

Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Church Music but Were Afraid to Ask

By James R. Fitzpatrick

I.

Though the title of this program implies that there are questions about music people hesitate to ask, let me assure you that at St. Margaret's, no one is afraid to ask anything or let me know about their preferences. Some of the questions I regularly get include:

1. Why do we sing songs NO ONE knows?
2. Why can't we sing hymns EVERYONE likes?
3. Why do we sing old moldy hymns and chants anyway?
4. Why does the Third Sunday Band have to play at church?
5. Why don't we have the Third Sunday Band EVERY Sunday?
6. Why don't we sing the Doxology?
7. Why do you always change the service music just when I finally learn it?
8. Why don't we sing patriotic songs at church?

Well, I hope to answer these questions and give you time to ask others this morning. But be forewarned, the answers are complex. For instance, in order to answer the questions I previously mentioned, we need to look at two other questions. The first is "What is the purpose of music in the church?" and the second is "Whose time are we spending in worship?"

II. Let's look at the first question: What is the purpose of music in church?"

The scriptures tell us that music has played a role in worship since the earliest of days and in the Book of Revelations we find that in Heaven there are creatures that have the express purpose of constantly singing praise to God and that all of creation will join in singing the praise. Though we know that music is important in worship, we don't have any document that tells us the specifics of how we are to incorporate music into worship.

In Marion J. Hatchett's "A Guide to the Practice of Church Music" (the basic music handbook for many Episcopal Churches) we read "Music gives solemnity, beauty, joy, and enthusiasm to the worship of the community. It imparts a sense of unity and sets an appropriate tone for a particular celebration. It is an effective evangelistic tool. It nourishes and strengthens faith and assists worshippers in expressing and sharing their faith. It heightens texts so that they speak more fully and more cogently. It highlights the basic structure of the rites. It expresses and communicates feelings and meanings which cannot be put into words." (*A Guide to the Practice of Church Music, Copyright 1989 by Marion J. Hatchet. Published by the Church Hymnal Corporation (Now Church Publishing) New York, NY 10017*)

Much of what we do musically today originates from traditions passed down for generations. Our denomination has a rich history of music and it is interwoven

through chants and hymns and the service music we use. The depth of this history and tradition ties our music back to the early church, allows us glimpses into the dark and middle ages, helps us to experience the glories of the Renaissance, reflect the order and beauty of form in the Baroque and Classic eras, and trace the growth of our faith through the cultural perspectives of both England and the United States. And it is not moribund, so locked in tradition that it is stifled and dead. As human artistic expression and communication change, new music is added into our tradition as well. (And herein lies the answer to the questions about Third Sunday Band. They are doing their part to keep our music growing and alive. Some people in our congregation would not get their spiritual needs met if there were no Third Sunday Band songs. Others would not get their spiritual needs met if all they heard were Third Sunday Band songs.)

Parenthetically let me mention that, having grown up in another Protestant tradition and served in three other denominations, I have found that the attention to music in the Anglican tradition is much more intense and spiritually focused than I have experienced in any other church. This is not to say that those churches did not have worthy music, but usually the choices were made more for emotional or sentimental reasons than spiritual ones. In the most extreme cases, hymns and songs were chosen as a form of “Christian Entertainment” rather than as acts of worship. The focus on music as an act of worship is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Episcopal Church.

It appears that in today’s Episcopal Church, following examples given in the scriptures, music serves two distinct purposes, the priestly and proclaiming.

Priestly – The Lifting of People’s Voices to God
To Glorify and Praise God
To Unify the Congregation in Sung Prayer
To Promote Meditation and Personal Communication with God

Proclaiming – Telling Forth God’s Message and Human Experience of God
To Focus Thoughts on Spiritual Matters
To Instruct and Edify
To Express That Which Cannot Be Expressed Merely in Words

So in our church, music is chosen to fulfill these distinct purposes. This does not mean that other considerations aren’t made. But it does mean that at the most basic and profound levels, these are the reasons our choices are made.

III. As to the second question, “Whose time are we spending in worship?”

It helps to consider the following. We have 168 hours a week. We sleep for approximately 56 hours, tend to our physical needs and grooming approximately 14 hours, prepare food and eat for an average of 21 hours, earn a living (only 40

hours per week– if we are lucky), and then we have approximately 37 hours to raise our families, fix our shelters, and have some personal time.

Most of us here eke out two hours on Sunday for worship and fellowship. Some of us are able to give a few more hours during the week to church related activities. But the pursuit of the holy and our relationship to God is usually one of the smallest chunks of time we set aside. This means that our time in church is limited and precious. And some feel that it is not to be wasted on singing songs that we don't know or like.

Why do we go to church anyway? When I ask this question, I often get answers like these:

To find comfort.

To express my faith.

To get something out of the sermon.

To be uplifted.

But I would propose that these are not the reasons to go to church or to spend two precious hours of one's personal time. We should not go to church to get something at all. We should go to church in order to give a sacrifice to God. Indeed, making a sacrifice of praise, and returning to God a portion of the time he has given us to use is the primary purpose for gathering together in a church. When we invest our time, energy, and talent in adoration of God, the most amazing thing happens: we receive back more than we give. We get blessed by God with deeper understanding of spiritual matters and our shared experience as humans interacting with the Almighty. Our faith is increased. Our compassion is augmented. Our time in God's presence is amplified by simply turning around our customary expectations of what a church service should be and dedicating that time to God.

IV. So if we are giving time to God how do we incorporate music into this act of worship?

Our denomination gives us good guidance with its traditions, many handed down from the early church. Right off the bat, we have a calendar of days and seasons that has to do with the daily cycle of our spiritual lives. Our church calendar begins with Advent and reaches its apex with Christ the King Sunday, the culmination of a yearly spiritual journey exploring the riches of scripture and the life of Jesus Christ.

We have seasons that delineate the year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and the long period following Pentecost. Holy Days and feasts mark key events in the life of Christ including Christmas, Epiphany, Holy Week, Easter, and Christ the King. Other special days help us observe the rigors of our own spiritual journeys or the faith of those who have gone before us, including

Pentecost, Ash Wednesday, Rogation Sunday, All Saint's Day, and all lesser feasts and fasts etc.

Running parallel to this year is our calendar year with celebrations of political and historic events. These include The Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Veteran's Day, etc.; and lesser holidays that we observe with cards and gifts.

The question then becomes when our national holidays coincide with our church Holy Days, where should the focus be? And music choices can easily come up against competing pressures. My goal as music director of St. Margaret's is to keep our worship focused on Christ, the church calendar, our corporate spiritual journey, and not focused on our national calendar.

Of course, it is entirely appropriate acknowledge the marvels of God's creations on their special days, as long as the focus of the worship remains on God. For instance, this coming Veteran's Day falls on a Sunday and we will sing "Eternal Father, strong to save." I have chosen the hymn primarily because it beautifully gives us the message of God's love, even as it reminds us of those who have risked and sometimes given their lives for us as a nation. The focus of this hymn is on God and his strength. Whereas, my personal favorite patriotic song, America the Beautiful only mentions God in passing and focuses on the beauty and history of our nation. I don't believe it would be appropriate to use as an act of worship.

- V. Where does the "old" and/or "difficult" music that we use in Anglican worship come from?

There are the chants used to recite Psalms or sung by the Priest or Deacon in other parts of the service. Some chant melodies (often called Psalm tones) are quite ancient. The majority that we use were finally notated under the direction of Pope Gregory, but had been used for many years prior. This connection to the early church provides us with a glimpse into eternity and the ongoing adoration of Christ. It is part of an unbroken song from the days of the martyrs going to the end of time, according to St. John.

Many of our hymns and choir anthems are based upon these chants, though we may not immediately recognize them. Often they are buried in the bass lines or harmonies of hymns with new melodies layered on top of them. Some of these sounds are no longer "easy" to reproduce since our culture bombards us with music primarily written with one specific set of tonal relationships. However, when we sing these chants and pieces based upon them, we enter into a mystical space where we touch the past and the future with sound.

The Service Music we use reflects the traditional form of the Mass. The traditional mass includes a Kyrie (Lord have mercy), Gloria (which the long form of the Doxology), the Credo (At St. Margaret's we tend to speak the Nicene Creed

rather than sing it), the Sanctus and Benedictus (which is theologically the highest point of praise in the service), and the Agnus Dei (or Lamb of God). Note that what is commonly referred to as the Doxology is not included in this service. That Doxology is actually a shortened version of the Gloria and when we sing it occasionally we are often both redundant and prone to eclipse the Sanctus in power and praise. However, the version we commonly refer to as the Doxology is of comfort to many. To this end, after a long hiatus, we brought back the Doxology for a substantial portion of the period after Pentecost this year. It will be resurfacing from time to time through out the year. One can begin to think of it like the term Alleluia which is omitted during Lent. When it goes unused for a while, one misses it as a familiar and comforting part of worship, but when it returns, that longing has made it more appreciated and precious.

The regular repetition of the service music enables another mystical experience from time to time. When we get to the point that we know this music by heart and it is totally comfortable, we can begin to go beyond the mechanics of it and use it as a vehicle to express our emotions, our deepest feelings, and unspoken thoughts. The Greek words Kyrie Eleison or the English words Lord Have Mercy Upon Us, go from mere repetition to real prayer, to an expression of the cumulative pains of our lives and the fears and frustrations we face and a genuine expression of our understanding that there is no help for all of this but that which comes from God.

So if the repetition enables such an experience, why do we change the service music seasonally? Because it makes us hear those words again with “new ears.” We have to grapple with the text and the notes for a bit and once again emerge into that experience of seeing a different aspect of spiritual truth.

Since I have been here, we have developed a seasonal pattern of rotating service music. Advent brings us a more spare set of pieces. This year, we will use some of the earliest plainsong chants to evoke the ancient longing for the Messiah. In Lent, we use a newer set of plainsong chants by African American composer David Hurd. For our two most joyous seasons, Christmas and Easter, we use what I call a Festive set of Service Music written by contemporary composers, William Matthias and Gerald Near. During the period following Pentecost and throughout the summer, we use family accessible service music. These are the pieces recommended by Fiona Vidal-White as being able to engage both adults and young children. Finally, we fill in the rest of the year with settings written specifically for St. Margaret’s, the contemporary setting by Al Todd and the more formal setting by yours truly. Other settings may be used as well because of the specific beauty and feeling they bring to a service.

Hymn selection ultimately lies with the Rector then the preaching clergy for the given Sunday. At St. Margaret’s, the rector has asked for weekly recommendations from the Director of Music. So while I may recommend hymns appropriate to the readings, etc., the ultimate decision rests with the Rector. At

St. Margaret's 101, I explained my basic rationale for making selections which include identifying (in so much as there are appropriate selections available) one hymn that exemplifies our Anglican and Episcopal heritage and traditions, one hymn that exemplifies the American musical experience, and one hymn that is commonly shared among Protestant denominations. Additionally, throughout the season I try to salt the mixture with hymns from other cultures or that use various types of inclusive language.

If you have a favorite hymn, write me a note or send me an e-mail and I will keep an eye open for the next occasion that might allow for using it in worship. If I can, I will include it as soon as possible.

References

The following publications were used in preparation of the remarks given above:

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(Now Church Publishing), New York, NY

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