

Worthy Is the Lamb: Moravian Worship and Music in Ecumenical Context

Dr. Paul Westermeyer, Professor of Church Music at Luther Seminary, has graciously allowed the Moravian Music Foundation to publish this lecture, which he presented at the Interprovincial Ministry Convocation and Worship Conference, held at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, in May of 2005.

I. Topic

My assignment is to look at you as an outsider in the hope that I might see things which those of you who are Moravians are too close to see. Then I am to make comments on how you might employ your resources in planning worship. This assignment means that, though I will not be able to avoid historical matters, careful and detailed historical analysis is not at issue. I am rather to work from the standpoint of my perceptions, which may not always be right. So you need to approach what I'll say with a hermeneutic of suspicion. I would also add that I do this out of deep respect for who you are, but with great trepidation. If I walk into land mines I don't know about and offend you, please understand that that is not my intent.

II. Random Observations

Let me begin with a series of somewhat random and unsystematic observations about how I perceive who you are.

1. You seem to have a **daily orientation**. That is perhaps most apparent in the *Moravian Daily Texts (Losungen)*, but it seems to have deep roots in your history. In Bohemia in the late fourteenth century, the sacramental and liturgical renewal from which John Hus sprang included daily celebrations of the Eucharist; and Zinzendorf in the eighteenth century had daily meetings (*Versammlungen*).
2. You seem to have a **seasonal orientation**. Your liturgical practice seems to be strongly adjusted to the seasons of the church year. The liturgies in your *Moravian Book of Worship* work from Advent through the Church Year; and you are known for your Advent, Christmas, Watch-Night, Lenten, and Easter observances.
3. You seem to place a strong **importance on litanies**. The *Moravian Book of Worship* begins with two of them, the second from 1571 - which suggests the historic depth of this interest. You were apparently influenced by Luther's editing of the church's Litany, and Zinzendorf fashioned them. Zinzendorf's running hymns together in his "hours of song" also has a litanic character to it.
4. You have a **historic concern for everybody**, and the concern is both individual and societal. Fourteenth and fifteenth century Bohemian preaching was in the vernacular so everybody could understand, hymn singing was in the vernacular so everybody could sing, and all the baptized - including infants and former prostitutes - were welcomed to the table. This had both individual and societal implications, as your persecution suggests. The same concerns for both individuals and society find expression in the Love-Feast which began in 1727.
5. You have a **concern for education and understanding** the Christian faith. Whether your contributions to the sixteenth century developments of Confirmation in the *Unitas Fratrum* and their broader influence on the rest of the church were good things or not may be open to question, but the underlying concern for education can only be read positively. The same positive affirmations need to be made about your sixteenth century prints of the Bible in the vernacular, the catechism you produced at that time, and the work of people like Amos Comenius.
6. You have a concern for the **singing of the faith** by the body of the baptized. It can be seen in Bohemian fourteenth and fifteenth century vernacular hymn singing, in Zinzendorf's singing hours (*Singstunden*), and in your hymnals which began in the sixteenth century before the Lutheran ones and run to your current *Moravian Book of Worship* of 1995.
7. You developed a considerable **choral and instrumental musical culture** beyond the congregation's singing. Herrnhut's Music Director Christian Gregor, composer Johann Gottfried Geisler, organ builder David Tannenberg, choirs, instrumental groups, trombone choirs, organ music, polyphony, cantatas, anthems, the Moravian Music Foundation, and the vigorous musical life of cities like Bethlehem, PA, and Winston Salem, NC, are all pieces of a remarkable musical life which you have spawned.
8. You have a **history of persecution**. It is evident in 1415 when Hus was burned at the stake, in the conflicts of the Ultraquists that followed, in the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 when the Bohemian Estates were defeated, in the Thirty Years' War, in Zinzendorf's welcome of exiles at Herrnhut in Saxony in 1722, and in the flight of Moravians from Europe at the end of the nineteenth century.
9. You are **Pietists** through your encounter with Zinzendorf, but your Pietism has the ballast of your earlier history, which, by your reckoning, stretches back to Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century. That history includes sacramental renewal, persecution, the discipline of the Church Year, and the ecumenical Creeds. Your Pietism is characterized by Christ-centered experience and a kind of simplicity, but it is not reducible to shallow feelings and does not appear to imbibe in Pietism's great temptation to cruelty.
10. You have a **very large hymnal** with a wide range of texts and tunes that stretch from your sixteenth century heritage to the present. That matches most denominational hymnals, but yours seems to stand somewhat outside the practice of the rest of the church in two ways. First, tune names are sometimes different - FORTRESS, for example, instead of EIN FESTE BURG, HERALD ANGELS in place of MENDELSSOHN, or AVE HIERARCHIA instead of GOTTEST SOHN IST KOMMEN. Second, it reflects a penchant for length. Zinzendorf's "London Songbook" of 1753 and 1754 is perhaps the pinnacle of this tendency. Its 3,265 hymns are far more than most groups of Christians have published in one of their hymnals.
11. The paragraph you repeat in your hymnals since the late eighteenth century **anchors your psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to the song of the redeemed** around the throne of God, "Worthy is the Lamb." That gives your song its characteristic Christological center with an eschatological telos. It means that all your singing and doing in this life lives under the umbrella of God's grace, that what God has done and will do in Christ contextualizes and gives meaning to your life together in and for the world. It is not surprising therefore that your hymnal gives prominence to the New Testament canticles and their offspring - the *Benedictus*, the *Magnificat*, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the *Te Deum Laudamus*, "Christ our Passover," "This Is the Feast," and the *Nunc Dimittis*. What is surprising is how few Psalms you include, only ten out of 150, since Christians have characteristically interpreted the Psalms christologically and

teleologically. They have characteristically regarded them as the ground and center not only of the Canticles, but of the whole corpus of their song.

12. While you have the ballast of history before Zinzendorf, **Zinzendorf is really pretty determinative for you.** You reference him regularly, and your practice clearly stems from him. Perhaps the most obvious symbol of that is your hymn singing. You gravitate to an eighteenth century musical idiom (with loud vigor). Sixteenth century rhythmic and unison melodies with a folk underlay are pulled into isorhythmic forms, in eighteenth to nineteenth century harmonic envelopes and a choral conception. Twentieth century unison melodies won't adapt so easily to four-part harmony, but you add harmonic parts anyway. Another illustration of this same tendency is your avoidance of unison psalm tones which are simple and congregational in conception, but your embrace of four-part harmonic Anglican chant which is much more difficult and operates from a more choral conception.

III. Reflections

1. Your daily orientation, or historic daily discipline, is not monastic in the sense of the Benedictines and their daily prayer offices; but it also is not the same as what Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, or other Christian lay people may do. These people are not in any sense monastic, but may attend Morning and Evening Prayer at various times during the week or may engage in other more private or familial daily prayer disciplines at mealtimes or on arising or going to bed. Your orientation seems to lie somewhere between these two models. While it does not assume the common life of a community that lives together in a monastery, it does assume close proximity and daily contact. This is part of what seems to have made it possible for you to compile large hymnals with a larger repertoire of hymns and liturgical materials than most of the church can assume. The scattered places of our homes in the contemporary world militate against this kind of proximity and therefore against daily meetings. In such a circumstance the question is whether large hymnals and an abundance of litanic and seasonal liturgical materials become anthology instead of part of the communal memory bank.

2. I wonder about your Eucharistic practice. I do not have in mind the theological disputes about Christ's presence. The question is about your actual practice. Do your daily and seasonal orientations obscure the church's weekly Sunday Eucharistic celebrations? For most of the church most of the time - Eastern Orthodox, Western Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Wesleyan - often in actual practice and always in confession if not in practice, Sunday is the Lord's Day for the weekly celebration of Easter and the Eucharist. You continually point to the importance of the Eucharist. At the worship service on Monday night, for example, numerous pieces came from the Eucharist or its practice: the beginning of the *Sursum corda* ("Lift up your hearts"); the Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel readings; and the litany's beginning and ending - the *Kyrie* and *Agnus Dei*, the same as the congregational bookends at the Ordinary of the Eucharist. Your emphasis on "Worthy is the Lamb" points to the Eucharistic foretaste of the feast to come; your language, imagery, metaphors are often Eucharistic; your fourteenth century history is Eucharistic with daily and weekly celebrations; and, apparently, like many other denominations, some of your churches are adding communion to their Sunday services - even weekly in some cases.

My sense is that you represent a kind of monastic presence in the church that unconsciously says something like this: we'll pray and sing together and let the rest of the church celebrate the weekly Eucharist for us. Your own eighteenth century practice may have presumed this weekly celebration in the Lutheran churches around your community. In this respect you have had an influence far beyond your numbers, for much of Protestantism operated as you do - though, at the moment, as for you, there appears to be a general Protestant Eucharistic hunger which is not content to let things stand as they are.

3. Here are some thoughts about musical orientation, longer because I was specifically asked to address music. Your gravitational pull to an eighteenth to nineteenth century harmonic musical practice also points to a monastic and in this case, somewhat choral orientation. What you are doing - which is extremely attractive and compelling, by the way - is not the norm. It takes practice and cannot be expected from most people most of the time. Most of the church most of the time has sung - and is able to sing without rehearsal - a unison vocal line. To expect more than that is to push the congregation to a rehearsed choir, which it is not.

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This poses a dilemma in our period. When we have such musical diversity going on and when there is so little singing by groups of people anywhere except in church - and even then not always much - the church's singing, especially in your kind of harmonic style, has been criticized. The criticism usually proposes one of two things: either sing for the people since they aren't singing, or give them something that's attractive like a solo and pretend they'll be able to sing it, but actually sing it for them and let them sing along if they want to or can.

This is part of a much larger agenda, sometimes articulated, but just as often practiced without conscious thought. It goes like this. We live in a post-modern age and inhabit a new paradigm. Therefore, we are advised to abandon our histories and re-invent ourselves in ways that are consonant with our culture. That means:

- the church's liturgy and hymnic heritage are outmoded and should be jettisoned,
- the ecumenical Creeds have outlived their usefulness,
- reading the Bible in public worship services is probably not a good idea - at least not very much of it and certainly not in any kind of sequence like a lectionary,
- the Church Year is a thing of the past,
- terms that Christians have used are to be avoided,
- the themes that various streams of the church emphasize are of no value any more because denominationalism is dead, and
- sing only what comes from the last ten years.

A set of statistics and demographic charts often accompany this program when it is consciously articulated. By analyzing the composition of the church and the culture, the future is predicted. The predictors can then tell you exactly what you must do for the sake of mission. If you don't do what they tell you, you are informed that your group will die in the next five years (or three or seven or whatever the projection shows). Presbyterians and the United Church of Christ, according to one analysis I heard just over a decade ago, were supposed to

die in the late 1990s. More recently, at a Synod meeting, Lutherans in one locale were given five years.

This is a very seductive point of view. It appeals to the Christian sense of mission, and the Pietistic motifs in the history of many American groups – which include at least you, Wesleyans, Reformed, and Lutherans – provide a natural bridge to it. On that bridge there is the willingness to hang loose with structures, to criticize the church (sometimes gleefully), and to perceive the faith as if it were solely about individual piety and feelings.

Groups like Moravians have the ballast of the church's deeper resources and perspectives. Your own wisdom tells you therefore that to adopt this program is to commit suicide, and that if you want to follow Christ as his disciples something else is required. That something else is considerably more textured and interesting than the flat suicide of those who presume to know the future, to say nothing of its faithfulness. It is a response that includes these characteristics.

- It affirms your individual heritage, not for reasons of nostalgia or self-interest, but because you represent a specific stream in the Christian church; both the world and the rest of us Christians will be the poorer if you abandon it.
- Denominationalism may well be dead, but the themes it represents are not. Just as there are four gospels and Peter and Paul, so there are various streams that are embodied in communities of faith. They have not gone away for twenty centuries and are not likely to disappear now. If you abandon your heritage, somebody else who does not know it as well as you will fill the vacuum.
- To jettison the church's liturgy and hymnic heritage is to make an ecclesiological judgment that says we in our generation can start the church from scratch and there is nothing we can learn from our sisters and brothers in Christ who have gone before us. That is not only arrogant; your own heritage, like most of ours, says it is a theological mistake.
- To abandon the ecumenical Creeds requires getting the whole church catholic together to fashion new ones. Whether that would be a good idea is itself debatable, but it is impossible given the state of our divisions.
- To abandon the Church Year and the reading of the Bible in some kind of lectionary sequence is to abandon the fullness of the story as well as the fullness of the faith, and to assume we can scoop it out of our own private opinions and individual experience somehow.
- To abandon terms that Christians have used is to assume there is nothing to be taught, that people know by some kind of automatic osmosis what the Christian faith is about. That not only evades the church's teaching responsibility, but it is a theological mistake because it ultimately denies that there is any external word about the Word that needs to be spoken to our sinful condition. There is nothing sacred about any of our terms, but they arose in order to get at the central mystery of what God has done in Christ and continues to do through the activity of the Holy Spirit. To avoid them is not only arrogant, but refuses to learn from those who have gone before us.
- To avoid the church's musical and hymnic heritage is to foster amnesia. It is also to deny the necessity of the church to sing together across

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generations and therefore to have a memory bank that crosses centuries. As William Inge said, the church that marries the spirit of one generation will become a widow in the next.

What we are being told and what is often being practiced collapses the Christian gospel into one more religious commodity to be sold with music as the means to attract customers. That is the antithesis of the church's perspective and use of music.¹ Your best instincts tell you to resist the push to succumb to selling religion, not to commit suicide, but to be disciples of Christ. Your request to me itself indicates that you know you need to access your heritage and live it creatively into the present for us all as disciples of Christ.

All of this brings me back to your musical practice. The question is this: how do you not abandon your own practice while still welcoming other genuinely congregational styles? That is, welcoming other styles that are admittedly not congregational or give the pretense of being congregational when they are not serves no purpose at all. Matters are just made worse by that move.

One way to go at this is to welcome various genuinely congregational styles and then sing them in their natural way. Sing what's four part in four parts. Sing what's characteristically unison in unison. Sing what's loud loudly and what's quiet quietly.

IV. Planning

Your problems about planning are the same ones we all have. You have to plan with your heritage and the ecumenical church in mind, just as each of the rest of us has to do it with our own heritage and the ecumenical church in mind.

1) The fundamental issue is not detail. The fundamental issue is perspective:

- Who are you?
- Who is the whole church?
- How do the two relate?
- What is your responsibility to the church and the world?

2) When you plan for the worship of the church, you plan for what is public, not what is private. Your faith, your piety, my faith, and my piety are not at issue. The faith of the church is at issue. The vapors of our individual faith and piety cannot be trusted. They will be too hot, too cold, and too idiosyncratic. The faith of the church finds expression in the liturgy. We need the liturgy to protect us. To make the public private is to make a category mistake.

3) Another category mistake is to choose oratorio music (of Handel's *Messiah* and the Brahms' *Requiem*, for example) for worship instead of worship music for worship. The oratorio tradition is an honorable and proclamatory one; we need to embrace it for what it does, not for what it does not do. Unlike music for worship, it is essentially

- solo,

¹ I have tried to analyze how the church has viewed music in *The Church Musician*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997) and in an expansion of Chapter 4, published as *The Heart of the Matter: Church Music as Praise, Prayer, Proclamation, Story, and Gift* (Chicago: GIA Publication, Inc., 2001). For the larger historical context see my *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

- choral in a performance sense,
 - usually with instruments a central rather than a secondary component, and
 - non-participatory.
- 4) Truth for the Christian is incarnational. That is, it is embodied in Christ and in Christ's body - the church - the body into which we are baptized. It receives expression in the church in forms. It is not a mental construct or a wispy feeling. It receives physical expression in actual worship forms, in what we say and do. What are those forms and actions? If you look across the whole church and its history they include:
- the Word and Table sequence of the Eucharist in our current ecumenical consensus, largely as you will celebrate it to conclude this conference:
 - Gathering: Greeting in God's name, Prayer, *Kyrie*, *Gloria in Excelsis*;
 - Word: Readings with intervenient Psalmody, Preaching, Hymnody for some traditions, Nicene Creed;
 - Prayers of Intercession and Peace (or later);
 - Table - *Sursum corda* ("Lift up Your Hearts"), *Sanctus* ("Holy, Holy, Holy"), Eucharistic Prayer, Communion with *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God") and other hymnody;
 - Sending - "Go in Peace to love and serve the Lord," that is, be in the world what you have received, the body of Christ; and
 - Daily Prayer: versicles, canticles, hymns, readings, prayer.

This has implications.

- i) It means you can't say that there is truth, and then we express it any way we want to. That makes truth a Gnostic phantom. There is certainly a variety in the way we speak, sing and act (work), but there are certain texts (like the *Kyrie*), certain actions at worship (like receiving communion), certain work in the world (for justice and peace, for example), that are not negotiable. They are givens.
- ii) The Protestant temptation is to say it doesn't matter what you do and to be legalistic about *not* doing certain forms. The catholic temptation is to say it matters what you do and to be legalistic about *doing* certain forms. Both of these temptations are idolatry. Our ecumenical problem is to realize we are disciplined by common forms which are important, but we are not legalistic about them. All sorts of ceremonial, for example, are possible without denying the common forms.
- iii) Your proclivity to write "liturgies" as compact forms within worship has its problems. First, it creates many forms not common to all. Second, it avoids the checks and balances of the whole church. Third, it fits with the Protestant temptation to be didactic, which sets up wordy and non-congregational forms. Fourth, it puts words into people's mouths that they don't believe, but which leaders want them to believe. This sets up anger and hypocrisy. That the anger is often not expressed makes it more dangerous. Fifth, it makes for anthology, not common prayer. Sixth, the Orthodox Romanian youth's comment you heard yesterday about making up prayers is *ad rem* here. He asked what makes us think the Holy Spirit will be present in our individual free prayers or our individual "liturgies"? This is a strange word for Protestants to hear, but not strange at all for much of the Christian world in its Orthodox and catholic forms.

So then, what is our common ecumenical musical heritage as Christians? For you, as for most of us, it has two parts: 1) the congregation's singing, and 2) the choir's singing (both with or without instruments). Words and vocal communal singing are central here. In the West, instruments have been admitted, but they remain secondary. Among instruments, the organ is first among equals because of its huge repertoire associated with the church and because of its capacity to lead congregations. The choir has to lead the congregation and to sing what the congregation cannot because it does not practice. As long as the conception is right and what the choir does is fitting for worship, its latitude is huge.

The congregation, precisely because it does not practice, necessitates a more careful discipline and is at the center of many of our disputes. One way to approach this discipline is to ask what the congregation's memory bank includes. If you ask the question by looking across the church's history, it includes:

- short pieces, like the *Kyrie*, *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei* from the Ordinary of the Mass, or prayer responses like "Hear our prayer;"
- longer pieces like the *Gloria in Excelsis* and Nicene Creed from the Mass;
- the Apostles' Creed from the baptismal service,
- psalms;
- canticles; and
- hymns, which for you are probably more important than psalms.

What are the proportions for each of these for you in your heritage, taking into account your ecumenical relationships and responsibilities? How much is too much? How much is not enough? What musical style is central? What other musical styles are welcomed? What is cross-generational? What crosses centuries? What is too much old, a museum? What is too much new, a fad?

You, like all of us, have to ask these questions and make choices, partially because we are finite and cannot do everything, and partially because we have to take into account the wholeness of Christ's body before, among, and after us. You have to sing the fullness of the ecumenical song with your particular contribution to the whole mosaic.

5) One of the church's strongest temptations today is to collapse ourselves into what we think will sell. You, maybe more than many, seem positioned to resist this temptation. You seem to know that it will betray us very soon, that it will lead you where much of the culture is today, hijacking the Christian faith for civil religious and nationalistic purposes. You know better. Christ is Lord, not Caesar. Planning music for worship ultimately is related to a whole host of other issues, like the relationship of Christians to the world. Planning finally comes down to a question of who is Lord, Christ or Caesar.

Plan by giving yourself away for the life of the world as God does in Christ. Your survival is not at issue; God is in charge of that and promises to be with us to the end of time. Selling out to the culture or political agendas is not what it means to lose your life for Christ's sake. Losing your life for Christ and the world means giving away *your* gifts, which means paradoxically constantly nourishing them. The grass is not greener on the other side of the street. And, even if it were, that's irrelevant. Be who you are- ecumenical Moravians, disciples of Christ, followers of the Lamb.

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