

## Occasional Reflections #6

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# Wonder and Grace

In 2014, in the June issue of *The American Organist*, Don Saliers wrote that “in a culture of distraction, greed, and cruelty, the experience of beauty becomes essential to our humanity.” He had more in mind than beauty in the superficial sense by which we often define it. He cited Alejandro Garcia-Rivera’s book, *The Community of the Beautiful*, which describes a community of hospitality and compassion. This is related to what I remember Saliers saying about a children’s choir he once heard. When he asked the children after the service what they liked about singing, one of them said, “It tastes so good.” In his book, *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*, John Eliot Gardner gets at matters like this when he says that Bach “makes it a great deal easier for us to focus on the injunction to love one’s neighbor than on all the filth and horror of the world. We emerge from performing or listening to a Bach motet chastened, maybe, but more often elated, such is the cleansing power of the music.”

Realities like this, however we try to define or describe them (and they are finally indescribable and undefinable), attend all of us who serve churches as musicians. We are tempted to restrict them to certain composers or virtuosos or performances when in fact they belong to all of us and to the people we serve. When a fourth-grader sings a stunningly beautiful solo with the choir and takes our breath away, when a clarinetist spins out a gorgeous descant above the choir, when the choir sings with balance, tone color, and phrasing beyond anything we expected, and when an organist’s hymn playing and the congregation’s singing coalesce with a potency nobody anticipated—what Saliers, Garcia-Rivera, and Gardner are reporting is there. It’s there among those musicians who are not the stars, but who are engaged in the weekly craft of making music with the people they serve.

Musicians cannot manufacture these moments, though they would not be there without their work. Nor should they try to manufacture them. Beauty, hospitality, and compassion come with gracious surprise in the quotidian—the daily, the usual, the customary—character of what churches sing and what musicians do in leading that song. This no small thing in our “culture of distraction, greed, and cruelty.”

We should celebrate it with our people in all its understated wonder and grace.