

Church music's joy limitless

By TIMOTHY O'TOOLE

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Dining with a choir director new to Albany, I compared notes with her on the music that finds its way into a liturgical setting. First Presbyterian Church had just witnessed the retirement of Victor Klimash, its music director for 10 years. While some people panic in times of change, I took this as an opportunity to reflection on what has been, and what the future will hold.

Church music is limitless. Throughout America, sanctuaries resonate with the sound of the classics (Mozart and the 3 B's - Bach, Brahms and Beethoven), Gregorian chant and plainsong, jazz (Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday"), folk (Michael and his boat that never quite makes it to shore), and ethnic melodies from Africa, Asia and South America (best sung in the original language). Even the predictable two-dimensional "praise music" which enlists drums, mikes and electric guitars - in keeping with John Wesley's 1761 instruction "Sing lustily and with good courage."

I am reminded of Harvard psychologist William James 1902 book, "The Varieties of Religious Experience". Just as there are different styles of worship, and different ways of experiencing the divine in our daily existence, there are different ways of raising our voices in song, and opening our ears and minds to inspiration.

Most hymnals have work derived from European sources, but America is blessed with an exceptional variety of home-grown music. Drawing from Charles Wesley's English experience, what was once secular can become sacred with a few lyric modifications. In 1882, Salvation Army founder William Booth wondered "Why should the devil have all the best tunes?" To which we Presbyterians might add "Why do the Methodists have all the best hymns?" Need gender-neutral lyrics? Call Brian Wren, an Englishman who now lives in New Hampshire and specializes in non-sexist imagery.

We resonate to William Billings' energetic New England hymns; the raucous, nasal sound of Sacred Harp and shape note singers, cousins of Southern Harmony, spirituals and gospel; even bluegrass

renditions with their own bittersweet quality. You can't have a wedding without music.

Hymns often make reference to the act of making music itself - "How can I keep from singing", or "Let every instrument be tuned for praise." Many "American pieces" trace their lineage back hundreds of years - before the first Dutch patroons, Spanish conquistadors or English settlers reached our shores. "The Water is Wide" is the grandchild of "Waly, Waly", a Scottish folk song dating back to the 1600s, and its entrancing melody is easily wed to liturgical lyrics.

Hymn tune lend themselves itself to imaginative harmonization, while highlighting the beloved melody as in Van Denman Thompson's arrangement of "My Shepherd Shall Supply My Need." "Beech Spring" was happily appropriated by Ken Burns as a theme in his PBS documentary of the Lewis & Clark expedition. Returning the favor, Jay Ungar's well-known "Ashokan Farewell" has graced both Ken Burns' "Civil War" and ceremonies mournful and joyous.

Christians do not enjoy a monopoly when it comes to liturgical music. Brooklyn's Aaron Copland, of Lithuanian Jewish descent, gave wings to Shaker melodies such as "Simple Gifts." His rendition of "Zion's Walls" (from "The Tender Land") is at home in any sanctuary. "Some of my best friends are cantors" in temple on Friday night, then in church on Sunday morning. Be it the Kaddish or Kol Nidre, Sanctus or Dies Irae, music resonates in the souls of all human beings. The mesmerizing chant of Tibet's Gyoto Monks was a New Age hit, but you can hear the real thing at Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery in Woodstock.

The thing to remember is - God likes to hear live music, sung and played by real people, at any skill level. Every choir has room for another singer, and every congregation can sing a little bit louder, even if your neighbor grimaces. Singing in a choir is also good cardiovascular/pulmonary exercise - an important consideration for baby boomers waiting to collect Social Security in the years ahead.

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