

# CHURCH MUSICIANS

Reflections on Their Call, Craft,  
History, and Challenges

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*To*

Anton Armstrong

David Cherwien

John Ferguson

Mark Sedio



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## Preface

It has often puzzled me that, in the same or adjacent years, I have been asked to speak about similar topics by people who had not talked or communicated with one another or even knew about one another. For example, I was asked in 2014–2015 to speak about justice in relation to the church’s hymnody and music for three conferences that had no affiliations or contacts with each other and were in different parts of the country. This book comes from a confluence of that sort about topics pressing upon us and calling for our consideration, though this one is a bit broader and stretches over a longer period.

In 2013 I addressed the Tallahassee (Florida) Church Music Conference. Jonathan Hehn had invited me to prepare three lectures on topics of my choosing, with the understanding that they would be primarily theological rather than musical, which I understood to mean theological reflections with their practical musical implications. I decided to run out some implications from *The Heart of the Matter*<sup>1</sup> into the practice of the church musician’s craft, which seemed suited to the assignment. After the conference Hehn asked me if I would publish the lectures. He suggested I send them to Mark Lawson at MorningStar Music Publishers. Mark Lawson looked at them and said he would like to publish them in connection with several more chapters to make a short book. I put his request on my desk with a list of other projects, but could not work on it at the time since the other ones had deadlines that made them more pressing.

In 2015 I was working on lectures I had been invited to give at Mercer University (Macon, Georgia) for a group called Polyphony: Fellowship of Pastoral Musicians. Like Hehn, Emily Andrews, at Mercer, had asked

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1. Paul Westermeyer, *The Heart of the Matter: Church Music as Praise, Prayer, Proclamation, Story, and Gift* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2001). This book was an expansion of Chapter 4 of *The Church Musician*, Revised Edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

me to prepare three lectures with a theological rather than a musical focus on topics of my choosing, which I again understood to mean theological reflections with their practical musical implications. She suggested that *The Heart of the Matter* might serve as a thematic focus. The lectures for Polyphony seemed to require that I re-work some of the material from Tallahassee for one lecture and then write two new and related ones. As I was finishing these it dawned on me that the two sets of lectures—at Mercer and at Tallahassee—grew out of the same concerns, that they fit together well with some other lectures I had recently been assigned, and that this cluster might be edited into the book Mark Lawson had requested. I explained this to him and asked if such a book might be what he had in mind. This book is the result.

I am grateful to Mark Lawson for his vision in publishing studies like this and to Tom Pearce and Kristen Schade for their skillful editing. I am also grateful to Emily Andrews, Timothy Bernard, Andrew Bruhn, Gordon Lathrop, Joshua Lindgren, David Music, Paul Richardson, Kris Rongstad, Anthony Ruff, and Mark Sedio for their gracious assistance at various points along the way. Their wise counsel and suggestions helped me think this out and articulate it far better than would have been the case without them. Mistakes remain mine.

+ + +

My doctoral dissertation was dedicated to my wife Sally, who made it possible. It was pivotal in my study. Books that followed have been dedicated to my family, doctoral advisor, teachers, colleagues, staff members, students, congregations, and choirs who helped me pursue the study of church music in more detail. The persons to whom this book is dedicated are encompassed in the dedication of the book David Music and I wrote together,<sup>2</sup> but they need to be singled out here. They are four remarkable church musicians, teachers, and colleagues with whom I worked closely for many years in the Master of Sacred Music program of Luther Seminary and St. Olaf College. In a variety of ways they provided refreshing opportunities for getting at questions like the ones that drive these reflections. They engaged in conversations, dialogue, and perceptive points of view from various angles as part of

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2. David W. Music and Paul Westermeyer, *Church Music in the United States 1760–1901* (Saint Louis: MorningStar, 2014).

their teaching, their work with me in solving administrative and other day-to-day details we had to attend to, and their splendid music-making at worship and beyond. This engagement has been of immense help in making reflections like these possible and in the teaching and learning from which they derive.

John Donne's insight that no one is an island, but that we are all a piece of the continent and a part of the main, is true in all circumstances; but its truth is especially apparent and constructively heightened when one is privileged to work with such unusually supportive colleagues. They are willing and able to pursue the heart of the matter in their daily interaction, teaching, administrative roles, and music-making—with helpful, honest, challenging, and engaging candor. This book is a symbol of my gratitude to them.

Paul Westermeyer

April 9, 2015

Commemoration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1945



# 1

## The Call to a People, Its Musicians, and Everybody Else

### A People

Even a quick scan of the Biblical witness tells you that God creates and calls a people.<sup>1</sup> Abraham went out, not by himself, but with Lot, Sarai, and the persons in Haran—called to be a nation (Genesis 12:2, 5). God called Moses to bring “my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:11). From the first chapter of Genesis it is apparent that God creates and calls a people: Adam is humankind, and the plural “them” in Genesis 1:26 is not accidental. God calls priests and prophets to serve a people. The people need a preacher, to be sure—how are they to hear without one (Romans 10:14), but the people, and not the preacher, are the focus. “The Word became flesh and lived among *us*” (John 1:14), not with *one* person, but among *us*. “Where two or three [not one] are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” says Jesus. (Matthew 18:20). “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people,” says 1 Peter (2:9).

What does this chosen people do? It gathers and scatters. It gathers in community to worship God in song around Word, Font, and Table where it receives God’s grace and mercy. Then it scatters in individuals and groups into the world to speak the Word and to be the body of Christ it has received. It goes as Christ to the neighbor, caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and prisoners; helping the wounded; seeking justice and peace; caring for the creation; pointing to and living out the unmasking of the principalities and powers; and working against

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1. Donald R. Heiges, *The Christian’s Calling* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 28–29, makes this point near the beginning of his treatment of this theme.

systems of injustice. As St. Francis said, sometimes it has to use words. Paradoxically, as it does these things, it meets Christ in the neighbor.

Focus on a people (and God's whole creation) is not our culture's norm. Though there are many wonderful things about our culture, there are some not so wonderful things, too. The culture's norm is to highlight individuals at the expense of the people. "I'm number one" is the culture's motto. "Where's mine?" is the culture's whine. The common good is commonly not a concern.

That's partly why so many differing agendas are forced on us by so many different people, with each agenda presumed to be the key to fixing everything. That's partly why we live in isolated silos where we talk only to ourselves and shut out everybody else, except that we try to get people outside our silos to do what we want them to do because everybody and everything are finally objects to be sold. That's partly

- why we think those who came before us did not know very much,
- why we presume we are the first generation to think rightly about things,
- why we think we are the first generation to experience change,
- why each of our own individual versions of change is presumed to be the only truth,
- why we are constantly at war with one another, and
- why we find it hard to collaborate.

The church is tempted to imitate these less than wonderful aspects of the culture. When you translate them into the church you get the assumption that everybody has to be a Christian and that, in the years before us, everybody in the United States, or maybe in the whole Western world, *was* a Christian.<sup>2</sup> Some people have been so traumatized by their discovery that this circumstance is clearly not the case now and never has been that they try to force everybody into the church's pews. In that process, self-preservation rather than service to the neighbor has

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2. Martin Marty, "Church Affiliation Colonial and Now," *Sightings* (115/2012), says that "20 percent of the colonial citizens were active in churches. Change came after 1776, so that, in one common estimate, church participation jumped from 17 percent to 34 percent between 1776 and 1850."

become paramount, and mission has been twisted into how to get people through the church's doors. The tool of choice for accomplishing this is music, used just the way the commercial culture uses it, as a manipulative sales jingle. Christianity becomes another product to be sold alongside all the other products we sell, and music is the way you sell it.

Self-preservation is not the church's concern. Jesus promises to be with us to the end of time (Matthew 28:20), so that's taken care of. Individual egos are not the church's concern. The good of the whole world is. There are checks and balances in community and especially in the Christian community, and nobody gets his or her own way. Manipulating people by music or any other means is the antithesis of the church's work. The church lives by grace, announces the Word and enacts it, but does not seek to force people to do what anyone thinks they should do. That's a form of work's righteousness which masquerades as mission or evangelism, but is their antithesis.

## Music

This book is about the church musician. Why begin then with a people, the community of the baptized? Because we have to get our priorities straight. The church musician is not an individual star or front page personality. The church musician serves a community, and, while virtuosity is warmly welcomed, it is not the goal. Those with lesser musical talents are also welcomed and called to develop them to the best of their abilities. In all cases, the music a church musician makes with the community of the baptized is broken to and contextualized by Word and Sacraments. Music in and of itself is not the goal. So we have to begin with the community and what that community does.

As I indicated, it does a number of things, and we need to examine them a bit more. One of the central things for most of the church most of the time (there are a few exceptions) is this: it sings. Kings, all peoples, princes, rulers, young men and women, old and young (Psalm 148:11–12), and the lowly whom God raises up (Luke 1:46–55) all sing with the whole creation (Psalm 150).

What then is music about? It is not a manipulative sales jingle calculated to get people to do something,<sup>3</sup> like join a church. It is possible

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3. Anne Morris, "Music in Worship: The Dark Side," *Practical Theology* 3:2 (2010): 203–217, has analyzed some of the deeper dangers of this temptation.

to imitate the culture and use music that way, but that is wrong and counter-productive. It may momentarily attract people—may, although that is not guaranteed. In the long run, however, it will empty the pews because people will figure out they have been duped. They will realize that the Christian faith is not about being drawn in by some kind of music or any other manipulative ploy, but is about the way of the cross, and that the Christian faith is not about what turns my crank, but about serving my neighbor.

So what then is music's purpose? The whole Biblical witness, as well as thoughtful voices from across the entire church, from the Psalms and St. Paul onward in Colossians 3:16,<sup>4</sup> tell us: it is for the glory of God and the good (edification or sanctification, depending on the tradition) of the neighbor.<sup>5</sup> There may be various emphases—on prayer, praise, proclamation, and the story the gift of music voices—but when you summarize what both the Bible and the church teach us, music is for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor.

We will return to this theme later, but for now J. S. Bach, one of our most able and summative instructors, can teach us well about this. He signed his scores "*Soli Deo Gloria*" ("to the glory of God alone"), and on the title page of the *Orgelbüchlein* just above his name, he placed this telling dedicatory couplet:

DEM HÖCHSTEN GOTT ALLEIN ZU EHREN,  
DEM NECHSTEN, DRAUS SICH ZU BELEHREN.<sup>6</sup>

My colleague Fred Gaiser paraphrases the German like this.

For the praise of the highest God,  
For the instruction of the neighbor.

As usual with Bach, there are multiple meanings here. The *Orgelbüchlein*, the "Little Organ Book," is a collection of forty-six chorale preludes for organ for the whole Church Year, originally conceived as 164 chorale preludes which "constitute virtually the entire 'classic'

4. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God."

5. I have explored this theme in greater detail in "To the Glory of God and the Good of Humanity," *CrossAccent* 22:3 (Fall/Winter 2014): 35-43.

6. For the title page clearly written out, see Johann Sebastian Bach, *The Liturgical Year (Orgelbüchlein)* (Bryn Mawr: Oliver Ditson, republished, 1933), p.iii. For a facsimile of the title page, see Johann Sebastian Bach, *Orgelbüchlein* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), p. 23. [First new US edition since Riemenschneider, 1933].

[chorale] repertory up to about 1675,<sup>7</sup> ten years before Bach was born. He wrote the *Orgelbüchlein* mostly between 1708 and 1717 while he was the organist in Weimar. He indicated on the title page that in this book a beginning organist is instructed about how to play a chorale in various ways, learning to master the pedal in the process since it is treated independently.<sup>8</sup> Then he adds the poetic couplet.

At one level Bach intends this music to be for the musical instruction of the beginning organist. Music itself is always instructive and instructed like this. But these are chorale preludes for use in church services as organists still use them, and the German couplet seems to imply more than simply the obvious instructional intent. Behind it is a deeper meaning. Like all of his music, Bach intends this too to be for the glory of God and the edification of the neighbor. Another angle of vision is supplied by Christoph Wolff who says that, “For Bach, the ultimate rationale for being a musician, that is, a performer-composer [Bach’s particular vocation], was not to pursue some sort of mental construct but ‘to make a well-sounding harmony to the honor of God and the permissible delectation of the soul’<sup>9</sup>—for God and the neighbor.

## Musicians

What then is the call of the church musician in light of the call of a people and the purpose of music? Bach helps us with that question, too. Andreas Loewe has prepared a carefully-researched and detailed description of Bach’s understanding of his vocation.<sup>10</sup> His work is a good place to begin.

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7. Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), p. 127.

### 8. *Orgelbüchlein*

*Worrine einem anfahenden Organisten  
Anleitung gegeben wird, auff allerhand  
Arth einen Choral durchzuführen, an-  
bey auch sich im Pedal studio zu habi-  
litiren, indem in solchen darinne  
befindlichen Choralen das Pedal  
gantz obligat tractiret wird.*

From the Oliver Ditson edition.

9. Wolff, p. 308f.

10. Andreas Loewe, *Johann Sebastian Bach’s St. John Passion (BWV 245): A Theological Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 21–96.

After recounting Bach's schooling and preparation<sup>11</sup> in the context of the Lutheran Reformation's development of a choral tradition in which music and preaching went hand in hand,<sup>12</sup> Loewe describes the Wittenberg theologian Abraham Calov who had made the systematization of Lutheran doctrine his life's work and had annotated the whole Bible in three volumes.<sup>13</sup> Bach owned those volumes. Calov placed "an individual's calling or vocation at the center of their spiritual journey," and Bach "identified his calling [as a] *Cappelmeister* [who was] to create musical offerings in the service of God and the church by writing and performing 'well-ordered church music to the glory of God'."<sup>14</sup>

Bach grew up with the dedication of Solomon's Temple as the frontispiece on the *Eisenach Hymnal* of 1673. "His understanding of church music was strongly shaped by the account of the dedication of the Solomon Temple in the Second Book of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 5:5–14)."<sup>15</sup> In the Calov Bible's margin of 2 Chronicles 5:13<sup>16</sup> Bach wrote, "Where there is devotional music, God with his grace is always present."<sup>17</sup> This high Lutheran regard for music should not be mistaken as a substitute for Word and sacraments, but as a complement to them in which music is tied closely to words and the Word of God.

The centerpiece of Bach's musical output, therefore, was five cycles of cantatas (we have about three hundred or two-fifths of them) meant to proclaim the Word of God in connection with the lectionary (the readings for the day), the Hymn of the Day (out of the sequences and *Leisen* Lutherans inherited, they developed a set of hymns, one for each Sunday

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11. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–29.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

16. "It was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord,

'For he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures  
forever,'

the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud."

17. *J. S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary*, ed. Robin A. Leaver (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), p. 97. For more detail about the Calov Bible, see *The Calov Bible of J. S. Bach*, ed. Howard H. Cox (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985).

and feast day of the church year), the preacher's sermon (an hour long in a three to four hour service of Holy Communion), and the libretto for a cantata (about twenty minutes in length).

Cantatas were built on the strong and characteristic link between word and music that Lutherans pursued with a proclamatory understanding. That is, Bach viewed his vocation as a call to proclaim the Word of God with music joined to words. In the Roman Catholic and Calvinist traditions, musicians might be more likely to view their vocations as related to prayer, in the Wesleyan tradition more related to story. All of these join praise to their centers.

The point here is not that Bach is the only example of a musician called to service in the church, nor that his particular embodiment of that vocation is or has been the only definition of that vocation. The point is the call to musicians itself and that Bach is an instructive example of this call of which there are many other examples. Bach's vocation was especially to compose choral music for the church with its proclamatory Lutheran emphasis. Some musicians are called to compose congregational music in the same or different traditions with the same or different emphases. Some musicians may have few vocational responsibilities as composers, though they invariably do some composing. It may be only to choose music of others, which itself is "com-posing," that is, "placing together" musical components in some fashion that forms a whole for a given service of worship. We will come back to this topic in Chapter 3.

### **The Whole Community**

The vocations of clergy and musicians need to be seen in the larger context of the whole church. We tend to see prophets and clergy as the only people who are called by God, but the Biblical vision is much larger than that. A whole people—a chosen people—is called out of bondage; that chosen people is called to follow the commandments,<sup>18</sup> and, within that whole community of call, craftspeople are called.<sup>19</sup> Bezalel, for example, is

filled with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver,

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18. Heiges, p. 30, details this.

19. See Heiges, pp. 30-31.

and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft (Exodus 31:3-5).

Oholiab is included along with “skill to all the skillful” (Exodus 31:6—see also Exodus 35:30-36:2). The skills referred to here are to be used by the men and women in their “day-to-day life in community [and] to special tasks to help advance the spiritual life of the people by the provision of a sanctuary.”<sup>20</sup> So, after giving the commandments, Moses commands the men and women to build the tabernacle with the skills and crafts they have been given and called to use—for the tent, its covering, clasps, frames, bars, pillars, bases, lampstand for the light, hangings, finely worked vestments, and on and on.<sup>21</sup> Shaping silver and bronze is part of this work as is spinning blue, purple, crimson yarns and fine linen.<sup>22</sup> It is not only musicians, therefore, who find their vocation here; so does everybody else. Bach traced his call to the Temple musicians,<sup>23</sup> but all the other crafts people and workers in the world can follow a similar tracing.

We tend to restrict call to a much too narrow field of vision.<sup>24</sup> It is not only prophets and clergy who are called; everybody is called. It is not only through some sudden individual flash of light that people are called. God calls a people. God gives individuals and families<sup>25</sup> within that people gifts, talents, and contexts through which the call also comes.

So we begin with a people in community with various roles and vocations. For the church at worship these include architects, artisans, acousticians, ushers, greeters, janitors, those who make bread and bring wine, those who decorate the church for its various seasons, those who prepare the space on Sunday morning, bulletin makers, lectors, assisting ministers, and others you may add to or subtract from this list, depending on your particular tradition and practice. The list is longer than we normally think, and it includes the central group whom we often leave out—the congregants.

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20. Heiges, p. 31.

21. See Exodus 35.

22. Ibid.

23. Loewe, p. 39.

24. For a sense of the breadth with which Christians have viewed their callings, see William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005).

25. Loewe, p. 90



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