

Perspectives in Church Music #15---

"Cross-bred Music: Joining Cultures to Proclaim the Gospel"

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Celebrating the best music from diverse cultures is a worthy heritage of the Lutheran Church. Combining these musics--and their people--in the context of the Christian Gospel provides new insights and relationships.

What a joy and privilege to be here with all of you at this esteemed conference! The late Howard Swan, a dean of American choral conductors, once said that choir directors are the most fortunate people in the world, as they get to work with its most wondrous gifts—people and music. For us church musicians, we get to add the high delight of glorifying God and sharing our faith in Christ through those two gifts—an immeasurably greater blessing. Tonight I'd like to share a travelogue of a few of my faith experiences with music and people from around the globe, and the ways that has impacted me and those I've encountered.

An early memory of music's impact to uplift and connect people is from grade school. I had a newspaper route, and one of our jobs as ten-year-olds was to also try to sell more subscriptions. A few of us newsboys went out with our adult manager to do some doorknocking/paper peddling. It was mid-December in Northern Minnesota—cold and dark. We had a few “normal” visits at houses, even selling a couple of subscriptions, and were approaching the final stop. It was a small, run-down house with half the lights out, but we did see a Christmas tree in the window.

Our boss had us knock on the door. An elderly man, all alone and very frail, shuffled to the door. He invited us in—it was warm, but shabby. He was stooped, not too clean, and hard to understand, but we did the usual pitch. He wasn't really paying attention to our spiel—he was more just glad for the company. Our boss, seeing we weren't going to make any money here, started to usher us out. As we were moving to the door, I felt a little bad deserting him, so I commented to the old man that I liked his Christmas tree. His eyes brightened, and he asked if I knew "*O Tannebaum.*" Having been raised in a good singing Lutheran home and church, I took a stab at it, but my German was iffy (*Sing opening phrase in falsetto*). The man nestled closer to me and filled in the gaps in my language (*Sing phrase down octave*). He continued singing more verses as I, and, thankfully, the other boys, hummed along. (During this exchange, our boss was impatiently trying to get us out the door.) The man offered us some Oreos before we left. I remember wishing we could have stayed longer, as I sensed that we had just been given something special. The power of music—particularly when there is a deep-seated cultural connection—in this case, the German language he learned as a child, infused with our shared faith—was imprinted on me. I invite you right now to take a moment to think of a time in your life where such a musical/cultural/spiritual event occurred for you. (*Pause*) I hope that rekindled a warm memory for you.

Fast forward thirty years. Our Christus Chorus at Concordia University, St. Paul was invited to sing for the Polish government's annual sacred music festival, *Gaude Mater* in May, 2020. We flew from Minneapolis to the International Airport at O'Hare, planning on an overnight flight to Warsaw. On arrival in Chicago, we were informed that our 5 pm flight would be delayed. We waited through several more delays until 9 pm, when the Polish airline staff told us we would be put up in a hotel overnight for a flight the next morning. Disappointed, we went

to the hotel (my sleep-deprived students were glad of the rest!) We came back the next morning only to be met by yet more delays.

The crowd that was waiting with us was mostly Polish nationals, anxious to get home to their families for the May Day holiday. As the hours dragged on into the afternoon, the crowd became more and more agitated. Perhaps to distract myself (and occupy my students), I thought it could be helpful for us to sing for the people at the airport. After getting permission from the airline check-in staff, we gathered by our stacked luggage to offer an impromptu concert. Just as we began to sing, the airline desk announced yet another delay. The crowd erupted with anger. Some close to us in the crowd, though, noticed us and turned to see what on earth we were doing in this chaotic situation. We were singing “*Lullajzhe, Jesu, Niyu,*” a beloved Polish Christmas carol. (*Sing Lullajzhe opening.*) One by one, the shouting mob turned to listen, leaving their anger and yelling aside to hear this dear song. Tears were streaming down the faces of many present as they held hands and thought of their home, family, and faith. We finished our song (and a couple more), and the people applauded, hugging and thanking us. One said to me in broken English, “Thank you. You brought us peace.” (We eventually got to Poland via London and had more adventures, but those stories are for another time!)

These two stories relate gifts we were blessed to share with others in their languages. Another song trip we had at Concordia, St. Paul was to Ghana in 2008. This was a remarkable tour. We were particularly struck at how the Ghanaians faith was infused in all aspects of their lives. Business signs like “God Is Good Funeral Decorations” “Holy Spirit Tire Service,” “Jesus Is Lord” Barber Shop were common. This overt joy and energy in their faith was infectious and inspiring for us. At St. Francis DeSales Catholic Church in Cape Coast (one of

the slave castle cities on the West African coast), a young Ghanaian priest concluded our concert by teaching us a joyful Ghanaian High Life piece that they use for offerings (we sang it twice that night for two offerings!) The music was infused with instruments, dancing, and joy in a way that wrapped us up in their community. Let's sing this song right now (we learned it by rote on the spot—really the appropriate way to do so—but in the interest of time tonight I've provided you with the words and melody and chords—feel free to take it with you.)

Learn/Sing song "You Are the Most High God"

Also sing all through with movement if time!

In 2012, our Christus Chorus had a two-week tour in South Korea. This is a marvelous country for choirs and church music. There are 50 professional chorales and enormous churches with multiple choirs and orchestras. On the tour, we were able to connect with our partner Korean Lutheran Church and Lutheran Theological Seminary. This story is more how NOT to be effective in cross cultural connections!

In the middle of the tour, we were blessed to share a concert with two professional choirs at a major hall in Taegu in central South Korea. Language was a bit of an issue. The signs on our changing rooms for "Christus Chorus" were written as "Choirs' Tooth." So we were most fortunate to have Pastor George and Joan Riemer, missionaries to South Korea for 40 years, along with us. For most of the concert, George announced our program in impeccable Korean—something the audience clearly appreciated; there was a large buzz in the room when they heard this distinguished American speaking to them in their language! The concert was going great, and we were very well received. Feeling a little cocky, I thought I would try to speak to the audience. After a perfunctory greeting and a *Kamsamanida* (thank you) in Korean, I tried to

introduce a dramatic piece, *The Lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet* by Alberto Ginastera. In what I now realize was hubris, I announced that title in English, and loudly proclaimed its emotion—“ANGER!” I was taken aback when the audience immediately broke out into applause. We sang the piece and it was received well, but for the rest of the concert, each time I turned to face the audience, they extended their applause much longer than they had earlier in the concert.

After we exited the stage, Pastor George told me that when I said “ANGER,” the audience thought I was announcing an “ENCORE!” At least their applause indicated they still wanted to hear more from us! Needless to say, I didn’t try any more impromptu audience interaction, and I gained a bit better perspective on how to better conduct myself in another culture.

In 2014, my wife, Katherine and I were able to do sabbatical teaching/work in Bethlehem, Palestine at Dar Al-Kalima University and Christmas Lutheran Church. We learned so much from these settings—people working, doing ministry, making music, and creating art under very difficult circumstances. I was struck at how the Palestinian Lutherans combined their heritages—Arabic music and art in a church that was founded by German Lutherans in the 19th - century. One of the men we sang with in the church choir, Adel Nasser, creates stunningly beautiful calligraphic artwork that proclaims the Gospel. We commissioned him to do this art on the Concordia St. Paul theme that year, “Full of Grace and Truth.”

The juxtaposition of the German and Palestinian cultures was striking. The church building had stained glass windows with inscriptions such as “*Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt.*” For the closing hymn one Sunday, Pastor Mitri Raheb announced that “We will now sing

GROSSER GOTT,” a German chorale led by the organ that the congregation sang in Arabic, from a hymnal that printed the music and words right to left.

That congregation sang with such gusto on their hymns—both old German chorales and Palestinian melodies—that I felt drawn to bring the two styles together. They regularly sang a Palestinian e minor melody for the Gloria in their service—(Sing “*Hallelujah, Mazhda, Hallelujah!*”) The meter, character, and harmony of the piece brought to my mind a chorale: *ERHALT UNS HERR* (Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word.”) I played around with the melodies and came up with a mash-up.

These global experiences point to the ripe opportunities for us all to collaborate with musicians from LCMS partner churches around the world. Phil Magness recently worked with Pastors David Saar and David Somers to create a hymnal for the French-speaking churches in Africa—the *Édition Africaine* . The Ghanaian Lutheran Church is in the midst of their own hymnal project—an endeavor I get to join in on next month in Accra. The Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa is training church musicians to recapture their heritage of singing Ethiopian music in harmony. The head of their School of Music and Media Arts, Amare Teklu, is completing his Masters in Church Music at Concordia University Wisconsin, and his wife, Tsega Abebe, is working on a church music major at Concordia University, St. Paul. Through connections with them, I will be working with and learning from 200 of their church musicians in Addis Ababa in November. In Taipei, LCMS World Missions is working with the Taiwan Lutheran Church to set up a music conservatory. Dr. Martin Dicke has been an advisor for them, and they want to tap into the resources and model created by David’s Harp music ministry out of the Music Conservatory at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Council Bluffs, Iowa, led by Pastors Nathan Sherrill and Timothy

Frank. We in the American church have tremendous opportunities to collaborate with, learn from, and be energized by the vibrance of the growing Church of the Global South. In turn, we can support their growth with our resources. These connections do not even require the time and expense of in person collaboration. With the communication resources we have developed, particularly during the pandemic, virtual collaborations can be quickly set up and yield a rewarding harvest!

My final story is a combination of global and local connections, virtual and in-person. In 2018, through a series of Spirit-led serendipities, I connected with *29:11 International Exchange*, a Gospel music/reconciliation ministry from Cape Town, South Africa. We've had several collaborations—both in person and virtually.

(I'm also their Board Chair, and they are looking for bookings in the Midwest for their next tour in January-April 2024-see me if you are interested!)

That group, plus relationships I built with the African American Twin Cities communities of Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church, Walker West Music Academy, and the sibling pop group NUNNABOVE (regional finalists on "America's Got Talent") led to a transformative "Cross-Breeding" experience this past February.

Concordia, St. Paul is in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, an African American community dismantled by the construction of I-94 in the 1960s. Concordia and the Rondo community also directly felt the effects of George Floyd's killing, with destructive riots in our neighborhood--stores were broken into and looted, buildings were burned down, and generations old businesses were demolished. In conversation with community musical partners, (which included one of my music composition major advisees, Carl Clomon, the Music Ministry at Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church and on the staff at Walker West Music Academy), we decided to

hold a “Rondo Reconciliation and Renewal” concert collaboration to directly address the issues of racial injustice and division.

This was a challenging project that took careful planning and listening. Some of my students were concerned that this concert would espouse “critical race theory.” Others felt they as white, privileged people should not sing music that expressed the experience of Black people. To address these concerns, we held talking/listening sessions, panel discussions, service projects, and a guided dialogue supper with all participants. Of course we also worked hard on the music in joint rehearsals!

When we came to the concert, we had built relationships and understanding, making it possible for us to connect authentically. We learned that, as one of our Black mentors said, “You can’t NOT do the pieces, but you need to do it right.” We learned that this is not a black and white issue—neither literally nor figuratively, but it impacts all of us in various shades of gray.

This mutual understanding by itself, though, would have only taken us so far. The crucial element we shared was our faith in Christ. That Rock gave us the common foundation that brought us together at the foot of the Cross.

If you look at the concert program on your table, you can see that each of the six collaborating groups did a short celebratory set reveling in our diverse gifts (including the Alzheimer’s friendly Amazing Grace Chorus).

We then had a panel discussion on the racial strife that harms us all. That set up our performance of two pieces that faced the issue head on—“Say Her Name” and “The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed.” These truthful but secular pieces alone would have left us in despair, but we then shifted to a “still, small voice” of a solo singing “*Jesus Died For All*” (*sung*) to the melody “We

Shall Overcome.” This simple song led the assembly to join hands in singing this uplifting song together. We ended with the joyful, yet purposeful “The Storm Is Passing Over” Gospel piece.

The result—we united, black and white, young and old, “with hearts and hands and voices” as a community full of grace and truth. We met at the foot of the Cross and were transformed to go forth in hope, love, and peace. This is the power of our music—even the most simple song, shared in community, with Christ at the center can change the world. It’s really the only thing that has ever truly changed the world. We as church musicians have been given these gifts of music, people, and faith. With those gifts, infused by the Spirit, we are empowered to join in Christ’s mission of redeeming the Father’s world.

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