

## 10. The Church's Song

Paul Westermeyer  
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Martin Luther spoke for most of the church across its whole history (yes, there are exceptions) when he said that music is a gift of God to be crafted as well as possible. The church's message propels that logic which is why the church has created such a huge and unparalleled repertoire of splendid music. The congregational part of that repertoire is sung by people who over long stretches of time practice it by repetition but seldom rehearse it. The choral part is sung by people who over long stretches of time sing together but also rehearse. The congregational part has yielded some of the world's finest folk song, the choral part some of the world's finest choirs.

Since it is not fundamentally a musical organization, however, the church does not always sing well. Worship is related to all sorts of people who assemble for particular worship services. There are times when those people include few or no musicians and maybe some monotones who also are welcome to the congregational party. There are times when the assembly is learning new things or is in the midst of turmoil. There are times when singing is under duress from both external and internal, conscious and unconscious sources. Like music itself, the church's song is not a static condition. Over the long haul, however, it transcends challenges and moves toward its intrinsic excellence.

Differences of opinion create tensions and disputes. They are momentary in the light of centuries, but they sometimes persist for lifetimes. At the end of one set of extremes is the highest possible quality of music defined musically. At the other end is music as a tool for things like pastoral care, ethics, or evangelism, with quality omitted or defined in ways extrinsic to music. At the end of another set of extremes is preserving the "classical" because it is seen as a past and present value. At the other end is opposition to the "classical" because it is seen as an irrelevant relic. In between these extremes are gradations and mixes derived from both the church and the culture. Distrust, fear, and wars exacerbate things and make snarly and confusing swirls.

Church organists are often at the center of these swirls. Though they hold differences of opinion themselves, they talk to one another and tend to be attacked as a group. They don't easily fit preconceived molds. They play instruments that are large and small, ones that include both expansive multi-voiced textures and intimate accompaniments. They play free-standing pieces and ones with many other instruments and ensembles, yoked to both choral and congregational singing. They learn that phrasing, breath, melodic contours, and all of music's facets relate to human health and shalom and what is well beyond the "only" musical (if there is such a thing). They play all sorts of music, including what is "classical" and what is not. They relate to very long historical expanses and link generations. They lead singing with an instrument that works for it better than any other instrument or ensemble. This cross-generational singing is easy to attack when generations are seen as divisive units.

All of this means that church organists are peculiarly positioned for perspective on the confusion and for help through it. This help grows from the historical vision organists have as their birthright which sees squabbles and attacks as momentary. It requires putting aside defensiveness and doing our jobs. That is not easy and cannot be interpreted to mean we should be silent about injustices which are a systemic part of the way church musicians are treated. We need to speak honestly yet compassionately about the problems. Mostly, however, we need to do our jobs as well as possible in the midst of the swirl on behalf of the people whom we serve and those who will follow them. The future is not what the rhetoric of destruction says, some appearances notwithstanding. And the people we serve—the known and the unknown ones—turn out to be more grateful for our constructive work than we are aware of.