

## The Role of the Musician in Worship

Musical leadership is a great challenge, with musical and pastoral demands. It is also a great privilege, with opportunities to celebrate the gospel and work among God's people. This article describes the practical life of the church musician in terms of these challenges and privileges.

Church musicians are all too typically regarded as those who sustain the church by providing musical services. This view has them responsible for creating fellowship and good feeling in the congregation—dispensing services that keep everybody happy, entertaining the troops, and giving everybody warm fuzzies.

This job description creates two intolerable tensions. First, if a congregation is even in the remotest sense Christian and not totally a reflection of the culture, its church musicians feel the gnawing sense that simply meeting people's needs is wrong. Church musicians are not trained to be theologians so they cannot always articulate this feeling, but it is there and it can be downright painful.

The second tension comes from the pressure of trying to satisfy the desires of everybody in the congregation. It can be difficult to try to meet what are often competing demands: some people want gospel hymns, some want rock, some want Lutheran chorales. Still others don't want to sing at all and expect the choir to do it. Some want the choir to sing sixteenth-century motets, others want it to sing only nineteenth-century music. One group wants nonsexist texts when referring to humanity; others want non-sexist terms for both humanity and God; others insist one should never alter the original text. The musician is supposed to meet all those requests. The musician is not expected, however, to think, make judgments, ask questions, or have a dialogue with anybody. The congregation wants the musician simply to satisfy its wants, no matter how contradictory and confusing those may be.

Defined this way, the life of a church musician is a nightmare indeed. Musicians in this situation not only sense that something is wrong at the heart of things, but that they can never do anything right. They do not know what to plan and practice, or what demands to heed. They receive no direction except for the worst sort of consumerism. This makes them always look over their shoulders, worried that they did something wrong or that one group will be offended when another faction gets its way. Ultimately, what Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon refer to as the "voracious appetites" of demanding people can devour the musician. So, to avoid being devoured, musicians seek to manipulate tastes and needs. Some use commercial television as a model, offering cute and contrived jingles (I have heard these called "teeny hymns"). Others push for high taste or for their personal tastes. These approaches inevitably lead to frustration because they focus on power. The musician's work gets reduced either to obvious power plays and outright war or to subtle forms of control, which are the antithesis of freedom.

I cannot begin to count the number of church musicians who have told me about the despair they have experienced in churches where they are regarded merely as need-fillers. Not all have articulated the problem in just this way, but it is suggested in many of their comments. Many of these musicians have continued to struggle in spite of the problems because of their grit, determination, and sense of faithfulness; many have switched churches; too many of them have left their musical posts altogether. The most tragic result is that countless young people who have sensed the despair of the musicians in their churches have never considered a career in church music even though in other respects it appeals to them.

There is an alternative to this situation, an alternative that can emerge when the church affirms some fundamental aspects of the faith. First, the church must acknowledge that it is not sustained by the

services it provides or by anything it does. As the community of the baptized, the church is sustained by God's grace. God creates the church, and God will sustain the church—with us, without us, and in spite of us. Our continual errors are eloquent enough testimony to that. If the church were supported only by human efforts, it would have disappeared long ago. So let us keep our priorities straight: the place to begin is with baptism; God's grace drives and sustains the church and our works, not the other way around.

Second, if the church is attentive to the New Testament, Justin Martyr and Hippolytus, the Eastern church, the Western Catholic tradition, the Anglican tradition, the Lutheran tradition, the Calvinist intent (and practice, if not in Geneva then in places like John Robinson's Leiden), the Wesleyan intent and that of the early Methodists, then its worship on every festival of the Resurrection—that is, on every Sunday—will include both Word and Supper, not one or the other. Our Protestant heritage has gotten derailed in the last several centuries. We have legitimately objected to the medieval practice of celebrating the Supper without the Word, which is a replication of the Old Testament practice of sacrifice. But we have substituted Word without Supper, which is a replication of synagogue worship minus the joy of the Resurrection. If we are serious about our worship and our responsibility as worshipping Christians, we will be faithful to Christ's command and to our heritage by celebrating Word and Supper every week.

While worship seems to be what we do, it is actually what God does. It looks like our praises, our prayers, our words, our bread and wine, but it is really God addressing us in our weak human words and giving us life in the messianic banquet. It looks as if God is our audience, but we are the audience and the object of God's grace, love, and care. That is true at all times and all places, of course, but in our worship it is uniquely and profoundly so.

Worship belongs to the people. It is not the sole property of the clergy, the musician, or any other church leader. The Reformation taught us that worship is not the precinct of the priests. We Protestants forget that and deny it every time we shut the people out and turn worship into entertainment by clergy or musicians before silent congregations. Worship belongs to the whole people of God, not to any individual or group.

Worship is profoundly related to both the past and the present. We did not invent it. Virtually all people have worshiped. For us Christians worship is derived from Hebrew sources, radically controlled by the Christ event and edited by the church from generation to generation. Worship is also profoundly contemporary. It relates precisely to the here and now and flows into our culture in the most priestly way while at the time bringing to bear on us the prophetic demands of justice and peace. For in worship God always calls us to a radically new and responsible life together. Worship is probably the most powerful engine for justice and peace because in it God's call, which stands behind and before us, cannot be denied, will not let us rest and drives us into the world on behalf of the downtrodden and the oppressed.

All of this means that worship has a rhythm about it that is bigger than our individual rhythms. It relates to a story that is far larger than our individual stories, even as it encompasses those stories. To sense the big rhythm and the big story we need to be attentive to the church year and the lectionary. They protect us from being confined in our pet likes and dislikes.

What is the role, then, of church musicians? They are fundamentally responsible for the people's song, the church's song. That's why the term cantor is so helpful in describing the church musician. Church musicians are the chief singers, the leaders of the church's song. They are responsible for singing the congregation's whole story. That means knowing the local stories and traditions of the particular

parish they serve, and it also means relating those local stories to the catholic fullness of the whole story, and doing that with pastoral sensitivity.

If these affirmations are correct, then the church musician's practical life grows out of the nature of the church. It is driven by the grace of God, not by our sinful needs. This view resolves some of the conflict church musicians so often sense, for it defines the church musician's duties by the logic of the community he or she serves, not by the claims of the surrounding culture. It also provides a sense of direction. With this understanding, musicians do not have to look over their shoulders, wondering if one or another group is satisfied. Nor will they try to manipulate taste or people. They should and can operate in freedom and with purpose.

This purpose might be described under five headings: Sunday morning worship, the church year, planning, practice, and relationships.

1. The Practical Life of the Church Musician Is Controlled above All by Sunday Morning. Each Sunday is a little Easter, the celebrating of the Resurrection and the time therefore for Word and Supper. The pastor, on behalf of the host who is Christ himself, serves in Christ's stead. The musician leads the people's song at this banquet. So, at the appropriate points—and there are many—the pastor relinquishes leadership to the musician. Church music has the capacity to give something of the fullness of the people's song each Sunday because it can put into context and pull together themes through the richness of poetic and musical imagery in a way that the spoken word cannot.

2. There Is No Way to Sing the Fullness of the Story on Any Given Sunday Morning. The only way to sing the fullness of the Christian story is over many Sunday mornings. Since we are all tempted to sing only our favorite parts of the story, we need some way to protect the people and to protect us from ourselves. The church year gives us that way. Over a year's time we recount Christ's advent, birth, epiphany, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension; then we celebrate the church's birth at Pentecost and reflect on the results of our life together and in the world. In the three-year ecumenical lectionary we get the richness of *lectio continua* and *lectio selecta*. (It is tragic that these readings do not always coincide among denominations. That not only destroys their purpose and makes denominational and ecumenical resources less useful, but it also prevents opportunities for interaction in marriages and families whose members represent different traditions and attend different churches.)

Unfortunately, church musicians often merely go through the motions of Sunday mornings and the festivals of the church year without sensing their order and relationship and without drawing on their tremendous potential. The weekly festival of the Resurrection and the celebrations of the church year are the fecund soil from which the craft of the church musician grows. We need to see these festivals for what they are and for the discipline and tremendous aid and direction they provide.

3. Observing the Church Calendar Requires Planning and Practice. Both need to be structured into the musician's routine because they are among the most critical things that happen in a local church. While no one formula will work in all churches, planning has to involve both pastor and musician. Otherwise the confusion that characterizes worship in so many churches is inevitable. It is possible to assign most of the planning to one person; if both agree on that arrangement, trust each other, and the planner communicates instructions to the other, that approach can work. It is possible to assign responsibilities and then meet briefly, even by phone, to make sure there is coherence. That too will work if both parties agree on the system, trust each other, have a common sense of direction and know each other well.

My preference, however, is for weekly meetings at which pastor and musician plan together and for regular planning meetings held weekly, monthly or seasonally with lay people. Since worship is communal, to plan it alone always seems to miss the mark, no matter how able one person is. The planning needs to reflect the communal nature of what is being planned.

There should be a discipline to this process. Nobody gets to choose his or her own few favorite hymns. Hymns have to fit the occasion. What we do has to make sense for the people of God in Chicago or New York or Springfield or wherever we are, in the late twentieth century, with the themes of Pentecost VI or Advent I or whatever the occasion is, with all the resources that are available to us within the confines of our capabilities: old hymns, new hymns, music from various periods and of various styles, old translations, new translations, the same and different ways of doing things, and so on.

4. For Musicians to Do Their Jobs, They Must Practice. Not to practice is to regard the people with contempt. Musicians must practice far enough ahead so things are ready when they need to be, and they must practice up to the last moment so that they will be fresh for the service.

This is difficult, particularly for those whose positions are part-time. While full-time church musicians find their hours consumed by paper work and phony administrative duties (not the legitimate ones), part-timers have a more difficult time finding practice time because they usually also hold full-time jobs and are tired at the end of the day.

There is no single solution, but it is possible to work practice into our days. It takes some imagination and some discipline, like the organist spending a few minutes every day at a piano keyboard and reserving certain times of the week, like Saturday mornings, for practice at the church. For the choral conductor, time with a score at a desk on a lunch break is possible, along with time later at a keyboard. The singer simply has to find times and places to sing: sometimes in the car, with the windows rolled up, on the way to and from work will do nicely. If we do not practice, we render our planning useless and deny our vocation.

5. Underneath All This Is the Church Musician's Relationship with Parishioners and with God. Because church musicians operate within a community of grace that is sustained by God, they do not have to try to manipulate people or their tastes. The musician is free to take risks, to fail and succeed, because sustenance is not the musician's concern; faithfully singing the song with the people is. That means knowing the big story, knowing the people's stories and their capacities, and then serving them with care.

Like all worthy crafts people, church musicians have their own disciplined inner peace. But that peace is not generated simply by the craft of church music. The practical life of the church musician is the outcome of a vocation—a calling—that serves God and the people of God with the unique gift of music.