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# The Organ as a Profession: Facing the Future

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# THE ORGAN AS A PROFESSION: FACING THE FUTURE

Quentin Faulkner

—A recent issue of the *Wall Street Journal* features an article about the phenomenal growth of the Assemblies of God: "Heavenly Gifts: Preaching a Gospel of Acquisitiveness, A Showy Sect Prospers."<sup>1</sup>

Eluding the hellfire and smoke surrounding his pulpit, the Rev. Tommy Barnett waves goodbye. With a hearty "Hallelujah," he soars straight toward heaven and out of sight.

The abrupt flight of this Pentecostal Peter Pan in a gray suit brings gasps from many of the 6,500 faithful at Phoenix First Assembly. Joining in the extravaganza are a \$500,000 special effects system, 200-member choir and 25-piece orchestra. It's a finale fit for the mecca where one of Mr. Barnett's assistant pastors studies how to make such miracles happen: Bally's casino in Las Vegas. . .

[Rev. Barnett] packs the pews with such special effects as his recent flight toward heaven on hidden wires, cranking up a chain saw and toppling a tree to make a point in another sermon, the biggest Fourth of July fireworks display in town and a Christmas service with a rented elephant, kangaroo, and zebra. . .

The article asserts that the Assemblies of God, recently embarrassed by the sex scandals of two of their most prominent ministers, Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker, have experienced a spectacular recovery, have now grown to roughly four million members—exceeding both the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches in size—and have set a goal of founding 5,000 new churches during the 1990s.

—In a recent highly controversial article published in *The Lutheran*, the Rev. Walther P. Kallestad, pastor of the Lutheran Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Arizona, writes:

The key to reaching our world with the "good news" of Jesus is entertainment evangelism. . . Christians should design Sunday nights for themselves and turn the morning over to evangelistic outreach. The reason most churches do not grow and, in fact, begin to decline is because they are unwilling to put the needs of the lost ahead of their own.

Sunday morning they sing hymns only traditional Christians know. They use religious language that only Christians can understand. . . Churchy rites and rituals are practiced. Sure, much of our traditional heritage has meaning and value—but only to those who understand by having been indoctrinated to it.

If we are absolutely honest—what most churches do on Sunday morning is not working. We can give profound theological reasons why we "have to" do what we do. However, if what we are doing doesn't work, let the Spirit show us new and different ways to reach people with the "good news" of Jesus Christ.

Entertainment-oriented churches are growing. . . When people come to Community Church of Joy on Sunday morning, they have fun. We may have a stage band, comedians, clowns, dramas, mini-concerts and productions, high energy choreography, as well as many other entertainment forms. One thing that is always present is a simple enthusiastic message about the unconditional love, the unlimited grace, and the transformational cross-centered salvation power of Jesus Christ.

. . . If Jesus were here today walking the face of the earth, he would without a doubt use the No. 1 medium of the day to tell his story. Jesus would become all things to all people to save some. He would use entertainment.<sup>2</sup>

—In a recent article in *Choristers Guild Letters*, distinguished author and educator Paul Westermeyer writes:

I expect that a vision of the church as Disneyland and entertainment will increase over the next few years. This perspective is already being argued, not only from television evangelists, but also from the leaders of some large and "successful" mainline churches. As the century nears an end, this point of view may well be attended by, and may sometimes even blend with, the views that will inevitably accompany the end of the millennium. These may be bizarre in some instances. It is very possible therefore that the spectrum of music as a medium of entertainment in worship could be quite wide.<sup>3</sup>

—The rector of a large Episcopal church in Dallas, Texas, writes a report to his congregation, giving his assessment of the recently adjourned diocesan convention:

The. . . Convention was, overall, a conservative convention, experiencing a resurgence of the biblical fundamentalism that is at best only just below the surface at every Dallas diocesan convention. Very difficult and complex issues were presented to the Convention in the resolutions, and only too often quick, emotionally charged answers were found in proof-texting exercises from the Bible. The debates were notable for this as well, and quick-fix answers, usually of the highly judgmental and condemnatory type, were the order of the day. It seems clear that the majority of the delegates, clergy and lay, want nothing whatsoever to do with continuing study on anything and seek instant Bible-based answers to questions for which the Bible was never designed. That there has been a return to fundamentalism (or literalism, to be more precise) is beyond argument.<sup>4</sup>

—Paul Wilkes, in a detailed article in a recent issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*,<sup>5</sup> examines the "changing and often deeply troubled world of America's Protestant, Catholic and Jewish seminaries." Among his more notable findings:

—Seminary administrators and teachers are quietly ashamed of the present state of affairs in their institutions: "They have squandered a legacy, and in their hearts they nurse the fear that perhaps it has been lost forever." (p. 59)

—"There is concern that at denominational seminaries and lesser-known interdenominational schools some students have turned to religious training after disappointment in the marketplace or to gain employment in a profession that they hope will bring them the status they have otherwise found elusive. . . One seminary in the South reported that seven to nine percent of those it admitted over a recent ten-year period had such elevated scores on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Index—which helps to detect mental disorders such as paranoia and schizophrenia—that they warranted immediate counseling." (p. 61)

—The issue of personal spirituality of Protestant and Jewish clergy has traditionally hardly ever been addressed in seminaries, and has not until recently been considered especially relevant. (p. 72)

—"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." (p. 75)

—In the prestigious university-based divinity schools, faculty "have adopted religious beliefs and values that diverge sharply from tradition. . . Radicalism threatens to become central to the curriculum in some schools, and faculty appointments are often made on the basis not only of scholarship but also of political outlook. Religious beliefs are hardly considered. As for religious practice—attending or working in a local church? Please!" (p. 86)

—In his recently published book, *Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste*<sup>6</sup> (widely reviewed and even discussed in the mass media), author Thomas Day chronicles with acerbic wit and devastating candor the chaotic condition of much present-day Roman Catholic church music in the U.S., where non-singing congregations are led by non-musicians singing non-music, the whole presided over by non-singing pastors who have not the slightest conception of or concern for the music of the church. Three reviews of the book by writers of various backgrounds and shades of opinion have certain reservations, but all admit that the author's criticisms are substantive and on target.<sup>7</sup>

—In some churches the primary role of the church musician has been radically transformed from "music maker" into "coordinator of music:"

"We changed the title and job description of our minister of music last year to make it reflect reality," explained the gregarious extroverted, friendly, and person-centered senior minister of a congregation averaging over six hundred at Sunday morning worship. "We redefined the position as Program Director with specialties in music, worship, and drama. To be more precise, we have organized our staff as two concentric circles. The three of us who are full-time constitute that inner circle. This includes me, our full-time executive pastor, and our full-time program director. We also have six part-time program staff members. . . four are responsible for our teaching ministry, our ministry of worship, and our ministries with family. Our Program Director oversees their work."<sup>8</sup>

—In a report appearing in *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, John Walker, chairman of the AGO Task Force on the New Organist, states:

A recent survey has shown, in the three academic years 1982–85, that the number of undergraduate organ majors in America decreased steadily from 673 to 469. Likewise, the number of schools offering a bachelor's degree in organ decreased from 378 to 347 during this period. In the year 1984–85, only 90 baccalaureate degrees were awarded in organ. The problem appears to be intensifying.<sup>9</sup>

—The organist of a prominent New York church is quoted in the *New York Daily News* as saying that if he were starting over, he is not sure he would choose the same profession.

It is difficult at short range to interpret all of these signs intelligently, to accord to each its proper weight and significance. Taken as a whole, however, they undeniably reflect profound changes in the culture of the Unit-

ed States. These changes have been cataloged before (indeed, by now they have become wearisome); merely a brief summary will suit our purposes here:

1. An obsession with and glorification of entertainment; more precisely on *being entertained*, not on entertaining oneself.
2. A concomitant insistence on immediate gratification, on feeling good *now*, and a neglect of those worthy pursuits that demand time, effort, and commitment to pursue.
3. A retreat from maturity, in some measure due to the rootlessness of modern lives that have to an increasing degree "weighed anchor" from the traditional moorings of family (witness the divorce rate), church, and the customs and lifestyles of the past.
4. An increase in cases of psychological instability, caused in part by all of the above.

Churches are no more immune to the pressures caused by these changes than any other element of our culture; the cases cited above bear ample witness to the truth of that assertion. The move toward worship as entertainment (an aspect of the "church growth movement"), the yearning for the "quick fix," the inclination to ignore or deny new developments that require radical (often painful) adjustment, the increase in clergy with less than stable, admirable personality traits: all of these are part of the reality of the church in the United States today, and all of them have profound implications for those who work in the church, including church musicians. Those implications are not for the future; practicing church musicians will recognize them as phenomena with which they must deal in the present, on a daily basis:

1. Greater public interest in music that provides immediate gratification, coupled with an increase in the promotion, availability, and performance of church music with little musical substance.
2. Radical liturgical change, change that in many instances has orphaned music styles and genres that have served the liturgy in the past.
3. An increase in publicized instances of committed, highly competent church musicians being treated badly by clergy and churches.
4. The continued intransigent problem of a clergy that is widely insensitive and unsympathetic to the purpose and value of substantive music making in the church.

**What shall we tell them?** We, who train young people for the ministry of music? We, who as church musicians befriend talented young people and encourage them to pursue a career in church music?

**Them:** the young who are seeking a focus and a cause for their lives, an arena in which to act out their faith; our colleagues who have suffered or are suffering the anguish that can arise from these unsettling developments. All of them have heard (or surely will hear) about these developments, and some will have experienced them firsthand. We cannot cover these things up, cannot ignore them and hope they will go away. What shall we tell them about their future in this pro-

fession, in this vocation?

First and foremost, we must tell them that the bleak outlook sketched above is by no means the whole picture. No one can deny that instances like those above reveal fundamental problems in the Christian church in this time and place, but the church has always had problems, because it is made up of fallible human beings. In spite of its eternal problems, however, the church has always managed to continue its ministry. Its active, fruitful ministry, though, seldom makes headlines. A local newspaper where I live recently ran a feature article about children's choirs in churches and those who work with them;<sup>10</sup> it is a paean of satisfaction, fulfillment, growth in faith. In his article on the state of U.S. seminaries, Paul Wilkes also "found that some of these institutions still attract—and seem to be shaping—the kind of people who can lead fractious congregations." (p. 61) Such encouraging news ought to be given the prominence that is its due—but that will not happen, for the same reason that the media feature more about murders than about good deeds, more about war than about peace. Future prospects of fulfilling employment for church musicians are actually far brighter than for many other musicians in this country. Consider the plight of talented young violinists; where will they find secure, fulfilling employment? Only the most talented will ever capture a seat in a major symphony orchestra; the majority must reconcile themselves to the reality that their desire for musical fulfillment will always have to take second place to their need for shelter, food, and clothing.

There are signs of change within the church, as well—admittedly only distant rumblings at this point, but nevertheless encouraging. In particular, a few of those who teach liturgics in seminaries have begun to realize and regret the fact that recent church trends, including radical liturgical transformation, have created an environment inimical to the arts.

... One of the tragedies of the modern church is that we are no longer vigorous champions of the arts. True, some talented and significant artists work as musicians, architects, and liturgical designers. I do not know one among them, however, who believes that his or her work is fully appreciated or adequately compensated.

In the last few years, the number of schools offering serious study in liturgical music has decreased, in many cases because of an inadequate number of students willing to pursue a vocation devoted totally to music within the church. While it has been gratifying to see several church-related colleges and theological seminaries launch new programs, unless the problem of their professional future and compensation is addressed, there are few grounds for hope that they will ever attract a significant cadre of highly gifted students.

Some months ago one of the major museums in New York City featured an extraordinary collection of Christian art. Tens of thousands of people flocked to the exhibition. They walked around recounting Bible stories to each other, piecing together bits of church history to appreciate more fully the art they were seeing. There is a lesson in evangelism here: people paid admission to a civic museum to see the treasures of the church. The church was the birthplace, indeed the mother, of many artistic achievements in Western culture. We have a huge responsibility for its continued nurture; we ignore that responsibility at our peril.<sup>11</sup>

Before becoming disheartened with the problems "out there," present and future church musicians ought to take stock of their

own motives for entering or remaining in the profession. There are those in every public profession that thrive primarily on self-glorification and financial gain, but the church usually provides a less-than-satisfactory theater for their ambitions (think of the recent downfall of national TV evangelists). Church musicians have to learn to content themselves with a modest lifestyle. More important, however, the experience of those who have thrived in the profession shows that "success" has to be measured in terms of serving others and music, often eclipsing personal dreams and aspirations. In other words, if your ego feeds on the backstage role of promoting the growth and successes of others, and of music well made, then your ministry has a chance to flourish and prosper; if your ego need constant feeding and tender loving care, forget it.

Furthermore, musicians who intend to enter or to remain in the field of church music need to examine themselves honestly, analyzing what direction their music ministry has taken or is likely to take. There is one "musical pole" that finds its greatest satisfaction in the act of involving people in music—any music. This mindset understands the music ministry as being more pastoral than proclamational; it sees music primarily as a means of bringing peace and joy to a parish, to heal and to inspire—a dimension of pastoral care and counseling. This mindset might well feel comfortable in the role of "program director" instead of "music-maker." The other "musical pole" finds its greatest satisfaction in bringing "great" music (music of substance) to life, in inviting others to join (or perhaps insisting that they join!) in the quest for musical excellence. This mindset understands the music ministry as being more proclamational than pastoral. It is understandable, in an increasingly insecure and unstable church, how a pastoral music ministry has received top billing in recent years. It is not, however, the only valid direction for a music ministry. Whether or not it recognizes it, the church has need of artists who single-mindedly pursue excellence, and who have difficulty accepting musical and artistic compromise.

Most church musicians act out music ministries to one degree or another, feeling the tug of the magnetic fields that emanate from both these poles. It should be evident, though, that musicians who are drawn toward uncompromising excellence are headed for a certain amount of friction with the presently prevailing cultural climate in the U.S. What course should such musicians adopt?

By all means, they ought **not** to deny their calling. There is likely to be a rise in the next decade in the number of people returning to school for further musical training, people who ignored their calling as musicians and embarked upon a career in business or computer science, only to find that they could not live with themselves. Prudence and an awareness of the present situation in music dictate, however, that such musicians might want to consider various options that might make their musical careers more fulfilling. For example, church musicians might want to consider developing other interests into alternate part-time careers that provide financial stability and the means to maintain musical and personal integrity. Such a dual-career path may be more open to some church musicians than to others, but in any

event the questions bear asking: "Do I have the inclination and talent to do anything else? How can I make this inclination and talent work for me?"

Church musicians also need to learn to ask questions before accepting a church job—questions not only of themselves, but of their prospective employers. These need to be probing questions, questions that may make people ill at ease—but in today's cultural climate they **have to be asked!** Questions such as: What is the minister's/priest's attitude toward music in the church? How has this church supported its musicians in the past? Why did the previous incumbent leave this position (this question should, if possible, be asked the previous musician as well!).

Organists in particular, but church musicians in general as well, need to support the work of the AGO, with their time, talents, and money. All human organizations suffer from inadequacies: blundering, ineptness, inefficiency. But having been associated with the American Guild of Organists at a number of levels for many years, I have to assert that there are fewer of those inadequacies, at all levels, than in most other organizations I am associated with. Indeed, various Guild-initiated activities—for example, the recruitment of young organists, contact with seminaries, professional concerns—are pioneering activities that promise lasting benefit to church music in general and to each of us in particular. Our last and best earthly hope in difficult times is to pull together, to support those people whose values and goals are in tune with our own.

Then church musicians need to reconcile themselves to the fact that, at least once in their careers and perhaps more frequently, they are likely to be hurt. In the face of all-too-frequent instances of peremptory dismissals, of festering resentments, of mistrust and suspicion, it is naive for any musician to expect that he or she is immune to or exempt from these unpleasantnesses. Accepting the likelihood of such chapters in one's life, and even planning for them, may help make their arrival easier to detect and their aftereffects easier to bear and to recover from.

Finally—be confident that the Spirit is always at work in ways that we cannot hope fully to understand, working for the growth and renewal of the Church (including its music). Glance backward at the history of the Church, and you will see that the point at which the situation seems bleakest is often just the time when the foundations are being laid for a glorious rebirth. In particular, I remember Erik Routley telling about Samuel Sebastian Wesley, the 19th-century apostle of English church music. On an Easter Sunday in the 1830s, Wesley attended worship at Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford. He subsequently reported that the choir consisted of three members: two trebles and a bass, who was the dean's butler. Keep that in mind when you listen to one of the myriad recordings of top-notch English church and cathedral choirs, or when you hear the worldwide broadcast of the service of lessons and carols sung by the choir of King's College, Cambridge—consider it, and marvel, and take heart.

#### NOTES

1. *The Wall Street Journal*, Vol. LXXII, No. 41 (Dec. 11, 1990), pp. 1A, 6A.
2. Walther P. Kellestad, "Entertainment Evangelism," *The Lutheran*, May 23, 1990, p. 17.
3. Paul Westermeyer, "The Bottom Line: What Provides the Chief Influence in the Direction of Church Music in the Late Twentieth Century?," *Choristers Guild Letters*, Dec. 1990, p. 130.
4. From a letter by Terence C. Roper, rector of the Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration, "Concerning the 95th Convention of the Diocese of Dallas," Nov. 1990.
5. Paul Wilkes, "The Hands That Would Shape Our Souls," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 1990, pp. 59f.
6. New York: Crossroads, 1990.
7. John T. Zuhlsdorf, in *Sacred Music*, Vol. 117, No. 2 (Summer 1990), pp. 22–24; Fred Moleck, in *GIA Quarterly*, Winter 1991, pp. 40–41; Haig Mardirosian, in *The American Organist*, Jan. 1991, pp. 79–80.
8. Lyle E. Schaller, "How Do You Do It?," *Choristers Guild Letters*, Nov. 1990, pp. 105–106.
9. April 1987, p. 5.
10. Julia McCord, "Music Helps a Child Grow in Faith," *Omaha World-Herald*, Dec. 15, 1990, pp. 55–56.
11. J. Neil Alexander, "Revisioning Participation," *Liturgy*, Vol. 9, No 1 (Dec. 1990), p. 20. The Rev. Mr. Alexander is an Episcopal priest who teaches liturgy and homiletics at General Theological Seminary, New York City.

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