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Christian Creativity in a Post-Christian Ethos

Quentin Faulkner

THE IDEAS I WANT TO EXPLORE IN THIS ESSAY begin with the experience of some works of art that have recently been created for St. Mark's-on-the-Campus Episcopal Church in Lincoln, Nebraska, the church of which I'm a member. All of the art you will experience has been created by active and faithful members of this church. Let me hasten to say that although I've been involved in various ways in fostering this art, I'm in no way responsible for it. That responsibility lies primarily with an insightful priest, Father Donald Hanway, who has vigorously championed the cause of the arts in the church; with my wife, Dr. Mary Murrell Faulkner, who is the church's director of music; and with various church members who have shared their talents and their support.

Please refer to the DVD that accompanies this issue: first to the visual art, in the form of altar fittings, eucharistic vestments, stained-glass, and sculpture; and then to the poetry and music, in the form of psalm settings and sung prayers. These are:

1. The altar as it was prior to the creation of new fittings
2. Advent (*Constance Backus-Yoder, fabric artist; stained-glass cross by Julee Lowe, stained-glass artist*)
3. Epiphany (*also common time; Constance Backus-Yoder, fabric artist*)
4. Lent (*Constance Backus-Yoder, fabric artist*)
5. Pentecost (*Constance Backus-Yoder, fabric artist*)
6. Altar cross (*Julee Lowe, stained-glass artist*)
7. Paschal candle (*Julee Lowe, stained-glass artist*)
8. Baptismal font (*Julee Lowe, stained-glass artist*)

9. Processional cross (*Julee Lowe, stained-glass artist*)

10. Christmas (*suspended stars designed by Julee Lowe and made by Penny Siefker*)

11. The Winged Lion of St. Mark (*sculpted by Gregg Wortham, M.F.A., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2002*)

12. Psalm 103: Bless the Lord, O My Soul (*music by Constance Backus-Yoder*)

13. Psalm 126: The Lord has done great things for us (*music by Constance Backus-Yoder*)

14. Come Holy Spirit (*text by Betty Sperry; musical setting by Mary Murrell Faulkner*):

REFRAIN

Come Holy Spirit,
Come Holy Spirit,
Come Holy Spirit,
Come now.

1. Rushing winds, in anticipation of God's gift to the nations.

REFRAIN

2. Doves descending in clouds of white, a glorious sight—love unending.

REFRAIN

3. Tongues of flame, portending speaking in tongues, Spirit descending.

REFRAIN

Holy Spirit, ever in our lives, in calm and strife. Come now.

REFRAIN

I want to use the art documented on the accompanying DVD as the basis for reflecting on several questions that have their common focus on creativity in today's church. The first question is this: Should any of the art recorded on the disk be called "great art"? To intensify that question, to up the ante, let me ask if you think the organa of Leonin and Perotin are great art? Is John Dunstable's isorhythmic motet *Veni Sancte Spiritus* great art? Is the triumphal cross at Brandenburg Cathedral in eastern Germany (see #15 on the disk) great art? All of these — Leonin, Perotin, Dunstable, the triumphal cross — are ancient artifacts from a vital culture of the past, and that automatically invests them with a certain value; but are they "great"? I think it's reasonable to label all of this art — old and new — as intense, gripping, arresting, vibrant, authentic. But great?

To get at that question, let me ask yet another: Who was the first "great composer" (great as conceived in the most usual, popular way, as in a concert program, or in an "encyclopedia of the great composers")? Handel? Perhaps, but once he moved permanently to England, Handel wasn't as widely celebrated on the continent as in his adopted country. He became great only with hindsight. The same holds true, of course, for J. S. Bach. I'd vote for Haydn. In his later years, Haydn was regularly referred to as great. Here, for example, is a poem about Haydn written by Charles Burney on the occasion of Haydn's first visit to London in 1791:

Music! The Calm of life, the cordial bowl,
Which anxious care can banish from the
soul,
Affliction soothe, and elevate the mind,
And all its sordid manacles unbind,
Can snatch us from life's incidental pains,
And "wrap us in Elysium with its strains!"
To cultivated ears, this fav'rite art
No new delight was able to impart;
No Eagle flights its votaries durst essay,
But hopp'd, like little birds, from spray to
spray.

At length great HAYDN'S new and varied strains
Of habit and indiff'rence broke the chains;
Rous'd to attention the long torpid sense,
With all that pleasing wonder could
dispense.
Whene'er Parnassus' height he meant to
climb,
Whether the grand, pathetic, or sublime,
The simply graceful, or the comic vein,
The theme suggested, or enrich'd the
strain,
From melting sorrow to gay jubilation,
Whate'er his pen produc'd was
Inspiration!¹

After Haydn a surge of "great" composers began to appear, first as a trickle (Mozart, Beethoven), then as a flood (Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Weber, Rossini, Chopin, Berlioz, Verdi, Liszt, Wagner, Brahms, Franck, Mahler, etc.). Now, who was the last great composer? Perhaps Igor Stravinsky? Or Benjamin Britten? Are any great composers alive and composing today? Why are certain composers great, and others before and after them not? And to further muddy the waters: are not other "composers" in our culture routinely labelled great? What about Frank Sinatra? Is Elvis Presley great? Are the Beatles great? They, and other modern popular artists as well, are regularly identified as "great" in the modern media. In fact, Elvis Presley has even had a postage stamp issued in his honor.

How do artists come to be labelled great? How do they earn that sobriquet? The answer to that question, it seems to me, ultimately boils down to this: a broad, widely accepted cultural consensus has anointed them as great. Specifically, within a given cultural context (western Europe from, say, 1790 to 1945) certain characteristics as to what in a given art form is great gained widespread acceptance among a large majority of the population — at least among those people who counted socially, especially the ascendant bourgeoisie. Once that consensus was established, then crit-

ics could identify artists whose works exhibited those characteristics of “greatness” in exemplary fashion. In the case of the great European composers, that consensus had been building for a very long time—at least since about 1100, maybe even earlier. The maturation of the Christian faith in Europe arguably had a great deal to do with that process. One of the most obvious signs that we are now living in a post-Christian era is this: that particular consensus is now unravelling in Europe. Since it was never as firmly rooted in the United States, it has already unravelled here. The great composers, then, can only rightfully be identified as great within their own cultural context. Some learned people in a subsequent cultural context (that is, you and I) may, with hindsight, also identify certain composers as great, but that greatness cannot expect to enjoy widespread cultural acceptance in a new cultural context.

Does all of this mean, then, that works of art created before that consensus—Leonin and Perotin’s organa, Dunstable’s *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, and that triumphal cross in Brandenburg Cathedral—are not great? It seems to me that the question is irrelevant, since no cultural context as to what was great existed when they were created; it was an idea whose time had not yet come. What about modern “classical” artists—Jackson Pollack, Andy Warhol, Philipp Glass, art created by elephants—are they great? Again, an irrelevant question, because the cultural context that once determined greatness has broken down, and no new consensus has as yet arisen to take its place. The only shred of consensus today lies in monetary value. The director of the Sheldon Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska recently admitted—rather shame-facedly—that he had silenced a woman who was ridiculing a modern painting simply by telling her what it would fetch on the market.²

Returning to the art recorded on the disk: Is any of it great? Again, the ques-

tion is irrelevant. No standard, no broad consensus exists that would establish it as great, or mediocre, or downright tawdry. It seems fair to me to call most of it competent, and perhaps some of it intense, or arresting, or vibrant, or authentic. But great?—it’s beside the point.

Why is this question of “greatness” important to us as artists in the church today? Speaking as a church musician, I’d say it is because a lot of church musicians still care about great art! We study it, analyze it, perform it; we live intimately with the most intense art of all ages and cultures. It forms and informs the criteria by which we assign value, worth. How long have we been able to do this? Not very long at all—only since the widespread, cheap availability of the printed word (beginning about 1700 or so); and of color reproductions of art, music recordings, videos, the mass media, and wide-spread foreign travel, these only since the later twentieth century. I’m hardly the first to observe that our modern culture is the first culture to preserve, cultivate, and appreciate all the art forms of the past, of all cultures. This has been a splendid gift to us—but it has also led to a certain failure of nerve, one might almost say an artistic paralysis, especially in the realm of classical music. We have come to note that there is indeed nothing new under the sun, and have begun to feel that the art of the past is as good as, and perhaps better than, the art created by contemporary artists. This has to be part of the reason why we as musicians, and specifically as organists, spend so much time re-creating instead of creating, playing organ literature instead of improvising. For organists, it certainly wasn’t always that way. The documentary evidence below—evidence that records the tasks required of those applying to become organists in several major European churches, from the 1500s through the 1700s—reveals vividly the improvisational hoops our earlier colleagues had to jump through!

Required for the position of second organist, Basilica of San Marco, Venice, in 1541:

1. Opening a choirbook and finding at random the beginning of a Kyrie or a motet, one copies this and gives it to the competing organist. The latter must, at the organ, improvise a piece in a regular fashion, without mixing up the parts, just as if four singers were performing.

2. Opening a book of plainchant equally at random, one copies a cantus firmus from an introit or another chant, and sends it to the said organist. He must improvise on it, deriving the three other parts [from it]; he must put the cantus firmus now in the bass, now in the tenor, now in the alto and soprano, deriving imitative counterpoint from it, not simple accompaniments.³

Required for the position of organist at Hamburg Cathedral in 1725, recorded by Johann Mattheson:

1. Improvise a short free prelude, approximately two minutes long, based on material "not studied beforehand." The prelude should begin in A major and end in G minor.

2. Improvise a trio "on two manuals with the pedal," approximately six minutes long, on the chorale *Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut*. The left hand should not double the pedal, and the middle voice should be artfully constructed.

3. Improvise a fugue on a given theme, with a given countersubject. The length of the fugue was left up to the candidate, whose concern should be "not how long, but how good."

4. Compose, within two days of the test, a well-worked out piece and submit it, in written form, for close scrutiny by the jury. (Note that the candi-

date was asked to compose the piece, not play it.)

5. Produce, at sight, an artful accompaniment (i.e., continuo realization) for an aria, approximately four minutes long.

6. Improvise, on the full organ, a *ciaccona* on a given bass theme. The work should be approximately six minutes long, and performed in a carefully considered style. Here the applicant was given a half-hour to gather his thoughts.⁴

Required for the position of organist at St. Nicholas Church in Berlin, 1773, recorded by Bach's pupil Johann Friedrich Agricola:

Requirements to be placed before the candidate...a quarter of an hour before the audition.

1. Improvise a prelude on the plenum, beginning in B major and ending in D major.

2. Improvise a prelude on the chorale *Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam*. The cantus firmus, or chorale tune, must be played on a manual with a louder registration. The performer is to improvise the added contrapuntal voices on a manual with a softer registration, while paying attention to the pedal as well.

3. Play the same chorale, *Christ unser Herr*, plainly but with full chords, as it must be played for congregational singing; one verse of this will suffice.

4. To accompany from the figured bass a sung aria, or an entire cantata, which the cantor...will provide.

5. In conclusion, either play an organ piece written by a good composer (which the candidate may choose himself) using the score, or, if he wishes, improvise a free fantasy; in the latter case he should change skillfully between three manuals with different registrations.⁵

Only in the final example, in Agricola's instructions from 1773, was the candidate allowed to perform a work already composed, and even in that case the candidate was given the alternative of improvising a free fantasy. Until the twentieth century all composers of organ music were at first improvisers (including Mendelssohn and Liszt), and a major part of the literature for the instrument began its life as improvisations. Only when we compare our situation with theirs do we begin to understand what's at stake here. Great music—the organ works of the great composers—is indeed both a blessing and a curse! To the degree that it overshadows (or even stifles) improvisation—the creation of the new; indeed, the valuing of the new—it contributes to the impoverishment of the art of music as a whole, and specifically of the art of church music.

Some of the art on the disk was produced by amateur or semi-professional artists. Amateur art in the church is in part the result of the rise of the egalitarian democratic ideal and the move toward empowering every individual, toward allowing all individuals to reach their creative potential. But amateur art in the church is also in part the result of a radically new cultural phenomenon, the separation of cult and government, of church and state. Has there ever been a traditional culture in which cult and government—church and state—have been or are separated? I can't think of one. The model on which all cultures previous to our modern culture have operated is as follows: the cult (the worship of God or the gods) is indispensable to the welfare, indeed to the very survival, of the people; the role of the ruling class, the government, is to collect wealth by various methods of taxation, and to dedicate part of that wealth to the adornment of the cult; it is the duty of the ruling and priestly classes to seek out and train talented artists to create works of art in the service of the cult, and to support the artists in that endeavor. Now and then one

does encounter examples of religious art created by amateurs (e.g., some medieval English devotional poetry), but in developed traditional cultures, amateur art in public cultic observances is the exception rather than the rule.

The model on which modern culture operates hardly needs to be described in detail. It's quite familiar to everyone living in the United States today: rigorously enforced separation of cult and government; cult (now actually many cults) supported by free-will offerings of adherents, etc. Neither of these models—the traditional or the modern—is inherently more friendly to art than the other, but the first has shown itself to be, on the whole, better funded and more congenial to professional artists; that is, friendlier to fine art.

It seems to me that it has now become vastly more important for Christians in the modern world to encourage amateur or semi-professional artists, for two reasons: (1) we need what they create, and (2) we need a broad base of discerning, committed amateurs as a fertile matrix for the development and support of professionals.

BUT! what do we do about the disasters, the failures, the trite, the second- and third-rate art that are an inevitable by-product of encouraging amateur art? Well, first we have to acknowledge that professional artists don't always create masterpieces either. And with that in mind, I can only recommend to you what we've been doing at St. Mark's: identify artists with talent, offer them guidance and support, and retire the ill-begotten as soon as is prudently and diplomatically possible—and above all, keep on encouraging more and better art to take its place. Granted, it's a messy business, but I think it's a risk we simply have to take. For me, a maxim (sometimes attributed to St. Augustine) comes to the rescue, reminding me that "we should not allow ourselves to be distracted by the imperfect as we strive for the perfect."

Should everybody in the Church be an artist? Clearly not. Should every individ-

ual church be in the business of identifying, encouraging, and supporting the artists in its midst? I think so.

It occurs to me at this point that I'm operating on a number of assumptions. Let me, in the interest of honesty and candor, make them clear to you now:

1. Christians, like all human beings, are subject to the creation mandate: since they're made in the image of God, they are, like God, creators. And, being made in God's image, they should exercise their creativity fully and continually.

2. The locus of human artistic creativity in the context of religion, viewed both historically and rationally, is principally in the service of the cult, i.e., of public worship — when imagination, impelled by intensity of love and devotion, takes wing.

3. Creative intensity is as good an indicator of intense religious conviction as any I know: we adorn what we love. We adorn by expending on what we love time, creative energy, effort, and resources. The truth of this statement is best understood when, viewed historically, we recognize and gauge the intensity of religious faith in past cultures largely by the creative uniqueness and intensity of their religious art: Mayan temples, Tibetan monasteries, Gothic cathedrals. Now, if we hold up the music of Christianity in the modern world to that standard we have a problem, because (in the words of Calvin Johansson) "if a knowledgeable observer were asked to name the institution in our society that clearly utilizes the highest musical creativity, we can be sure it would not be the contemporary church."⁶

4. The fourth and final assumption is this: religious creativity, at its most intense and vital, forges its own unique artistic stylistic norms, conditioned by its passionately held religious convictions. Those stylistic norms are always based in some way on the art of the past, but they always embody something new and original as well, in order to mirror a given religion's unique identity. Conjure up in your mind, for ex-

ample, an image of the nave of a medieval Gothic cathedral. What's holding up its stone-vaulted ceiling? Columns. Are columns indigenously Christian? Of course not — the Gothic style inherited them from the earlier Romanesque, which in turn borrowed them from Greek and Roman architecture, which in turn... So Gothic architecture uses elements that are derived from the art of past cultures (we can trace that same process with the stone vaulting, and with the arches). The borrowing is not important, though. What the Gothic style does with what it borrows is important. We should ask: Does Gothic architecture incorporate those borrowed elements into something new and unique to its own culture (that is, to medieval Christianity)? Would you ever mistake a Gothic cathedral for a Greek or Roman temple? Would you ever mistake it for anything but a medieval Christian place of worship? Hardly! Most people the world over would immediately identify it as such. What makes a religious art form a truly indigenous expression of a particular religious faith, then, is not its individual elements, but the way those elements are put together, and the degree to which the resulting synthesis is truly a hallmark of a given religious identity.

If this final assumption of mine is true, then the music of modern Christianity has more than a problem; it has a major dilemma! The music available to us as modern Christians is either cloned from the art of a former Christian culture, or it's borrowed lock, stock, and barrel from the surrounding secular culture, which is driven by ideals and assumptions that can hardly be considered Christian. Judging from the present state of its music (and other arts as well), Christianity in the modern world is to a large degree impotent, sterile; it has lost its zeal and vitality, its inner conviction, its confidence, its consistency.

Such a claim may be exaggerated, I'll grant — but a candid assessment of our present situation will confirm, I believe,

that it is not entirely baseless. It is not the threat of a “take-over” by popular music that we as church musicians should fear — that is, in my opinion, a red herring. The importation of popular music into the church is not a cause but a symptom. The secular culture of the modern world is not fundamentally the problem. If by waving a wand we could suddenly banish it from our modern churches, what creative intensity could today’s churches muster to produce something viable in its stead? No past art form alone can adequately serve the modern church. Just like the church in every age, today’s church requires art that is indigenous — native to Christianity — and modern — of our time — and we don’t have it: that’s the dilemma!

How do we surmount this impasse? We can’t go back — that leads ultimately to creativity stifled, to stagnation, to epigonism. Neither can we uncritically adopt the alien secular musical styles that surround us — that would brand us as sterile, exhausted, without prophetic power. How do we surmount this impasse?

If I knew the answer to that, I’d be a prophet — and I’m not a prophet. I don’t know. But I suspect that some part of the eventual answer is to begin again at a grass roots level to identify and empower the artists in our midst; to encourage a vital artistic expression within the churches we serve, an expression that is driven by a community’s faith, and that intensifies that faith; to build a broad-based, creatively aware constituency, people who intuit what’s at stake here. And that brings us full circle to the ideas I put forth earlier in this address; those are:

- put greatness into proper perspective. In fact, retire it from our modern religious artistic vocabulary. Talk instead about *vital* or *intense* or *convincing* art, so that we can take a load off our backs and move ahead;
- support and encourage artistic activity at all levels — amateur, semi-professional, professional — wherever we find it

in the church — in our church! Showcase it, celebrate it, treasure it;

- and finally, have the courage to take risks, and to allow ourselves not to be distracted by what is less good as we strive for what is better.

Endnotes

1. From Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Western World* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), 313-14.
2. L. Kent Wolgamott, “What is Art,” *Lincoln Journal Star* (August 3, 2002): K 2. Art painted by elephants is now bringing up to \$500 a painting — check it out on the web: www.elephantart.com/catalog/
3. Quoted after Haar, “The Fantasie et recerchari of Giuliano Tiburtino,” *Musical Quarterly* 59 (1973): 223-38
4. Johann Mattheson, *Grosse General-Bass-Schule* (Hamburg, 1731), 34-35, as translated and condensed by George B. Stauffer, “J.S. Bach as Organ Pedagogue,” in *The Organist as Scholar*, ed. Kerala J. Snyder (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1994), 37-38.
5. See Quentin Faulkner, “Die Registrierungen der Orgelwerke J.S. Bachs,” *Bach-Jahrbuch* (1995): 29-30.
6. *Music & Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Henderson, 1998), 26.



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