

Worship Diversity Respects Culture

Part 1 of 2

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“God help us! This is surely comedy opera!” It is reported that an elderly lady threw up her hands in horror and exclaimed these words in response to the worship music she had just heard in church.

What music could elicit such a retort? Perhaps a song ill-advisedly inserted into worship from an irreverent Hollywood movie like “Jesus Christ Superstar”? An LCMS pastor once proudly told me years ago that for Palm Sunday his choir had sung the movie’s “Hosanna” which included these words:

Ho-sanna, Hey-Sanna, Sanna,
Sanna-Ho, Sanna, Hey-Sanna, Ho-sanna,
Hey J.C., J.C., won't you die for me?
Sanna-Ho, Sanna-Hey, Superstar.

My jaw is still on the floor.

Other “comedy opera” kind of church songs might derive from a source like Monty Python’s “The Meaning of Life.” This movie contained a number of pseudo-religious congregational songs with lyrics such as:

Oh Lord, please don't burn us/Don't grill or toast your flock,
Don't put us on the barbecue/Or simmer us in stock,
Don't braise or bake or boil us/Or stir-fry us in a wok...
Oh please don't lightly poach us/Or baste us with hot fat,
Don't fricassee or roast us/Or boil us in a vat,
And please don't stick thy servants Lord/In a Rotissomat.

It’s a no-brainer that songs like these are not worship songs. At best, they are irreverent; at worst, they are anti-Scriptural and anti-Christological. “God help us!” might be a wholly appropriate response.

But the music to which this elderly lady had reacted with disgust was not from an irreverent source. The woman had just listened to three hours of the majestic *St. Matthew Passion* by J.S. Bach, performed by choir and orchestra within the framework of a traditional Good Friday service in Dresden, Germany.¹ The year was 1729. She was horrified that the *St. Matthew Passion* sounded to her like music she might expect to hear

¹ Karl Geiringer, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 66 (updated)

at the theater. She wasn't upset by the text of the Passion account of Jesus' death or the classic chorale text and tune by Nikolaus Decius (1485-1546) "O Lamm Gottes, Unschuldig" (appearing in our hymnal as "*Lamb of God, Pure and Holy*" – LW 208). The woman objected to the *style* and the *sound* of the music. To her it was vulgar, no different than "popular entertainment music" of her day.

How could anyone mistake Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* for the common sounds of popular theater? To us, Bach's music sounds like "church," not Hollywood. In a movie theater we'd never expect to hear a soundtrack using Bach's complex textures, contrapuntal intricacies or baroque style of terraced dynamics. Simultaneous with the sounds of popcorn crunching between our jaws, we are used to the engaging rhythms of a John Williams (*Star Wars, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Schindler's List*), a musical landscape from a Howard Shore (*Lord of the Rings*), the soaring, jazz melodies of a Leonard Bernstein (*West Side Story*) or the "action sounds" of a Michael Giacchino (*The Incredibles, Jurassic Park, Mission Impossible*).

It is hard for us today to imagine someone throwing up their hands in disgust because of the "contemporary sound" of the venerable Lutheran composer Johann Sebastian Bach. But that is precisely a point not to be missed by worship leaders, pastors and musicians today. To listeners in Bach's lifetime (1685-1750), musical polyphony, recitatives, arias and choruses were "Hit Parade sounds" of the day. It was precisely because Bach's music reflected contemporary musical art that the elderly lady felt justified in her "God help us!" In fact, Bach had even been censured and forced to sign a pledge not to write operatic church music by the church council and city fathers and was described by one of them as "incorrigible."

Johann Adolph Scheibe (1708-1776), editor and author of one of the earliest journals of music criticism was also critical of Bach's church music. "It is unnatural, overly artful, and confused in its style . . . [He] covers up the beauty of the melody and obscures the harmony . . . He makes all voices equally busy and difficult." He might as well have said, "Bach's church music sounds like a din of noise."

To be sure, one person's "din of noise" is another's person's "heavenly sounds." But live together we must, despite our personal preferences. To quote that great theologian of the LA riots, Rodney King, "Why can't we all just get along?" Paul said it better, "*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*" (Eph 4:3). And Jesus made our loving acceptance of one another, despite differences or diversity, a sign of those who follow Jesus in mission: "*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (John 13:35).

Love, peace and respect for one another are at the root of Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Resolution 2-04 passed in the 2004 convention. The resolution calls for more than mere tolerance of worship diversity. It calls for mutual **respect**. As we respect each other, we show respect for the diversity in American culture in everything from language to age to geography, etc., not to mention respect for the variety of ethnicities in our land:

“Resolved, That the Synod in convention affirm respect for diversity in worship practices...” (my emphasis added).

As we grow as a church body in **respect** for diverse styles of worship, no matter our personal preferences, we must give the same respect we anticipate receiving. It cuts both ways. As National Worship Consultant in the area of diverse worship, don't expect me to beat a drum for one style at the expense of another. I have a love for all styles of worship that invite us to worship Jesus “in spirit and in truth.” Truly authentic worship draws our focus to Christ, fuels us by Word and Sacrament, and sets our hearts ablaze to share what we've seen and heard at the foot of the cross and at the open tomb. And that is worthy of our utmost respect.

¹ Karl Geiringer, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 66 (updated)