

Perspectives on Church Music 2

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THE BEAUTY OF SIMPLICITY

“O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness....” (*Psalms 96:9, KJV*)

Some years ago my wife Noël and I were visiting in Wellington, New Zealand. It was late afternoon when we had checked into our downtown hotel and we decided to go for a walk to stretch our legs.

A few blocks from the hotel we happened upon the local cathedral and discovered that a service of Evensong was to begin in a few minutes. There were only a handful of people there, perhaps a dozen at most. We settled into a pew in the peaceful quiet of the dimly-lit nave.

The choir of sixteen singers soon processed in with the clergy and the service began with usual versicles and responses and the choir chanted several psalms. Scripture readings, canticles by sung by the choir, prayers, and a hymn by the congregation followed. The anthem was Richard Farrant's familiar " Lord, For Thy Tender Mercy's Sake" sung with utmost simplicity and elegance. The clergy and choir processed out and we sat quietly for a few minutes before we returned to our hotel.

What had just happened? We had stumbled upon a service of Evensong in a city halfway across the world attended by a dozen people at most in the midst of a bustling metropolitan city. The music was sublime, well-rehearsed and performed with loving care.

Our immediate reaction was "This would never happen at home." "All that effort," people would say, "with only a handful of people present. It just doesn't pay to expend all that effort for so little return."

Not worth it? In that cathedral on another continent with a handful of Christians we were living out what we sang that late afternoon in John Ellerton's great evening hymn "The Day You Gave Us, Lord, Is Ending:".

We thank Thee that Thy church, unsleeping
While earth rolls onward into light,
Through all the world her watch is keeping,
And never rests by day or night.

The sun, here having set, is waking
Your children under western skies,
And hour by hour as day is breaking
Fresh hymns of thankful praise arise.

Perhaps something like that is what is needed in an American churches where everything is measured in quantifiable results, where music is judged by the level of its decibels and the frenetic pulsing of a background beat.

Perhaps what is needed is worship steeped in quiet reverence. The beauty of holiness. Holiness and simplicity.