

## The Vocation of Music in the Divine Service

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We Lutherans, who are heirs of Johann Sebastian Bach and so many other great composers of sacred music, certainly understand that various instruments can be used faithfully in the liturgical context to God's glory. But what are some important considerations with respect to music in the Divine Service in the way it is used and selected with integrity?

### **Thesis I – Nothing comes into the Divine Service “as is” from the world’s use. It must be sanctified.**

Music is powerful but this power can be both negative and positive, and not simply from the perspective of taste or preference. Music can manipulate the emotions and senses greatly regardless of context or purpose. God calls out of darkness into His marvelous light and we become holy as a gift of God when we are brought to faith in Christ our crucified and risen Lord. God's creation is and will be transformed and on the Last Day God will make a new heaven and a new earth.

This end times reality impacts the Divine Service as well when through the preached Word and the administered sacraments heaven comes down to earth for us (Hebrews 12:22-24). The old Adam is put to death and buried and the new believer in Christ comes forth (Romans 6:5-11). Yet this is a daily and hourly pattern of repentance and faith in the absolution. For the steward of the mysteries of God, he must be aware that his shepherding of the liturgical context must take into account this baptismal rhythm of those working with the church music (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). Out of the heart proceeds all kinds of sins, and yet also the Gospel has its way with the life and heart of the believer from outside of us.

The old Adam must not have the upper hand. The law of God in the third way He uses it does provide structure and order within the larger life of the church as well. Our Confessions acknowledge this as well. The old Adam does not worship the Lamb but himself and his own predilections, sentiment, and power. Not only does the old Adam not want God in Christ at the center, but he refuses to sit at the receiving end of God's Gospel gifts as one in need of rescue, cleansing, and forgiveness. The old Adam will not say “*soli Deo gloria*” in truth. The liturgical musician is one who lives in no other way than from the Apostles' doctrine, fellowship in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. Here catechesis from pastor to musician is essential – whether to choir director, organist, instrumentalist, cantor, or parishioner singing a chorale. The one who serves in these areas of the church's liturgical life needs to be formed by sound doctrine and good practice from the start (*lex orandi, lex credendi* and vice versa).

### **Thesis II – The theology of the Divine Service, its action and power, will shape the character and type of music that is selected as liturgical music and the way it is delivered.**

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession defines the mass or liturgy as “a public ministry” and this is said to square well with the showing forth of the body and blood of Christ as well as the proclamation of the Gospel (AC XXIV and Apology XXIV; Luke 22:27). This means of grace language is declaring that the chief thing about the service is that it is something God does for us. The liturgy is first and

foremost sacramental (gift) rather than sacrificial (return of offering to God or response). We serve God because He first serves us. We are called into communion with Jesus within the communion of His people and receive from Him forgiveness, life and salvation. This is the end of missions! This is a monergistic, Christocentric, cruciform activity as opposed to a synergistic or anthropocentric activity. Jesus is among us in the flesh as the One who serves, continuing to do and teach in our midst.

The music is there in much the same way that the pastor is there for the liturgy. It is there for the sake and purpose of the Word and Sacraments. The music vests the voices of pastor, congregation, and choir. If used well it may de-emphasize the personality and emphasize the words of the musical piece in liturgy or song. Music in this way serves as John the Baptist did in relation to Jesus – preparing the way, pointing the way to Jesus. And this also is important as pointers or symbols are not the thing themselves. But they have importance in directing us to what is most important and real. The Word is greater than the music. Music humbly submits to be a John the Baptist of sorts. This may help answer the question of whether something strictly constructed as “praise service” with a “praise band” is sufficiently centered on the monergistic delivery of grace via the Word and Sacraments and is reflective of the liturgical two-way street with its initiating accent on what God does for us. We liturgy God because He first liturgies us. So much of what we have today in the variety of themed services like “traditional worship” (or “Classic Grace”) vs. blended worship or contemporary vs. contemporary family friendly worship is so much marketing like the flavors of a hip coffee shop. What is the main thing in practice? Are traditional liturgical services in the past and not contemporary or does contemporary mean really “beholden to the zeitgeist”?

### **Thesis III – When speaking of liturgical music, we “set the music to the text” rather than the other way around.**

The first table of the law commands us to have no other gods and to not misuse the holy name of God. In liturgical music, God’s Word, rightly divided, comes first as setting the priority and purpose of the Services of God’s House. And this goes on continually in the Church throughout the ages (Matthew 16:18; Jude 3). Out of the Word of God comes everything that exists therefore the text, the priority of the Word, the Gospel message comes first. Music is set to the requirements, character, and message of the text as the power of God for salvation present for us. The music does not (or should not) presume that the biblical text or its right application has no power on its own. This principle should be kept in mind by the one choosing and delivering the music with the sound text. What is said of music here presumes that the text is sound theologically (but that is a subject for another time).

Obviously there are a variety of ways to deliver music for any given biblical or liturgical text. With this said, however one may understand it properly in this way: while many sermons may come from a particular Gospel pericope, this does not mean that all sermons claimed to be based on said pericope are therefore right, sound, and rightly dividing the word of truth or based on sound exegesis. There are boundaries and clear principles in what would be considered a right homiletical application of a text, sound exegesis, and so forth. (Of course one could choose to ignore that matter out of other motives or priorities that reflect a divergence in theology from our standard.) So there is variety and yet not libertine or indiscriminate variety based merely upon preference, popular styles, pop Christian radio, neighborhood marketing, opinion polls, or alien theologies from other confessions.

Likewise, the musical selection does not disregard the liturgical structure of the service nor the church year nor the teaching of the whole counsel of God. Neither can the music disregard the real presence of Christ or the humility of sinners before the holy God who saved us only out of pure divine Fatherly goodness and mercy. Evangelism or recruitment cannot be substituted for justification by grace alone as *der Hauptartikel* of the Christian faith (the chief article by which the church stands or falls). In the Psalms the text was often given to the Chief Musician. The text came first within an occasion and then the music was brought to that to fit the purpose of the text. As Johann Walther, the composer colleague of Luther, put it aptly, "All music should be so arranged that its notes are in harmony with the text" (Carl Schalk, *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise*, p.27).

**Thesis IV – Music is not a mediator between God and man, thus the means of grace cannot be improved upon or made more effective by making the music a reflection of the local culture or enticing the old Adam in a religious way.**

God alone is God. There is no getting around that fact. Jesus Christ is the one who has made the atoning sacrifice once and for all and there is none other who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the One who comes to us here and now in His Word and Sacraments to deliver the benefits of Good Friday and Easter to us. Since we are conceived and born in sin (Psalm 51:5) and likewise are native to death and sin (Ephesians 2:1-2) and we cannot naturally discern the things of the Spirit of God (I Corinthians 2:14), it is not more likely to get converts by religious entertainment than otherwise. Remember the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed in the Catechism?

Of course, all the arts can be abused. Neither PowerPoint nor icons, neither baroque music nor soft rock, are mediators between God and men. The church has a culture all its own as the Word bears fruit in the history of the Church in contrast to our surrounding culture. And the music used in the liturgical context serves within a circle that is more particular than merely the circle of Christian music for devotions or casual listening. Despite what may be suitable or satisfactory as music for Christians for relaxation, work, or devotions, music for the unique context of the Divine Service and its purpose comes under a different vocation from anything else and is set apart. This might indeed help us answer, for example, the question of the location in the sanctuary from which the musicians should deliver the music or if a soloist or cantor is best front and center or not? Even such music that may be called Christian in the pop culture of American Evangelicalism and the charismatic movement is not necessarily or automatically qualified for liturgical service given the greatly differing theologies and purposes of music between that realm and the confessional Lutheran understanding of liturgy for the Church.

God has called His sheep into His green pastures in the Divine Service. It is not we who invite God to the gathering. He initiates the giving of His gifts. Music is summoned into the liturgical context as an "Amen" to the structure of texts in the liturgy and church year. To praise God is to praise His marvelous deeds (I Peter 2) not merely to emote or speak in testimonials whether in old Pietism or in new American revivalistic ways. So the music is to go along with the text rather than to direct us back to our own filthy rags. In this way the Word of Christ dwells among us richly with the prominence and reverence that is truly meet, right, and salutary.

