

## featured interview

# Carl Schalk

## Wisdom across the Ages

by Nancy Raabe

As God's people, gathered around Word and Sacrament, we sing. But the song is not primarily *our* song, but the *Church's* song. Of course *we* sing, but in worship we sing as a community of faith, joining together with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven. It is a song sung by all the faithful who have gone before us, and a song that will continue after we are gone. It is a song that, in our own time and place, we are privileged to join. It is a song in which proclamation, teaching, and praise interweave in a tapestry of music unique to the Church. At the heart and center of that song is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

**W**ho wrote these words? Faithful practitioners of and fans of Lutheran church music over the past half-century will know it can be only one person: Carl Flentge Schalk, composer, conductor, professor, author, radio personality, and lecturer extraordinaire.

Schalk died on January 24, 2021, but that doesn't keep us from wondering what he is doing now.

In our All Saints service last year, many of us heard the vision in Revelation 7 of the multitudes gathered before the throne of the Lamb, proclaiming that great truth which defied the iron fist of the Roman empire and its cultic emperor worship: "Salvation belongs to *our* God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

(Rev. 7:10b; NRSV; emphasis added).

Schalk is surely among these multitudes. Yet we can be fairly certain he is not resting on his laurels—or rather, on his palm branches. "I keep saying the same things over and over again," he once half-apologized.<sup>2</sup> That is most certainly true, all who knew him would agree. So why would death stop him?

Therefore, as we mark the third anniversary of his death, let's imagine Schalk imparting nuggets from his trove of churchly wisdom to whomever will listen. This "interview" is drawn from various sources and unpublished interviews between Carl and me, and these are his own words.

### The Christian Life in a Nutshell: Salt, Light, Leaven

I am neither optimistic nor am I pessimistic about the future of the church. But like anything else in the Christian life, you live in hope—which is not a cop-out. If there are three scriptural images that say to me how Christians are to live in the world, it is salt, light, and leaven. You only need a little bit of salt. One ray of light brightens the darkness. One little lump of yeast leavens the whole loaf. So every church musician, where they are, ought to be that.<sup>3</sup>



### The Vocation of the Composer

God is praised when the Gospel is proclaimed; and the proclamation of the Gospel is the way Christians rightly praise God. ... To help the Church proclaim that Gospel is the privilege and responsibility of the composer for the Church. To proclaim the Gospel means to tell the story of salvation—or at least that significant part of the story which the particular time, season, festival, or commemoration might suggest. Moreover, to tell the story does not mean to tell *about* the story, but to tell it, the story of how God accomplished our salvation.<sup>4</sup>

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## Advice for Composers: Start Small

In Wausau [WI, where Schalk served at Zion Lutheran from 1952 to 1958] I wrote a few little descants, and stuff you do for necessity. I was not writing big pieces. That's one thing I don't often see. If someone has any talent for writing at all, immediately they think, "I'm going to write some big splashy piece," and then think, "Now, who will publish this?" Don't worry about it. If it's worthwhile, if it's worth publishing, if it's worth a wider distribution, you will find somebody. But you don't start by looking at a publisher's catalog and say "What are they weak in? I'll write something to fit that." What you ought to be doing is concentrating on writing music for the forces that you have available. That makes so much more sense. However, it's not always going to ensure that you get published, because sometimes your forces are peculiar to your situation.<sup>5</sup>

## The "Anthem" Should Be Liturgical

The bulk of the music which is in print is not designed for Lutheran liturgical worship, and in many ways is antithetical to the kind of thing you ought to be doing in a Lutheran service.<sup>6</sup>

[Instead,] music in the liturgy is indeed a proclaimer of the Word. Music is not just a mood setter or a tool to be used for a variety of other purposes. ... Proclaiming the good news of the Gospel means saying and singing

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explicitly of what God has done for us. It means telling the story of salvation in a way appropriate to the particular Sunday or festival. It does not mean saying or singing any kind of "religious" words, repeating moral platitudes, or voicing amorphous religious statements. It means telling the story of salvation. To put that into practice will necessitate a sea change in the repertoire of church choirs and congregations.<sup>7</sup>

Paul Bouman and I once did an all-day workshop at Concordia, Ann Arbor [MI]. For the last session we told people to bring 50 copies of something you have found to be very useful in your church, and we will have a reading session. Paul and I got in the car afterward and shook our heads: everything we'd said about what the choir should be doing in

worship was destroyed by the music that they brought. It was the music they felt their choirs really liked. There was no effort on their parts to say, "We need to help people experience things that maybe they haven't experienced and maybe learn to love them."<sup>8</sup>

## The Hymn of the Day

Its purpose is to help focus on the central theme of the particular Sunday or festival of the church year being celebrated. ... As the *chief hymn* in the service, it reflects the central thrust of the proclamation for the day.<sup>9</sup>

Here's my thesis: If you have ten choices on any given Sunday, you've lost the idea of the effect of repetition and growing into that practice. One of the things that has contributed to this is the three-year lectionary. There's no way you're going to dislodge it. But you can have one single hymn of the day, such as "*Christ lag in Todesbanden*" for Easter—one



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hymn across the three years for a particular Sunday even though the Gospel lessons are different. I don't want to disjoin the tie between the Hymn of the Day and the Gospel lesson; I want to expand the concept of what the Gospel lesson is proclaiming to include all the lessons and to say, “Here is a hymn which encapsulates this day, and it will work for all three years.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Gospel Motets: Liturgical Music for Choir**

[In 2012 Schalk completed a set of four-part motets set to excerpts from the Gospel readings for specific Sundays. It was a continuation of the long German tradition of *Evangelienmotetten* that Carlos Messerli describes as “the polyphonic setting of a text taken from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.”<sup>11</sup> Schalk

collected thirty-five of his original fifty into a spiral-bound collection that remains unpublished.]

If you look at the history, Gospel motets have been a disaster from a publishing point of view. Yet they have a clear liturgical purpose. They must flow right out of the reading. “And Jesus said ...,” the choir stands and goes right into it. Ideally what should eventually happen is that a congregation

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## At the heart and center of that song is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

should at some point be so used to the idea of a Gospel motet interrupting the readings, or repeated after the reading is completed, that they get so used to the idea that it isn't a novelty. And that can only happen if they are used more than infrequently. The one day where we [at Grace, River Forest, IL] do it every year is during the processional gospel on Palm Sunday: "and they cried out, 'Hosanna!'"<sup>12</sup>

### All Staff Should Participate in Worship Planning

When Paul Bouman was in charge at Grace—I was his assistant from 1971 to 1997—sometimes he would direct and I would sing, or vice-versa. We always met together to plan the music with Dean Lueking [former pastor at Grace, River Forest]. He said, "Here's what I'm going to preach about," and we'd say, "How about this or that." It's so much better if everyone knows what is going on. Now, references from the pulpit to music are few and far between. There is such a rich connection that could be made if the staff worked together in this way.<sup>13</sup>

In worship we sing as a community of faith, joining together with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven. It is a song sung by all the faithful who have gone before us, and a song that will continue after we are gone. It is a song that, in our own time and place, we are privileged to join. ... At the heart and center of that song is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>



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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.

Photos pp. 42, 44, and 46: Tasha Schalk.  
Photo p. 43: courtesy Nancy Raabe.

### Endnotes

1. "The Church's Song: Proclamation, Pedagogy and Praise," in *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns*, ed. Joseph Herl, Peter C. Reske, and Jon D. Vieker, vol. 2 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2019), 123.
2. Interview with the author, July 26, 2012.
3. Interview.
4. "The Church and the Composer," in Schalk's *Singing the Church's Song: Essays & Occasional Writings on Church Music* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2015), 224.
5. Interview.
6. Interview.
7. "Learning from the Past," in *Singing the Church's Song*, 124.
8. Interview.
9. *The Hymn of the Day and Its Use in Liturgical Worship*, Church Music Pamphlet Series (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1983), 5.
10. Interview.
11. Carlos Messerli, "Gospel Motet," in *Key Words in Church Music*, ed. Carl Schalk (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2004), 273.
12. Interview.
13. Interview.
14. "The Church's Song," 123.