



A Church Musician's Journey with Amos

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What is a church musician to think about Amos? “Take away from me the noise of your songs,” he said—but what will this mean for the life of the church today? And, not least, for the place of the church’s music?

As I began to consider this assignment, I realized that Amos has been with me from the beginning. I became interested in church music when I was around nine years old, and I started asking questions about it. Amos was there already and has remained a constant companion—sometimes closer to the foreground, sometimes in the background, but always there. This realization suggested that I might approach this essay not by analyzing the book, which others can do better than I, but by recounting my journey with Amos as a church musician.

MUSIC

Amos is not only in my own background. He is in the background of church music and church musicians generally. Whenever justice is discussed, Amos is called in regularly to question our priorities and to suggest cutting back on church music and church musicians. Even if justice is not at issue, Amos occasions comments like, “Oh, he’s the one who doesn’t like music,” or “He’s the one who wants to get rid of music.”

Amos’s famous diatribes against music and ritual make no sense as denunciations of worship itself. But they should continue to worry us profoundly as warnings against music and worship that anesthetize us against the justice that Amos calls for and that God requires.

As a young boy I heard statements like that. I remember how Amos's words seemed:

Take away from me the noise of
your songs;
I will not listen to the melody
of your harps. (Amos 5:23)

Was not Amos's point to get rid of music in church? Yet, in my own circles there was this stunning contradiction: somehow what Amos said did not apply to Protestant churches. I found it hard to sort this out, but Amos's words seemed applicable only to churches whose music was wrong—to Roman Catholics (and maybe Orthodox).¹ This was one of those unchallenged assumptions in the woodwork, probably related to the presence of hymn singing among Protestants and its absence among Roman Catholics. How the various groups fit together was not clear, but those who were called "Protestant,"² whether black or white—even though they used music congregationally, chorally, and instrumentally—apparently did not use music in a way that would upset Amos.

WORSHIP

By the time I was in high school I had come to understand that the problem was much deeper than music. It concerned worship, about which Amos also had something to say.

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your
solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your
burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them. (Amos 5:21–22a)

I learned that sacrifice and works righteousness were at issue here. Roman Catholic worship was understood by Protestants as offering something to God in order to gain God's favor. Amos and Protestants were presumably against that, and Roman Catholics were presumably for it. Roman Catholics required that people do something before God would pay attention. They believed people were justified by works, not by grace. That made sense until I met some Roman Catholics who did not seem to believe any such thing. They did not think that they had to do something to get God's attention, and grace seemed as important to them as to any Protestants I knew. The first person to hint at this startling bit of intelligence was a very bright high school classmate who played the organ in his Roman Catholic Church, but he was not the

¹A girl my age in my home church (Salem Evangelical and Reformed in Cincinnati, Ohio) came from a Greek Orthodox family. I learned something about the Orthodox from her, but beyond that, unlike Roman Catholics, they were invisible.

²I gradually discovered that the churches who generally appeared to group themselves in this category had Anglican, Baptist, Calvinist, Lutheran, and Wesleyan roots.

last. Not only that, but Protestants seemed to be required to do works to earn God's favor as much or more than Roman Catholics. They just had different works to do.

PREACHING

Protestant preaching confirmed this and made matters worse. Strangely enough, it had precisely what Protestants regarded as the Roman Catholic defect: it required people to do something before God would pay attention. There were some remarkable exceptions, which were always astonishing, but these were rare. Protestants were usually admonished by their preachers to some act of the will before God would listen. The nature of the act varied with the denominational flavor. The variations went like this: believe this or that in this or that way, open your hearts, be kind to your neighbor, give money, work harder, go to church every week, or don't do something like use profanity. I could not see how this was different from Roman Catholic admonitions to do something. Catholic variations seemed to go like this: believe this or that in this or that way, make some "sacrifice," say the Rosary, go to Confession, or don't do something like eat meat on Friday. Both the Protestant and Roman Catholic purviews made God a reactor to a human agent who was the central actor. The only difference was which trigger the agent pulled to get God's attention. In both cases God was on a human string as a contrivance that human beings created or at least controlled.

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JUSTICE

More complications followed. I remembered that if you kept reading Amos after he objected to the noise of songs and the melody of harps, you found this:

But let justice roll down like
waters,
and righteousness like an
ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

I had not been unaware that this verse was there, but it had only been camouflaged by musical concerns. Now I noted that justice was a huge deal for Amos and dwarfed music. Justice appeared to be the main theme of the book, not music.

This led to bigger problems. I noticed Roman Catholic churches who celebrated Latin masses with music (this was before Vatican II), but who also faithfully served the poor and cared about justice. I also noticed suburban Protestant churches whose worship services were far more opulent than Roman Catholic ones and who had more extensive music programs, but they showed little or no concern for justice. How, I wondered, could Amos's words be construed only to refer to

Roman Catholics, when at least some Protestants were hardly worthy models of justice and at least some Roman Catholics were trying to do something about it? Even if there were some Protestants who cared about justice (I knew of one such African American church and two such white churches in the city's worst slum), if some Roman Catholics were also working at it, how could they alone be the target of Amos's words?

A CONFLICT

The biblical readings I heard in church each Sunday, the classical hymns and classical choral music I sang there (by "classical" I do not mean a style or historical period, but what had remained in use through long duration), the liturgy, the portions of the Bible that my family read during the week, and the snatches I began to find from writers like Augustine and Luther did not seem to match most of the churches' preaching (or teaching, either). Things did not fit together. I found myself thinking that either the Bible was a lie or the church's preaching was a lie. If the latter were the case, maybe it was best to bail out. But Amos and the rest of the Bible made that difficult. They cracked open something profound. So did the church's music and liturgy along with all the biblical texts they carried. This was puzzling, however. Was there a common message, or was Amos in conflict with church music or perhaps even with the rest of the Bible?

MUSIC AND POETRY

Somewhat later, probably beginning in college, I learned that the book of Amos was poetry and that maybe the prophet had sung his rebuke.³ Now things got even more complicated. Was the point that we should all give up music but Amos, that he who attacked it by using it was the lone exception? How was one to make sense of that?

The complications increased when I realized that the book of Amos has form, symmetry, rhetorical zip, and even beauty tied to its poetic and possibly musical character.⁴ Protestants seemed to be suspicious of those things. They smacked of a dangerous relation to music and worship because they apparently could turn everything into sacrifice and works righteousness. Amos was a large part of the reason for the suspicion. How was one to make sense of a prophet who himself used what he presumably regarded with suspicion?

SACRIFICE

I began to ask if Amos was concerned about a sacrificial system and the music associated with it. Was the attack against music an attack against music's misuse as

³See, for example, Joyce Rilett Wood, *Amos in Song and Book Culture* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002) 17, 106.

⁴See, for example, M. Daniel Carroll R., *Amos—The Prophet and His Oracles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 45.

a magic means to get God to do something? Were Protestants on to something critically important, even if they were blind to the fact that they as much as Roman Catholics were snared by the sacrificial perversion? Did a sacrificial system and its music intend to manipulate God? Was that what riled up Amos? Once I asked those questions, this one immediately followed: Was Amos attacking the use of music as a means to manipulate not only God, but people as well, in order to insulate them from concerns for the poor? Study in seminary helped make more sense of sacrifice and works righteousness when I learned about Luther's categories of *sacrificium* (sacrifice) and *beneficium* (gift).

VOCATION

Then a personal dilemma arose. During the 1960s it was impossible to miss the disparities between what we said and what we did—both “we” as church and “we” as a society. Injustice toward blacks was clearly a huge societal cancer. Hearing Martin Luther King, Jr., and reading about civil rights taught me a lot about it, but the problem became intensely personal when my wife Sally and I asked my best high school friend Byrne Camp, a pianist and organist, to play for our wedding. Sally saw a danger. Byrne was black. She wondered if he could stay with the wedding party in the motel in her hometown, where we were to be married. She checked and found he could not. She made other arrangements: Byrne stayed with the pastor and his family.

“Was my vocation to help the people at worship sing faithfully right into the face of evil, just as those who carried the song from worship were doing in the streets?”

What did Amos have to say about this? When rampant injustice prevails, in sometimes brutal forms, not only toward a friend but toward his whole race, should music come to a halt? I was serving as a church musician while I was a seminary student. What was my responsibility? Should I rehearse the church's choirs during the week and play the services on Sunday, or should I abandon my vocational duties as a church musician and go with my classmates and faculty members to join freedom riders in response to another part of my churchly vocation? What did Amos mean? What did his words suggest? Was his message to shut down the church's song altogether? Or were there prophetic guts in the song, as in what I had learned by then was the church's quintessential song, Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55)? If that were so, was my vocation to help the people at worship sing faithfully right into the face of evil, just as those who carried the song from worship were doing in the streets? Was that the church musician's vocational responsibility?

MUSIC AFFIRMED

Not only because of Mary's song, but because of the intensity of Amos's rebuke itself, I began to wonder if Amos really meant to rid us of music, as my earliest filters of him had led me to believe. Was a quite different intent at work, and were filters that focused on music or its absence themselves what Amos objected to? Did he simply assume God's gift of music? Was it because he assumed it that the horror of the offense was so intolerable when music was misused to hide injustice? Was the underlying assumption about music's presence precisely what made it possible for him to sound as if he wanted to get rid of it?⁵ Was the point to set what was worth singing against idle songs?

It became clearer and clearer to me that the answers to these questions were affirmative ones. In my own book, I begin the chapter on "Music as Gift" by quoting Amos:

Alas for those who sing idle songs to the sound
of the harp,
and like David invent for themselves
instruments of music. (Amos 6:4–5)

I said that this was a curious quotation to use when considering music as gift because it could be understood to attack music generally and to undermine David, the primal musical figure in the Bible. I pointed out, however, that Amos was probably singing his rebuke, which is a funny way to attack music. And I said his intention was not to silence music. He was angry about its perverse use to console those who neglect justice.⁶

AMOS

By the time I wrote the book I had concluded that any objective overview of the whole book of Amos made it clear that Amos was not angry about music, but about its misuse. I do not know if the book of Amos represents one prophet, two prophets pulled together by an editor, a bundle of wisdom literature, or some other conflation. Form-critical studies that biblical scholars write about these matters are important, as are careful word studies. We all, church musicians included, need to attend to them—a telling example will be cited before the end of this essay. But as a practicing church musician I have to deal with the biblical texts as they stand.

Here is the book of Amos as it stands. The shepherd from Tekoa announces that the Lord roars (1:1–2). For three transgressions and for four God will not revoke the punishment against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, Judah, and Israel. First this word is spoken against Israel's neighbors, but

⁵This is parallel to the argument of Norman Podhoretz, *The Prophets: Who They Were, What They Were* (New York: Free Press, 2002), who says, "Indeed, it is only because Amos takes the sanctity of the rituals for granted that he can permit himself to sound as though God has sent him to call for their abolition" (131).

⁶Paul Westermeyer, *The Heart of the Matter: Church Music as Praise, Prayer, Proclamation, and Gift* (Chicago: GIA, 2001) 47.

the cry gets more intense and extended as it moves against Judah and Israel. What has Israel done? It has sold the righteous for silver, trampled the poor, pushed the afflicted away, and profaned God's name (2:6–8). God has known only Israel, yet Israel has become cows of Bashan who oppress the poor and the needy (4:1). So lamentation is made over Israel (5:1). A cry goes up that Israel would wake up, seek good and not evil, and establish justice (5:14–15). God's roar takes almost five chapters.

Finally, near the end of chapter 5 comes the first mention of assemblies with music. God hates them, will not accept burnt offerings, does not want the noise of Israel's songs, and pleads for justice in place of melody (5:21–24). The musical motif continues in chapter 6. Those who are at ease in Zion lie on beds of ivory, eat lambs, sing idle songs, like David improvise on (or invent) instruments, drink wine, anoint themselves with oil, but do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph (6:4–6).

The Lord relents, but takes back the relenting when a plumb line (7:7–9) and a basket of fruit (8:1–2) are introduced. The record is read out against those who trample the needy and bring the poor to ruin (8:4–6). Once more music is involved, this time the songs of the temple turned into wailing, feasts into mourning, and all songs into lamentation (8:3, 10). The book concludes with Israel's destruction (9:1–10), but from this havoc a remnant is promised from the booth of David with breaches repaired, ruins raised up, and a rebuilding accomplished as in days of old (9:11–15).

To read this as a diatribe against music is to mimic Israel's ingrown disobedience. It gets us off the hook. That is exactly what Amos objected to. The problem is not music. The problem is the absence of justice and using idle songs to console those who hide from their wicked ways. Musical references are minimal, as the book and its commentaries indicate, but the concern that the little guy get justice is massive.

Amos cannot *not* sing. Israel and the church cannot *not* sing. Amos knew that. But he also knew that music can be misused for ingrown celebrations while the poor are trampled and forgotten. Against that he rails intensely, especially when music is allied to worshiping assemblies who by their neglect of the poor profane God's name.

AMOS AND THE EARLY CHURCH

Amos and the early church are on the same page. This becomes increasingly apparent in Calvin Stapert's observation that the early church's writers did not object to the art music and folk music of the pagan world, but they unanimously and vehemently objected to the music associated with the spectacles, lavish banquets, weddings, and pagan religious rites.⁷ The problem was that the music used in these connections pointed to lasciviousness, to obscene luxury, to misplaced allegiance,

⁷Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

and to self-gratification. God and the neighbor were neglected. The poor and the needy were forgotten. These are the same concerns as those of Amos. Against such idle songs the early church set the music of psalms and hymns. It expressed music's true New Testament character, namely, to rejoice in response to God's work (while retaining the proper role of lament) and to sing to God and to each other with the saints, angels, and all of creation.

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Amos does not explicitly give us this psalmic type of New Testament alternative, but one has to ask whether Amos's form does not do it—in two ways. First, the overall poetic structure of the book itself recalls the Psalms and therefore the song of Israel (which became the song of the church). Second, three little parallel hymnic doxologies tell of God's creating and sustaining work and include the same refrain, “The Lord is his name.” They are imbedded in the book at verses 4:13, 5:8–9, and 9:5–6.⁸ It may be that these are a later addition, as some suggest, or it may be that “Amos” inserted a hymn that already existed and split it into three parts.⁹ Who can tell? As we have the book, however, their presence points to the faithful song, not to the perverse idle ones that Amos attacks. The perverse ones, of course, can use all the right words while the singers fail to act on them, or treat them idly as a cover for their evil deeds. Subtly imbedding these hymns may be a way to make just that point. This is especially telling if Norman Podhoretz is correct in arguing that Amos is a “conservative radical” who was “continuous with [his] predecessors.”¹⁰

In a forthcoming review of Stapert's book for *Worship* and in some recent lectures¹¹ I have suggested that there are critical implications here. Since the eighteenth century when the Constantinian alliance between church and state fell apart, various attempts have been made by the church to climb back into the surrounding culture by using the self-gratifying stream of music that both Amos and the early church rejected on the premise that it would attract many people.¹² The question is whether this move is a suicidal denial of the faith and a collapse into the

⁸See James Luther Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 83–84.

⁹So Mays, *ibid.*, 83.

¹⁰Podhoretz, *The Prophets*, 134, 113.

¹¹The lectures were based on Susan Cherwien's hymn, “Rise, O Church, like Christ Arisen,” for the Mississippi Conference on Church Music and Liturgy, 31 July–5 August, 2007, in Canton, Mississippi. I have edited them into a little booklet called “Rise, O Church: Reflections on the Church, Its Music, and Empire.”

¹²Stapert, *A New Song*, 22, points out that nothing appears in the New Testament about music in relation to evangelizing, nor does this theme appear in the literature of the early church.

same misplaced allegiance to which Amos and the early church objected, now visible in the pretensions of empire, its warfare, and its rape of the planet earth.

I also suggested that, since church musicians are so often beat up on in the church of late,¹³ they may occupy the vantage point and privilege of the poor and the oppressed. That also gives them a big responsibility, namely, to sing the church's new song¹⁴ with the people of God with renewed vigor and stamina. By so doing they will perhaps voice the strongest opposition to the empire that confronts us, with the prophetic song of Mary and the tenacious fire of Amos.

THEN AND NOW

I sometimes think I am living in a time warp that replicates my experience when I was in high school. Though it was not true of all of them, large suburban Protestant churches, which were all too often considered normative, had extensive music programs *then* and cared little about justice. Though again it is not true of all of them, large suburban Protestant churches, which are all too often considered normative, have extensive music programs *now* and seem to care little about justice. They are sometimes even allied to the governing authorities who trample the poor and have no concern about the common good. The musical style may be different, but the perspective is the same, maybe worse and more anesthetizing today. Amos would be furious. So should we. ⊕

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¹³This comes as a surprise to some people who are unaware of it because some musicians have quietly left. Though, of course, musicians are sometimes at fault, there are nonetheless far too many instances where they have been major targets of thoroughly unfair abuse. This accounts for an enervating exodus of musical talent from the church and a dismissal of the church as worthy of serious consideration by musicians and others.

¹⁴As I have indicated in "Rise, O Church: Reflections on the Church, Its Music, and Empire," the "new" song has nothing to do with when a text and its music were written. See also Marion Lars Hendrickson, *Musica Christi: A Lutheran Aesthetic* (New York; Peter Lang, 2005) esp. 243.