

*both sides now*

# What Do Lutheran Pastors Treasure in a Church Musician?

by Nancy Raabe

**Both Sides Now** is a resource for both clergy and cantors. The column explores the working relationship between the pastor and the musician in a Lutheran congregation. It offers suggestions, advice, and encouragement for all parties who are committed to the sacred vocation of leading worship in today's world.

See *In Tempo*, no. 2 (2021): 27–8, for Part I of this two-part series on Carl Schalk.

**I**n the wake of the death of Carl Flentge Schalk (September 26, 1929–January 24, 2021), we continue to give thanks for his prophetic voice.

Carl Schalk was the consummate embodiment of the vocation that we all share. We remember him not just as a composer or as a church musician but as a vigorous—dare we say zealous—advocate for the church's song. This vocation describes Schalk's entire situation in life. It informed everything he did and said, from his loftiest writings to his never-ending supply of mischievous one-liners. Being an advocate for the song of the church was what he lived and breathed.

Schalk also lived out the truth that vocation is the location of cross and suffering, “the place in which the person of faith chooses sides in the ongoing combat between God and Satan.”<sup>1</sup> Did Carl Schalk choose sides?

Absolutely!

In the previous issue, we considered Schalk's perspective on what church musicians treasure in a pastor. Drawing further on the same essay, we now ask: what do Lutheran pastors treasure in a church musician?<sup>2</sup>

*“They treasure a church musician who understands that music in corporate worship is a vehicle for the common praise and prayer of the entire worshipping community.” (94)*

With worship as an activity of the gathered community, music serves “as a uniting force helping to bring together the various concerns of each individual and uniting them in the common prayer and praise of all” (94). Music can only unite “when it helps the Christian community focus attention where it belongs: on Christ and what he has done for us” (94). When it devolves into entertainment, “or when its focus is on lesser or peripheral concerns” (92), it can become a source of division. Thus, the pastor and the entire worshipping community cherish the musician who can bring people together as one in “*common supplication, adoration, and thanksgiving*” (95; italics mine).

**What does this mean?** That the impulse for the choice and presentation of music during the worship service must always be to thank and praise God in the context of the Lutheran

**The choice ... of music during the worship service must always be to thank and praise God in the context of the Lutheran understanding of the day and season.**

understanding of the day and season. This means we may not indulge in abstract music whose only purpose is to fill time and show off keyboard technique (as in a Chopin prelude or a Liszt etude) or in more contemporary classical music that plunges worshippers into the dilemma of having to decide stylistically whether they like it or not. This also means, for example, that an Ave Maria, lovely as it might be, is not appropriate for a Lutheran worship service during Advent, Christmas, or any other season.

*“They treasure church musicians who understand that music in Lutheran worship finds its most comfortable home in the liturgy.” (95)*

Schalk points out that music best serves Lutheran worship when it falls “under the discipline of the liturgy” (21), in his inspired turn of phrase. “For Lutherans, music in worship—whether congregational song or the music of choir, pastor, organ, or other instruments—is liturgical song” (95). Lutheran pastors cherish the church musician who

understands that the highest use of music in worship serves the liturgy, “the living tradition of praise, proclamation, prayer, and mutual edification” (95). For organists, this entails focusing on playing hymns and liturgical music effectively, “thereby enabling the congregation to sing with confidence and enthusiasm” (95). For choir directors it means “giving primary attention to psalms, responses, Gospel motets, offertories, [and] music to enrich congregational singing” (95).

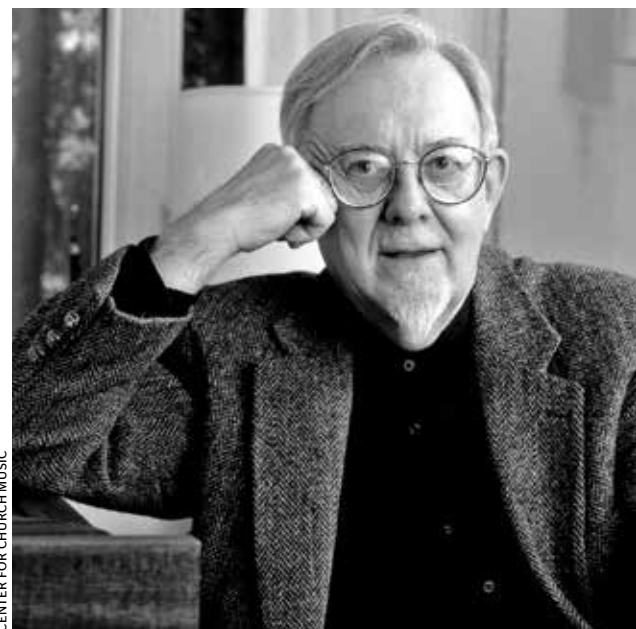
**What does this mean?** For keyboardists, that your practice time must include liturgical music. For choir directors, that the choir’s liturgical leadership allows the congregation to learn new settings more quickly and experience old ones in new ways. They will grow into their role as worship leaders, from which you may develop cantors and assisting ministers, and provide models for young people to do the same.

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***“They treasure a church musician who understands that God is praised and the faithful are edified when the Word is proclaimed through texts which speak the Gospel clearly and distinctly, and through music which in its honesty, integrity, and craftsmanship reflects the same Gospel.” (95)***

Schalk says that we neglect the living voice of the Gospel when we do not care enough about *what* is sung, or when we “forget that music is God’s gift to us to be used to the best of our ability in his praise and for his glory” (95). Worship requires the very best we can bring. The church musician must therefore help people learn to distinguish “between texts which speak the gospel with clarity and distinctness and those which blur its witness” (96), and also to discern the difference “between music which reflects the character of the Gospel in the honest integrity of its craftsmanship and music which is too ready to sacrifice those characteristics for other more immediate goals” (96).

**What does this mean?** That we can develop a simple litmus test for texts and music that serve the purposes of the Gospel. Does the text address, in some way, the resurrection of God in Jesus Christ? The redeeming gift of God’s son for a world otherwise lost in sin? The boundless compassion and infinite forgiveness that are ours in him? And does the poetry of the text lay before



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Carl Schalk’s (1929-2021) thoughts on the pastor/musician relationship—shared in this article—is a “uniting force.”

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us new revelations, unique to each worshipper, of how this is so? Where music is concerned, does the shape of the tune and the integrity of the harmony lift the text into that mysterious realm where text and tune combine in a new creation in Christ? By the example of the music we choose, worshippers can become prolific in making these subtle distinctions.





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*“They treasure a church musician who understands that the church worships best with a living musical tradition.” (97)*

This last phrase brings home the high responsibility to past, present, and future that church leaders must hold dear. “The worshipping congregation has a responsibility to all three because the faith we hold now is rooted in a past event and will come to fulfillment in the future. Singing the songs of faith which we share with the saints of the past is a vivid reminder of our unity with the church of past ages and emphasizes that fact in a way few other things can do” (97). And our songs are always being made new, as the best hymns of today will find their way into the traditions of tomorrow. “The church musician who cultivates the old and simultaneously nourishes the new is faithful to the vision of a living musical tradition in worship” (97).

*What does this mean?* Love the best of what has been handed down to us. Find new horizons of revelation as you revisit familiar hymns beloved by our worshipping bodies. Respect the deep connections that people have to those great old songs. They love them, so why shouldn’t you? At the same time, mine newer resources for texts that proclaim the Gospel in fresh ways and tunes that surprise. For it is in these “wonder full” surprises<sup>3</sup> that we always hear God’s voice.



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### Notes

1. Mark Kolden, “Luther on Vocation,” *Word and World* 3 (no. 4): 384.
2. All quotations are from Schalk’s essay “The Pastor and the Church Musician: Thoughts on Aspects of a Common Ministry.” First published in *Church Music* 80 (1980), it was reprinted four years later by Concordia Publishing House in their Church Music Pamphlet series and again in 2015 by Lutheran University Press (now part of Fortress Press) in Schalk’s collection *Singing the Church’s Song: Essays and Occasional Writings on Church Music* (89-98).
3. Herbert Brokering (words) and Carl Schalk (music), “Thine the Amen” (*ELW* 826; *LSB* 680).