

# Music Discernment Committee

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## REPORTS

Providing insights into the music ministry of Church of the Redeemer

*Our voice does not come from deep within us but rather emerges in the give-and-take of listening and speaking to others. We go to church to sing together and to listen to the Word. We go, in other words, to find our voice.*

*It is often said that the church is the people, not the place, but it also needs to be said that the church is not just the physical presence of the people. The church is the space made by the people's voices.*

*Stephen Webb The Divine Voice*

BY PETER VANDERVEEN

Why do we have music at all as part of our church life? It's a reasonable question and probably not pondered enough. Most likely, few among us have ever been members of a church that had no music at all: no singing, no organ, no anthems. Music has been a given, and, therefore, its place and value have neither been examined nor appreciated.

Part of the testimony of Scripture, however, is that music is irreplaceable. The psalms are songs of both lament and praise. Paul's letters are filled with hymns. The prophets spoke of God's kingdom as a time of exuberant singing, the lifting of words to the highest expression possible. That music is irreplaceable is also noticeable in our own time by its presence almost everywhere we go. Music is no longer reserved for concert halls. It's played in restaurants and stores and gyms and even elevators. We often drive to music and even walk through nature trails with our ear buds firmly in place.

The noted church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, wrote: "Of all the arts, the one that has had the most continuous positive relation with Christian faith and theology is music... there has never been a time, since Jesus and his disciples sang the Passover hymn in the upper room on the night of his betrayal (Matthew 26:30) that music and verse did not figure

prominently in Christian life and worship." (The Melody of Theology) Yet it has always been clear that music serves the church. It is not the church that serves music.

- **Within our worship**, the role of music is to support and enhance the liturgy, leading the congregation to a finer and deeper experience of the mystery and beauty of God's presence with us.
- **In Christian formation**, music provides a rich foundation for faith (think of the hymns and anthems you know by heart or remember from years gone by).
- **As a form of outreach** to the community, music offers an experience of Sabbath and peace, revealing the richness of creation and the expansiveness of human skill, expression, and emotion.

The key is finding the right form and balance of musical expression for the distinct community that gathers as the church, which is a task that should always be under revision. In 2003, the Rev. Peyton Craighill wrote an essay entitled *Worship, Music, and Christ's Mission for Church of the Redeemer*. It was his response to the Strategic Plan published that year, and, seven years later, his reflections are just as timely. One section is particularly pertinent.

Among its many gifts, music possesses two great powers—the power of transformation and the power of incorporation.

Music is often called the language of heaven. Perhaps more than in any other experience, it has power to raise us out of the ordinariness of life to a new level of being. In worship, it is a magnificent means for opening us to the glory of God in our midst.

Music also possesses unique power to bring a collection of individuals into community. A great attribute of music is that, except in the case of an unaccompanied solo, it is profoundly corporate. Nowhere is the need for the total surrender of the self to the action of the whole more important than in music.

In the Eucharist, both these gifts are used to enhance the experience of worship. In worship, music is both transformative and incorporating. For assembly-centered worship, music's power to incorporate is most obvious. A congregation is never more united than when it is singing. Yet the transformative aspect is also of great importance. At a Christmas Eucharist, as a congregation sings *Silent Night*, it is united—but also transformed.

As we reflect on corporateness in worship, we need to consider the contribution of the choir and choir music. In the nineteenth century when vested choirs became prominent, they tended to emphasize the division between worship leaders and congregation. In music, too often

choirs became performers *for* rather than supporters *of* the congregation. As corporateness in worship grows in importance, how do we find the proper balance between the corporative and the transformative functions of music? It is easy to employ readily singable music that encourages the whole congregation to participate. But such music may become so prosaic that it loses its transformative power. Yet music that is closest to heaven may be so difficult that it can only be sung by well-trained choirs.

One answer to this dilemma is to recognize that the choir can approach the more difficult music in two different spirits. One is in a spirit of display. The choir puts on its performance primarily to impress the congregation. The other is a spirit of servanthood. The choir that is trained serves the assembly as a whole by enabling all present to "...lift up their hearts to the Lord" through music.

When does choir music move from the display side of the line to the servanthood side? Only through awareness of the issue, prayerful thought, and continuing experiment can the proper balance be found between music that supports the congregation in its singing and music that serves the congregation through the trained singing of the choir.

Music has an unquestionable place within our ministries. Our responsibility is to find the way in which music helps us become a stronger and broader community of faith.

*The human voice is at the heart of all sound this side of heaven... In the consummation of creation, even nature will be given a voice to praise God. As Isaiah writes, "the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (55:12). The sounds of heaven will not be an ear-splitting cacophony of a roaring*

*Babeldom but the uplifting harmonies of a community that speaks "as those who are taught" (Isaiah 50:4). If noise lies at one extreme of sound, then choral music lies at the other. And if all sound echoes the Word spoken by God in Jesus Christ, then the choral music of heaven will accompany the solo of Jesus' voice, and all noise will be joyful.*

Stephen Webb *The Divine Voice*




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Members of the MDC are listed below, with their email address. Please feel free to contact them—in the mode of discernment. Your voice and contribution will help us build a stronger church and a more cohesive set of ministries.

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