

Invisible Enough

by Richard L. Sowers

Originally published in THE ANGLICAN DIGEST
Michaelmas A.D. 2004

The use of music in worship has always been a kind of mystery to me. My very first experience in a structured choir was as an eight-year old, singing in an urban Presbyterian church in North Carolina. My school classmates invited me to sing with them in their children's choir. I was very excited because I loved to sing! I vividly remember our first rehearsal – it was right after school, in the balcony of the church. I stared hypnotically at the imposing, stained-glass windows – barely listening to the choir director's instructions. I was the only boy in the first soprano section. The director told me that I sang with a "sweet fervor." I had no idea what this meant, except to say that the choir director said it with such kindness that I figured it must have been a good thing.

At the time I somehow sensed I was listening more than I was singing. Although I loved it, I did not understand this ethereal sound the choir was making. Our voices echoed through the church rafters, and seemed to merge with the sun-stroked colors radiating through the stained glass mosaic. Was this heaven? It certainly seemed heavenly. A curious emotion made me want to cry with joy. This new sound, this new feeling was sensational, yet, mysterious to me. Was this the presence of God? Was this the voice of Christ? This mystery kept me coming back for more of something abstract in nature, but concrete in essence.

Age-old debates seem to center on the presentation of church music as concert versus exaltation. Another forensic distinction contrasts the exaltation of self with the exaltation of God. This is and always has been a controversial topic. Churches typically seek trained musicians because churches genuinely care about the quality

of their music in worship. This quality reflects who we are as a congregation. If we use untrained musicians who play wrong notes or sing with deplorable diction, we would feel our worship experience diminished, if not embarrassing.

A formally trained musician, I strive for the highest performance standard possible. I attempt to achieve this through well-prepared, regular rehearsals, rigorous but compassionate teaching, and comprehensive planning. This regimen may imply more concern with music in worship as concert venue. Regardless of the music or worship style employed, this regimen is unavoidable with the conscientious, trained musician. However, (and this is a big "however") when high performance standards are blended skillfully with the invitation for God's presence in worship, there is the potential for the ethereal and indescribable "God moment" – that point in time when we sense God is entering the room and filling our hearts with insurmountable hope, love, courage, justice, and peace. Has there ever been a moment in church (or elsewhere) – as the music is being sung or played – when you could hear a pin drop? Why was everything so still? What were you listening to? The music? The performance standard? The voice of God? I first felt this when I was eight, in that North Carolina church. I have been seeking the origin of this spiritual ignition ever since.

It is my fervent prayer that the highest performance standard we can achieve through music ministry will be invisible enough to reveal the presence of God. To me, this is ministry at its very best – when those who deliver God's word are willing and able to become transparent so only Christ can be seen, only God can be heard. This is a difficult, high art providing a vital prelude to the loving mystery of God's presence, an abstract essence that is palpable, brimming with awe and wonder. And every time this happens, I'm eight years old again.

-RLS