“O felix culpa...” Death and Resurrection in Church Music
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I. MINDFUL OF DYING AND RISING

“O happy fault that was worthy to have so great a Redeemer!”

This ancient paean of Christ’s victory over death ponders the irony of the situation. Christ, indeed, has conquered. The entire church, creation, and the company of heaven are invited by the cantor to sing of the victory. However, the old and last enemy, death, still confronts us, instilling fear. The Exultet is thus sung in defiance, THIS night—haec nox—in mindfulness of Adam’s debt and of the dark, the kingdom of terror, sin, death, and the devil.

The Great Vigil of Easter is from beginning to end a song; it is music of pilgrimage, of contemplation, of death and rising. Its language is that of “the bathhouse and the tomb.” Huddled around the paschal “pillar of fire,” Christian communities confront death in baptismal water in order to remind themselves, lest they forget, that the last foe no longer has the last word. The Vigil is death’s own funeral.

Death, even ritualized memory of it, is a fundamental threat to community. Our individual experiences of death call up the remembrance of anger, loneliness, loss of control, and isolation. It is at this stage that the unique power of communal song is revealed. Music can refocus individuals into a praying community; it can reimage Christ’s own living body, the church. Such was the rationale of Luther’s hymnic reform.

Lawrence Hoffman observes,

Music thus acts to convert individuals into a group where they can experience together the message of the alternative world being established in their prayers.

Living between the promise and fulfillment, such tension is inescapable. In fact Scripture
itself is an embodiment of the kingdom breaking in, but not yet completely. Certainly the church struggles to proclaim faithfully the Lord of life, yet it bears the responsibility to care for the sick, the troubled, and the dying. Two trajectories of faith emerge: the confidence that the dead do sleep in Christ, and the recognition and accountability of the brokenness we share in our lives. Authentic music of the church must express this tension, too, or it has not served the gospel. The “trumpet of salvation” announces “the victory of so great a king,” but the “day of wrath and mourning” as well.

II. MUSIC AS PROCLAMATION AND RESPONSE

The music of the church serves both to proclaim the eternal Word of truth and to give voice to the faithful’s reaction and response to that Word. Even though the Lutheran tradition may be the only Western movement which has considered systematically this dual role of music in worship, there is evidence of this duality within most traditions. The juxtaposition of the gospel and human response is crucial for a musician’s understanding of death and resurrection, for it is the music of the church, most often the hymns, which tends to inculcate orthodox or heterodox belief.

Two overarching categories of church music can be identified which address death and resurrection: music which is intended primarily as proclamation, and music which specifically gives voice to human response. The categories are by no means mutually exclusive. Rather, Hoffman reminds us, in order to define music as sacred in the first place, one must discover “what it does” in the church’s liturgies or devotional life. Composers are faced with both the faithful, objective proclamation of Christ’s death and resurrection as well as the subjective meaning of his death in the lives of believers and non-believers.

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Musical sounds do have the ability to evoke memories, emotions, and prior associations, thereby offering interpretation and response as well. However, sound does so not by a meaning inherent in the sound itself but through its association with the established context. Thus, in this article we restrict ourselves to the text alone.

The old Roman and Gregorian chant formularies made it possible for first an individual, then soloists, and eventually choirs, to present aurally the dramatic content of the passion narratives. Although the chants were intended to be used for the entire gospel, the sung passion became the most frequently set portion. Traditionally the part of evangelist was chanted by a tenor, and that of Christ by a bass. Passions by Johann Walter and Heinrich Schuetz retained the ancient formulas. Later polyphonic settings indicated change of character by changing the voicing and timbre.

Probably the most famous of the passion settings are those of Johann Sebastian Bach. However, Bach significantly follows seventeenth-century tradition and interpolates congregational chorales and freely composed texts for the chorus as a response to and contemplation of our Lord’s passion. Continuing this move beyond the biblical text, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German composers in particular wrote popular passion cantatas or oratorios about the story of the passion. The half million people who attended the Oberammergau Passion Play/quasi oratorio this past year suggest that such works still hold a central place in piety.

2. Music: Response in Faith

The passion cantatas and oratorios serve as a bridge to the other major category of music concerning death and resurrection. The kerygmatic word, “sung and said,” has as its goal the awakening and sustaining of belief (Rom 10:1-17). Thus, the faith response of the church shapes the second genre of music considered. How the church has variously interpreted the gospel and the relationship of the person of Christ to the life of faith, communally and individually, is reflected as well in the music.

Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians addresses the uniqueness of the Christian response to death.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thess 4:13)

Christian grief, we learn, is not expressed in despair and elaborate displays of mourning. Psalms and hymns expressing hope in the resurrection replace music intended to appease the gods.
Bishops and priests are obviously hard pressed to instruct the faithful in this fundamental shift in vision. John Chrysostom suggests “proper” psalmody—Pss 22, 23, and 116—for funerals while acknowledging the pastoral problems of dealing with the bereaved.

Christian grief should not be such as to show lack of faith in the resurrection, but merely because the separation is hard to bear.\footnote{Geoffrey Rowell, *The Liturgy of Christian Burial* (London: Alcuin/SPCK, 1977) 22.}


III. CHRISTOLOGY: CHANGING EXPRESSIONS OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Much of our understanding of the theology and piety of the early church is informed by the iconography of the catacombs. This theology and piety is mirrored in the texts sung at funerals and anniversaries of deaths. Indeed, throughout the church’s history a surprisingly close correlation can be charted between Christology, visual depictions of Christ, funeral rites,\footnote{Richard Rutherford is to be thanked for concisely summarizing this relationship in his book *The Death of a Christian: the Rite of Funerals* (New York: Pueblo, 1980) 16 and passim.} and the music of those rites. In such images, consistent with Psalm 23, the Good Shepherd welcomes those who have fallen asleep and now rest “in Paradise,” a synonym for the cemetery.\footnote{Van der Meer, *Early Christian World*, 67.} Other complementary Old Testament antetypes also abound, particularly the rest found in the “bosom of Abraham.”\footnote{Van der Meer, *Early Christian World*, 44.} The range of images that the Old and New Testament passages evoke become standard fare for music thereafter.

The Constantinian settlement in the church transforms the way in which Christ is understood. In the age of trinitarian debate, patristic theologians define Christ increasingly as teacher, “Holy Wisdom,”\footnote{Van der Meer, *Early Christian World*, 44.} and deliverer. The doctrine of atonement, that theological matrix of death and life, receives its classical form.\footnote{Monastic communities blossom at this time, and their hymns written for the daily round of prayers pick up this shift to “deliverer.” The seventh-century hymn for compline, *Te lucis ante terminum*, prays for deliverance from the “ghoulies and ghosties” of this world.\footnote{The hymn for Sunday matins, *Primo die, quo Trinitas*, gives thanks for the liberation from death.}\footnote{By the seventh century yet another shift is detected. The doctrine of sin as expounded by}
Augustine develops into a severe Christian anthropology. Confident trust in the merciful God which marked the early understanding of death and life recedes in favor of a formidable penitential discipline.\textsuperscript{28} The faithful now pray more for deliverance from their own sin than from the foes that assail them. Implicit, especially in the writings of St. Gregory, is the doctrine of purgatory. Souls after death need purification; prayers of the bereaved can contribute to the process.\textsuperscript{29}

Moreover, as the doctrine of sin develops, so does the image of Christ as judge. This culminates in the high Middle Ages and is embodied in the tympana over cathedral portals where Christ as enthroned judge weighs the fate of the sheep and goats. Durandus of Mende’s famous treatise on the liturgy, \textit{Rationale divinorum officiorum}, is sobering proof of the extent of this shift in the church’s theology of death and dying. The book is an allegorical treatment of all aspects of Christian liturgy, including the music of the rites. No longer is the focus on the resurrection, but on Good Friday.

The pattern of the office of the dead...is similar to the liturgy for the last three days of Holy Week, the \textit{triduum sacrum}, when the Gloria, Alleluias, blessings before lessons, and other joyful responses are omitted. In the office of the dead, [Durandus] asserts, there should not be rejoicing but rather sorrow and mourning, and all canticles of exultation and joy should be omitted.\textsuperscript{30}

The rite of the papal funeral mass takes shape in the thirteenth century and is codified in the 1570 Tridentine missal of Paul V, which gives a fixed place to the twelfth-century sequence, \textit{Dies irae}, “O Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning.”\textsuperscript{31} It is the sequence hymn and the responsory, \textit{Libera me}, which set the tone of the Requiem mass, although it is surprising that the passage cited earlier from 1 Thess is retained. The rest of the liturgy is marked by a continual plea for purgation, absolution, and deliverance from the fires of hell.

Although certain aspects of the Marian piety of Roman Catholics have both puzzled and scandalized post-Reformation traditions, devotion to the Virgin in its Western catholic form is a logical development of medieval Christology. It is born out of the poignant longing for a merciful, loving God. St. Anselm writes, “So the


\textsuperscript{30}Hymns of the Breviary, 9-10.


\textsuperscript{32}Rowell, \textit{Christian Burial}, 67.

\textsuperscript{33}Rutherford, \textit{Death of a Christian}, 27.
Judge his human face....”33 And one might well add, his heart.

Thus, the Marian hymns sung at Vespers and accompanying the rosary at wakes sing to
the gentle mother as the loving advocate they once knew in the Shepherd Christ. She is called on
to remember the joy of Gabriel’s announcement,34 reminded of her utter beauty,35 and claimed as
“our life, our sweetness, and our hope.”36

Martin Luther’s goal was to rehabilitate the faithful’s perception of the Christ, not as the
forbidding judge over the church portal, but as the loving God-with-us of the Incarnation. A
joyful hymn to the Christ child,37 Gerhardt’s hymn to the Lamb of God,38 Luther’s Easter hymn,39
and Martin Schalling’s on death and resurrection40 are all of one piece. In the Large Catechism,
Luther states,

...we could never come to recognize the Father’s favor and grace were it not for
the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father’s heart. Apart from him we see
nothing but an angry and terrible Judge.41

The reformer’s preface to a 1542 collection of burial hymns became in effect the rationale
for funeral music of post-Reformation Lutheran, main line, and free church traditions.

We do not want our churches to be houses of wailing and places of
mourning....Nor do we sing any dirges or doleful songs over our dead and at the
game, but comforting hymns of the resurrection of departed so that our faith may
be strengthened and the people be moved to true devotion.42

Later evangelical attitudes about death, dying, and rising are numerous and varied,
ranging from the maudlin propriety of Victorian piety43 to the riotous swing of the Dixieland
funeral procession. Consistent in its music, however, even when social conventions would
suggest otherwise, is a sure confidence in Christ’s (Jesus’) redemptive work for me.44 Although
often individualized—“I Come to the Garden Alone,” romanticized—“Beyond the Sunset,”45 or
commercialized,46 the trajectory of thought is the same, even when simplistic or trivialized.

33Ibid., 316.
34Alma Redemptoris Mater” (Gracious Mother of Redemption) and “Regina caeli laetare” (Rejoice O
Queen of Heaven).
35“Ave Regina caelorum” (Hail, O Queen of the Heavens).
36“Salve Regina, mater misericordiae” (Save Us, O Queen, Mother of Mercy).
37Martin Luther, “From Heaven Above,” LBW, Hymn 51; see particularly stanzas 7-9.
39Luther, “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands,” LBW, Hymn 134.
40Martin Schalling, “Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart,” LBW, Hymn 325.
42LW, 53.326.
43Martha V. Pike and Janice Gray Armstrong, A Time to Mourn: Expressions of Grief in Nineteenth
Century America (Stony Brook: The Museums at Stony Brook, 1980).
45There are several songs popular at evangelical funerals that unfold in a similar manner to “Somewhere
Over the Rainbow.” Dorothy, indeed, personifies and voices our common longing to come home.
The spirituals of Black slaves and similarly those of Whites in the Appalachian highlands recover to some extent the image of Christ as strong deliverer. In particular, slave spirituals sing of liberation from bondage by identifying with the plight of Israel. In death, if not in life, human dignity will be restored.

Death and burial rites and customs, as well as the theology of death and resurrection, of Roman Catholics remain in sharp contrast to most other Western traditions from the Council of Trent until the Second Vatican Council, until which time the Requiem mass and Marian devotions remain normative. Therefore, the music of the respective rites remains substantially different, too.

The more recent funeral rites of the Roman Catholic Church recover the proclamation of the paschal mystery as the foundation of the entire cluster of liturgies solemnizing the death of a Christian. Moreover, in this age of fruitful, ecumenical dialogue, a number of other traditions have thoroughly revised their own rites, including the Episcopal, Lutheran, United Methodist, and Presbyterian, U.S.A. In rediscovering the richness of the paschal mystery and its relationship to death, we have learned anew the profundity of our rebirth by water and the Spirit.

Thus we have come full circle, huddled again like Egeria in fourth-century Jerusalem around a candle to sing Christos aneste, Christ ist erstanden, Surræxit Christus hodie, “We know that Christ is Raised.”

May he who is the morning star find it burning—
that morning star which never sets,
that morning star which, rising from the grave,
faithfully sheds light on all the human race... 