

A Re-Discovery of Melody

Alice Parker & *Melodious Accord*

Melody...It doesn't sound like much of a discovery. It has been around for millennia, probably since the beginning of time. Some cultures believe that God *sang* creation into being; some have postulated that the earliest melodies and songs were sung by primeval women & men, perhaps lulling their children to sleep, calming their fears, or soothing their injuries. Where do melody and song come from? How is it that the simplest of melodies can move our emotions from joy to love to heartfelt national pride or to deep pathos? Poets and scholars have pondered the power and origins of melody over the centuries, and probably have not come any closer to an answer than we will in the short space of this article. Whatever the truth may be, melody has been with us throughout time, and it is a miraculous force, a gift from the Creator that can unite a diverse group to a common goal, purpose, or meaning.

Melody also has the power to remind us who we are and to whom we belong. This fact was brought home to me the other day as I was paging through a facsimile of *Praxis Pietatis Melica* 1653. There they were, right in front of me: "Erhalt uns, Herr"; "Liebster Jesu wir sind hier", "Es ist gewisslich", "Ein feste Burg", and more. It was a powerful remembrance and realization that centuries of faithful Christians before me have been proclaiming the faith with the same melodies and words. This was also brought home to me in a secular manner as I am writing this article over the Fourth of July weekend which has been filled with strains of many patriotic melodies and national songs. Again, melody has that power to evoke a strong sense of who we are and to whom we belong.

Without a doubt the most passionate scholar of our time regarding all facets of melody would have to be Alice Parker. Alice is an amazing woman who has spent her life devoted to choral music, song and melody. Alice grew up in Boston, and after attending Smith College, where she received her Bachelor's degree in performance and composition, she attended the Julliard School of Music where she received her Master's degree in choral conducting. It was at Julliard that she met and began working with Robert Shaw, a relationship that would change her life and career forever. The focus of her writings and scholarship has been focused primarily on choral and vocal music. Her work in these areas has managed to form a unique creative balance for her life which keeps her vitally engaged and active as a composer, teacher, and conductor, and I personally owe Alice a great debt of gratitude when it comes to my own *rediscovery* of melody.

My first encounter with Alice Parker came in October of 2011 when I was accepted as a fellow in her composer's workshop—a rigorous, weeklong, sun-up until *well past* sun-down, *tour de force!* As an instructor, Alice is an amazing, energetic, thoughtful, and profound teacher. She has a lot to share with each of her students and she *insists* that each student participate fully as the week unfolds. Her energy is infectious as she combines her vast theoretical and practical knowledge with verbal vignettes from her own life and career. The first assignment that she asked of us was to choose a text, poetic or scriptural, and then notate the various stresses in the text *precisely* as we felt the text should be read. No one—and I mean *no one*—got it right the first time! Ever the true Yankee matron, she is passionate about language and text and insists that an excellent melody must evolve *from* the text. "You must memorize, speak out loud, feel how the words feel in your mouth,

and *dance* with a text to allow the melody to rise up from the written word”. It is an amazing, and life-changing process to experience.

The formal study sessions take place in Alice’s studio— which is an addition to her 18th - century home located on “Singing Brook Farm” in the quintessentially New England town of Hawley, MA. Those who come for study live communally together in a farmhouse located down the hill from Alice’s home and studio. Many of the daily aspects of life are shared amongst the students residing in the house, and all meals are shared adventures with many of the students taking a turn in preparing meals for all of the participants.

When class is in session, everyone gathers around a large wooden table in Alice’s studio which is adorned with a brilliant blue table cloth. The first day there are a few books and notebooks on the table; by the end of the week the table is swamped with scores, books, musical examples, assignments, notes, used tea bags and coffee mugs. She begins with Gregorian chant and over the course of the week she deftly weaves her way through music history ending with examples submitted by the participants. In each case she carefully analyzes the relation of text to tune – is it a happy marriage, or are there irreconcilable differences?? Can the melody be sung unaccompanied, in canon, can you find and create an *answering voice* to the melody, can you improvise around the melody, and most important...*does it dance?* She nudges and cajoles participants to look at melody through a new set of lenses—and if you allow it to happen, this new, sharper prescription will give you a whole new outlook on melodies old and new. It should also come as no surprise that Alice has no shortage of opinions on almost *any* topic, but her innate warmth, charm and wit help one to keep an open mind even when you might not agree with her position on some of the points. The hymn writer, John Thornburg, has eloquently summed up time spent around the table at Singing Brook Farm in his poem “This Table”

This Table

John Thornburg, October, 2002

This table does not speak.
Its legs transmit no truth.
The top with tea-stained cups
and piles of scores
with notes demanding to be free from print's captivity,
says not a word.

Yet seated all around are music hounds
who cannot wait to get the scent;
to be released, to jump the fence
and join the hunt for sanity.
For this is music's gift,
to show that what is deep is real.

And so, the table speaks
as those around its blue-draped edge
find glimpses of the Word
who pitched a tent on Earth
and pitched a song that will not end,
and, in the glimpse, rejoice.

What all of this has meant to me so far? On a practical level I find that I take more time in preparing my work as an organist, a role that she holds largely in suspicion! I spend more time reviewing the historical roots of hymns used in worship; trying to find the *dance* in each melody. I have grudgingly had to admit that louder, faster and brighter are not always...OK, *seldom* are the correct approach to take in leading people in song. It is true, sometimes the people actually sing better if I back off from the organ when I instinctively would like to pull out more stops...and that has been a *bitter* pill to swallow! I have also been working at refocusing my work as a choir director, modeling more how I want the text to be treated by my choir members, and working *very* hard at getting their noses away from the score as much as possible. My favorite and most successful example of employing these new found techniques has been while working with my Middle School Choir. Largely due to Alice's encouragement, I intentionally include at least one American folksong on every concert. I teach the kids the melody and then *we* begin improvising answering voices and various accompaniments. By the time the concert arrives we have worked out a wonderful fresh arrangement, it has been a blast from beginning to end, and my students and I learn so very much through the process! All of this is hard work, but it is so worth the effort, and when we allow ourselves to shed some of our preconceived notions as to who we are as church musicians there is so much to be learned and it is so much fun to do.

Alice Parker has authored a number of very important books which *all* church musicians should have on their shelves. They are as follows:

1. [Melodious Accord Hymnal](http://www.giamusic.com/search_details.cfm?title_id=11304)
http://www.giamusic.com/search_details.cfm?title_id=11304
2. [Melodious Accord: Good Singing In Church,](https://www.giamusic.com/search_details.cfm?title_id=22701)
https://www.giamusic.com/search_details.cfm?title_id=22701
3. [The Anatomy of Melody: Exploring the Single Line of Song,](https://www.giamusic.com/products/P-6765.cfm)
[https://www.giamusic.com/products/P-6765.cfm;](https://www.giamusic.com/products/P-6765.cfm)
4. [The Answering Voice: The Beginnings of Counterpoint](https://www.giamusic.com/search_details.cfm?title_id=22747)
https://www.giamusic.com/search_details.cfm?title_id=22747
5. [Alice Parker's Hand-Me-Down Songs](http://www.giamusic.com/products/P-6533.cfm)
<http://www.giamusic.com/products/P-6533.cfm>
6. [Alice Parker Folksong Transformations](http://shop.melodiousaccord.org/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=1&products_id=20)
http://shop.melodiousaccord.org/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=1&products_id=20

These books are written in a clear voice which gives us an understanding into Alice Parker's thinking, and passion for melody and song. They are written from her years of experience as a teacher, conductor, arranger and composer. They are eminently useful and well-written, and are a perfect resource for the individual and the classroom alike.

The most passionate point that Alice Parker makes in her work is that *melody* belongs to the people. Whether it is in a choral setting, singing in church or a community sing—melody *belongs* to the people, and those that are charged with the leading of the song had better do their homework thoroughly as we prepare to lead God's people in song on a weekly basis.

Perhaps the act of *creating* sound and song is one of the ways that we share in a small way God's never ending act of creation. It is my hope that at the end of the day we can look back at our work with melody and song and join the Almighty in declaring that what we have created is good. In these days when we see more and more people watching others perform, rather than joining in the song, I would strongly encourage all of you to take a look at the writings of Alice Parker. You can

also learn more about Alice and her various Melodious Accord programs at <http://melodiousaccord.org>. Even if you are never able to join Alice in one of her retreats, I would eagerly encourage all of us to take more time to pause and *rediscover* God's amazing gift of melody both in our personal lives, and especially in our work as executors, curators and as leaders of God's *new* song.

*Almighty Creator, source of sound: in the roar and whisper,
In the breeze and the whirlwind, may we
Hear your Name.*

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<photo of Scott>