

***Suspension of communal singing, an imposed fast from music-inspired spirituality, and nostalgic yearning for live musical assembly, individually and jointly, wounds souls.***

## On Pandemic and Singing

Claude Monet, Weeping Willow, 1918

WIKIMEDIA/KIMBELL ART MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

by Mark Bangert

By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down  
and there we wept when we  
remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors asked us for songs, and  
our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

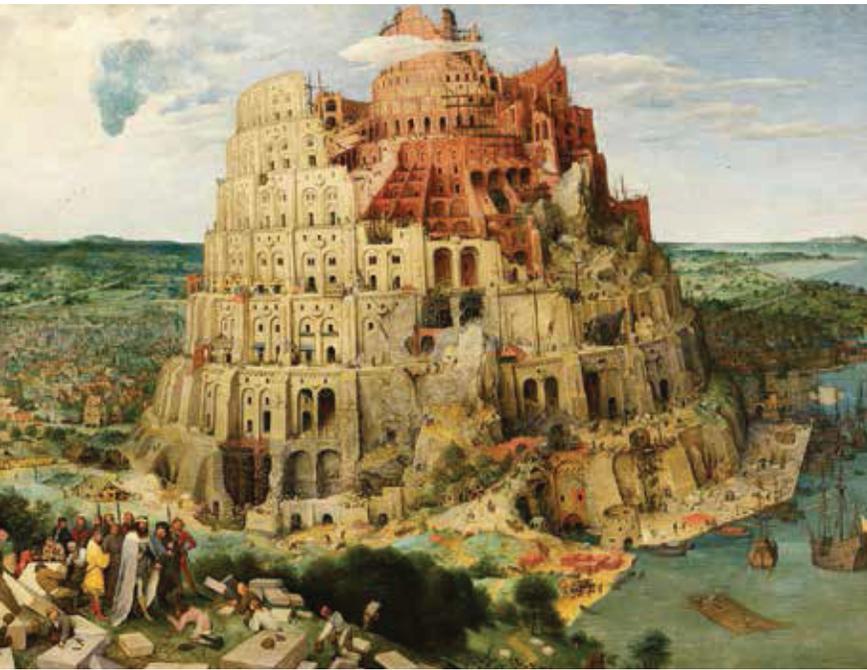
(Psalm 137:1–3; NRSV)

**T**he words of the psalmist reverberate poignantly in these days of COVID-19 as assembly hymn singers and their choir

partners obediently and responsibly “hang up” their vocal chords in hopes of keeping the air free of potentially infectious particles. For most this is not an easy transition. Suspension of communal singing, an imposed fast from music-inspired spirituality, and nostalgic yearning for live musical assembly, individually and jointly, wounds souls. And while various forms of singing in virtual worship and brave spurts of musical output from family tables mitigate this particular fallout of the pandemic, wounded spirits are still moved to lament.

Israel’s river’s-edge outpouring of grief has moved countless composers across the centuries. There are settings of Psalm 137 by Nicolaus

## KEYWORDS: ASSEMBLY, COMMUNION, SINGING



Pieter Bruegel the Elder,  
The Tower of Babel, ca. 1563

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Gombert, Francisco Guerrero, William Byrd, Giovanni Palestrina, Heinrich Schütz, Orlandus Lassus, Giuseppe Verdi (“Va Pensiero” from *Nabucco*), Antonín Dvořák, Steve Reich, Arvo Pärt, Leonard Cohen, and Stephen Schwartz (“On the Willows” from *Godspell*). Whether or not these works were prompted by some identifiable musical loss cannot be determined. Schütz’s work, “*An den Wassern zu Babel*” (SWV 37) for two choirs, demonstrates the composer’s uncanny ability to solicit pathos by way of musical rhetoric. It was published in 1619, toward the beginning of the Thirty Years’ War, but it likely came into being earlier, because the text provided perfect grist for him to apply lessons taught by his Italian teachers. Let it be remembered that each of the compositions above was written with the expectation of performance, so with marked irony these artists set out to vent lament with a medium forbidden by the very text at hand.

Like all the psalms, this text also spawned metered versions. One of the earliest of these, in the Reformed style, came from the pen of Matthias Greiter, “*An Wasserflüssen Babylon*,” a five-stanza hymn based on Psalm 137. Though it made its way

to northern Germany, it gradually lost its appeal. Its tune by the same name, composed by Wolfgang Dachstein, did garner widespread affection, especially when linked to a completely different text associated with Holy Week, “A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth” (*ELW* 340; *LSB* 438; *CW* 100). J. S. Bach, according to his obituary, improvised on that tune for 30 minutes while playing a private concert in Hamburg for local notables, among whom was the famous organist, Johann Adam Reincken. Bach then later left us with a composed chorale prelude for organ (BWV 653) on the same tune in his so-called “Leipzig” chorale preludes. Circumstances point to the second text as topical source for Bach, though it is not without significance that as a Passion-themed chorale it finds its temporal home at a time when most music was silenced in Leipzig.

Imagining assembly life without song is one thing; engaging the pathos of such a possibility through lament set to music is another; but still another is the actual experience of this reality. Longing is not easily mitigated, and the disabled (or perhaps idling) engines of the church musician are not routinely ignited. We are in an in-between time that is uncertain, significantly void, and in search of some perspective.

We also need to recognize that the weighty repercussions of this new feature of “mask culture” extend well beyond yearning and musical suspension. One way to safely descend into the gravity of the situation lies in taking a closer look at Luther’s *theology of music*. Those italicized words are quite deliberately chosen, for Luther is one of the few who thought about music in a truly theological way. First, we will measure his words about musical participation against some current ways of evaluating music’s purposes in general, and then we will explore the theological implications of his view of music’s origins against the current suspension of assembly singing.

In his 1538 “Preface” to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae iucundae* (PSI), a collection of 52 motets for the church year, Luther offered his largest and most systematic exposition of his thoughts on music.

*The meaning of music is embedded in the relationships of its participants; ... most intensely sensed in participatory performance.*

For him the musical experience was nothing but live. His most ebullient comments on music come at table after family and friends have eaten (and presumably quenched their thirst), followed by a round of singing from part books.<sup>1</sup> Even if PSI does not directly derive from table, it is with that context in mind that we best read these words from it, taken from a section in which he addresses the wonders of composed music:

the greatest excellence is that, while one and the same voice continues in its course, several voices play, exult, and adorn it with the most delightful gestures all round it in wondrous ways, and so to speak, lead a kind of divine dance so that those who are even moderately affected by it think that there is nothing more wonderful in this world.<sup>2</sup>

Described here is fifteenth- and sixteenth-century vocal polyphony of the *Tenorlied* style, in which the tenor voice sounds the tune around which other voices weave their own newly devised lines. The use of part books lent each performance an element of existential surprise in that there is no way a participant could know, at least initially, how a piece would evolve. This sense of always being in the midst of a happening struck Luther as a form of heavenly dance, coming into being every moment as a kind of eschatology, actually, that for him seemed to be at the core of what music is. Just like God doesn't do the same thing twice, so the musical experience—even with the same composition—is always new. It took effort to bring music into being but in that effort lay an experience quite like no other while simultaneously being a revealing sign of life beyond.

It may be impossible for us to duplicate the intensity of such moments even under normal circumstances simply because so much of our music culture is built on reproduction. That culture is



Joos van Craesbeeck, *Three Young Men Making Music*, ca. 1635–1661

increasingly being questioned. Current trends among scholars of diverse disciplines are campaigning for reconsideration of our usual patterns of confronting music. As a way to comprehend the issues at hand, musicologist and banjo player Thomas Turino has helpfully charted the four ways we normally engage music: participatory performance (one is a participant), presentational performance (as active listener, one hears others in a live event), high fidelity (one hears a recording of a live performance), and studio art (the electronic production of music).<sup>3</sup> He holds that the first of these comes closest to what he believes music to be, noting from his own experience how he finds participatory performance to be a “heightened sense of social interaction” and a strong experience of social bonding.<sup>4</sup> He is persuaded that, as a participant, one loses oneself to an unfolding communal event that is both pleasing and satisfying in an extraordinary manner.

When participatory performance is neglected or traded in for musical experiences of a lesser sort, additional byproducts erode Luther’s “heavenly dance.” In the same sense that we talk about “music stores” or the “music business,” it can be said that we have come to think of music as an object, something to be bought and sold with a fixed meaning embedded within the transaction. Issues surrounding commoditization aside, the results of such



Dirck Hals, *Fête Champêtre* (Country Feast), 1627

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tendencies lead to a loss of hunger for the heavenly dance and to satisfaction with musical experiences that simulate the heart of music. Among the efforts to bring us all back to existential surprise and social cohesion are those of Christopher Small, who has come up with a neologism to get our attention.<sup>5</sup> Most languages, except for English, have a word to describe participatory performance (e.g., the German *musizieren*), so he is suggesting we start using the word “musicking” to encourage one another in a return to making music in every place and in restoring its core purpose of enabling a group to hear its own social coherence. Luther and at least two contemporary authors lead us to say that the meaning of music is embedded in the relationships of its participants; moreover, that meaning is most intensely sensed in participatory performance.<sup>6</sup>

We all have come to the moment of pandemic dulled by the “object” myth, by its corollaries, and by the charm of electronic wizardry, admittedly combined with the comforts and diversions the

object can bring while safe in our place. Nevertheless, we are dulled in such a way that we are unable to name what it is, precisely, that we miss. Here is what we really miss: we long for assembly song because it is the means by which we surface our identity and our cherished way of “saying” and “dancing” our communal relationships in Christ. We miss the heavenly dance in all its forms because it is essential to being the body of Christ. The pandemic is piercing that gift of being.

If singing our identity into being is one thing we yearn for, then akin to it but also distinct is the longing for the “free course”<sup>7</sup> of the word. Like the huge mutes that symphonic tubists use, COVID-19 has muffled sounded word—with results far more profound than a muted tuba. In PSI, Luther, following the lead of late medieval theorists he had read, gives much space to what he believes the origins of music to be. He considers it a creature of God. Addressing the intended users of Rhau’s musical collection, he concludes his essay with these exuberant words:

May you ... accept the commendation of this noble, salutary and *happy creature*, to be on occasion medicine for your passions against shameful lusts and evil company. Then may

you become accustomed in this *creature* to recognize and praise the *Creator*.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere in Rhau's preface the reformer expands upon this core understanding. The thing itself, as he refers to it, is sound. With great amazement he notes how moving something through the air at great speed causes a sound. If you think about it, he muses, music is embedded in all of creation. But he is particularly fond of sound from birds, songbirds especially, calling them out for mention both here and elsewhere in his writings. Next, he marvels at the human voice, its varieties and its singular ability to sound words by way of adding consonants and vowels, noting too that humans laugh and weep—all examples of sound in operation. On account of this spectrum of possibilities, Luther views this creature as a distinct gift.

There is, of course, much more at stake here than lots of different sounds. Ironically (or maybe not) in the introduction to a 1522 book of printed sermons, Luther laid out his understanding of the gospel. "The gospel is a story about Christ, God and David's son, who died and was raised,"<sup>9</sup> a story he then claims "should really not be something written, but a spoken word. . . . This is why Christ himself did not write anything but only spoke."<sup>10</sup> Two years later, offering a rationale for his contributions to the hymn repertoire, he claims to have taken on that task "so that the holy gospel which now by the grace of God has risen anew may be noised and spread abroad"<sup>11</sup> (literally, oscillated abroad or swung abroad [*im Schwang*]). When God cheers our hearts in God's son you cannot be quiet about it, Luther declares; instead, you will gladly sing and speak about it, "so that others also may come and hear it."<sup>12</sup>

Emphasis on sounded word, word swung by sound—especially by music—receives this special attention from Luther because that's the way the gospel gets into people's hearts. And it's not only sounded so that others hear it, but the word is swung in a way that we hear it from ourselves as well as from others. Even though we are the sound generators, the word reaches us from outside of

ourselves, offering comprehension through text and faith through affect-laden music. And all of that runs congruent with the insistence that the gospel always needs to come to our hearts from outside of ourselves. Live music swings the gospel right into our hearts. No wonder he called the church a "mouth-house" (*Maulhaus*).<sup>13</sup>

We are lamenting not just the loss of the pleasures of communal singing, not just the cherished memory of the choir we know and love. We are grieving the gospel, now uncontrollably muted by a virus. Of course the word is still proclaimed, in some cases just like before, but the chords have been hung on the willows and the swung gospel has either been silenced or relegated to digital replay or, mistakenly I think, given to a lone individual at safe distance.<sup>14</sup> Exiled from assembly, the psalmist wrote, "We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet, and there is no one among us who knows how long" (Psalm 74:9). More than once the word of the Lord has gone silent. When Samuel received his call to be a "trustworthy prophet," it was said that the "word of the Lord was rare in those days" (1 Samuel 3:1).

Is this overly dramatic? It doesn't seem so if you consider the times and places across the ages when the word did not have "free course," and if you ponder how the church in North America has enjoyed relative unfettered interaction with word, swung or unswung. Muted word is a new mode of spiritual existence, unfamiliar to many. "That your word, as becomes it, may not be bound but have free course and be proclaimed to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people," the prayer reads, signaling God's promise that the word of the Lord

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will not be muffled forever. So let's keep praying words like that with confidence and hope.

As we address the current acoustical-scape, we might also use this opportunity to reflect on times past when we took lightly how essential the sounded swung word is to our faith and to our spiritual and physical well-being as the body of Christ. Lament includes self-reckoning. Then, we might fire up the creative juices in order to conceive of ways to address the void. Gordon Lathrop has suggested that congregations might work to distribute congregational song books to people at home that they might have resources at hand for singing together there. Regarding those congregations who continue virtual assembly, leaders should question, deliberate over, experiment with, and evaluate every possible way of delivering music virtually while soliciting song from distant participants in the best possible fashion. With the array of digital tools at hand, musical leaders can beneficially use this time to assist people in their newly found opportunities to sing and to sing together at home.

Finally, it is possible to think of this time of muteness not as something imposed but rather as a choice made by the believer for the sake of others. In this way we exercise our freedom in Christ by loving our neighbor.

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit upon your church and grant us the wisdom that comes from above, that your word, as becomes it, may not be bound but have free course and be proclaimed to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, and that, in steadfast faith, we serve you and abide in your name to the end through Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord.



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### Notes

1. Manuscript or printed books that each contain the music for an individual voice of a composition.
2. Martin Luther, quoted in J. Andreas Loewe, "Musica est optimum': Martin Luther's Theory of Music," *Music & Letters* 94, no. 4 (November 2013), 602.
3. Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26.
4. Turino, 28.
5. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).
6. Small, 11.
7. Using here the words from a prayer for the church: "that your word, as becomes it, may not be bound but have free course and be proclaimed to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy church," adapted by the author from *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941), 102.
8. Loewe, 604; emphasis by the author.
9. Martin Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels," in *Luther's Works* American edition [hereafter LW, AE], vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 118.
10. Luther, LW, AE, vol. 35, 123.
11. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal," LW, AE, vol. 53, *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1965), 316.
12. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Bapst Hymnal," LW, AE, vol. 53, 332.
13. Martin Luther, "First Sunday in Advent, Matt. 21:1-9," LW, AE, vol. 75. *Church Postil I*, ed. by Benjamin T. G. Mayes and James L. Langebartels (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 51, n. 72.
14. One congregation known to me meets on Sundays in groups of 50 or less and hears the hymns sung by a soloist from the rear gallery.