

**Remarks of Nancy M Raabe
2015 Good Shepherd Institute**

“The role Bill and I have had in promoting and creating new music for the church”

Patronage of the arts has been indispensable to the creation of art since ancient times. Beneficiaries over the ages included Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Shakespeare, and later Mozart and Beethoven to some degree. By the mid-19th century, Western European culture had moved away from patronage to forms of *public* support for arts organizations, a system that continues today, e.g., with university employment.

Where has that left composers for the church, all of whom tend to be overworked and underpaid?

That’s where our commissioning project comes in. Over the past 25 years, Bill and I have commissioned nearly 80 hymn-based and compositions from Lutheran composers and hymn writers. What we do can be seen as a form of patronage, but one with a unique twist: Our desire is not only to support composers, but even more to help the church reconnect with its past, revitalize its present, and ensure its future. We do this by encouraging composers in their sacred vocation to contribute to the body of great music for use in Lutheran worship.

The system we developed emerged gradually in what seems *now* like a very organic way.

Before we were married, when Bill was singing with the Master Singers of Milwaukee, the choir ran into a performance problem in a Shakespeare song by Dominick Argento. So a member of the group volunteered to call him up at the University of Minnesota and ask for help. We all were amazed to learn that he answered the phone and spoke with us, and this helped Bill to realize that composers were actually approachable people.

Our first commission was from a longtime friend, Gary Foxe of Milwaukee, to celebrate the recovery by our sister-in-law from a life-threatening illness. This project turned out very well, and the idea began to form in our minds of commissioning music from Lutheran composers on a more regular basis.

Through singing in hymn festivals and attending conferences of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, we became acquainted not only with the music of many Lutheran composers, but with the composers themselves, and we developed working relationships with many of them.

Our second commission was from David Cherwien on “God Who Made the Earth and Heaven,” and we found him to be very friendly and receptive to the idea. Quickly we engaged with other composers, both better- and less well-known. Among the best represented on our chart are Don Busarow with 5 commissions, Bob Hobby with 6, Charles Ore with 8, John Behnke with 9, and Kevin Hildebrand with 15...and counting!

How do we arrive at pieces to be commissioned?

In terms of liturgical season, we might indicate to a composer that there's plenty on Christmas but not much on Advent, Epiphany, Ascension or Christ the King. Or where hymn writers are involved, we might suggest that they work on a text in an under-served area, such as Christian marriage, grief, or the life of the Christian community.

We ask the composer to name a fee, which often turns on the length of the piece and the forces used. We request only to craft the dedication line, and perhaps to allow us a performance or two from the manuscript.

Our commissions tend to be designed for weekly worship in medium-sized congregations with capable but not professional choirs. Almost all involve congregational participation.

The commissions tend to fall into four types:

- 1) The largest group involves hymns from the traditional Lutheran canon that the world seems to be moving beyond and leaving behind. Our desire is to maintain that legacy and make sure we don't lose it. A typical example is "Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain" by Paul Weber.
- 2) Then there are those projects in which we work with the composers on ideas: We might ask, "Could you write something on this?" and they might say, "Well, how about this?" In this category, Bob Hobby of Trinity English here in Fort Wayne, with whom we'd worked before, came to us asking for support for a collection of hymn settings for funerals that Augsburg Fortress was asking for: It might be 10 or so easy-to-medium-level pieces, not complicated, and could be put to use for 5 minutes or 20 minutes as conditions demanded. The collection became a big hit, and in fact the series now has three volumes. In our correspondence Bob called them "Songs to Die For" but the actual name of the series is "For All the Saints," which now boasts three volumes.
- 3) A third category is when the idea for a hymn setting happens to come to us on a sort of personal whim, and we think, "There should be something on that."
- 4) We were also interested in hymns new to our hymnals that could use a boost. "Jesus Has Come and Brings Pleasure" by Donald Busarow was one of these. We love this hymn and wanted to give it broader exposure. Don's concertato included parts for French horn and baritone solo – which happen to be Bill and my own primary instruments. So when we first saw the manuscript we said, "That's us!"

This has been a wonderful and rewarding process. We are happy that we have been able to be instruments of God in helping bring about music that might not otherwise have been written.

A few other observations:

- We don't typically give deadlines to the composers because these usually aren't commissions for specific events such as retirements and ordinations. Because of this, sometimes the piece falls to the bottom of the composer's to-do list, and it is a long wait.

- We have enjoyed working with younger composers who need encouragement. We might say, “Keep at it, this is something you are good at,” or “You’re good at organ pieces, now try a choral anthem.”
- We have our favorites: One is Charles Ore’s “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright,” which his wife told us that he considered to be his best piece. Another is Don Busarow’s “Lord, Thee I Love With All My Heart.” A new favorite is Kevin’s “Let All Together Praise Our God” that we sang last night--just wonderful, Kevin!

How can one encourage other composers and patrons to do the same?

- Support your local musician. After an uplifting prelude or hymn setting, drop a hint, “Why don’t you write that one down and share with others?”
- Commissioning requires financial resources, so you might identify a potential donor or two to support your congregation’s first commission. Or put a Commissions Fund on your congregation’s Giving Wish List.
- If your congregation is involved in so-called “contemporary worship,” tell your musician that “We need new contemporary repertory that measures up in terms of Lutheran theology and Lutheran liturgical worship.”

Here in fact is a chance to take the old and make it new: If there’s been a generation in which we’ve lost the focus on our Lutheran legacy, we can bring these pieces of the canon back and present them as new. That’s a nice challenge, to *reintroduce* the chorales. Composers are in a great position to do that!

The church owns a rich inventory of hymns, anthems, organ pieces, and much more. But new times and new opportunities require that we work to celebrate what we have and develop some new ideas. With encouragement and support, composers will lead this on-going effort. A commissioning project like ours can be rewarding in so many ways.