

More First Person Singular

Carl Schalk

Reflections on Worship, Liturgy,
Church Music, and Children in Worship

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*To Paul Bouman,
my friend and colleague for over half a century,
whose life and ministry as a church musician is a model for us all.*

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Foreword

In 1998 MorningStar Music Publishers issued a small collection entitled *First Person Singular*. With the encouragement of the publisher, this second collection, titled *More First Person Singular*, is being made available. It contains twenty-three new essays on a variety of subjects related to worship and church music, many of which have surfaced in the years since that first collection.

It is hoped that these brief essays will cause the reader to think again about some subjects related to worship and church music, and perhaps come to new or different conclusions. These essays can be helpful and useful as discussion starters for worship committees or conversations between pastors and church musicians. Whether or not you agree with every point of view expressed here, it is my hope that you will be challenged to approach each subject anew and with an open mind.

In all of these essays there is an underlying point of view that treasures and embraces the richness and beauty of the church's tradition of worship and music, a tradition that both upholds the best of its past and simultaneously looks to the future. To quote from the Foreword of the first volume, it is my hope that these essays will help us all come to see that, in the words of Garrison Keillor, "some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known."

Carl Schalk
September 26, 2014

The Day the Music Died

On a recent Saturday evening I ventured into a church of my denomination that promised exciting, dynamic, contemporary worship designed to reach out to the un-churched.

The scene was a familiar one. The church seated several hundred people, but only a scattering of people were in attendance. The building was resonant and good for singing. Up front, a small instrumental group—keyboard player, flute, guitar, trumpet, and solo singer—was setting up and testing the volume of the amplifiers in the Sanctuary.

The service was intentionally informal. After a folksy introduction and a rambling extempore prayer, the piano player, who led the instrumental ensemble, introduced the first song. The words appeared on a big screen in the chancel, blocking any view of the altar. With only the words to follow on the big screen, we were encouraged to listen to the melody and follow along: “You’ll soon catch on!” Most never did.

When it soon became evident that only a few were struggling to sing along despite frequent coaxing by the piano player, the volume on the amplifiers was turned up and the singer sang even louder into the microphone. The result, with the exception of a few diehards, was to squelch any semblance of singing that was left.

And so it went throughout the service. It was a vicious circle: the less the people sang, the louder the instruments played, the less the people sang. Most of the congregation simply gave up, sat back, and resigned themselves to silence.

For most present at that service, it was the day the music died.

What went wrong?

Setting aside the admittedly lightweight character of the theology, what about the music?

Whatever one may think of the style of music or the intent of their writers, these songs were really solo songs, not designed for congregational singing. They had a more extreme melodic range suited for a soloist, not for a congregation. The melodies themselves were often difficult to sing, and the introductions and interludes between stanzas were indeterminate and of indefinite length, their length often determined at the moment by the singer/leader. That many if not most followed the solo/refrain pattern was a sure sign that the soloist/leader was at the center of attention.

The characteristics that made these songs unique for solo singing are exactly the characteristics that made them difficult for congregational singing.

As Erik Routley, the most prominent British hymnologist of the twentieth century, once wrote:

“there is no...miserable hymn or demoralizing hymn tune, no mawkish anthem or organ voluntary...but someone thought it beautiful.”

(Church music and Theology, SCM Press, 1959, p. 31)

It is true that people can probably learn most anything with sufficient repetition. But, as congregational song, these failed the most basic musical tests.

To quote that other prominent American hymnologist of our time, Pete Seeger: “When will they ever learn? Oh, when will they ever learn?”

Singing the Church's Song

When Christians gather to worship, they sing. They sing the *church's song*, a song the church was singing long before we were born and a song it will be singing long after we are gone. As the church's liturgy reminds us at every celebration of Holy Communion, it is the song sung "with angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven."

It is not that we at St. John's by the Gas Station are singing God's praises and how nice that the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven join with us; rather, it is that we at St. John's by the Gas Station are privileged, in our time, to join with those angels and archangels in the *church's song*.

What is the *church's song*? It is the sweeping narrative—the rich, deep, multi-faceted story of God's plan of salvation for the world—centered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ who ascended into heaven and will come again at the last day to judge the earth. It is this story, this Good News, to which the church's celebration points through its word and song, church year and liturgy.

It is not, first of all, *our* song, but one to which we, as redeemed children of God gathered as church, join our voice. The 16th-century Lutheran Reformation was quite clear about the purpose of music in the church's worship. It is that this great narrative of how God has acted to save us might be

"kept fresh in human memory,

 This is the weightiest reason why
 God music did at once supply."¹

Our response as church to the Good News was for Luther simply to tell that story back to God, reminding God of his promise to us, to

1. From a poem by Johann Walter, Luther's musical advisor and the first Lutheran cantor, entitled *In Praise of the Most Noble Art of Music* (1538). Emphasis mine.

sing that Good News back to each other in the congregation, building up one another with the only truly nourishing word, and singing that Good News to the world in proclamation and praise.

So how is the church's song doing in your congregation? Is that great narrative story of God's plan of salvation the constant refrain of the song heard in your congregation?

It is all too easy for us as church musicians, enamored by a catchy tune or clever new musical setting, to overlook a text that tells another or different story, or no story at all. Or it is too easy settling for texts which are little more than a gauzy "spirituality," texts that are all about us and how we feel about things, or music that has little more than a catchy rhythm or a clever melody.

What is the narrative of the songs sung in your congregation? Too many congregations are, sadly, unfamiliar with the church's rich heritage of song. Too many congregations pass over this rich treasury of song, opting instead for the comfortable old "chestnuts," most of which could be characterized as hymns "lite"—no calories with little, if any, real nourishment.

Perhaps its time for a real revival of the *church's song* in your congregation. If not now, when?