



The ALCM's Congregational Song Series: That's What It's All About

by Nancy Raabe

I must begin with a disclaimer: As Publications Chair of ALCM, I am neither impartial nor unbiased when it comes to the subject of the Congregational Song Series. For whenever I ponder this tremendous legacy of live hymn festival recordings spearheaded by former ALCM administrator Tom Leeseberg-Lange, I become impassioned all over again about our organization's mission and purpose. In many and various ways, on track after track, we are invited into an encounter with the jubilant song of the assembly as led by some of our finest and most creative musicians.

In so doing, we find perfect expression of the chief goal of ALCM as articulated on our web site: to inspire each member "to excel in the exalted task of leading members of the Body of Christ in praise of their Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier" and to create worship experiences which proclaim the risen Christ in our midst. Selected highlights follow.

Congregational Song Series #2: The Book · The Meal · The Song

Recorded live at the 1995 national ALCM conference in Denver, this stirring disc documents a hymn festival under the artistic leadership of composer and organist Donald Busarow, who retires as choir director from Wittenberg University at the end of the current school year and whose legacy includes a rich body of work of music geared to the assembly. Also featured on the disc are choir directors Karle Erickson and Mark Mummert.

In "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," Busarow urges the gathering to vigorous, full-throated song. Busarow's majestic arrangement of "Thy Strong Word" is set up by a haunting introduction for trumpets and organ and recurring transitions which create the necessary space and scope for the arresting images of darkness pierced by light in Martin Franzmann's chiseled text. "The Lord's

My Shepherd; I'll Not Want" constitutes a primer in sensitive congregational singing: A single voice begins, the assembly gradually joins and the second verse allows the gathering to proclaim the text unaccompanied in full harmony.

In "Come With Us, O Blessed Jesus" Busarow demonstrates throughout how the organ can be used to support and encourage the people's song, always with humility and never calling attention to itself. His conception of "Now the Silence" includes an extended contemplative prelude for flute and organ, and infuses the hymn with a surprising urgency. And Busarow's timeless arrangement of "Praise My Soul, the King of Heaven" arches toward heaven with glorious brass and the giving-over of the gathering to the awe of worship: "Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise with us the God of grace!"

Congregational Song Series #3: Sing! A Hymn Sing led by Alice Parker



Recorded live in 1998 at Gettysburg Seminary, this disc invites us to experience the beauty and communicative power of the human voice, the subject of Alice Parker's life and work. Here we are given the opportunity to enter into the engaging way she works with congregations, on the spot, to create living, breathing entities out of the union of music and text.

A hallmark of her ministry lies in her tremendous attentiveness to the words we sing, and the *human* way in which they find expression in music. "Singing a melody is like a leaf on the sea," she tells her gathering at Gettysburg. "We never let it come all firm and legato. It's all these little dips and lifts, and dips and lifts."

Light and life are essential to Christ-centered song. In “Lord Jesus Christ, Be Present Now,” she urges her gathering to “Think recorders. Don’t think trombones!” Working through “Jesus Shall Reign,” she exclaims that “You can never become bored with hymn singing if you recognize *all* of these expressive possibilities, if you really respond to the character of the melody and what the words are telling us through that melody.” Just listen to the spine-tingling way she gets her gathering to preach this line in verse 4: “The prisoners LEAP to lose their chains.” Hearing this, you will never sing it the same again.

And in “How Firm a Foundation” she weaves out of the tune a magnificent multi-layered canon. Afterward she tells them, “It’s an incredible miracle of the Lord that, with our bodies, we can make that kind of sound—that we can offer up that kind of praise.”

Congregational Song Series #4: The Lutheran Chorale: Paul Manz, Martin Marty

Recorded at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Luke in Chicago in 1999 with the Valparaiso University Chorale, directed by Christopher Cock, this hymn festival, with commentary by Martin Marty, lifts up the legacy of one of the church’s brightest lights, the beloved composer and organist Paul Manz, who died last fall at the age of 90. In his last major public performance, Manz shows us in a dazzling variety of ways how music can function theologically to proclaim the text in a way that transcends the limitations of verbal discourse.

The booklet includes a powerful essay on the Lutheran chorale by Carl Schalk. “At the heart and center of Lutheran musical tradition stands the chorale,” Schalk writes, that body of congregational song (texts and melodies) which developed in the early years of the Lutheran Reformation, enabling the congregation to participate more directly in the liturgy in their own language and in a musical form particularly suited to congregational singing.”

Nearly 500 years later, the chorale remains today “the central music treasure of the church” just as it was then. If we are ever inclined to forget this, we may return to this disc as a welcome reminder.

“Oh, That I Had a Thousand Voices” features classic, stirring Manz introductions and transitions that bring home the central truth in Johann Mentzer’s text of worship as humble, awed adoration of God. “Savior of the Nations, Come” features the organ alone on verse 5, another classic Manz trademark which permits music itself

to proclaim theology. Here we pass unforgettably, with Christ himself, through his miraculous journey: “He leaves heaven to return; traveling where dull hellfires burn; riding out, returning home as the Savior who has come.” (This version of v. 5 is from the *LBW*; the *LSB*, *LW* and *CW* have different translations. The *ELW* omits the verse altogether.)

The organ functions theologically in a similar manner in “Break Forth, O Beauteous Light” when it joins the previously unaccompanied assembly only on the final line as we experience Christ breaking Satan’s power and assuring us eternal peace; in “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright!” when the zimbelstern glistens in quick shafts of light at the beginning, and as the organ heralds the exultation of verse 5, “What joy to know when life is past, the Lord we love is first and last, the end and the beginning!”; and in Manz’s introduction for “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” which sculpts for us a towering pyramid of sound, building gradually to an overwhelming affirmation for the entrance of the assembly’s song.

Congregational Song Series #8: Alleluia, Voices Raise

Finally, for the purposes of this survey, there is the 2003 hymn festival at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, *Alleluia, Voices Raise*, devoted to the original hymns and concertato settings of the late Richard Hillert.

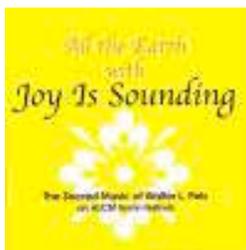
Hillert may not be as widely known outside Lutheran circles as is Manz, but he has left perhaps a greater imprint on the life of the church through his hymns and liturgical music. For more than three decades millions of American Lutherans have experienced the breaking of the Lenten fast only when the assembly erupts into the joyful song of Hillert’s 1975 festival canticle “Worthy Is Christ,” known to many as “This Is the Feast.” This disc features organist Martin Jean in a dizzying three-minute swirl of triplets that prepares the assembly to sing this canticle with all the fervor and pent-up excitement of the liturgical event itself. Those who were not looking at their program booklet would not have known until nearly two and a half minutes in where this hair-raising introduction was leading. The clarity that suddenly strikes, at the moment when the pedals articulate the main theme in the midst of all this, constitutes a matchless encounter with the divine.

Memorable as well on this disc is the inspired extended introduction to the title hymn, which leads into the assembly’s stirring proclamation of the text and no doubt accounts for the power and focus of the unison singing that follows. Hillert colors his setting of “When

in the Hour of Deepest Need” with expressive harmonic brushstrokes and instrumental touches: after a full stop following verse 2, the strings enter alone at the beginning of verse 3 and shroud the singing in a halo of shimmering sound.

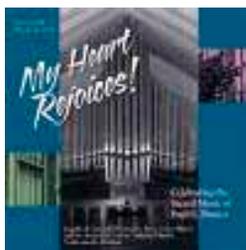
The recording closes fittingly on a note of humility with Hillert’s setting of Susan Cherwien’s “Image of the Unseen God,” a stirring original musical conception that draws out the mystery of Cherwien’s interpretation of the Colossians text with its first note, a downbeat, on the major seventh of the scale (has such a bold move ever been before attempted in congregational song?). In classic Hillert-ian fashion, the melody quickly moves to the flat seventh of the scale and, with utter persuasiveness, finally home again along a course that no one else could have charted.

Other recordings in the Congregational Song Series are:



Joy Is Sounding, Congregational Song Series #5: A hymn festival at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio in 2001 featuring the music of Walter Pelz with Pelz at the organ and commentary by Walter Bouman. Lynda Hasseler directs the Capital University Chapel Choir.

So Much to Sing About, CSS #6: A hymn festival at the Meyerson Symphony Center in Dallas, Texas in 2001 featuring the hymns of Jaroslav Vajda, with organist David Schack, narrator Paul Westermeyer and choir director Donald Rotermund.



My Heart Rejoices!, CSS #7: A hymn festival at St. Lorenz Lutheran Church, Frankenmuth, Michigan in 2001, celebrating the sacred music of Paul Bunjes with organist Steven Wente, conductor Charles Brown and narrator John Zeile.

From the Heart to the Heavens, CSS #9: A hymn festival at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2004 featuring composer and keyboardist John Schwandt, liturgist Emily Brink and choir director Pearl Shangquan.

Thankful Hearts and Voices Raise, CSS #10: A recording devoted to the music of Ronald Nelson released in 2008, which features an array of Minneapolis-area choirs and conductors.

The first recording in the CSS series was the popular *When In Our Music*, a hymn festival recorded at Central Lutheran, Minneapolis, in 1994 featuring St. Olaf College’s John Ferguson and Anton Armstrong. It is out of print, but ALCM hopes to reissue it soon.

Also available from ALCM are *Behold the Lamb of God*, a disc featuring the Jubilate Choir of Valparaiso, Indiana, led by William Ickstadt; and the DVD *Empowered to Join the Song*, a 25-minute video designed to be a resource useful for congregations of any denomination as the beginning step towards understanding the opportunities and responsibility for the children in their midst, which includes scenes from worship preparation, rehearsals, worship, and camp life coupled with interviews from choristers, college counselors, directors and other support personnel. The intent is to help children, ages 5-18, to become and remain life-long worship participants.

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