CHURCH MUSICIANS

Reflections on Their Call, Craft, History, and Challenges

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MorningStar Music Publishers
To
Anton Armstrong
David Cherwien
John Ferguson
Mark Sedio
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# Table of Contents

*Preface* ix

1. **The Call to a People, its Musicians, and Everybody Else** 1
   - A People 1
   - Music 3
   - Musicians 5
   - The Whole Community 7
   - The Vocation of the Clergy 10
   - The Vocation of the Church Musician 12

2. **The Craft of the Church Musician: The Congregation** 15
   - General Considerations 15
   - Aspects of Congregational Song 18
   - Specific Musical Responsibilities 22

3. **The Craft of the Church Musician: The Choir** 27
   - Aspects of Choral Song 27
   - Specific Musical Responsibilities 31
   - General Considerations 32

4. **Historical Perspectives** 41
   - “You Have to Sing” 41
   - The Psalms and Colossians 3:16 41
   - Tertullian and Laodicaea 42
   - Hymnody 43
   - Hymns and Beyond 45
   - Calvinists 47
   - Anglicans 48
Zwinglians, Anabaptists, English Baptists, Quakers 48
Wesleyans 49
Black Spirituals 50
The Twentieth Century 50
Crossing Boundaries and Repertoires 51
Education 51

5. Challenges We Face 55
Oratorio 55
Musical Syntax 57
Iconoclasm 59
Music's Intent 61
Music, Theology, and the Life of the Church 64
Justice 71
In Relation to the Church Musician 72

Bibliography 76

Index 82
Preface

It has often puzzled me that, in the same or adjacent years, I have been asked to speak about similar topics by people who had not talked or communicated with one another or even knew about one another. For example, I was asked in 2014–2015 to speak about justice in relation to the church’s hymnody and music for three conferences that had no affiliations or contacts with each other and were in different parts of the country. This book comes from a confluence of that sort about topics pressing upon us and calling for our consideration, though this one is a bit broader and stretches over a longer period.

In 2013 I addressed the Tallahassee (Florida) Church Music Conference. Jonathan Hehn had invited me to prepare three lectures on topics of my choosing, with the understanding that they would be primarily theological rather than musical, which I understood to mean theological reflections with their practical musical implications. I decided to run out some implications from *The Heart of the Matter* into the practice of the church musician’s craft, which seemed suited to the assignment. After the conference Hehn asked me if I would publish the lectures. He suggested I send them to Mark Lawson at Morningstar Music Publishers. Mark Lawson looked at them and said he would like to publish them in connection with several more chapters to make a short book. I put his request on my desk with a list of other projects, but could not work on it at the time since the other ones had deadlines that made them more pressing.

In 2015 I was working on lectures I had been invited to give at Mercer University (Macon, Georgia) for a group called Polyphony: Fellowship of Pastoral Musicians. Like Hehn, Emily Andrews, at Mercer, had asked

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me to prepare three lectures with a theological rather than a musical focus on topics of my choosing, which I again understood to mean theological reflections with their practical musical implications. She suggested that *The Heart of the Matter* might serve as a thematic focus. The lectures for Polyphony seemed to require that I re-work some of the material from Tallahassee for one lecture and then write two new and related ones. As I was finishing these it dawned on me that the two sets of lectures—at Mercer and at Tallahassee—grew out of the same concerns, that they fit together well with some other lectures I had recently been assigned, and that this cluster might be edited into the book Mark Lawson had requested. I explained this to him and asked if such a book might be what he had in mind. This book is the result.

I am grateful to Mark Lawson for his vision in publishing studies like this and to Tom Pearce and Kristen Schade for their skillful editing. I am also grateful to Emily Andrews, Timothy Bernard, Andrew Bruhn, Gordon Lathrop, Joshua Lindgren, David Music, Paul Richardson, Kris Rongstad, Anthony Ruff, and Mark Sedio for their gracious assistance at various points along the way. Their wise counsel and suggestions helped me think this out and articulate it far better than would have been the case without them. Mistakes remain mine.

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My doctoral dissertation was dedicated to my wife Sally, who made it possible. It was pivotal in my study. Books that followed have been dedicated to my family, doctoral advisor, teachers, colleagues, staff members, students, congregations, and choirs who helped me pursue the study of church music in more detail. The persons to whom this book is dedicated are encompassed in the dedication of the book David Music and I wrote together, but they need to be singled out here. They are four remarkable church musicians, teachers, and colleagues with whom I worked closely for many years in the Master of Sacred Music program of Luther Seminary and St. Olaf College. In a variety of ways they provided refreshing opportunities for getting at questions like the ones that drive these reflections. They engaged in conversations, dialogue, and perceptive points of view from various angles as part of

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their teaching, their work with me in solving administrative and other day-to-day details we had to attend to, and their splendid music-making at worship and beyond. This engagement has been of immense help in making reflections like these possible and in the teaching and learning from which they derive.

John Donne’s insight that no one is an island, but that we are all a piece of the continent and a part of the main, is true in all circumstances; but its truth is especially apparent and constructively heightened when one is privileged to work with such unusually supportive colleagues. They are willing and able to pursue the heart of the matter in their daily interaction, teaching, administrative roles, and music-making—with helpful, honest, challenging, and engaging candor. This book is a symbol of my gratitude to them.

Paul Westermeyer
April 9, 2015
Commemoration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1945
A People

Even a quick scan of the Biblical witness tells you that God creates and calls a people. Abraham went out, not by himself, but with Lot, Sarai, and the persons in Haran—called to be a nation (Genesis 12:2, 5). God called Moses to bring “my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:11). From the first chapter of Genesis it is apparent that God creates and calls a people: Adam is humankind, and the plural “them” in Genesis 1:26 is not accidental. God calls priests and prophets to serve a people. The people need a preacher, to be sure—how are they to hear without one (Romans 10:14), but the people, and not the preacher, are the focus. “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14), not with one person, but among us. “Where two or three [not one] are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” says Jesus. (Matthew 18:20). “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people,” says 1 Peter (2:9).

What does this chosen people do? It gathers and scatters. It gathers in community to worship God in song around Word, Font, and Table where it receives God’s grace and mercy. Then it scatters in individuals and groups into the world to speak the Word and to be the body of Christ it has received. It goes as Christ to the neighbor, caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and prisoners; helping the wounded; seeking justice and peace; caring for the creation; pointing to and living out the unmasking of the principalities and powers; and working against

systems of injustice. As St. Francis said, sometimes it has to use words. Paradoxically, as it does these things, it meets Christ in the neighbor.

Focus on a people (and God’s whole creation) is not our culture’s norm. Though there are many wonderful things about our culture, there are some not so wonderful things, too. The culture’s norm is to highlight individuals at the expense of the people. “I’m number one” is the culture’s motto. “Where’s mine?” is the culture’s whine. The common good is commonly not a concern.

That’s partly why so many differing agendas are forced on us by so many different people, with each agenda presumed to be the key to fixing everything. That’s partly why we live in isolated silos where we talk only to ourselves and shut out everybody else, except that we try to get people outside our silos to do what we want them to do because everybody and everything are finally objects to be sold. That’s partly

- why we think those who came before us did not know very much,
- why we presume we are the first generation to think rightly about things,
- why we think we are the first generation to experience change,
- why each of our own individual versions of change is presumed to be the only truth,
- why we are constantly at war with one another, and
- why we find it hard to collaborate.

The church is tempted to imitate these less than wonderful aspects of the culture. When you translate them into the church you get the assumption that everybody has to be a Christian and that, in the years before us, everybody in the United States, or maybe in the whole Western world, was a Christian.² Some people have been so traumatized by their discovery that this circumstance is clearly not the case now and never has been that they try to force everybody into the church’s pews. In that process, self-preservation rather than service to the neighbor has

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² Martin Marty, “Church Affiliation Colonial and Now,” Sightings (115/2012), says that “20 percent of the colonial citizens were active in churches. Change came after 1776, so that, in one common estimate, church participation jumped from 17 percent to 34 percent between 1776 and 1850.”
become paramount, and mission has been twisted into how to get people through the church’s doors. The tool of choice for accomplishing this is music, used just the way the commercial culture uses it, as a manipulative sales jingle. Christianity becomes another product to be sold alongside all the other products we sell, and music is the way you sell it.

Self-preservation is not the church’s concern. Jesus promises to be with us to the end of time (Matthew 28:20), so that’s taken care of. Individual egos are not the church’s concern. The good of the whole world is. There are checks and balances in community and especially in the Christian community, and nobody gets his or her own way. Manipulating people by music or any other means is the antithesis of the church’s work. The church lives by grace, announces the Word and enacts it, but does not seek to force people to do what anyone thinks they should do. That’s a form of work’s righteousness which masquerades as mission or evangelism, but is their antithesis.

Music

This book is about the church musician. Why begin then with a people, the community of the baptized? Because we have to get our priorities straight. The church musician is not an individual star or front page personality. The church musician serves a community, and, while virtuosity is warmly welcomed, it is not the goal. Those with lesser musical talents are also welcomed and called to develop them to the best of their abilities. In all cases, the music a church musician makes with the community of the baptized is broken to and contextualized by Word and Sacraments. Music in and of itself is not the goal. So we have to begin with the community and what that community does.

As I indicated, it does a number of things, and we need to examine them a bit more. One of the central things for most of the church most of the time (there are a few exceptions) is this: it sings. Kings, all peoples, princes, rulers, young men and women, old and young (Psalm 148:11–12), and the lowly whom God raises up (Luke 1:46–55) all sing with the whole creation (Psalm 150).

What then is music about? It is not a manipulative sales jingle calculated to get people to do something,3 like join a church. It is possible

to imitate the culture and use music that way, but that is wrong and counter-productive. It may momentarily attract people—may, although that is not guaranteed. In the long run, however, it will empty the pews because people will figure out they have been duped. They will realize that the Christian faith is not about being drawn in by some kind of music or any other manipulative ploy, but is about the way of the cross, and that the Christian faith is not about what turns my crank, but about serving my neighbor.

So what then is music’s purpose? The whole Biblical witness, as well as thoughtful voices from across the entire church, from the Psalms and St. Paul onward in Colossians 3:16, tell us: it is for the glory of God and the good (edification or sanctification, depending on the tradition) of the neighbor. There may be various emphases—on prayer, praise, proclamation, and the story the gift of music voices—but when you summarize what both the Bible and the church teach us, music is for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor.

We will return to this theme later, but for now J. S. Bach, one of our most able and summative instructors, can teach us well about this. He signed his scores “Soli Deo Gloria” (“to the glory of God alone”), and on the title page of the Orgelbüchlein just above his name, he placed this telling dedicatory couplet:

DEM HÖCHSTEN GOTT ALLEIN ZU EHREN,
DEM NECHSTEN, DRAUS SICH ZU BELEHREN. 6

My colleague Fred Gaiser paraphrases the German like this.

For the praise of the highest God,
For the instruction of the neighbor.

As usual with Bach, there are multiple meanings here. The Orgelbüchlein, the “Little Organ Book,” is a collection of forty-six chorale preludes for organ for the whole Church Year, originally conceived as 164 chorale preludes which “constitute virtually the entire ‘classic’

4. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”
5. I have explored this theme in greater detail in “To the Glory of God and the Good of Humanity,” CrossAccent 22:3 (Fall/Winter 2014): 35-43.
[chorale] repertory up to about 1675,”7 ten years before Bach was born. He wrote the Orgelbüchlein mostly between 1708 and 1717 while he was the organist in Weimar. He indicated on the title page that in this book a beginning organist is instructed about how to play a chorale in various ways, learning to master the pedal in the process since it is treated independently.8 Then he adds the poetic couplet.

At one level Bach intends this music to be for the musical instruction of the beginning organist. Music itself is always instructive and instructed like this. But these are chorale preludes for use in church services as organists still use them, and the German couplet seems to imply more than simply the obvious instructional intent. Behind it is a deeper meaning. Like all of his music, Bach intends this too to be for the glory of God and the edification of the neighbor. Another angle of vision is supplied by Christoph Wolff who says that, “For Bach, the ultimate rationale for being a musician, that is, a performer-composer [Bach’s particular vocation], was not to pursue some sort of mental construct but ‘to make a well-sounding harmony to the honor of God and the permissible delectation of the soul’”9—for God and the neighbor.

Musicians

What then is the call of the church musician in light of the call of a people and the purpose of music? Bach helps us with that question, too. Andreas Loewe has prepared a carefully-researched and detailed description of Bach’s understanding of his vocation.10 His work is a good place to begin.

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8. Orgelbüchlein
Worin einem anfahrenden Organisten
Anleitung gegeben wird, auff allerhand
Arth einen Choral durchzuführen, an-
bev auch sich im Pedal studio zu habi-
litiren, indem in solchen darinne
befindlichen Choralen das Pedal
gantz obligat tractiret wird.
From the Oliver Ditson edition.
After recounting Bach’s schooling and preparation\textsuperscript{11} in the context of the Lutheran Reformation’s development of a choral tradition in which music and preaching went hand in hand,\textsuperscript{12} Loewe describes the Wittenberg theologian Abraham Calov who had made the systematization of Lutheran doctrine his life’s work and had annotated the whole Bible in three volumes.\textsuperscript{13} Bach owned those volumes. Calov placed “an individual’s calling or vocation at the center of their spiritual journey,” and Bach “identified his calling [as a] Cappelmeister [who was] to create musical offerings in the service of God and the church by writing and performing ‘well-ordered church music to the glory of God’.”\textsuperscript{14}

Bach grew up with the dedication of Solomon’s Temple as the frontispiece on the \textit{Eisenach Hymnal} of 1673. “His understanding of church music was strongly shaped by the account of the dedication of the Solomon Temple in the Second Book of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 5:5–14).”\textsuperscript{15} In the Calov Bible’s margin of 2 Chronicles 5:13\textsuperscript{16} Bach wrote, “Where there is devotional music, God with his grace is always present.”\textsuperscript{17} This high Lutheran regard for music should not be mistaken as a substitute for Word and sacraments, but as a complement to them in which music is tied closely to words and the Word of God.

The centerpiece of Bach’s musical output, therefore, was five cycles of cantatas (we have about three hundred or two-fifths of them) meant to proclaim the Word of God in connection with the lectionary (the readings for the day), the Hymn of the Day (out of the sequences and \textit{Leisen} Lutherans inherited, they developed a set of hymns, one for each Sunday

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., pp. 21–29.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 29.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 33.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 35.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 36.
\textsuperscript{16} “It was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever,’ the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud.”
and feast day of the church year), the preacher’s sermon (an hour long in a three to four hour service of Holy Communion), and the libretto for a cantata (about twenty minutes in length).

Cantatas were built on the strong and characteristic link between word and music that Lutherans pursued with a proclamatory understanding. That is, Bach viewed his vocation as a call to proclaim the Word of God with music joined to words. In the Roman Catholic and Calvinist traditions, musicians might be more likely to view their vocations as related to prayer, in the Wesleyan tradition more related to story. All of these join praise to their centers.

The point here is not that Bach is the only example of a musician called to service in the church, nor that his particular embodiment of that vocation is or has been the only definition of that vocation. The point is the call to musicians itself and that Bach is an instructive example of this call of which there are many other examples. Bach’s vocation was especially to compose choral music for the church with its proclamatory Lutheran emphasis. Some musicians are called to compose congregational music in the same or different traditions with the same or different emphases. Some musicians may have few vocational responsibilities as composers, though they invariably do some composing. It may be only to choose music of others, which itself is “com-posing,” that is, “placing together” musical components in some fashion that forms a whole for a given service of worship. We will come back to this topic in Chapter 3.

The Whole Community

The vocations of clergy and musicians need to be seen in the larger context of the whole church. We tend to see prophets and clergy as the only people who are called by God, but the Biblical vision is much larger than that. A whole people—a chosen people—is called out of bondage; that chosen people is called to follow the commandments, and, within that whole community of call, craftspeople are called. Bezalel, for example, is

filled with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver,
and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft (Exodus 31:3-5).

Oholiab is included along with “skill to all the skillful” (Exodus 31:6—see also Exodus 35:30-36:2). The skills referred to here are to be used by the men and women in their “day-to-day life in community [and] to special tasks to help advance the spiritual life of the people by the provision of a sanctuary.” So, after giving the commandments, Moses commands the men and women to build the tabernacle with the skills and crafts they have been given and called to use—for the tent, its covering, clasps, frames, bars, pillars, bases, lampstand for the light, hangings, finely worked vestments, and on and on. Shaping silver and bronze is part of this work as is spinning blue, purple, crimson yarns and fine linen. It is not only musicians, therefore, who find their vocation here; so does everybody else. Bach traced his call to the Temple musicians, but all the other crafts people and workers in the world can follow a similar tracing.

We tend to restrict call to a much too narrow field of vision. It is not only prophets and clergy who are called; everybody is called. It is not only through some sudden individual flash of light that people are called. God calls a people. God gives individuals and families within that people gifts, talents, and contexts through which the call also comes. So we begin with a people in community with various roles and vocations. For the church at worship these include architects, artisans, acousticians, ushers, greeters, janitors, those who make bread and bring wine, those who decorate the church for its various seasons, those who prepare the space on Sunday morning, bulletin makers, lectors, assisting ministers, and others you may add to or subtract from this list, depending on your particular tradition and practice. The list is longer than we normally think, and it includes the central group whom we often leave out—the congregants.

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21. See Exodus 35.
22. Ibid.
24. For a sense of the breadth with which Christians have viewed their callings, see William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005).
25. Loewe, p. 90
Index

Abbington, James 62  
abstract art 58  
a cappella 18, 21, 22, 29, 47  
acoustics 17, 24  
Adams, Charles G. 62  
Ainsworth, Henry 60  
Alleluia 46  
Ambrose 45, 62  
American civil religion 61  
Amish 48  
Anabaptists 48  
Andrews, Emily ix–x, 52, 64  
Anglican  
choral music 48  
hymnody 48, 50  
Oxford-Cambridge movement 65  
Aquinas, Thomas 62, 65  
Augustine 35–36, 45, 62  
Ausbund 48

Bach, J. S. 4–7, 29, 30, 32, 47, 55, 62, 65, 66, 73, 74  
B Minor Mass 55, 74  
cantata 29  
Cantata 12 74  
Crucifixus 74  
Passions 55  
St. John Passion 5  
St. Matthew Passion 55  
Baker, Frank 49  
bands  
English church gallery 63  
in the Civil Rights era 63  
praise 62–63  
Baptist  
church music associations 52  
church music school 51  
hymnody 50  
Barnes, Craig 56  
Bartók, Béla 59  
Baylor University 52  
Beckerlegge, Oliver A. 49  
Beethoven, Ludwig van 47, 55  
Missa Solemnis 55  
Begbie, Jeremy 33  
Bell, John 66  
bells 46  
Benedict 45  

Benson, Louis 43–45, 47–48, 52–53  
Bernard, Timothy x  
Bezalel 7–8  
Bible 60  
Biblical references  
1 Peter 2:9 1  
2 Chronicles 5:5–14 6  
Colossians 3:16 4, 41–43, 61  
Exodus 3:11 1  
Exodus 31:3–5 7–8  
Exodus 31:6 8  
Exodus 35 8  
Exodus 35:30–36:2 8  
Genesis 1:26 1  
Genesis 12:2, 5 1  
John 1:14 1  
Luke 44  
Luke 1:46–55 3  
Matthew 16:18 37  
Matthew 18:20 1  
Matthew 28:20 3  
Matthew 28:20b 37  
Psalms 148:11–12 3  
Psalms 150 3  
Psalms 4, 19, 27, 28, 41–45, 47–48, 50, 61  
Revelation 44  
Romans 10:14 1  
Romans 12:4 40  
Billings, William 48  
Binchois, Gilles 46  
Bishop, Patrick 67  
black spirituals 23, 50, 73  
Blackwell, Albert 36  
Blocker, Robert 17  
B Minor Mass 55, 74  
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich 10  
Book of Psalms, Englished, both in Prose and Meter, The 60  
Bortniansky, Dmitry 47  
Boston University School of Theology 52  
Boyle, Gregory 73  
Bradley, Randall 52  
Brahms, Johannes 47, 55–56  
German Requiem 56  
Breach Repaired in God’s Worship: or Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, proved to be an Holy ordinance of Jesus Christ, The 49  
Bricker, George H. 69  
Britten, Benjamin 48
Broome, E. W. 50
Bruhn, Andrew x
bulletins 24
Buxtehude, Dieterich 47
Byzantine chant 47

Caecilians 47
Caecilian Society 64
Calov, Abraham 6
Calvinist 65
choirs and instruments 48
hymnody 47–48
tradition 7, 15–16
Calvin, John 62, 65
Cantata 12 74
cantatas 7
canticles 43–44
cantor. See church musicians
cantus firmus 35
Cappelmeister 6
Catholic. See also Roman Catholic
church music school 52
tradition 7, 16
Center for Church Music, Concordia
University Chicago 52
Central Presbyterian Church, New York 57
Centre Church on the Green, New Haven 57
Cherwien, David 47
Cherwien, Susan Palo 36
Chicago Symphony Orchestra 55
choir 13, 15–16, 25
as a hindrance 28
challenging 30
choosing repertoire 30
early church music 46
function of 27
in the worship service 28
in worship wars 63
listening to 31
location of 28
practice 27–28
sixteenth century music 47
twentieth century music 50
chorale 47, 66
Chorale Book for England (1863) 51
Christian West and Its Singers, The 42
Christ ist erstanden 46
Church Fathers 65
church music associations 52
church musicians
abilities of 32
composing 32
conflict with 39–40
craft of 32–40
cruciform 36–37
demands of 32
ecumencial 37
justice for 71–74
King David as a symbol for 40
leading in song 21
personal challenges 37
practice 33, 38
preparing repertoire 31–32
relationships with clergy 72
responsibilities 22–25, 73
responsibility to community 31
servanthood 37–38
temptations 33
trust 25
use of ears 20, 21, 25
vocation 12–13, 38, 73
Church Music Institute, Valparaiso University 52
church music schools 51–54
Baptist 51
Catholic 52–53
Lutheran 51–52
Methodist 52
Presbyterian 51
United Church of Canada 52
circular 23
Civil Rights era 63
Clement of Alexandria 61
Clement of Rome 61
clergy 54
conflict with 39–40
relationships with musicians 72
vocation of 10–11
commandments 7
Concordia University Chicago 52
Confessions (Augustine) 45
congregation
vocation 8–9
Congregationalists
congregational song 48
hymnody 50
congregational song 15–17, 47–48
Anglican 48
aspects of 18–22
black spirituals 50
communal 16
Congregationalists 48
dissonance 59
early church 45–46
Machaut, Guillaume de 46
Magnificat 40
Mahnke, Allan 46
Mahrt, William 68
Manz, Paul 38
Marty, Martin E., 2, 37–38
Mass 23, 25, 46
Master of Sacred Music (MSM) 51–52
Matins 45
Matskenyiri, Patrick 66
McKinnon, James 44
Mendel, Arthur 73
Mendelssohn, Felix 47, 55
Mennonites 48
Mercer University ix–x, 52
Messiaen, Olivier 20, 30, 47, 70, 74
Quartet for the End of Time 74
Messiah 55
Methodist. See also Wesleyan church music schools 52
hymnody 49, 50
Missa Solemnis 55
Mitchener, Jack 52
monophony 18, 35
monotone 19
Montanism 69
MorningStar Music Publishers ix
Morris, Anne 3, 69
motu proprio 64
Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus 47, 55, 66, 67
Mundhaus 17
music
as a sacrament 64, 67–68
as a sales technique 62
as sacramental 68, 72
Broadway 66
commercial 61, 71
contemporary 59
contemporary Christian 64
country 66
country western 66
heavy metal 66
intent in the church 61–64, 72
jazz 66
nineteenth century gospel 66
polka 66
purpose of 4
shape-note 66
styles 66
Taizé 66
western 66
musical works
Bach cantatas 29
challenging 30
complicated 30
dissonant 30
large 29
translating 29–30
Music, David x, 52
Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture 23
Neale, John Mason 48, 62, 65
Nelson, Ronald 55
Nevin, John Williamson 69
New Testament 44, 69
Nichols, James Hastings 69
Nicolai, Philipp 47, 73
Notre Dame 52
Obaga, William 66
Oholiab 8
Old Testament 44, 65
oratorios
in worship 55–57, 66, 72
Ordinary 23, 25, 28
organists 5, 25, 33
organs 24–25, 27, 46, 48, 50, 66
early church music 46
in worship wars 63
sixteenth century music 47
Orgelbüchlein 4–5
Oxford–Cambridge movement 65
Page, Christopher 33, 42–43, 51
Palestrina, Giovanni Pierluigi da 47, 64
Pambo 41
pastors. See clergy
Pentecost 47
Pentecostal tradition 64, 68
perichoresis 34
Perotin 46
Picasso, Pablo 58
Pilgrims 60
pitch memory 20
Pius X 62, 64–65, 69
Placher, William C. 8
polyphony 35, 47
Polyphony: Fellowship of Pastoral Musicians ix–x
Praise and Worship music 64
praise bands 62–63
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>87</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>praise choruses 62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Common Worship 43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>church music associations 52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>congregational song 48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hymnals 43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hymnody 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princeton 52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princeton Seminary 43, 52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proper 15–16, 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>psalmody 44–46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>canonical 44–45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gradual 46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metrical 47–48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opposition to 48–49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsorial 27, 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>psalm tones 20, 21, 22, 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purcell, Henry 48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quakers 49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartet for the End of Time 74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasmussen, Larry 70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reed, Luther 46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformation 6, 15–16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiem (Verdi) 55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>restitutio 69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised Common Lectionary 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhau, Georg 35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richardson, Paul x, 11, 52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rinkhart, Martin 73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rite of Spring 59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic. See also Catholic 47, 52–53, 65, 67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rongstad, Kris x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Routley, Erik 13, 40, 49, 50, 71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruff, Anthony x, 65, 68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samford University 52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaff, Philip 43, 51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schalk, Carl 47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schmemann, Alexander 70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Church Music, Southern Baptist Seminary 51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Sacred Music, Union Seminary 51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Sacred Music, Union Seminary 51</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Sacred Music, Union Seminary 51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schuler, Richard 53, 62, 67–68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schütz, Heinrich 29, 47, 73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Settlement 45–46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sedio, Mark x, 47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeker services 64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separatists 59–61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sequences (sequentia) 46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sequentia cum prosa 46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaw, Robert 17, 29, 66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singenberger, John Baptist 47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slavery 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smyth, John 48, 59–61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soehngen, Oskar 35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesmes, France 47, 64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soli Deo Gloria 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomon's Temple 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solti, Georg 55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sosa, Pablo 66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound the Bamboo 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Baptist Seminary, School of Church Music 51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Methodist University 52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spaeth, Harriet Krauth 62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stabat mater dolorosa 47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Agnes Catholic Church, St. Paul 68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Francis 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. John Passion 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. John's University 65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Matthew Passion 55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Olaf College x, 52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Paul 42–43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stravinsky, Igor 47, 59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rite of Spring 59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swain, Joseph 17, 51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>synesthesia 20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syntax, musical 57–59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taizé 23, 50, 66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tallahassee (Florida) Church Music Conference ix–x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tallis, Thomas 48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Ilyich 47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperley, Nicholas 49, 63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertullian 42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Courtship of Miles Standish.” 60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Settlement 45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirty Years’ War 73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Is Your Brain on Music 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thompson, Bard 69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinity in relation to music 34–35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tye, Christopher 48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unequally-tempered 22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Seminary, School of Sacred Music 51–52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
United Church of Canada 52
University of Toronto, Emmanuel College of
Victoria University 52

Vajda, Jaroslav J. 47
Valparaiso University 52
Vatican Council II 50, 62, 65
Vaughan Williams, Ralph 48
Veni Sancte Spiritus 47
Verdi, Guiseppe 47, 55
  Requiem 55
Vespers 45
Victimae paschali laudes 46–47
vocation
  church musician 5–6, 12–13, 38, 73
  clergy 10–12
  community 7–8
  congregation 8–9

Ward, Andrew 50
Watts, Isaac 48, 50
Weimar 5
Wesleyan
  hymnody 49–50
  tradition 7
Wesley, Charles 49, 62
Wesley, John 40, 49–50, 62, 66
Wesley, Samuel Sebastian 73
Westermeyer, Sally x
Whitley, W. T. 49, 59
Widor, Charles-Marie 47
Winkworth, Catherine 51, 62
Wittenberg 6
Wohlgemuth, Paul 53
Wolff, Christoph 5, 73
Wolterstorff, Nicholas 70
works righteousness 62
worship
  as an event 56
  contemporary venues 56
  planning 23–24, 56–57
  space 17
  warfare 63–64

Yale University 52, 57
Young, Carlton 49
Yrigoyen, Charles, Jr. 69

Zwingli, Ulrich 48
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