

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE CHURCH MUSICIAN

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To yield is to be preserved whole
To be bent is to become straight
To be empty is to be full
To be worn out is to be renewed
To have little is to possess
To have plenty is to be perplexed

Lao-Tzu (c.604–631 B.C.): *The Way of Lao-Tzu*, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan

If conscientious church musicians aren't careful they can end up working seven days in each week. A five-day work week, Monday through Friday, is so ingrained in our sociological traditions that we don't question it; but church and synagogue musicians often have services on Saturday, and Sunday duties are the heaviest of all. It's not difficult to end up doing at least some work on every day of the week. That is the reason why it is important, if not essential, for the full-time church musician to take one day off systematically during the week.

Just as church musicians cannot stop time, neither can they stand still in their religious or educational lives. Musicians seem prone to work toward an ill-defined point in their lives when they can stop learning and stop practicing, believing they have "arrived." There is no possibility for true stasis in human existence—we either grow and continue to develop or we decline.

There is a constant and pressing need for growth, or at least for maintenance, of our bodies and our beings. Lucretius has said:

Thus the sum of things is ever being renewed, and mortals live dependent one upon another. Some things increase, others diminish, and in a short space the generations of living creatures are changed and like runners pass on the torch of life (*De Rerum Natura*, "On the Nature of Things").

Many of us stop thinking about growth once we pass two points: adolescence (in the case of our physical growth) and the final academic degree (our intellectual growth). Intellectual and spiritual growth must be tended and nurtured if one is to remain mentally and spiritually healthy. Minds and spirits must have stimulation or they will stagnate. Symptoms of this stagnation may be seen most easily in repetitiveness. Church musicians find it easy to "do the same thing we did last year" or simply restrict the congregation to a few hymns that are known to be palatable and that will require little or no effort.

Some Models for Growth

How is it possible for the church musician to grow? In his book, *Self Renewal*, John Gardner reminds us that in Greek mythology Antaeus was supposedly invincible as long as he was touching the earth. For the ordinary mortal there will always be a need to return to simple, earthy things for refreshment and renewal. More important, however, one must *want* to grow if any of these methods are to have any effect. We too often find our ruts to be much too comfortable to try to climb out of them.

St. Benedict of Nursia (480–c.546) produced a model by which monasteries were to live and operate. His *Rule* concerns the administration of the monastery as well as the patterns of daily life of monks, and gives both spiritual and practical advice toward achieving the virtues of obedience, silence, and humility. St. Benedict's motto, *Ora et Labora* ("Pray and Work"), is ideal for church musicians in a search for renewal and growth.

For the church musician, the work of self-renewal takes three forms: study, listening, and practice. Study includes reading books and periodicals or, more formally, classes and private study. Even a short course with a master teacher can do wonders for a sagging technique and/or provide some new approaches to the literature.

Church musicians spend so much time listening to themselves that there is not always time for the stimulation of listening to others. Listening today is made so simple by the electronic media that anything the ears desire is only as far away as a CD or tape recording. Church musicians must be careful not to isolate themselves so completely in the glorious heritage of church music that they become numb to the beauties of other music. In the way that a wide variety of reading materials is needed, the same variety of listening experiences is needed.

As to practice, do you ever practice *performing* or do you just practice *practicing*? Do you ever *really* listen to yourself? Surely you hear yourself practice and you listen as you sing or play or as your choir sings, but do you ever sit and listen to yourself *perform*? We might forget that God has given us the gift of making beautiful sounds. We may prepare long and hard for performances to inspire and uplift others but we may forget to inspire and uplift ourselves. It is too easy to immerse oneself in the techniques of performance to the point that the art is not apparent to the performer. Take some time out and listen to yourself. Enjoy the sounds you make! Bathe in the warmth of a musical experience you create for yourself. This can be a tremendous renewal of mind, body, and spirit. It can be as though we hear ourselves for the first time, as we have never heard ourselves before.

Unfortunately, hearing our colleagues is difficult because we all mainly perform at the same time. We are so busy that we cannot take time off either to explore what our neighbors are doing or to hear the results of their work. On those occasions when we find ourselves released from the every-Sunday obligation, the temptation to take Sunday off and rest is almost overwhelming. This tendency must be fought so that we can know what others are doing and be stimulated by them.

We can have several responses to our peers' work. We can be uplifted and stimulated by what we might view as an affirmation of the same tastes and standards that we uphold. We even might be stimulated to greater effort by those who excel in ways that we do not. We may occasionally be appalled by what we hear going on around us. Each response is possible and stimulating in its own way. We can either come away seeking to raise our standards or at least to maintain with some tenacity what we see as the right and proper path.

Finally, practice plays a large part in our early development as musicians and must not be discontinued as one moves toward musical maturity. There seem to be three major reasons for practice: first, to rehearse that music we plan to perform and thus keep it in a continuing state of readiness; second, to sharpen old skills so that they may be available when needed; and finally, to learn new skills. Practice should be the one area in which our individual growth is most apparent to us. We begin with easy materials and progress to more difficult. Epictetus said, "Practice yourself, for heaven's sake, in little things, and thence proceed to greater" (*Discourses*). By constantly challenging ourselves with more difficult and more exhilarating materials, we can renew ourselves in a way that perhaps we had not thought possible before.

Spiritual Development

Finding aids for spiritual development designed especially for the church musician is not an easy task. Some church musicians are so alienated that they shy away from any additional personal religious experiences. Are you to be a church musician or a musician in the church? A musician in the church is one who, though skilled in music, perhaps a brilliant performer and/or teacher, lacks a proper understanding of the motivations and purposes for having music in the church. Church musicians, on the other hand, are those who have carefully developed a philosophy of the role of music in their denominations and in their roles as musical pastors.

Every truly dedicated church musician must also be something of a student of theology. At the very least, a knowledge of the specific vocabulary of theology is important. How many church musicians can define such terms as *exegesis*, *anamnesis*, or *eschatology*? We expect our clergy to speak the church musician's argot but often feel no compulsion to speak the minister's "language."

The study of theology as an avocation is not easy. The language is difficult, obscure, and contained in books and articles to which the musician does not always have easy access. Libraries rarely contain specialized journals that one needs to pursue an interest in theology. Local colleges and universities frequently offer only a few courses and only at times when it is difficult if not impossible for the church musician to attend. Still, if being a church musician is a worthy pursuit, we must find the ways and means to educate ourselves as thoroughly as possible in the "corporation" we serve. The results will not only enrich the musician's spiritual and personal life but will provide a more solid structure on which to build communication with the clergy. If we view our role in the light of the use of music for the praise and worship of God, then it seems reasonable that the study of theology as a search for knowledge of our God is a natural pursuit.

St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Barrington, Illinois, where I served as organist and choirmaster for seven years, is one of many churches that provide daily Morning and Evening Prayer as well as a daily eucharistic celebration in addition to the regular Sunday services. It was very convenient (and I must sadly confess that this was a major consideration) for me to attend the Friday morning Eucharist, the service then followed by my own practice time. After that began the day's quota of organ students before driving to the college and teaching there. Those Friday morning services (which had no music at all) became a significant part of my own spiritual life. Here I became quickly convinced of a radical idea about church music: it is *not* necessary to have music in worship.

Not have music in worship? Isn't this heresy to a church musician? Isn't this in contravention to much of what church musicians have thought, heard, and been taught for many years? At St. Michael's, the Eucharist flowed along each Friday morning without benefit of hymn, sung psalm, or spiritual song. No doubt the service might have been enriched, sustained, and propelled by their inclusion; nevertheless, the stark fact remained: they were not essential. During the relatively quiet time of prayer, devotion, and communion it was possible for me to feel a sense of God's presence that was difficult to achieve during services where I was responsible for all the music. These spiritual encounters I believe to be essential for the church musician.

The "Holy" Church Musician

Personal development, whether professional or spiritual, need not necessarily be all work and no play. While church musicians are ever engaged in a serious business, we cannot neglect the lighter sides of life.

Relaxation should form as important a part of any program of self-renewal as any other activity. Church musicians need a systematic and thoughtful method for regeneration of selves and bodies as much as they need the stimulation of study and practice. The words "holy," "whole," and "hale" all have similar etymologies, i.e., a completeness or fullness that comes when something is all together in unity. Things that are "holy" have this trait, and it is instructive to try to apply this term to church music. Is the music that you produce for your church "holy"? Are you yourself "holy"?

We all know someone who is "burned out" and we must take steps to ensure that that does not happen to us. It doesn't matter whether the burnout occurs simply because of age or the battering effects of repetition and stress in our lives; we must find an antidote for it. Those who would be holy must first be hale, and regenerative relaxation is an important part of the process.

Music is, with the possible exception of a marching band, a sedentary activity. Musicians spend long hours in the practice room, usually seated, while the muscles of hands, legs, and/or throats are exercised to an exquisite keenness. The rest of the body is often left to go into decline.

Regular exercise can have some very important benefits for the church musician. It is probably the *best* method for relieving stress. By getting involved in some physical activity, the church musician can have an opportunity to meet a portion of the congregation that may have been unknown before. One minister has said that 18 holes of golf with the chairman of his board is worth at least six months of Thursday night meetings. Why should the church musician be excluded from this kind of interaction?

A balance of work, play, and exercise is necessary for the well-rounded life we would like to have. If church musicians are to be sufficiently creative, they must constantly be stimulated by new perspectives. This means not only changes in ideas but changes in scene as well.

One of the best ways to gain new perspectives is through *retreats*. The most obvious form of retreat for the church musician is to attend workshops and conventions. Time in the schedule and money in the budget must always be provided to attend some of these—certainly at least one per year—and more frequent attendance could be helpful provided it does not interfere with the normal schedule of activities. Churches should provide *budgeted* money for at least one such workshop each year for every member of its staff, whether full- or part-time. Smaller churches, of course, might only provide partial support for this kind of activity but there must be a concerted effort to ensure that musicians continue their educations in theology, in music, and in methods of extending service to the church.

Attending workshops and continuing education courses outside of one's own denomination can result in some exciting possibilities. Those who work in mainline Protestant churches might attend a workshop intended primarily for Roman Catholics and vice versa. Roman Catholics seem to have discovered the incredibly glorious body of music contained in Protestant hymnody. On the other hand, many mainline Protestants do not relate well to the vast power and great beauty found in liturgical celebration. Introducing the concept of processions to a church that has not previously experienced one is a heady experience. At one of the churches I served, our first procession, which began a Christmas service of lessons and carols, was such a moving experience that some members of the congregation wept. We all have much to learn from one another.

Another type of retreat is a religious retreat. Many denominations offer group religious retreats but only a few offer individual retreats. The Roman Catholic church has long sponsored retreat houses where it is possible not only to join in group retreats but also to make an individual, personal retreat as well.

While an individual retreat provides an opportunity for spiritual growth that cannot be matched, one need not travel to a distant location to enjoy its benefits. Simply taking a day off, driving to some attractive and comfortable place to read, contemplate, and pray can produce valuable rejuvenation. Reading material can be drawn from any number of sources. A Protestant church musician might explore the possibilities of the Roman *Breviary* and read the lessons appointed for each day. A Roman Catholic church musician might spend time with a standard Protestant hymnal. Sr. Cynthia Serjak's book, *Prophecies and Puzzles* (Washington, D. C.: National Association of Pastoral Musicians), provides specific readings, food for thought, and guidance for a self-led retreat. What is im-

portant is to have a change of ideas and a change of scene as well.

Church musicians' lives seem opposite-ordered: Sunday morning is filled with the most intense activities and pressures, sometimes beginning very early for those with multiple services. The afternoon may come as a sudden, complete change of pace, and, for those without evening services, there may be no other duties that day. Church musicians have to find some way to adjust to this strange imbalance on what for most people is the "Day of Rest."

This opposite-ordering can lead to tensions in life-styles, e.g., it is often difficult to accept social engagements on Saturday night knowing what the rigors of Sunday morning will be. It is difficult for church musicians to be away from home on the weekends. Patience, tact, and understanding are necessary to explain this life-style, which makes its demands in ways that are not always understandable to friends and relatives.

Certainly *intensity* is necessary in church music. Church music as a profession requires a disciplined, hale, holy, and directed life for success. The intensity required to produce this can also bring on stress. Whoever it was who said, "The Church is a hospital for sinners—not a hotel for saints" was absolutely correct. Tensions and energies are often pulled in different directions. There are always parishioners who want to cling to the status quo; others want to return to the hymnody and musical styles of their grandparents; still others complain because the musical offerings aren't "relevant." Church musicians must deal with these conflicts that demand enormous amounts of time and energy.

With balance in our lives, these travails need not lead to burnout. St. Paul writes in his Second Letter to Timothy:

Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will grant you understanding in everything.

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