

both sides now

Singing Theologically

by Nancy Raabe

Recently I got to thinking about how people engage in worship. What moves them, what touches them, what keeps them coming back? And more to the point for us church musicians,

What keeps choir members engaged?

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This train of thought was sparked by a thoughtful discussion on Facebook earlier this year about how hard it is to get choir members to commit to regular rehearsals.

The gist of that discussion was: how many times have we double checked with our choristers or their parents to make sure everyone remembers the big dates, only to learn at the last minute that something has come up for key singers and they can't be there? That leaves us scrambling, adjusting, rewriting, either trying to find a way to make Plan A still work or going hastily to Plan B. About choir attendance, various tactics have been tried and found wanting. The conclusion of the thread seemed to be that "people are doing the best they can," or as one person put it with more than a hint of resignation, "Such can be the vicissitudes of modern times."

This led me to wonder whether our singers' inability to make a deeper commitment to participating in choir could have to do with what people are—or aren't—getting out of the entire experience of music in worship.

There is joy in singing, joy in lifting one's voice as part of a larger body.

Of course, for choir members there is joy in singing, joy in lifting one's voice as part of a larger body, joy in knowing you are leading the congregation's song. But if we sign on to the thinking that evoking emotions is the leading sign of effective worship, we could be completely missing the boat. The higher ideal we strive for transcends emotion, which could affect the commitment to being part of a church choir.

Emotion has to do with personal experience.

Some have argued that experiencing strong feelings in worship unites people in their faith. But who can have the same emotional reaction to something? In fact, emotions separate us from others around us. No one can have the same emotional reaction because the degree and nature of your emotion is based on your own life experiences. I sometimes look over at my husband as we are watching a show or a movie to find him in tears, when I was just sitting there like a lump. What was he feeling about which I had no clue?

The best example I can think of is a former parishioner whose face I saw streaked with tears as we were singing "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus." When I inquired after the service about her reaction, she said, "Oh, I always cry at that hymn because we sang it at my father's funeral." That's a reaction

that no one else present could possibly have had, and it's one that effectively sequestered her from the worshipping body because of the extreme personal nature of her association.

So what do we strive for? What brings us together in worship or rehearsal?

Answer: our conviction of the risen Christ, our awareness of the movements of the Holy Spirit, our praise of the magnificence and splendor of God—these are experiences that unite us, because the triune God comes to us most powerfully *as* the gathered body or as musicians preparing to lead the gathered body.

If this could be front and center in our experience of church choir, I wonder whether people would be so casual about skipping a rehearsal or singing date in favor of some other engagement that has come up *since* they made the commitment to prepare for a piece on a given Sunday.

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Quiz

How Well Do You Know Chorales?

Quiz Answers on page 43

How, then, is this accomplished?

Through what I am sure many of you are already doing: in your rehearsals, focus first and foremost on the text. Talk (briefly!) about why you are singing a piece, and how, specifically, it serves to deepen our faith. Give illustrations showing what the composer was trying to accomplish. After all, they chose that text for a reason, and they certainly did their best to bring to their setting an awareness of God's activity through that particular lens.

This may help you to choose music wisely, as well. If you can't fathom what insights a given piece has that you could open to the choir, search for a piece whose theological integrity you can argue for eloquently. And if the composer or text-writer is still alive, ask them. People are not hard to find, and I am sure they'd be happy to correspond with you.

Share your thoughts with me; I'd love to hear them. In the meantime, abundant blessings on all that lies ahead for your ministry!



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Previously she served as music director at congregations in Wisconsin and Ohio. She has written a three-volume set of *One-Minute Devotions for the Church Musician* (St. Louis, MO: MorningStar, 2010-12) based on readings for all three lectionary cycles.

1. Who invented the chorale?
 - a. Martin Luther, of course
 - b. Josquin des Prez
 - c. Paul Speratus
 - d. Michael Praetorius
2. For a hymn to be a chorale, it must be:
 - a. Lutheran.
 - b. originally in German.
 - c. polyphonic and metrical.
 - d. written before Bach's death (1750).
3. If J. S. Bach wrote the pieces, why is the famous collection called the "Schübler Chorales"?
 - a. They were first published by a master engraver in the town of Schübler, Germany.
 - b. They were published by a former student of Bach's named Johann Georg Schübler.
 - c. "Schübler" is a colloquial German word for "greatest hits."
4. Which chorale mentions one's heart breaking for sorrow?
5. Which chorale's original text called on God to "curb the Turk's and papists' sword"?
6. Which chorale tune did Paul Simon use for his 1973 song "American Tune"?
7. Name Paul Manz's signature chorale motet.
Hint: it's on an ALCM CD of Lutheran chorales, made in 1999 at Valparaiso with Paul Manz, organist, and Martin Marty, narrator. Still too hard? Hint: it's for Advent, with a text from Revelation.
8. Which is the "queen of chorales"?
9. Which is the "king of chorales"?
10. Why does Philipp Nicolai get to have *his* hymns named the "king" and "queen" of chorales?
 - a. He paid off the local Protestant duke for the honor.
 - b. Martin Luther said so.
 - c. He wrote verses of monumental light and life out of the horrors of monumental Black Death loss.
 - d. Shakespeare later used them in two of his history plays.