



Which Way Are You Leaning?

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In my thirty years of traveling and working with Lutheran musicians, I've discovered that all church musicians can be divided into two groups, performists and hymnists—those who emphasize music groups in their churches and those who strive to develop solid participation from the whole congregation. I have met very few musicians who are well balanced in this area. Most choir directors, for instance, are perfectly at home with their backs to the congregation but are quite uncomfortable when they are required to turn around and lead congregational singing. I have a cousin with a Ph.D. in conducting who was in a complete panic when asked to lead a banquet sing-along at his church. I've spoken to organists who would rather die than to address the congregation or actually to sing in front of the congregation.

Because the music in our churches is the domain of performists, the lowly congregation is usually left to fend for itself. We tend to think that good congregational singing will happen automatically. It won't. I've been in churches with excellent choirs and handbell groups, etc., but with very poor congregational singing. One gets the feeling that the leadership is so self-contained that there is precious little left for the congregation to contribute. And since the choirs sing every Sunday, there is never a chance for the congregation to be responsible for itself and carry the service alone.

I. THE HYMNIST

The church musicians called "hymnists" are those who take congregational singing seriously, and work hard to select hymns and responses which are appropriate for everyone, not just the musically literate. The performists, on the other hand, tend to select music which is challenging (interesting) for them, but which the congregation finds too complex. It is *not* necessary to write with complex

melodic intervals, rhythms, or harmonies to be interesting or modern. That sort of music is better suited to choir performance. The pew-sitter doesn't think like a choir member, and actually sings better with no musical notation at all, like in the old days when only the text of the hymn was printed in the hymnal.

The hymnist encourages singing in harmony with strong bass lines and interesting inner parts. The structure must be unaltered from verse to verse to give everyone a sense of stability and confidence. Improvisation is limited to what can be done over a consistent progression. Performists feel too restricted by this requirement and frequently alter the harmony of familiar tunes. This is the "classical" method of improvisation called theme and variations. It is the only

style of music where improvisation means structural change. When you alter the structure of a piece you are the only one who knows where it is going. Thus it becomes exclusive rather than inclusive.

Hymnists enjoy unaccompanied singing and the use of instruments other than the church organ. This affords greater opportunity for closer stylistic identity with the music and can broaden our musical horizons. Since there is a serious shortage of classically trained organists today, this becomes a practical issue as well. Where will our next generation of church musicians be trained, and what kind of skills will they have? They probably will have the talent, but their skills are more likely to be centered on computers and new technology than on the traditional organ with full pedal board. Many of these organs are old and in need of substantial repair. To replace a large pipe organ is a very expensive matter—\$500,000 to a cool million in some cases.

Hymnists recognize the long-standing tradition of corporate singing that goes back to the Hebrew synagogue. The synagogue cantor was a hymnist, and the successors to the cantor in Christendom (the *Vorsänger* in Germany and the *klokker* in the Scandinavian churches) were also hymnists, carefully trained and skilled in the art of song leading. Even after hymnals were introduced, the popularity of these hymnists continued well into the twentieth century, a tribute to the strength of vocal leadership in congregational singing. It was the invasion of the large pipe organs into small churches that finally drove the *Vorsänger* and *klokker* out the side door. And, now when we have new stylistic demands on our worship, we need these folks back. Mainline Protestants are doing next to nothing in terms of training hymnists for the twenty-first century.

At a recent Lutheran musicians conference in Chicago, Alice Parker, Robert Shaw's venerable arranger, gave the keynote address. The first thing she said was, "The two greatest impediments to good congregational singing are the organ and the hymnal." After we had recovered from the shock of that, she said, "For millennia, music was transmitted by ear, and this is as it should be. So teach by rote! *Sing* your articulation, your color, sonority, tempo, and above all, your way of communicating the meaning and sound of the words. No book, no page, no other instrument can teach this, and it's what the music *really is*."

II. STYLISTIC DIVERSITY

Why encourage stylistic diversity in our churches? The first reason is easy to understand. We no longer have the excuse of living in European ghettos or even hispanic or African-American cultural ghettos. The music of the world is a con-

stantly shifting and changing blend of cultures, and we have access to all of it. This sort of cultural assimilation is what ultimately gives American music its character. Country music sprang from an intermingling of African-American blues and Irish ballads. "Soul" came from a combination of gospel vocal style and a rhythm and blues beat. Now we see race lines being crossed all the time as interest and excitement grow. Very few people have a monaural taste in music.

The second reason is that no single style of music (except classical) can express the entire range of human experience. Classical music, if utilized to its fullest (medieval to modern), can be an adequate vehicle for any text. But here again we run into the problem of performance. Very little classical music is appropriate for group singing. Serious composers do not enjoy writing for

mass consumption; they don't do it very well anyway. A classical composer's job is to write interesting, unique, and challenging music for musicians to play. If it doesn't have some degree of difficulty, the musicians quickly become bored and lose interest. Often serious composers (Arthur Sullivan, for example) will accept commissions to write hymns, but the results are seldom satisfying. It's pure accident that a classical composition is "singable" by everyone. A few noted examples are: "Joy to the World," "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee," "Finlandia," and the theme from *Judas Maccabaeus*. On the basis of such few examples, I wouldn't begin a research project to incorporate more classical compositions into our hymnody. The most requested hymns among Lutherans in this country tend to be traditional tunes such as "Amazing Grace," "How Great Thou Art," "Beautiful Savior," "Children of the Heavenly Father," and "Let All Things Now Living."

The jazz style, because it is such a private domain of performers, would not qualify as a source for hymnody. The traditional tunes upon which some jazz compositions are based would be good resources, but one must get past the stylized interpretation to find the simple tune.

Progressive rock is another style which has too much complexity to be considered as a resource. But the main problem with rock music is controlling the volume of its amplified sound and the strong drum tracks. It takes a very skilled song leader to bring the people in on the music and not just let them sit and listen to it. If they don't sing, it becomes a performance *for* the people, not a leadership *of* the people. I've been to a number of "rock" churches where the band does everything. The congregation is not involved at all. What difference is there then between this concept and the middle ages when the monastic choirs did everything?

"Pop" music (different from rock in that it is more predictable and therefore more accessible) is a good resource. However, because of its "lightness" (we sometimes call it "lite-rock") it won't support many biblical texts and doctrines. One can do the warm, togetherness texts of the Epiphany season with pop music, but the depth of Lent and the height of Easter are never reached by this style.

Country music, because it is traditionally based, works well for group singing. It is especially good for the traveling texts in the Bible: Abraham, Jacob, the good samaritan, the prodigal son, the journey of Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem, and Paul's missionary travels. Country music "gets you on down the road," so to speak.

Traditional music of all nationalities, races, and cultures, is still the best

resource for group singing. In it you can find the entire range of human experience. The tunes have stood the test of time and are simple enough for all to enjoy. They just sort of fall off the page onto your vocal cords. They are also flexible enough so that arrangers can adapt them to many formats and accompaniments. You simply use the musicians you have and mold the music to their ability. They can be (and are) arranged for choirs and soloists also, but this is not the best use of these tunes. This is music "of the people, by the people, and for the people," and we have not even begun to tap this bottomless reservoir. Rhythmic music from Africa and the Middle East, for example, is great for expressing the urgency, energy, and anticipation of Advent. The profundity of the African-American spiritual and the various blues styles do Lent very well. We need a deeper, heavier mood to express texts such as the temptation in the wilderness, the prodigal son, the ten commandments, the death of Lazarus, and the passion texts from Isaiah and Luke.

But then Easter comes, with its lofty exuberance, which the traditional German style does very well, followed by those grand texts about heaven which are best interpreted by traditional American hymn tunes and some Scandinavian melodies. Then, of course, the high feast days are concluded with Pentecost. What better way to express the unbridled ecstasy of Pentecost than through the singing of black gospel music. But this is not the only mood of Pentecost. There is also the secret visit of Nicodemus and the mystical, contemplative side of the Spirit life which is best expressed in East Asian and Native American modality. We are just discovering the rich heritage of these people. A wide range of musical style is becoming available to us through the work of the World Council of Churches and several new hymnal projects.

The expression “the medium is the message” has been around since the ‘60s, but it has never been more useful than when it is applied to the matching of text with musical style. For the pew-sitter, the vehicle (the medium) is always more powerful than the words. But when there is a perfect marriage between the mood of the text and the mood of the music the effect is dramatic. That is why all of the reform groups of the sixteenth century (except Lutheran) sponsored metrical psalm projects. With a metered paraphrase of the text it was possible to select a tune which exactly fit the spirit of the psalm. From this practice we inherited such hymns as “All People That on Earth Do Dwell,” “My God, How Wonderful Thou Art,” and “Turn Back, O Man.” Luther used metrical settings of the liturgical songs. This resulted in his German song mass which was much more “congregational” than the medieval prose mass which was never sung by everybody. It is much easier to make the medium fit the message if you have a broader range of stylistic possibilities.

III. OUR HERITAGE

It is my belief that exuberant, popular singing has always been a part of our Judeo-Christian heritage. Even during the middle ages when congregational singing didn’t exist at all (monastic choirs did all the music), there was a lively religious song tradition *outside* the church. We know this from the existence of biblical songs, carols, and ballads from this period. Percy Dearmer, in his preface to the *Oxford Book of Carols*, writes: “Indeed, to take life with real seriousness is to take it joyfully, for seriousness is only sad when it is superficial; the carol is thus all the

nearer to the ultimate truth because it is jolly!”¹ There is an American song entitled, “How Can I Keep From Singing?”; evidently this was also the spirit of the medieval Christians. So they sang.

It is a matter of continued argument which was best, congregational singing *outside* the church building or congregational singing *inside* the church building (as Luther introduced later). Again, if you have a strong performist view of worship you would tend to think of the medieval cathedral style as the more correct way. I personally feel that the strict performance orientation for worship was a perversion brought on by the Constantinian era. Overnight, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Since there was no more need for pagan temples, these ornate buildings could now be owned by the Christians, and hundreds of them were brought into service with the help of a new breed of church professional. These monks, living in community around the temples, were the source of the monastic orders as we know them today. They organized and led the worship services and eventually took over completely

with their strange style of music which had no accented syllables on the accents of the music. This kept the monks from having “carnal thoughts” by relating the music to dance. If the psalms and hymns and spiritual songs referred to by the Apostle Paul were anything like the congregational music of the Hebrew synagogue, they were probably accompanied by simple rhythm instruments and guitar-like stringed instruments. This music would be much more like the biblical songs, carols, and ballads (the *outside* church music) of the medieval period than the *inside* church music of the monastic cathedrals. The music of the cathedrals was so alien to the common singing style that the average person could not participate even if he or she wanted to.

I visited Norway recently, and was once again impressed with the contrast between the cathedral (state church) worship and the “*bedehus*” (prayer house) worship. The people don’t even attend the state church services except for high feast days and special events such as weddings, funerals, confirmation services, and baptisms. But the prayer house is regularly filled with joyful singing of popular hymns and religious folk songs. The state church hymnal and worship forms are based on a medieval model with very few folk-style hymns; so on very formal occasions the people attend, but have minimal participation. They seem to be able to move very easily from the formal to informal and back again.

The kind of singing styles associated with full communal involvement can be reclaimed in our time. Long, heavy, wordy theological dissertations in the form of hymns don’t work well in the prayer house. Short responses, easily learned and often repeated, are much better. The use of antiphonal singing (echo singing), the practice of lining out the text and tune, refrains, gospel shouts, call and response, choruses, cumulative songs, layered songs, ballads, as well as the use of familiar tunes (or tunes that have a ring of familiarity to them) can and should be encouraged. This will serve to draw everyone, small children to older adults, into full participation. Only one of Luther’s original hymn tunes caught on (“Ein feste Burg”), but it was borrowed (in the main) from a popular tune (we call it, “Vom Himmel hoch”) used later in Schumann’s *Geistliche Lieder* of 1539. His other tunes,

¹P. Dearmer, R. Vaughn Williams, and M. Shaw, *The Oxford Book of Carols* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1928) vi.

such as “Isaiah, the Prophet” and even “Aus tiefer Not” (Psalm 130), are quite challenging and not ideally suited for congregational singing.

About this same time, a Unitas Fratrum bishop wrote the following:

Our tunes are, in part, the old Gregorian, which Hus used and in part borrowed from foreign nations, especially the Germans. Among these latter tunes are popular airs according to which worldly songs are sung. At this strangers, coming from countries where they have heard them used in this way, take offense. But our hymnologists have purposely adopted them in order through these popular notes to draw the people to the truth which saves.²

Here we have an example of how popular hymnody was used as a tool for evangelism.

Henry Gilbert, Arthur Sullivan’s operatic accomplice, once wrote (in an unpublished letter):

More than the music of any individual composer, more than the music of any particular school, the Folk tunes of the world, of all nationalities, races and peoples, have been my never failing source of delight, wonder and inspiration. In them I can hear the spirit of all great music. Through them I can feel the very heartbeat of humanity. Simple as these folk melodies are in structure, they yet speak to me so poignantly and with such deep sincerity of expression as to be more pregnant with inspirational suggestion than the music of any composer.

This may be a little overstated, but it is nonetheless significant. It should not be imagined that the users of popular-style hymnody were all rampant revivalists. Most were common folks with a deep feeling for their religious ways. They were simply trying to reclaim what was rightfully theirs. Most hymnbook compilers seemed to think these melodies inferior to composed tunes, but the tunes somehow survived in country choirs and in collections such as the *Southern Harmony* of 1835, the *Sacred Harp* of 1844, and the *Kentucky Harmony* of 1816. These tunes proved to be the major hymnological contribution made by the *Lutheran Book of Worship* of 1978.

IV. CONCLUSION

In American religion we seldom have the luxury of separate buildings for formal (performance) and informal (hymn-singing) styles of worship. The Hebrew synagogue has to be physically converted to be more temple-like for high feasts and special holy days. Since most of our Christian churches have a temple-like orientation (thanks to Constantine), we need to think of ways to informalize them for ordinary Sundays to contrast with the highly decorated feast days. This can be done visually, but even more important than the visual aspect is the sound. On high feast days, have the choirs do a major part of the service—a cantata, mass, motet, musical, a passion or oratorio—then reduce the level of formality on ordinary Sundays by using instruments other than the church organ; or at least supplement the sound of the organ with rhythm and other keyboard sounds. Have the choir sit with the congregation to aid in the singing. Have the singing be led by a singer. Have the preacher preach from the center aisle. Use free prayer rather than

²Edmund De Schweinitz, *The History of the Church Known as the Unitas Fratrum or the Unity of the Brethren*, second ed. (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Concern, 1901) 402-3.

the formal, printed prayers. Use metrical hymns and songs in place of the prose/chant liturgical pieces. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* includes an outline of how this might be done, but use your imagination when you make substitutions.³ These are just a few suggestions as to how we could turn our cathedrals into prayer houses. And if we continue to use our high-church formality in a responsible way, we can satisfy the formal *and* informal worship needs of our people.

It's never been a question of which way was correct. It's always been a question of when to do what, and how often.

So, whether we lean toward the performist side of things or the hymnist side, we need to find a better balance between the two. Hymnists can practice and become better performers. Performists can learn how to lead their congregations as well as they lead their choirs. And we can all explore the amazing diversity and wonder of our Christian heritage.⁴

³*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, and Philadelphia: Board of Publication, 1978) 120.

⁴For additional practical suggestions on this subject, see John Ylvisaker, "Imaginative Use of the Arts: Music and Audio," *Word & World* 5/3 (1985) 296-303.