

## Where Will We Find Sanctuary?

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During the worst days of the blitz in London (WWII), when the city was turning into rubble and ashes around the feet of its citizens, every morning they woke to find the house next door, or the whole row opposite, smoking and reeking with the blood of their neighbors. They woke to hear the tinkle of broken glass being swept up, the wail of ambulances. When the people did not have butter or milk or jam or eggs or enough meat or paper or any string at all or stockings or hats or paint for their fences, then at that time, when they were down to the bone, they turned to what they had to have, to what they must have in order to survive. They turned to music. Every day in the National Gallery, empty, of course, because the pictures had been taken away for safety—Myra Hess played to anyone who cared to sit on the floor and listen—Bach and Schubert and Mozart. The halls were crowded with quiet people in sanctuary, drawing salvation from what they heard; drawing a sense of truth, a sense of verity, of sanity, health, humor, and delight. They needed these things because they were frightened. They needed them in order to be able to go out and face another night, to make them understand what they were fighting to live for, why they were fighting to live. They turned to music, not to silk stockings. (Agnes DeMille, What Is The American Tradition In The Visual and Performing Arts?, American Artist).

The experience of WWII Londoners just described creates the strong impression that the art of music performance held within itself, for these people in this dire circumstance, the ability to nurture and sustain the spirit of life itself. When the physical amenities of life have been taken away, when human beings are forced to grapple with the tenuous nature of life itself, art becomes what DeMille has termed “the ventilation of the spirit”.

In this context I envisioned another scenario several years ago when war once again erupted in Iraq, and sitting in our living rooms we were able to watch, in living color, the skies light up from the relentless night bombings, and sense the nearly palpable tension of a population preparing to put on gas masks at any moment—mothers encasing their baby cribs in a plastic bubble of oxygen in the anticipation of the horrifying effects of chemical warfare. As the terrors of war seeped in, the thought occurred to me, “how would the American population, particularly the youth, respond to vulnerability of this proportion? How would we find sanctuary if there were no physical amenities? If our youth, as did the WWII Londoners, turned to music, what meaning and salvation might they draw from MTV videos, or the latest offerings of shocking lyrics from rappers and a host of heavy metal bands?”

The point is—how do we inform our souls? Or almost more importantly, how do we inform the souls of our youth? Of course, that is the reason for The Church—to inform our souls with belief systems that focus on the existence of God and the promise of salvation and life eternal to those who believe on him/her/them,

depending upon your personal view of the form and shape of God. And there are literally hundreds of religions, synods, sects, and belief systems, all of which claim to have a slightly better version of “the pure truth.” Thus we humans have created a plethora of exclusive faith systems. Even within the Lutheran church to which I belong there are several different synods, each somewhat different, each somewhat exclusive.

Thankfully, this address is not specifically about religion or philosophy, though I dare say both of them are inextricably enmeshed with the notion of church music and worship style—at least I would hope so—because the experience of religion and music come from the same place within us; and that can be a dangerous place. In an article entitled [The Significance of Music in Worship](#), Peter Roussaki quotes Joseph P. Ashton, former professor of music history at Brown University: “It is not by mere accident that music has always been used in religious worship, for religion and music arise from the same general part of our being. Religion is the most intimate of all human experiences, and music is the most intimate of the arts. Music is at once the most subjective and least concrete of all the arts; its subjectivity is the most personal, its substance the least tangible. It has the valuable property of stimulating the emotions and strengthening consciousness, yet at the same time regulating them through the sense of balance and proportion inherent in the art of music itself. Music is the ideal art for religious worship.”

On a lighter note, Roussaki goes on to quote John Chrysostom, one of the fathers of the fourth century church: “When God saw that many were lazy, and gave themselves only with difficulty to spiritual reading, He wished to make it easy for them, and added the melody to the Prophet’s words, that all being rejoiced by the charm of the music, should sing to Him with gladness.”

The “charm of music”—it is a powerful elixir—one which we must administer with caution. Yet in the church, in nearly every denomination, we have thrown caution to the wind and in the name of artistic expression, personal statement, or worst of all religious expression, allowing virtually every brand of entertainment evangelism to run rampant in our community of worship. In church after church across the country, congregations are dividing over worship style, causing a phenomenon in which congregations essentially become two congregations—those who attend only contemporary worship, and those who attend only traditional worship; and this division essentially concerns the musical style of the worship service. In this scenario, the word has become mistress of the music—thus we face the dangers of the charm of music, the power of the elixir. In the Chinese language there are two characters which are used to indicate the word “crisis”; they are symbols which mean “danger” and “opportunity”. We stand at a crossroads in the organized church on several levels, not the least of which concerns worship style. It is a dangerous place, yet it is ripe with opportunity for growth. We must be intentional, we must be cautious.

We must realize that what has been termed contemporary or alternative worship styles are as response to the demands of what our church-going society wishes, and those who lead the church—the pastors, ministers of music, organists, and choir directors often stand numb and lock-jawed, pondering what monster we have created, and how like a steam roller it comes pressing down upon us. The truth is that in increasing numbers, parishioners want music—and religion—that is based on the entertainment model; feel-good religion amplified by feel-good music. In contemporary society's frantic search to avoid pain and pursue pleasure, many come to church seeking another fix—an elixir which offers a purely emotive response to religion. From an article by church music composer Robert Wetzler:

Professor Walter R. Bouman of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, refers to the tempting siren call of "entertainment evangelism". In Homer's epic, the sailors had their ears plugged so they would not run the ship into destruction, lured by the siren's call. Bouman then asks, "Who will warn us today?" He refers to a book by Neil Postman, a professor of communications at New York University, who wrote a work called *Amusing Ourselves to Death; Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. His thesis is that Orwell's *1984* was not as prophetic as Huxley's *Brave New World*. "Orwell feared that we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared that we would become a trivial culture....Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us." Bouman says, "Postman leaves us in no doubt. When we try to adapt Christianity to the entertainment medium, we lose Christianity to the entertainment medium. What remains is people gathering on Sunday to "have fun". Postman writes, "Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether." And Bouman adds, "if your medium says 'have fun', you have nullified the cross of Christ....The audience for religious entertainment is passive, more like spiritual "couch potatoes". It is hard to imagine an entertainer issuing a call through entertainment to 'take up your cross and follow me'.

Wetzler quoted one other article written by Mark A Olson, who at the time this article was written in 1990 was assistant to the bishop of the ELCA Rocky Mountain Synod in Denver. "The agenda for the evangelical church is found in the biblical story of Jesus. Entertainment's agenda is determined by the audience's desires. 'Entertainment Evangelism' is a contradiction in terms. Sunday worship should not be advertised by statements about fun, excitement, and enthusiasm. Church doors should bear warning signs saying 'This experience could change your life.' An invitation to worship is an invitation to be turned around inside and out by an encounter with God. It is an invitation to die--not a very entertaining thought."

In several churches I have discovered, in conversations with pastors, complaints that the same sermon and prayers were not working well in both the contemporary and traditional worship services. I am not at all surprised by this. It is very tempting for the focus in many contemporary music styles, though it might be difficult to pinpoint, to be on the intoxicating elixir of style, not the good news—and sometimes the hard news—of the word of God. I would like to ask every pastor who

faces the daunting task of leading a contemporary worship service, “how do deal with the ‘bad news’ of sin, death, and pain in the guise of the entertainment model?” I will submit to you that we in this country have largely become quite accustomed to silk stockings; in our material needs as well as our music and religion. We wish a comfortable, easy gospel and cheap grace. The truth is that the gospel can be hard and grace, though freely given, can cost you everything you have.

Within this context of entertainment evangelism, allow me to share a story with you I will title “Youth Musical At My Church”.

The church was filled; there was nearly a palpable anticipation in the midst of the congregation that was comparable to the opening of a Broadway show. The chancel had been transformed; around a rather elaborate set were two pairs of large amplification units and speakers, and flanking them, elevated from the pulpit and the lectern on the opposite side were two 52” projection television screens. Two immense banners in high-tech lettering (obviously a prepackaged set) bedecked the back wall above the altar, proclaiming the title of the spectacle we were about to witness. I was very curious as to what was going to transpire here.

It began: from the speakers came music which must have been a combination of the Boston Pops and the Rolling Stones, or some other rock band. In nicely-choreographed movement, the choir proceeded to the chancel from down the center aisle, uniformly dressed in white shirts, white Bermuda shorts, white socks, and white shoes. I thought, “if they all only had Donny Osmond’s teeth!” They began singing—I think, yes, they were singing, but not by themselves or even with the taped accompaniment. The accompaniment tape also included a chorus of voices, so all they needed to do was join in.

So it continued for over half an hour. A sentimental, maudlin story-line clothed in slick, commercially-inspired music. I thought if I heard another major 7<sup>th</sup> ostinato I would have to go home and play octaves all day just to get it out of my brain. It was nearly over, and I was still curious about the TV screens. Then it happened; the screens flashed on with a re-enactment of the Crucifixion scene. Christ with the two malefactors impaled on their crosses; the attendant guards and centurions, the weeping mother Mary—all in biblical garb—a scene that must have been very similar to the actual event. There was no sound however. While this scene unfolded on the screens, the choir, in their dazzling white apparel performed a two-tiered chorus of what I might call “interpretive choreography”.

It ended. I know I must have appeared to have been in shock, or else looking like I had just received a generous shot of novacane. But no matter, no one really noticed. The congregational response was generally ecstatic. They rose to their feet in thunderous applause. The choir marched back down the center aisle and lined the exits to receive the congratulations of the congregation as they exited the nave of the church.

On the way home, I asked myself, “what would there have been if there was no focus on the machinery?” Take away all the technological trappings and there was next to nothing left. What did these young people have to create for themselves? What pain and problems did they have to overcome to succeed? What did they learn? And what did they learn when the congregation rose to their feet in applause?

At this point we must be cognizant of the possibility of idolatry; that is, making an idol out of any kind of music, contemporary or traditional, classical or popular, that occurs when style and not substance becomes the focal point. We need to be reminded that the point of view regarding the use and performance of music within the service needs to begin with the illumination of the Word—God’s word as expressed in the lessons, epistle and gospel, the hymns and sermon. The edification of the spirit, the enlightenment of the soul, the emotive connection to beauty that are all possible in the experience of great church music must have at its center the humility of offering to God that which is the best we can produce. In the immortal words of J. S. Bach, “the aim and final reason of all music should be nothing less but the glory of God and the refreshment of the spirit.” Recall that Bach, one of the great compositional minds of history, inscribed his scores with the letters SDG—to God alone the glory. We must remember that the proper creation and performance of church music arises from a felt need to respond to God with expressive thanks. We make an idol out of any kind of music when we place the proverbial cart before the horse, allowing egocentric performance to cloud our sense of humble offering.

Perhaps Paul Westermeyer, professor of church music at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul says it most effectively in his article [Beyond Alternative and Traditional Worship](#): “The traditionalists leave the impression that the unvarying things they do and the way they do them define worship. The alternatavists leave the impression that by their musical efforts they can control the Spirit of God and convert people. To assume that either track is a sacred or certain formula to health, salvation, and success is idolatrous.”

I believe the aspect of the youth musical I just described that most bothered me concerned the lack of real work, effort, and struggle with the music in order for them to feel that they succeeded; nearly all the work was done for them. There is no parallel for this in the reality of life; virtually anything that is worthwhile, including a spiritual life, does not come easily. The difficult is also good; the delay of gratification ultimately allows deeper satisfaction. The Christian writer C.S. Lewis wrote, “We must not rely on our emotions to sustain our spiritual life.” It seems to me that creating a worship style which has as its focus the easy, comfortable approach, one which is satisfied with a simply emotional response, encourages a “check your brain at the door” participation in worship. It lowers God to the position of a talk show pop psychologist, offering feel-good advice in catchy, upbeat phrases. If we believe that God is indeed the God of creation, then all we need do is observe the wonders of creation, the elegant splendor of the physical universe, the marvelous complexity of our bodies, and we realize in a humbling

moment the awesome power and infinite intellect of God. In the words of my youngest child she said years ago as a little girl, “Daddy, God is pretty big, isn’t she?”

In my choir at Concordia College, one of the guiding principles in the pursuit of our choral performance is 50% head, 50% heart. It is not enough just to mean it; you can sing with all of the most heart-felt emotions and with great sincerity and sing badly. You can also sing with such a high degree of intellectual clarity, control, and precision that your spirit of expression is bound up in the concentration of execution. In great musical performance, one informs the other—our head and heart work in symbiotic relationship. This is not easy; rather it is hard work.

The same notion applies to our spiritual lives—personal as well as corporate. Relying on fleeting and ephemeral emotions to sustain our belief system is at least dangerous and at most tragic. We must find ourselves grappling with the Word of God, applying our intellects to the issues of faith and doubt, reasoning solutions to the infinite problems of human existence. If God is deserving of the best we can offer, we must be prepared to work a little in the act of offering our praise. Conversely, the congregation must be prepared to listen and participate with their minds as well as their hearts, lest we become too accustomed to the “silk stocking” of choosing the easy path.

So, what are we to do? The answer, if we have the courage and tenacity to attempt it, is education and challenge. In terms of music, the standard litmus test needs to involve *suitability* and *craftsmanship*. 1) Suitability – is the music and the text appropriate to the demands of the liturgy? 2) Craftsmanship – Is it well-made?

Carl Schalk, in an older article entitled “Thoughts On Smashing Idols: Church Music in the 1980’s”, makes this observation. “Mediocrity thrives where the superficially attractive is held in high regard, where the easy effect is too readily applauded, and where the trite rhythm or the maudlin melody too easily satisfies.” Well-made, remember, does not mean complex. I think, rather, it has more to do with integrity in style and craftsmanship in design. This allows for many different styles of music—an anthem in gospel style may be highly effective and beautiful if done with the proper performance style and execution. A unison Gregorian chant is nearly as simple as music can be, yet it illuminates with beauty and spirituality with every interval. What we must acknowledge in the music of the church is standards of musical integrity—anything, just because it has a semi-religious text, is not acceptable. The musical leaders of the church—the organists, choir directors, and ministers of music must work closely with the pastors, both using their training and expertise in the process of shepherding the flock. Musicians must remember that their music is the servant of the Word, edifying and

bolstering the convictions of theology. Pastors must remember that they need the expertise of musicians to proclaim the Word with vigor and impact.

We must teach our children the great hymns together with the essential teachings of the church. I remember as a child and then an adolescent, complaining about the need to memorize Bible verses or go to Children's Choir on Wednesday afternoon when the baseball field seemed much more attractive—it all seemed so irrelevant to me at the time. It was not until I was out of college and married that I came to realize the value of early religious and musical training in the church. It took a special experience for me to realize that the most valuable benefit of this discipline was not to be at that time in my life...but for later, perhaps much later.

I would like to tell you the story of my grandmother. She was a sturdy first-generation American woman of German background who spent many years being the wife of a farmer. If you have ever spent much time around a mid-west farming family, you know that it is more than a full-time job—and she handled it well. As she grew older, she like many people in their late 70's began to lose her memory and developed into what we now call Alzheimer's. It was difficult to see her slipping, becoming worse over time. Near the end of her life, she had difficulty remembering the names of her daughters when they came to see her—her children—those closest to her and with the most shared history, and she was losing her connection to them. I was awestruck, though, when my aunt related an experience she had with her mother shortly before she died. When she entered her room and was unrecognized by her own mother, my aunt heard her singing—“softly and tenderly Jesus is calling”. She recalls her reciting long passages of the Psalms with complete accuracy—“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me to lie down in green pastures; he restores my soul. These were the songs and bible verses she learned and memorized as a child, locked intact, securely in her long-term memory. She needed them now.

The church must be constantly reminded that it is in the business of life-transforming possibilities. Seeds planted today, with proper care and nurturing, will grow and mature. They can also wither and die, or lay dormant in the ground for a long time, finally growing and blooming at the most unexpected moments. We must make sure to plant good seeds.

I will close with a brief, but powerful paragraph from Paul Westermeyer's article from which I quoted earlier. It contains both the admonition and promise about which we must all be aware. He has just finished a discussion of seven components he feels are essential in an effective worship service, traditional or alternative, and closes the segment with these words: “None of these components will please musicians who think that revelation comes through their high art, or their commercial appeal. It will not please pastors who think that revelation

comes through their beautiful words of their folksiness. It will not please any group with dynastic pretensions or with the need to have egos gratified. It will not please any of us. But then the gospel is not about pleasing us. It's about life—new life.