



# Prophetic Implications of the Cantor's Vocation<sup>1</sup>

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A shorthand version of the vocation of cantors (to use the characteristic Lutheran term for church musicians) might go something like this: they are called to enable the church to sing its praise, prayer, proclamation, and story with the gift of music around word, font, and table.<sup>2</sup> The ordained clergy, by contrast, are called to proclaim the word differently from, but complementarily to, the cantor and to preside at font and table.<sup>3</sup> Both of these vocations have a primary responsibility to the gathered church. For the most part, the rest of the baptized have a primary vocation to the world as the body of Christ scattered throughout the world.

## PROPHETIC IMPLICATIONS

There are prophetic implications in all these vocations—that is, connections to proclamatory speech and deed on behalf of God that cuts into the empire's cul-

<sup>1</sup>Parts of this article are adapted from a sermon and two lectures: "Perichoresis and the Song and Dance of Trinity," preached on the Sunday of the Holy Trinity at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Fayetteville, Arkansas (June 19, 2011); "The Cantor in Perspective," for the Mortenson Dialogue on Church Choral Music at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota (October 6, 2011); and "The Cantor in the Lutheran Tradition—What Does This Mean?" for the Manz Tage at Mount Olive, Mount Olive Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota (October 29, 2011). I am grateful to Kristin Rongstad, Gordon Lathrop, and Paul Richardson for their perceptive suggestions.

<sup>2</sup>For more detail, see Paul Westermeyer, *The Church Musician* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

<sup>3</sup>This presumes a catholic Lutheran ecclesiology.

*The cantor shares the prophetic, priestly, and kingly vocations of all God's people—vocations the cantor exercises primarily nonverbally, from the choir loft or the organ bench. The cantor's musical "harmony" with the congregation is unique and must be carefully tended and fully respected.*

tural grain. The implications are normally associated with ordained or lay preachers like Amos, Jeremiah, John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, Sojourner Truth, or Martin Luther King Jr.; but they also have a long association with musicians:

- Miriam and Deborah issue prophetic imperatives to sing to the Lord for triumphing gloriously (Exod 15:21 and Judges 5).
- The temple singers in Chronicles proclaimed God's presence.<sup>4</sup>
- The earliest singers in the church were lectors who proclaimed the text by singing it.<sup>5</sup>
- Guido, the choirmaster who devised staff notation, fought simony.<sup>6</sup>
- The psalms, the foundation of the church musician's literature, are filled with prophetic themes.
- So are the New Testament parts of the church musician's grist, which include the doxology in Revelation and the canticles, particularly Mary's *Magnificat*.

The prophetic implications of the cantorial office move in various directions at various times and places. Here are some of them for us.

#### *The glory of God and the edification of the neighbor*

As a culture we are addicted to rampant individual greed. Everybody and everything are for sale at a price, and the church is often snared by the addiction. In this addiction, Christianity is a product to be sold, and music is the manipulative means to sell it. The connection to music places cantors in a particularly prophetic posture.

Cantors, in considering their vocation, discover Christianity is not a product to be sold and music is not an entertaining jingle to sell it. They discover music is for the glory of God and the edification of humanity,<sup>7</sup> not a manipulative sales technique.<sup>8</sup> Lutherans—and Lutheran cantors—especially know that manipulative techniques of any sort that seek to force people to act in particular ways are off limits. They know that we are justified by God's grace through faith and not by works of any kind; that we are therefore free to agree and disagree in love under the umbrella of God's grace without trying to herd people into our preconceived and idiosyncratic notions; that the word goes forth with its proclamatory power; and that by God's grace—not manipulative strategies—the word does what it will do, surprising everybody, including those who utter it.

<sup>4</sup>John W. Kleinig, *The Lord's Song: The Basis, Function and Significance of Choral Music in Chronicles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 27.

<sup>5</sup>Christopher Page, *The Christian West and Its Singers: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 71.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 446.

<sup>7</sup>As expressed by Paul in Col 3:16 and by numerous writers across the church's history, among them J. S. Bach, who said at the beginning of his *Orgelbüchlein*,

Dem höchsten Gott allein' zu Ehren,  
Dem Nechsten, draus sich zu belehren.

(English: For the glory of God alone, for the edification of the neighbor.)

<sup>8</sup>See Anne Morris's analysis of this dangerous temptation in "Music in Worship: The Dark Side," *Practical Theology* 3:2 (2010) 203–217.

Music is incredibly powerful. John Calvin gave some of the strongest expression to this reality,<sup>9</sup> but virtually everybody realizes it, including cantors. For them, it is a vocational matter. Their temptation is to use music's power for self-glorification. Faithful cantors know that on behalf of God and the community they are serving, they have to guard against this idolatrous lure. Their vocation puts them in a particularly helpful place to see this temptation when the church engages in it. This calls them to a prophetic confrontation against the empire's cultural grain that snares the church. They are called to remind the church that it lives for God and the neighbor, not for its own, music's own, or the cantor's own personal gain.

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### *The privilege of the poor*

In this prophetic confrontation the cantor has the privilege of the poor. As Christopher Page points out, though the church has realized how singularly important music is,<sup>10</sup> from the beginning it has not given musicians "too much status"<sup>11</sup> and has kept them "under surveillance."<sup>12</sup> This is probably because the church has rightly realized the power of music and the necessity for checks on those who wield its power. The reason is a good one, but its outcome has not always been positive. There are wonderfully healthy exceptions, but cantors have too often been paid poorly, treated badly, expected to do the impossible, and assumed to be the cause of all the church's problems. For those who think this assessment is a dark and sinister figment of our imagination, my students and colleagues who are church musicians can supply ample evidence of its reality. I could easily spend all of my time counseling musicians who have been beaten up either subtly or openly, mildly or viciously, mostly by clergy who misconstrue their ordination promises as those of the culture's micromanagers or CEOs, or by misguided lay leaders. Cantors have the privilege of the poor with little to lose by telling the truth.

Let it be understood that cantors are not perfect. They do things that are awful as anybody else, and they need to repent as much as everybody else. Systemically and structurally, however, the church's musicians are free to tell the truth in the same way the poor and dispossessed have that freedom.

### *The whole*

Our cultural dilemma is twofold: on the one hand, we are sliced into fragments of individual greed, one against the neighbor; on the other, we are lacerated

<sup>9</sup>See Charles Garside Jr., "Calvin's Preface to the Psalter: A Re-Appraisal," *The Musical Quarterly* 37/4 (1951) 570–571.

<sup>10</sup>Page, *Christian West*, 49–50.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.

into individual expertise about detail—that is to say, we assume that solving a specific detail will fix the problem. It will not, of course, but more helpful and constructive concern about the whole is rare.

The vocational being of the musician always bears on the whole. The engagement with music, with sound construed across time and the trajectory this brings with it from start to finish, means the musician has to figure out how details relate to the whole. Otherwise there is no music. Music requires overall shape and flow. It goes somewhere. Notes make phrases, which make phrase groups, which join to make larger units, which finally yield whole pieces.

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This is true not only of individual pieces, but of how pieces work together in worship and how worship flows. More than any other leader at worship, the cantor articulates time and gives shape to the world of God's grace to which worship exposes us. Jeremy Begbie has demonstrated how musical waves of tension and release in an individual piece generate higher waves in a progression that extends beyond the piece itself.<sup>13</sup> This is also true in worship as music articulates the trajectory from creation to consummation and as the church, Christ's body, scatters into the world. That is to say, cantors in their vocational being point us away from our fragmentation to the whole.

This may be understood to fly in the face of a postmodern presupposition that we know we don't know and that everything is by definition fragmented. Note however that it also flies in the face of a premodern presupposition that assumes we know that we know and that everything is by definition whole, or of a modern presupposition that says we know that we may not know and everything is by definition in a kind of limbo. The church, in this case through the vocational being of its musicians, lives unencumbered by cultural presuppositions and propels a prophetically alien yet profoundly human word.

In our finitude we live under an incomprehensible Holy Three who becomes comprehensible in word, water, bread, and wine, and gives us a song to sing—in, with, under, for, above, and against the culture. How, how much, or what we may or may not know is not the control. That we are known by God and embraced in the perichoresis<sup>14</sup> of the Three in One is what matters.

<sup>13</sup>Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 125–126.

<sup>14</sup>“The containing or holding or having room for in relation to or around”: “peri” = “around” or “in relation to,” plus “chorein” = “to have room for,” “to hold” or “to contain.”

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This embracing perichoresis is directly related to our music. Where does the music come from? It comes from the song of the God we know as Three in One and One in Three. There never was any silence in eternity, says Robert Jenson. The Holy Three was always singing. “God,” he says, “is a great *fugue*.”<sup>16</sup> Jenson puts it this way: “The phrase ‘the one God’ directs us finally to the sheer perichoresis of Father, Son, and Spirit, and that is to their communal music.”<sup>17</sup> There is nothing so “capacious as a fugue.”<sup>18</sup> God is “roomy.”<sup>19</sup> God chooses to share this roominess and not to hoard it; to include, not exclude others within it. “The opening of that room,” says Jenson, “is the act of creation.”<sup>20</sup> We creatures get to share in the music of the Trinity.

Music, as Martin Luther knew, is an incredible gift of God to the good creation.<sup>21</sup> But, as Luther also knew, we human beings are not to leave it in its natural state. We are to craft it responsibly. When we do this, “when [musical] learning is added to all this and artistic music which corrects, develops, and refines the natural music, then,” says Luther, “at last it is possible to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God’s absolute and perfect wisdom in his wondrous work of music.”<sup>22</sup>

What we taste is the remarkable reality that we can sing a single line together in unison, and we can also sing two or more different notes at the same time without those notes displacing one another. A *cantus firmus* can be sung in community all by itself, at once in slightly different versions, with multiple independent lines running around it, and harmonized. This can be in modal, tonal, and pentatonic frames—even polytonal, atonal, and aleatory ones. Musical textures—monophonic, heterophonic, polyphonic, and homophonic—help us participate in the song of the Three in One.

This is the substance of what the musician deals with vocationally. It points, and by it the musician points prophetically, to the harmony and justice of society. Here is Augustine on this subject:

[T]he united efforts of dissimilar voices are blended into harmony by the exercise of restraint. In the same way a community of different classes, high, low

<sup>15</sup>Used here as a musical term referring to monophony, a single line of music; heterophony, two simultaneous but different forms of the same melody; polyphony, two or more independent lines of music; homophony, a series of harmonic progressions that move in step with one another.

<sup>16</sup>Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Triune God*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 236. Italics in original.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 226.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Oskar Soehngen, “Fundamental Considerations for a Theology of Music,” *The Musical Heritage of the Church*, vol. 6, ed. Theodore Hoelty-Nickel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963) 9.

<sup>22</sup>Martin Luther, “Preface to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae iucundae*” (1538), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53, ed. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 324.

and middle, unites, like the varying sounds of music, to form a harmony of very different parts through the exercise of rational restraint; and what is called harmony in music answers to concord in a community, and it is the best and closest bond of security in a country. And this cannot possibly exist without justice.<sup>23</sup>

Here is Jonathan Edwards:

The best, most beautiful, and most perfect way that we have of expressing a sweet concord of mind to each other, is by music. When I would form in my mind an idea of a society in the highest degree happy, I think of them as expressing their love, their joy, and the inward concord and spiritual beauty of their souls by sweetly singing to each other.<sup>24</sup>

More tersely, Paul Hindemith famously said, “People who make music together cannot be enemies at least while the music lasts.”

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### *The church catholic*

The current civil-religious culture pits groups against one another, often with malice. This disease also invades the church. Sometimes it takes the form of fights about theology, music, or moral deliberation and then turns into accusatory attacks related to statistics, organization, and reorganization in one particular denomination or corner of a denomination. Gloom and doom follow in mean-spirited destruction. I have recently found the contrast between demoralizing meetings where this sort of thing occurs and meetings of church musicians to be striking, because the latter tend to be constructively hopeful. Why is that?

I take it the answer is that cantors know about the cruciform character of the church. They experience it all the time because they have little power, receive small budgets that are continually cut, and are attacked unjustly. Moreover, they are often unfairly released after long tenures of faithful service and fine work. Since they are among the most ecumenical of the church’s servants, however, they are not controlled by one denomination even if it represents their personal confessional posture. They move easily among various denominations and know denominations to be recent inventions that will die. They know that:

- the promise is to the church catholic—the whole body of Christ—not to a specific group in it (Matt 16:18; 28:20b);
- they are to help the church sing around word, font, and table in season and out of season, no matter what; and

<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Albert Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 189.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

- it is God—not any denomination, tradition, program, publisher, professional group, musical style, or the cantors themselves—that sustains the church.

The result is that cantors are freed to be faithfully optimistic in spite of the systemic obstacle courses and personal challenges they face. They are sometimes depressed like any other individuals, but their demeanor as a whole tends to pose a prophetic challenge to ingrown isolation and malicious civil-religious warfare. As a whole, in their musical vocation they live above the demoralizing detail. They learn from one another across denominational boundaries and relate to one another and to the whole church with a prophetic freedom.

### *Servants*

This freedom offers hope. Does it mean cantors control everything or much of anything? No. Will they be a power bloc? No. Though their office is “a high and holy calling,”<sup>25</sup> cantors are usually near the bottom of the church’s concerns, where they are little supported and likely to remain that way. They are servants who do their part. Like Abraham and Sarah they go out, not knowing where they are going but only that God is leading.

They are uniquely poised therefore to “build cultures of trust.” That phrase comes from a recent book by Martin Marty<sup>26</sup> in which he faces up to cosmic levels of mistrust and does not presume that any simple scheme will fix them. He poses the patient and happy discipline of conversation, meeting, unrehearsed adventure, and the delightful possibilities that emerge from variegated experience. The cantor does this building in musical ways: in, with, and under the local church and the whole church catholic as well as outside it.

### BEYOND THE PROPHETIC

We have now arrived at a point beyond the prophetic. The servanthood of the cantor that builds cultures of trust is wholistic. It moves beyond prophetic themes. More than any other person in the church, the cantor lives above the demoralizing detail but in the midst of the fray (albeit a different one from the church’s theological, social, moral, or political squabbles). Leading the church in song means cantors are the breath, pulse, and pacing of the people. By their musical vocation they are at the center of a people’s heartbeat. If wise, they learn paradoxically to let the control go to the community. They negotiate musically with the people, breathe with them, become part of them, and help them by nudging them, following them, and “playing” with them. They become one with the community in a way that nobody else does. This is a priestly role of identity with the people before God, not a prophetic one to the people on behalf of God.

To do this well is to enable the song as if the cantor were not there. It has to do

<sup>25</sup>Poster, *The Association of Lutheran Church Musicians*.

<sup>26</sup>Martin E. Marty, *Building Cultures of Trust* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

with health and profound shalom. It is why Paul Manz pointed not only to the prophetic and educational roles of the cantor to preach and teach, but to the priestly one: to “comfort the bereaved and help sustain the weak,” to “counsel the troubled and the distressed,” to “assist at the distribution of the sacrament.”<sup>27</sup> This, says Manz, is all done “from the choir loft or the organ bench...largely in a nonverbal manner.”<sup>28</sup>

To do this poorly is to get in the way, set up roadblocks, and cause problems that are sensed but seldom understood, problems that exacerbate fissures, anxiety, and warfare. Doing this poorly explains why battles often surround music and musicians and why responsible musicians practice their musical craft as much as possible so they can exercise it as well as possible. The traumas we face about music in the church are fundamentally not about the prophetic implications of the cantor’s role, though prophetic implications always cut across the empire’s cultural grain and bring with them prophetic fire.

The more fundamental traumas, however, result from the ill-conceived, unprepared, and incompetent priestly work of the cantor, which, though subtle, inhibits the very breath and heartbeat of a community. Incompetent hymn playing, for example, with lack of concern about breath between stanzas or how a phrase is shaped in a specific space with a specific people at a specific time of the day and year is a deadly disease.

To do this priestly work at all is to set up a potential conflict with those ordained clergy or self-appointed laypersons who want to control or micromanage the song of the people from some vocational vantage point other than the office of the cantor. It provokes a battle from those who are jealous of the unique relationship the cantor has with the people. This relationship is unique indeed. Nobody else has it, it does not depend on personality or personality type, and it extends beyond its primary locus in the gathered assembly. It is evident at coffee hours and at going-away parties when someone says, “Thanks. You helped me sing that hymn all week and got me through some bad times.” It is evident in the nature of the connections, encounters, meetings, and conversations between cantor and people.

Three things need to be said about this relationship. First, when misguided or unscrupulous cantors use it to their personal advantage, they do untold harm to a community. They may play up to wealthy people, triangulate or subtly manipulate people, massage their egos, turn the church’s worship into a platform for the cantor’s virtuosity, put themselves on display, or exercise control over things that are outside the orbits of their responsibility. This can be more deadly than when pastors do things like this, because the cantor’s vocational role, though it relates to the whole, does not oversee the whole. The pastor’s does. Skewing a community from an angled vision can be worse than skewing it from a vantage point where the whole provides checks and balances.

<sup>27</sup>Paul Manz, “Foreword,” in Joy E. Lawrence and John A. Ferguson, *A Musician’s Guide to Church Music* (New York: Pilgrim, 1981) vii.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

Second, misguided and control-hungry people who are not cantors but want to control the people's song do equal harm. For example, micromanaging cantors' responsibilities, shaming cantors in public, and singing loudly against cantors' tempos are deadly. Cantors who carry out their office in the worshiping context are right even if they are wrong. Private conversations with cantors about planning, tempos, or anything else relating to their musical role are welcome and desirable, just as conversations with pastors about their sermons and everything else they do are welcome and desirable. But these need to happen when collegial and constructive work can be done together. Nobody would think of telling pastors in the midst of their sermons to go faster or slower, yet self-appointed loud singers who attempt to control cantors' tempos are sometimes accepted as normative.<sup>29</sup> They are far worse than whatever mistakes the cantor may make, no matter how bad they are.

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Third, cantors and pastors who sense the unique relationship between cantor and people can welcome the natural health it yields. Cantors can keep it in check for the sake of the community and not for their personal glory or gain. Clergy can welcome it in the one body (Rom 12:4) without being threatened by it. Clergy and cantor together can use it as one more communal "opportunity for glorifying God through fruitful partnership."<sup>30</sup>

#### *David*

David is the primary biblical symbol for church musicians. He was the king. The song he sang is the kingly one, sung not only before the earthly king, but in psalms before the king of the universe. The king of the universe, unlike earthly kings, cares about widows and orphans. The kingly song is the one Miriam and Mary sang, about the victory of this strange and unusual king who acts on behalf of the lowly and poor. Its essence is narrative, the story of what God has done and does.

The cantor is not king—far from it. The cantor is servant. The song the cantor sings with the people, however, is the kingly narrative of victory over sin and death. That it is also about the prophetic and the priestly points to its unique relation to the whole and suggests the breadth of the cantor's office. ⊕

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<sup>29</sup>John Wesley's "Directions for Singing" are to the point here: "Sing lustily and with a good courage," but "Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear and melodious sound." See *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989) vii.

<sup>30</sup>Erik Routley, *Church Music and Theology* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 110.