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Information vs. Formation in the Training of Church Musicians

QUENTIN FAULKNER

The inexorable erosion of purpose in the formation of U.S. clergy—which is of course a reflection of the current malaise in U.S. religious life—is both well established and well-documented. An article by Paul Wilkes in *The Atlantic Monthly* reveals the uneasy situation in U.S. seminaries of all denominational stripes:

The issue of personal spirituality of Protestant clergy has traditionally hardly ever been addressed in seminaries, and has not until recently been considered especially relevant. . . . faculty appointments are often made on the basis not only of scholarship but also of outlook. Religious beliefs are hardly considered. As for religious practice—attending or working in a local church? Please! . . . The curriculum is said to be driven not by what congregations might need but by what the seminarian wants or demands or thinks he or she needs to be an effective professional, as well as by faculty members' interest in areas of their own specialization (Wilkes, 72-86).

Dr. Donald Webster expressed one effect of this malaise on church music and musicians in a lecture at the 1997 Three Choirs Festival in Hereford, England:

. . . of more immediate concern to musicians has been the fact that a high proportion of recent recruits to the ministry . . . have been either unaware of or are unsympathetic to the Church's great musical traditions or are unconcerned about standards of linguistic beauty (Webster, 19).

That same erosion of purpose is apparent in the formation of church musicians. Church music curricula impart information and teach particular skills: they offer organ and voice lessons, choral conducting, instruction in worship, and so forth. But spiritual formation is, if anything, less addressed in the training of church musicians than in the training of clergy. By "spiritual forma-

tion" I mean nothing less than the fostering of Christian faith as understood from a musical perspective, the framework that gives the "information" both matrix and meaning. It may be the case, therefore, that church musicians embark upon their careers and ministries with a love of music, both organ and choral, but with either a weak sense of their calling as church musicians, or with a profound religious naïveté that, by its refusal to countenance ambiguity, blocks growth in faith and can result in rapid burnout. This is truly a regrettable state of affairs, for in times such as ours even the most committed and astute church musicians are constantly confronted with situations and demands that threaten their standards and try their sense of calling. The words of a writer to the editor of the most recent issue of the Westminster Choir College Alumni Newsletter will illustrate what I mean:

In a 10-year stint as director of music at All Angel's Episcopal Church in New York City, it became necessary to meet and master "The Praise Song." Over the years, I read through more than 4,000 of the creatures, discarding about 3,600 instantly for sins of lyric, melody, and/or theology. The other 400 or so entered my database, and about 250 showed up in worship services at least once. The following is a short list of 20 songs I consider to be among the most palatable; it might serve as an introduction to the genre and/or a quick and easy way to locate a few songs which might bless and inspire your congregation, get the clergy and lay leadership off your back, yet allow you to maintain some musical standards in your program.

Perhaps a brief examination of earlier types of Christian formation as related to church music and musicians could lend a sense of perspective to the present situation. Among the traditional types of Christian spiritual formation—i.e., private prayer, individual spiritual direction, the class or cell, and communal worship—the last, continual participation in communal worship (the liturgy, the Eucharist and the offices) has been most significant for Christian church music. The institutionalization of that concept of formation was the *maîtrise*, or choir school, that provided large churches with the

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choral forces necessary for the vitality of their liturgical life, but also (and, for purposes of this essay, more importantly) accomplished the education, both general and musical, and the spiritual formation of the children entrusted to its care.

As an institution, the choir school flourished from about the tenth until the eighteenth century. Its curriculum was of course centered on the daily conduct of the liturgy, and it served to ensure not only a central role for music in education and character formation, but also an intelligentsia in medieval and Renaissance Europe that was both literate in and appreciative of liturgical art music. More important than any of these, however, the incessant involvement in the breadth and depth of the liturgy—the fortuitous conjunction of prayer, scripture, and artistic stimulation—throughout the formative years from childhood through adolescence provided an incomparable matrix for the germination of a rich and subtle Christian faith, a faith all the more profound and tenacious in that it was forged not merely individually, but communally.

As the most talented and committed choir-school students matured in their musical training, they would typically apprentice themselves to skilled church musicians at the same time that they assumed growing responsibility for the musical conduct of the liturgy. These students in turn became the church musicians—singers, composers, instrumentalists—of the next generation. Thus we have the choir-school/apprenticeship system to thank both for the age-long procession of saints who have devoted their lives to the music of the church, and for the extraordinary gifts to music that we enjoy as the legacy of their creative endeavors. Perhaps the last and greatest product of this system was J.S. Bach, who took part in the choir school of St. Michael's Church in Lüneburg from 1700 - 1703, probably studying organ with Georg Böhm during his stay there.

Not that the choir-school/apprenticeship system was any more a bed of roses than what today's church musicians have to endure. Then, as now, the clergy and musical establishment had their fair share of misfits, misanthropes, charlatans, martinets, frauds, crooks, and cheats. Neither were congregations then any less demanding, insensitive, indifferent, or deaf. Over against all of those disappointments and discouragements, however, stood the ceaseless, dependable round of the liturgy—the Mass, Eucharist, the offices—constantly validating itself, reminding, nourishing, refreshing, comforting, inspiring, and shaping faith. During my three-year tenure

as assistant organist of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City, I also underwent the choir-school experience, though as an adult. The profound effect that experience had on my own faith and understanding of my calling has only become apparent to me in recent years, in my later adulthood.

The choir-school/apprenticeship system formed church musicians right up through the middle of the eighteenth century. Thereafter, the profound shifts in European thought and politics sent the institution into precipitous decline. An account from 1831, for example, states:

The invasion of Italy by the armies of republican France, in 1796, followed as it was by an almost total destruction of the power, and dissipation of the riches of the Church; by the suppression of monasteries and hospitals, and the sale of the lands destined for their support, destroyed at once the schools which educated the young and the retreats which fostered the adult musician. (From *The Harmonicon*; quoted in Weiss, 347.)

When the churches regrouped in the nineteenth century, new and quite untraditional methods of forming the clergy made their appearance. That was the era that witnessed the birth of the modern Protestant seminary, the child of both the Enlightenment and of pietism. It was not until the early twentieth century that similar institutions were founded, both in Europe and the U.S., for the training of church musicians. In these institutions, both for the training of clergy and of musicians, worship, while not necessarily daily, was nevertheless a seminal component—until the general cultural and religious rebellion and unrest of the 1960's pushed it ever more to the periphery. Furthermore, the appearance of programs of religious studies and of church music in large state universities meant that church musicians could be trained without any regular involvement in the practice of worship. Almost all institutions involved in the training of church musicians are by far more concerned with informing their charges than forming them. Schools do indeed hope that Christian formation takes place within their courses of study, but they take it largely for granted; elements of the curriculum that foster it are much outweighed by elements that impart information.

This state of affairs is especially anomalous, since the philosophy and practice of church music is experi-

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encing a crisis unparalleled except for the waning years of the eighteenth century. The evidence from all sources reveals that church music at the end of the twentieth century is fraught with immense challenges, uncertainties, and discouragements. Given the situation that present-day church musicians must deal with, attention to spiritual formation—the fostering of Christian faith as understood from a musical perspective—would seem to be more necessary than ever before. Again to lend a sense of perspective: the rebirth of the choir school in England during the nineteenth century enabled the apprentice system once more to flourish in the Anglican Church, and with it (according to Dr. Donald Webster) the spiritual formation of apprenticed musicians:

The question of training church musicians is an ongoing problem. Those artiled pupils [i.e., those trained through apprenticeship] known to me suffered from no lack of musical skills or sympathies, and their vocational devotion was frequently greater than that shown by graduates from universities and music colleges (Webster, 19).

Does Christian formation belong in the curriculum of schools that train church musicians? The obvious relevance of such a suggestion, juxtaposed against the near impossibility of achieving it, clearly reflects the magnitude of the crisis facing the church music profession. Are there any viable ways to realize the fostering of Christian

faith, through the natural union of music and worship, in church music curricula? What are the most fruitful avenues to explore in this regard? What are the advantages of the venture? What are the dangers?

Surely a minimum effort would involve an exploration of the theological basis of music-making in the church, in order to help church musicians understand the value and appropriateness of what they do, and to enable them to speak the same “language” as the clergy. Church musicians need also to understand that adorning what one loves is profoundly right, that the impulse to adorn worship with gifts of great skill, with activities requiring rare and/or expensive gifts, much time, and much creative energy, are intrinsically and primally human, some historic and present-day Christian attitudes notwithstanding. These are, however, only tentative and insufficient measures. The problem of adequate spiritual formation of church musicians remains, and will continue to haunt the practice of music in the church until it is adequately addressed.

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