

“OUR SINGING HERITAGE: WHAT THE REFORMERS TEACH US ABOUT WORSHIPFUL MUSIC,” A Series of Singing-Point Meditations compiled by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Michigan, Music Sunday, June 12, 2022

Some Preliminary Remarks

Today is a day both joyful and a touch sad. It is Music Sunday in which our choir shares a special music program with us to the glory of God. That’s the joyful part. What’s a little sad is that their performance and sharing this morning is a signature to their season. Although we have music right through the summer always the choir hereafter takes a vacation until September. As we all know, it’s been said that absence makes the heart grow fonder. But that’s also true in the case of the *anticipated* absence of our choir for us.

Music and worship go together—as both our Bible and historic church leaders have time and again affirmed. We’ll be hearing more from them about music in the hour ahead. Likewise, in the same spirit, worship and choir music have long gone together right here at St. Paul Church.

Our choir was first organized in 1894 by Pastor Ludwig Schulz. That was just twelve years after our church’s original founding. Sad to say the long-bearded Pastor Schulz had a very short, two year tenure with us, dying from tuberculosis at a young age. But his legacy as our choir’s founder is great—and endures. Our choir has been singing 128 years. We have a historic photo of the original St. Paul Choir with Pastor Schulz seated in a center chair with his young son’s head resting on his shoulder. It’s a tender, charming portrait of pastor and choir. There were twenty choristers—ten men, ten women, all mostly young. I hope Music Director Tracy Hoffman doesn’t go green with envy at that kind of gender balance.

All too recently, the COVID pandemic put a dent in our choir’s performance and worship participation. There was no choir gathered for months on end. But showing courage and fortitude our choir has come back to life, its Sunday morning schedule resumed. Thank you, choir! We have been blessed by their return to worship. Today, joy and a little sadness mingling, let’s relish the wonderful sacred music they we share with us—all of us together in God’s grace. **Amen.**

Martin Luther on Singing:

- Prior to the 16th century Protestant Reformation, there was no congregational singing: instead, Roman Catholic monks chanted in Latin.
- However, in inaugurating a reformation of the Christian church, Luther imported melodic singing into worship services.
- In Luther's sight, the church was no longer composed of priests and monks; it was now the congregation of believers. Accordingly, all were to take part in worship and congregational singing helped make this possible.
- Luther believed in both the educational and ethical power of music for the people of God.
- For Luther there was no value to a worship hymn if those singing didn't understand its printed words. Consequently, he insisted that hymns should be sung in the everyday language of the people worshipping.
- Luther also instructed his ministerial colleagues that the best tunes should not be "left to the devil." It was important to have good melodies for congregational singing. Although Luther and his followers borrowed some simple chant tunes from the traditional Roman Catholic mass, which were already familiar to most, he appropriated some very old folk tunes, as well as some of the most singable and popular music of the day, and set these tunes to new words celebrating Christ. He also composed some 36 completely new hymn melodies with biblically-inspired lyrics, while encouraging others to do so likewise.
- Luther published the first Protestant hymnal in 1524, containing only eight songs. Three of them were personally written by Luther, based on Psalms 12, 14, and 130. The hymnal was very popular: Luther's enemies complained that "the whole people are singing themselves into his doctrines."
- Luther believed so strongly in the power and value of music and singing for church worship that he required all would-be pastors to pass a musical test before they could be accepted for ministerial training.
- Luther's musical philosophy can be summed up in six rules or principles: (1) Harness the teaching power of hymns; (2) Sing the Psalms as Paul's Letters to the Colossians and Ephesians exhort all Christians to do. (*Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19*); (3) Respect the past— for worshipful singing don't always chase after the new and novel because familiarity is good for the congregation; (4) Even in a church where congregational singing is emphasized, worship leaders have an important role to play in both leading songs and championing the act of congregational singing; (5) Keep it simple—elaborate hymn melodies are of little benefit to the congregation; (6) Use the best songs, both from the hymnal, and

from folk or popular culture if they can be freshly set to appropriately faithful words.

- Sounds all like very good advice to me!

As Martin Luther wrote in his introduction to his early hymnal:

“That it is good, and pleasing to God, for us to sing spiritual songs is, I think, a truth whereof no Christian can be ignorant; since not only the example of the prophets and kings of the Old Testament (who praised God with singing and music, poesy and all kinds of stringed instruments) but also the like practice of all Christendom from the beginning, especially in respect to psalms, is well known to every one: yea, St. Paul doth also appoint the same (1 Corinthians 19) and command the Colossians, in the third chapter, to sing spiritual songs and psalms from the heart unto the Lord, that thereby the word of God and Christian doctrine be in every way further and practice.”

John Calvin on Singing:

- Almost a generation younger than Martin Luther, Protestant reformer John Calvin, was not quite as enthusiastic about music in church. Yet he was biblically informed enough to remember that Jesus sang at least one hymn with his apostles at the Last Supper before departing to the Garden of Gethsemane. (*Matthew 26:30*). Calvin was also wise and pragmatic enough to recognize that music and singing could play an invaluable part in Christian worship.
- In his introduction to his *Genevan Psalter* for worship leadership, which was published in the 1540s, Calvin addressed both the possibilities and hazards of music for God’s people, remarking: “There is hardly anything in the world with more power to turn or bend, this way or that, the morals of men... In fact, we find by experience that [music] has a secret and almost incredible power to move our ears in one way or another. Wherefore me must be the most diligent in ruling it in such a manner that it may be useful to us and in no way pernicious... [Accordingly, it was essential] to have songs not merely honest but also holy, which will be like spurs to incite us to pray to God and praise Him, and to mediate upon His works in order to love, fear, honor, and glorify him.”
- For church music Calvin advocated sticking strictly to the singing of the Psalms as found in the Bible which, as we know from their introductory words in the Book of Psalms, had been originally set to music and sung.
- Calvin thought plain, unembellished acapella singing was best--no instrumental accompaniment needed. He also looked with disfavor upon any four-part harmonization in singing, contending that it undermined the “unity of Christ.” Better for everyone to sing in unison.

Reiterating many of his concerns about music and church singing but also affirming them as a variation of prayer, John Calvin later wrote:

“As to public prayers there are two kinds: the one consists of words alone; the other includes music. And this is no recent invention. For since the very beginning of the church it has been this way, as we may learn from history books. Nor does St. Paul himself speak only of prayer by words of mouth, but also of singing. And in truth, we know from experience that song has a great power and strength to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a heart more vehement and ardent. One must always watch lest the song be light and frivolous; rather it should have weight and majesty, as St. Augustine says. And thus there is a great difference between the music that is made to entertain people at home and at table, and the Psalms which are sung in church, in the presence of God and his angels, There if any wish rightly to judge the kind of music presented here, we hope he will find it holy and pure, seeing that it is simply made in keeping with edification of which we have spoken whatever further use it may be put to. For even in our homes and out of doors let it be a spur to us and a means of praising God and lifting up our hearts to Him, so that we may be consoled in meditating on His virtue, His bounty, His wisdom, and His justice. For this is more necessary than one can ever tell. Among all the other things that are proper for the creation of man for giving him pleasure, music, if not the first, is among the import important, and we must consider it a gift from God expressly made that purpose. And for this reason we must be all the more careful not to abuse it, for fear of defiling or contaminating it, converting to our damnation what is intended for our profit and salvation...”

Folks, Calvin was a wide and learned man of God. Yet if we had kept completely to Calvin’s almost overly sober advice, our choir would have a pretty limited repertoire. Thank goodness, other more musically-minded leaders prevailed.

John Wesley on Singing:

- The eighteenth-century Protestant church leader John Wesley launched a bold movement which resulted in the establishment of the Methodist Church. Under his early preaching leadership, early Methodists frequently gathered for worship in outdoor tents and tabernacles so as not to exclude anyone who might be intimidated by an impressive, formal edifice or made to feel less welcome by those who are better dressed.
- Inviting men and women of all social classes across Great Britain to join together in worship, Wesley emphasized within his movement and church the dynamic interplay between faith and works. Though we are saved by God’s grace and our faith accordingly, that faith, Wesley believed, should lead us to do good works that further sanctify and anchor us in God.

- Besides being an important theologian, preacher, and teacher, John Wesley was also a prolific hymn-writer who believed in the power of sacred songs to bring sinners to Christ and repentance. Along with his brother Charles, John Wesley wrote 482 original hymns—many of them appear in our own church hymnal.
- Even as John Wesley encouraged the singing of sacred hymns, he had some very directive advice as to the best way that they should be sung so that nothing distracted from the spirit of true community in Christ.

In a hymnal that John Wesley published in 1761 for church use, he set forth on its last page seven principles to guide all Christians in their singing:

1. **Learn these tunes [from this new hymnal] before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please.**
2. **Sing them exactly as they are printed here [as presented by your hymnal], without altering or mending them at all and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.**
3. **Sing all [together; not solitary or alone] – See that you join the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up and you will find a blessing.**
4. **Sing lustily – and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half-dead or half-asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan.**
5. **Sing modestly – Do not bawl so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation that you may not destroy the harmony, but strive to unite your voices together so as to make one melodious sound.**
6. **Singing in time – Whatever time is sung, be sure to keep with it. Do not run before and nor stay behind it; but attend closely to the leading voices and move therewith as exactly as you can and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from among us and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.**
7. **Sing spiritually – Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.**

On the Value and Joy of Singing:

In July 2013, *The Week*, a British magazine, published an insightful reflection on the transformative power of singing. Entitled “When Singing is Truly Heartfelt,” the short article observed:

“As choir singers harmonize, their breathing and heartbeats synchronize in time with the music—creating a rewarding feeling of oneness. That’s the conclusion of a new study by Swedish researcher, who strapped heart-rate monitors on 15 young choral singers. The singers were asked to perform three exercises: humming, singing a popular national hymn, and chanting a mantra. Researchers found that the pulses of the singers increased and decreased together as the music’s tempo changed. When the songs required the singers to breathe in unison, their heartbeats were especially aligned. The controlled breathing that singing demands also seems to have a calming effect on signers. ‘Songs with long phrases achieve the same effect as breathing exercise in yoga,’ study author Bjorn Vickhoff of the University of Gothenburg tells The Daily Telegraph (U.K.). ‘In other words, through song we can exercise a certain control over mental states.’ The lungs and the heart communicate with the brain via the vagus nerve, which also helps regulate emotion. Vickhoff says that link could explain why group singing strengthens solidarity, not just in choirs but among football fans and work crews. ‘When you’re singing together, he says, ‘you are synchronizing with other people, and harmonizing your hearts.’”

To sum it all up, a congregation that sings together in Christ feels together, feels better, and is happier and healthier! **Amen? Amen!**