

Occasional Reflections #5

Paul Westermeyer

Music's Intent

Michael Barone, in addition to hosting *Pipe Dreams* weekly, hosts an annual “Bach’s Birthday Bash.” In 2015, the week before that celebration, the Bach Society of Minnesota went to Central Lutheran Church in Winona, Minnesota, where it performed Bach’s *St. John Passion*. Central Lutheran and Erik Floan—the Director of Worship, Music and Arts at Central—organized a dinner on Saturday evening, the day before the Sunday afternoon performance. At the dinner I was asked to speak about Bach and his setting of the *St. John Passion*. On Sunday morning, between the services, Erik Floan and I led a forum which followed up on the previous night’s dinner.

At the forum someone asked about how Bach’s music engages us. I said that Bach wrote music which engages us at a deep level. In our culture, virtually all music is regarded as a tool to sell things. Bach’s music, however, is doing something else. It’s for the glory of God and the good of humanity. It reaches to essence. I added that the music of the church, with Bach and the organ as chief representatives, is what church musicians regularly encounter in their study and practice. That puts them at odds with music as sales technique and makes them—along with Bach—easy targets.

A week earlier I had conducted Bach’s Cantata 12 for a Vespers service at Christ Church in Minneapolis, having lived with that score and its profound interweaving of cross and crown. A few weeks before that I had corresponded with a bishop about our abuse of and systemic injustice against musicians. I pointed out that by avoiding the central issues we face, organists become scapegoats. Then I learned about yet another faithful church musician who had been summarily and unjustly dismissed years ago, with the divisive results still doing their damage. After that I heard David Weiss perceptively explain that we have to tell the painful yet joyful truth to a culture in denial about its death.

We all encounter such a series of seemingly unrelated, but, with all their paradox, ultimately enlightening events. Church musicians are particularly alert to them because they are so open to attack in their responsibility for music that tells the truth and refuses to treat people like slabs of flesh to be sold or manipulated by money changers in the temple. The music they steward treats people with honor and

respect, but, because we all would prefer to accede to our addictions and avoid the constructively subversive health and life that the church's music offers us, we are tilted toward resisting the offer.

The church and its musicians need not despair and can be of good cheer. If musicians' vocations are like Bach's, they too are telling the truth for the common good and facing similar sorrows and joys.