however, the church has to give particular attention to burning issues. Montanism, Donatism, Eucharistic theologies, how ecclesiastical offices were obtained, justification, evangelism, and confessional and liturgical renewal are among the themes that have required the church’s close attention at various times. The church in our age is called to give special attention to justice and peace, joined now with care for the creation. That is why so many hymns have recently been written about those topics. This is a good thing; but, as I attempted to show in *Let Justice Sing*, the specificity of any generation which seems so relevant at the moment quickly becomes irrelevant—not the theme itself which continues to take its place with all the other themes of the faith after its flame has burned down a bit, but the particularity of the concerns which very quickly turns into other particularities. As Ernest Gellner said, “There is nothing so dated as the modernism of the previous generation.”³⁹ That is “why the most potent cries for justice and peace [as for the themes of any age] come from the most ancient liturgical and musical traditions.”⁴⁰ They are imbedded in the praise of God and the recounting of God’s mighty deeds. This tells us three things about choosing texts.

1. Keep the worthiest texts of the whole church in play even when they seem less relevant. That means singing the praise, lament, prayer, proclamation, and story imbedded in the church’s song from across the church’s history, not solely from one period or even several periods—and certainly not only from our period which is the most tempting curved-in line of least resistance. For Lutherans this means regularly and amply drawing on the chorale heritage, its precursors, and what it has spawned, as well as all the other streams of the church in the East and West, past and present.
2. Give voice to the texts our age needs to

A fundamental insight for Lutherans is that what the church sings follows the Bible’s lead and proclaims in song what God has done.

sing—experiment with them, try them, and let the church see how they fare—in the context of the whole.

3. Follow the confessional center we represent—for Lutherans the ecumenical creeds, the Lutheran confessions, and the centrality of justification by grace through faith.

Music

The following suggestions are more precisely musical, though textual considerations attend them.

4. Realize that the confessional center does not presume a narrow focus. The song of the church is broad, with various theological, liturgical, and musical streams. These streams come together in the public worship of the church without compromising the confessional center.
5. Follow the wisdom of our sisters and brothers in Christ who have gone before us, and use what they have bequeathed to us. That is partly what “across the church’s history” means. Multiple generations have kept what is worth our time and effort and have dismissed what is not. They may have made mistakes which we can reverse, but the wisdom of multiple generations far exceeds any one generation.
6. Follow the wisdom of the church catholic in our period, and use the “global” resources that have become available to us.⁴¹ These remind us that the faith has not been and is not sung in any one style or ethnic envelope, they keep us from that idolatry, they expand our insights and understanding, and they help us sing and work in solidarity with our sisters and brothers around the world. Global song is largely, though not only, a congregational repertoire which often uses cyclical rather than strophic structures. It serves us best therefore where layered repetition is more important than narrative (for example, during communion rather than at the Hymn of the Day).

Points 5 and 6 should not be taken to mean a commitment to “globalization” as faith in cosmopolitan universalizing or secularized catholicity. William Cavanaugh is right that globalization in this sense “abstracts human relations .

. . . from their concrete embodiment in the local and particular” and represents an aesthetic “that ultimately dissolves all differences into the same.”⁴² That is a “parody of true catholicity.”⁴³ I have in mind his definition of “catholic” as “a gathering rather than a spreading out, a unification of the many through attachment to the local eucharistic community”⁴⁴ which respects various stylistic streams in their integrity and pulls them together in community.

7. Choose thoughtfully by grappling with matters like the ones Nicholas Wolterstorff calls fittingness and Martin Marty calls intrinsicalness.⁴⁵ Wolterstorff carefully unpacks this with his characteristic skill in a complex discussion, at the end of which he locates our age as exceptional (see below, point 8) in its artistic experiments of not wanting to come to rest.⁴⁶ Marty says that if there is a God as Christians confess and we are to bring our gifts in response, then there are “betters” and “worses” to which we have to attend.⁴⁷ These issues go beyond simply figuring out whether a piece itself is good or bad, though that is critical. They also concern what fits a community when and where, where it fits in a given service, performance practice, the musical character of introductions for the congregation’s song, as well as musical syntax in relation to eschatology. Linearity and how cyclical meditative structures fit are part of these considerations. Pulling anything out of a hat without thought or practice will not do.
8. Distinguish between what is congregational and what is choral, and choose the appropriate genre for the appropriate group. The two are not the same, and asking one to be the other is courting disaster. The Lutheran heritage knows about these two streams, has embraced them both with consciously strong intent, and has a huge repertoire of both to help us.

The congregation is that body of people largely without musical training and practice who sings around Word, font, and table. Its music is hardy communal folk-song. The choir is two

This means that making my favorite piece a criterion, choosing something because of how I think it will make people feel, and trying to be chummy are ways for me to be curved in on myself and—let us say it forthrightly—sinful.

or more people who practice to help the congregation sing and who sing what is beyond the congregation's capabilities. The congregational stream poses particular problems in our age because of our "not wanting to come to rest" which sets up this syntactical dilemma: since congregational music is folk music, how do you reconcile our contemporary atonal or non-tonal experiments—as well as rhythmic fracturing—with it? Béla Bartok would tell us that this is impossible, because he says "folk-tunes are always tonal"⁴⁸ which includes pentatonic and non-Western systems. The music a choir practices can theoretically be anything, but it too needs to be conceived in the context of a congregation for whom it has to make some accessible sense. Accessible sense may counter our intuition. I learned this by discovering that dissonance, tone clusters, white noise, aleatoric techniques, difficult intervals, and a sometimes hidden or rhythmically fractured text can be quite meaningful and faithful in the right contexts.

These matters call for our best work. They go to the heart of our responsibility for the church's sonic being in but not of the world. Whatever we fashion, however, we need to keep before us this fundamental reality: the music of the congregation needs to be congregational—not choral, not solo, not anything but congregational.

9. Choose what is communal, not what is soloistic or in any way treats the congregational assembly as an audience. The concern here is about the church as a body that gathers for public worship. It can be argued that in our digital period of YouTube and Facebook the distinction between public and private has "become ludicrous"⁴⁹ and even our sense of the space where people gather has been compromised.⁵⁰ These arguments carry a certain weight, but they are largely theoretical. People still gather in "public" places (like restaurants); these gatherings are different from private ones (like dining rooms in peoples' homes); the church still gathers publicly around Word, font, and table on the Lord's day

of resurrection and in prayer at other times; such gatherings are different from the private prayer of a family or a small group; and the church's practice of twenty centuries has far more power than a few years of a "digital age."

10. Choose what is directed outward. The church's song is hardy, public, folk-like, communal, non-manipulative, and for the good of the whole. This means that making my favorite piece a criterion, choosing something because of how I think it will make people feel, and trying to be chummy are ways for me to be curved in on myself and—let us say it forthrightly—sinful. That does not mean that my predilections, capacities, abilities, and feelings are shut out any more than those of the people I serve. It means that they are part of the communal whole which is not only local but part of the church catholic. The common good—the good of the whole church and the whole world we are called to serve—is the fundamental criterion here.
11. Choose what has goodness, truth, and beauty, not what is banal or gimmicky. This essentially means good craft. My feelings, piety, and favorites are irrelevant.
12. Choose what will serve generations—the youngest, the oldest, those in between, and those who came before us and will follow us. Choosing music for public worship in order to appeal to various generations is nonsense since the church by its very nature is radically cross-generational. This in no way avoids developmental tasks. It folds them into a communal whole so that some feel stretched while others feel no stretch all. These responses are different for different people at different times. The whole is run out around a communal memory bank that encompasses the entire gamut so that the youngest learn what will sustain them throughout life and in its dissolution. (This obviously assumes that children are welcome at worship and should not be sent away.)
13. Choose what is worthy of repetition. Church musicians have a special responsibility at this point. They repeat and study the music they choose

many times before they use it with a congregation. They repeat therefore in a short span what it takes a congregation many years to equal. They know more quickly what bears repetition and what does not. They make mistakes and need to enter this process with humility, but they are called to save congregations from wasting valuable time on what is new and not worth learning. They also need to repeat what is “old” and worthy of repetition (see point 1) which means checking scope, balance, and contrast over a year and over years.

14. Choose what is vocal which is at the center of the church’s musical being. Musical instruments have been and still need to be welcomed in the Lutheran heritage, but they are not central. Communal song—vocal and texted—is central. For the congregation tunes that can be sung without instrumental accompaniment are to be preferred over ones that require such accompaniment. This in no way rules out instrumental music if it is used where it fits. It simply means instrumental music is not central, is not where musical choices begin, and should not overwhelm worship.
15. Respect the pipe organ. Neither all, part, or any of the church’s song has to employ the organ or any other instruments, but the pipe organ for Lutherans and much of the church in the West has more of the church’s song associated with it—by a huge margin—than any other musical instrument. A Lutheran ecclesiology says that we have to respect and reform the stream we inherit, not presume we can start from scratch. The stream we have inherited is replete with organ music which is still compelling, and composers are still writing creative music for it. Though it can be used poorly, the pipe organ still makes sound the way human voices do and “remains the single best instrument from which one person can lead the greatest variety of styles of congregational song.”⁵¹
16. Respect other instruments and use them with a full-orbed abandon, but do not allow them or the organ to substitute for the church’s vocal center.
17. Choose what has “soul” which Martin

Marty, relying on Aristotle and Leon Kass, defines as “the integrated vital powers of a naturally organic body. . . [and indicates] the possibility of an ever-greater awareness of and openness to the world, and an ever greater freedom in the world.”⁵²

18. Choose with compassion and humility for the sake of the other.

This list is well within our capabilities. It is about the finest crafting, appropriately conceived with love for specific groups and purposes where there are differing resources and sizes in the context of the whole body of Christ. A responsible denominational hymnal summarizes it and points toward a model where checks and balances mean nobody gets his or her own way and where the whole story is sung. The best of the past is brought forward; current experiments are tried; the communal memory bank of the church catholic is respected and takes flesh in local embodiments; various theological, liturgical, and musical postures are culled together around a common confessional center; the good of the whole church for the world under Christ through the Spirit with the Father’s blessing clues us in; and everything is chosen and carried out with care, compassion, and humility on behalf of the people we are called to serve.

Paul Westermeyer is Professor of Church Music at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he also serves as Cantor and administers the Master of Sacred Music program with St. Olaf College. He has taught at Elmhurst College and Yale University’s Institute of Sacred Music, was the President of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, Editor of its journal *The Hymn*, and in 2004 was made a Fellow. From 1991 until 1998 he was the national Chaplain of the American Guild of Organists. In 2009 he received the Faithful Servant Award from the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians. His most recent book is the *Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. He and his wife Sally (nee Young) have four children, two daughters-in-law, one son-in-law, seven grandsons, and two granddaughters.

(Endnotes)

- 1 I began work on this article and used parts of it in conjunction with my lecture, "Hospitable Environments: Presuppositions" for the Word and Music Festival at the Church of the Redeemer, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, May 14, 2010. As it evolved I am grateful to Kristin Rongstad, Samuel Torvend, Walter Brueggemann, David Cherwien, Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Ferguson, Fred Gaiser, Christopher Aspaas, Robert Hausman, Marshall Bowen, Martin Marty, Dirk Lange, Paul Harrington, and Anton Armstrong for checks on accuracy, helpful comments, and suggestions.
- 2 These include the following: "The Present State of Church Music: Historical and Theological Reflections," *Word & World* XII:3 (Summer 1992): 214–220; "Tradition, Liturgy, and the Visitor," *Word & World* XIII: 1 (Winter 1993): 76–84; "11. Responses," *The Church Musician*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 121–142; "Dissonance and Discordance, Consonance and Concordance: Late-Twentieth-Century Music as Reflective of a Violent Society," *Word & World* XX:1 (Winter 2000): 72–89; *The Heart of the Matter* (Chicago: GIA, 2001); "Choosing Music: Choices for Holiness," *CrossAccent* 12:3 (2004): 4–11; *Let the People Sing: Hymn Tunes in Perspective* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2005); "What Is a Hymn Heritage?" *The Hymn* 59:1 (Winter 2008): 7–13, and *Rise, O Church: Reflections on the Church, Its Music, and Empire* (St. Louis: MorningStar, 2008).
- 3 Printed as Samuel Torvend, "A Curse or a Blessing? The Peril and Promise of Forming the Assembly in Faith," *CrossAccent* 18:1 (2010): 8–12.
- 4 Martin Luther, "Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*," *Luther's Works* 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress, Press, 1965): 323. Nicholas Wolterstorff (e-mail to me, August 1, 2010), after noting that Augustine said something similar in his *Confessions* IX, 6, makes this perceptive observation about Luther's comment. "Certainly music does do that, and it is worth mentioning. But I would say that more intrinsic to music in the liturgy (and elsewhere) is that it ennobles or elevates the liturgical action. If the music is right, it does this whether or not we find ourselves moved on a given occasion."
- 5 Torvend, 9–10.
- 6 Paul Westermeyer, "Paul Manz and the Promised Life," *Lutheran Forum* 44:1 (Spring 2010): 27.
- 7 Joy E. Lawrence and John A. Ferguson, *A Musician's Guide to Church Music* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981), viii.
- 8 <http://vodpod.com/watch/3562328-sundays-coming-movie-trailer>
- 9 Luther, "Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*," 324.
- 10 Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, Press, 1988), 52.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 12 It's not Brueggemann's point, but has been argued that sound itself "can make order out of chaos." Robert Lawlor, "Geometry at the Service of Prayer: Reflections on Cistercian Mystic Architecture," *Parabola* 3:1 (1978): 18.
- 13 Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*, 7.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 15 Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing—The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 17 Martin Marty, "Seeking 'the soul' in worship, theology, and the arts," St. Olaf Conference on Worship, Theology and the Arts, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, July 22, 2010.
- 18 Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume I, The Triune God* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 226.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 228.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 236.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 235.
- 22 Supplied in an e-mail from Martin Marty, August 27, 2010.
- 23 Robert S. Fortner, "Waking Up in Anaheim," *Word & World* 20:3 (Summer 2010): 267.
- 24 See, for example, an overview from the mid-twentieth century, H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Twentieth Century Music*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: World University Library, 1969).
- 25 For a definition of "contemporary" that actually relates to the music of our period see Joseph Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).
- 26 Dwight Zscheile, "Social Networking and Church Systems," *Word & World* 20:3 (Summer 2010): 247–255.
- 27 Mary Sue Dehmlow Dreier, "E-vangelism: At All Times and All Places?" *ibid.*, 256–264.
- 28 Mary Hess, "What Difference Does It Make? E-Learning and Faith Community," *ibid.*, 281–290.
- 29 Paul C. Adams, "The Theology of ...Video Games?! Using Games to Build Relationships in Your Congregation and Community," *ibid.*, 291–299.
- 30 Amy C. Thoren, "The Pastor on Facebook: Boldly Going Where Everyone Else Goes," *ibid.*, 272–280.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 Andrew Root, "Identity in a Digital Age," *Word & World* 20:3, *ibid.*, 241–246.
- 33 Mark E. Stenberg, "Everything You Know Is Wrong: Shame, E-dentity, Identity, and the Samaritan Savior of Luke 10:25–37," *Ibid.*, 319–327.
- 34 William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 46.
- 35 Anton Armstrong, Seminar for the St. Olaf Conference on Worship, Theology and the Arts, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, July 22, 2010.
- 36 Philip Schaff, "German Hymnody," *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, ed. John Julian (New York: Dover Publications, 1907), 412.
- 37 C. Michael Hawn, "Streams of Song, An overview of congregational song in the twenty-first century," *The Hymn* 61:1 (Winter 2010): 16–26. Hawn's categories are Roman Catholic Liturgical Renewal Hymnody, Protestant Contemporary Classical Hymnody, African American Spirituals and Gospel Songs, Revival/Gospel Songs, Folk Song Influences, Pentecostal Songs, and Global and Ecumenical Song Forms.
- 38 This insight was forcefully repeated once again by Carl Schalk in "Tools for Assessing New (and Old) Texts and Tunes" at the St. Olaf Conference on Worship, Theology and the Arts, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, July 21, 2010.
- 39 Quotation supplied by Martin Marty (e-mail, August 27, 2010).
- 40 Paul Westermeyer, *Let Justice Sing* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 96.
- 41 I take these to include what C. Michael Hawn discusses in *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003): Latin American Hymnody, Asian Hymns, South African Liberation Song, Indigenous Song in Zimbabwe, and the Iona Community, to which one might add the music of Taizé.
- 42 Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 60.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 45 See Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 314 and 318–319.
- 46 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 96–121.
- 47 Quoted in Westermeyer, *Te Deum*, 314.
- 48 Béla Bartók, "On the Significance of Folk Music," *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 77.
- 49 Fortner, "Waking Up in Anaheim," 268.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 269–270.
- 51 From John Ferguson, August 6, 2010.
- 52 Martin Marty, relying on Aristotle and Leon Kass, "Seeking 'the soul' in worship, theology, and the arts," St. Olaf Conference on Worship, Theology and the Arts, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, July 22, 2010.