

Through the Church the Song Goes On

ALCM 25th Anniversary Hymn Festival Reflections

Reflection 1 – *Mark P. Bangert*

“While we own the mystery” . . . and for a moment there it seemed like we did have our bodies wrapped around it through soaring sounds of voice and instrument. It’s convenient, if not satisfying, to imagine ourselves owners, as if mystery were artifact. If it were true, if we indeed can own the mystery, even for a moment, then could we just call it quits right now, content with our contribution to the waking praise hours from morn to set of sun? Are we done?

The problem is that we don’t own the mystery; rather, the mystery owns us. Can we call it quits now? No, because we never *have* or *own* the mystery, we are given to be known by it. We have just begun to enter that intricate braid of relationships revealing what it means to BE in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Could we call it quits now? I doubt it. Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Breath have been roused. They are owning us. We could never even have begun without the Creator giving us, as Luther reminds us, “my body and soul, eyes, ears, . . . house, home, life,” and, in this moment, voice – all gifts. Nor could we know that all those things are gifts without any merit on our part, were it not for the Son, the Word, who, “just as he is risen from the dead lives” (now, here) “and reigns” (now, here) “eternally”. Nor could we even get our mouths to shape those words, our voices to sound, were it not for the holy breath who is “calling, gathering, and enlightening the whole Christian Church,” including this assembly. The mystery possesses us and we sing in order to know it intimately. This singing we do, writes Christopher Small, just like all singing with others, “establishes a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act of singing lies.”

Dare we say another thing? Is it possible that as we need to sing our way into the triune relationship, so the Trinity needs our song to know intimately its own braid of relationships? Perhaps as a mighty stretch of imaging God in our form, we can hear the Father say: “Now, Jesus, just why was it again that you took on flesh?” And the son’s finger points here, to this gathering: we are the beggars whose cacophonous tunes require that incarnation of love. So then, the Trinity waits for these moments when we make ourselves available, as St. Clement said, to be the cithara, the stringed instrument upon which the Trinity plays its song. The mystery possesses us to play its song, and in their plucking we get *to know* the Trinity intimately – the other meaning of “own.” “While we own the mystery,” that is, while we get to know the mystery intimately.

“Kindle faith in each heart,” we plead in the next hymn, but let us, dear God, even more, know ourselves as “chorus,” the holy instrument through which the song goes on, our way to know and be known.

Reflection 2 – Victor Gebauer

“Through the Church the Song Goes On!” And it is a song, not merely lifeless instrumental notes or indistinct trumpet tones.ⁱ The song is about something; it is proclamation of God’s own truth. Martin Luther would be proud of us as Word-proclaimers. The prophets and fathers, he said, wanted music more than anything else to be associated with the Word of God. In Luther’s Latin “*sermo et vox*” (sermon and voice) — yes! preaching and hymns! — merge in one heraldic proclamation.ⁱⁱ

But proclamation (“kerygma” in New Testament language) is tricky business. Lutheran musicians and hymn singers do well to keep this in mind. One may want to “proclaim,” but someone else in a pluralistic society may well hear the triumphal proclamation as religious, ideological arrogance. In biblical terms, “kerygma” is the business of the “keryx” or herald. The herald in ancient times blew a loud instrument (but not as loud as a pipe organ!) and yelled in a loud voice to proclaim the king’s message of good or ill. The “keryx” acted almost with the king’s power, full of arrogance and great noise, tempted to exaggerate his message and self-importance. But “keryx” was nonetheless a servant and also had to perform menial kitchen tasks.ⁱⁱⁱ Actually, in the New Testament, the Christian “keryx” matters little. It is the message and the act of proclaiming, not the status of the proclaimer, which reveals God’s promise and joy.

Proclamation is tricky business indeed, but the next two hymns help us sort out two sides of musical proclamation. “Listen! Listen!” we will sing. Reminiscent of the canticle in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, “Listen, you nations of the world,” this Swahili hymn reminds us that proclamation follows listening. “Listen! Listen!” It is God’s call, the “Word inviting.” This “listen” is no arrogant command in trumpeting fourths and fifths. It sings in inviting thirds and gentle dancing — African Christians do dance to this hymn^{iv} — hearing Jesus’ good news. In Tanzanian and Kenyan worship, this hymn invites believers to stand and hear Gospel and sermon — the original intent of the third verse — and then to share comfort and joy.

The other side of proclamation is the bold, heraldic trumpeting of the “strong Word” that cleaves darkness and creates light. Death broods in our f-minor singing, but light then bursts on the world in A-flat major again and again in every refrain. This proclamation refuses to be ashamed of the Gospel. Its music marches rhythmically into the world offering alleluias and light “without end.” Martin Franzmann penned “Thy Strong Word” for seminary graduation processions. We, the singers, now march along with all the heralds of the Gospel, praying God for “lips to sing” and “tongues thy mercy to proclaim.”

Martin Luther would indeed be proud of such proclamation.

Reflection 3 – *Jerry Evenrud*

Text and Tune
Tune and Text
Intertwined
Oh! So fine.

This black gospel melody
Is indeed a precious
vehicle for the intimate
text by Thomas A. Dorsey

After his wife died in
childbirth, Dorsey wrote
the text of “Precious Lord”
and it appears in the
Lutheran hymn books to
the tune “Precious Lord”
by George N. Allen arranged
by Thomas A. Dorsey
All three stanzas of the hymn
close with “Take my hand precious Lord
Lead me home.”

Text and Tune
Tune and Text
Intertwined
Oh! Sublime

Reflection 4 – *Lorraine Brugh*

Through the church the song goes on . . .

Choices abound when the church gathers to sing. Our song is communal, crafted with care for that purpose. That is what makes a worship song eminently singable – its usefulness as communal song. When we sing a song from a time and place other than our own, we are making a translation for our use.

In this next section, we will sing a German Reformation chorale and a Chinese folk melody. In both cases, we are making a translation into our own 21st-century context. For some, the sturdy harmonic setting of the chorale is familiar and easily singable. For others it appears formidable. Likewise, the Chinese melody is unfamiliar to some. Its undulating melody may seem daunting, and its range is large. Here the beauty is in the subtle turn of the melodic line, the beauty of the rise and fall of the musical phrases. Neither of these hymns was originally in English, so we are also making a literal translation when we sing them in English.

The message in both hymns is remarkably similar. Both count on God's love for their life's journey. "Lord, Thee I love with all my heart," begins the chorale. The Chinese hymn says similarly, "Lord, I will today on your love rely." The Chinese hymn uses images of humanity and nature to compare to God's love. Speaking of the sun, it says, "Like an athlete strong, set to run the course." The chorale says "earth has no pleasure I would share," showing that God's love exceeds every imaginable part of creation. Both conclude with assurance that God's grace is sufficient for the day. "Knowing all I need from your kindness springs," is the closing text of the Chinese hymn. "Thou art the portion I have sought," states the chorale, assuring the singer of God's ability to meet our needs throughout our life.

The explosion of hymnody in the 20th-century has given us innumerable choices today. Whether we sing a hymn from the Pacific Rim, Africa, or South America, we always have more we could choose. Finding what the community can truthfully sing may take us to other continents and other historical periods. What remains central is the communication of the gospel, sung by a community that embraces these truths as its own.

So the song goes on . . . and on.

Reflection 5 – *Carlos Messerli*

From earliest biblical times the word *Amen* has served as a general all-purpose declaration of assent by the faithful. Century after century Jews, Muslims, and Christians have pronounced it after statements, hymns, and prayers. While expressing affirmation, *Amen* also carries implications for incorporation of what has been affirmed into one's own future action.

These two projections are exemplified in "Thine the Amen."

This hymn was created in almost impromptu circumstances at a summer camp in 1981 by author Herbert Brokering and musician Carl Schalk. The poetry forms a stream of consciousness enumeration (and thereby affirmation) of more than forty events, conditions, and qualities that form salvation history and the resulting response of the Christian life. The progression in the music of mostly eighth-notes without pause through five stanzas appropriately affirms the steady and endless quality of God's mercy and our requisite human response.

Reflection 6 – Paul Westermeyer

Through the church the song goes on. Why?

- The Psalmist said because God has done marvelous things.¹
- Paul suggested so that the word of Christ may dwell in us richly.²
- Christopher Page read Tertullian and found singing to be of singular importance on both sides of the grave.³
- Ambrose knew that prayer hums.⁴
- Martin Luther realized that once you know what God has done, you can't keep silent.⁵ Called in night and drawn to light, the whole creation sings the praise of its Creator and Redeemer. When there is doxology, sighing cedes to singing.
- Walter Brueggemann discovered that doxology disestablishes other worlds and affirms the real world of justice, mercy, peace, and compassion.⁶ Songs of praise conspire to sunder disharmony and strife.
- Hildegard of Bingen knew that the Spirit awakens us on wings of lustrous movement.⁷ Song renews life with beauty and tunes our being with wisdom.
- Paul Hindemith is reputed to have said that people who make music together can't be enemies, at least while the music lasts.
- Robert Jenson explained that God is a capacious fugue who opens the room to us at creation and invites us into the communal music of the Three-in One.⁸ The voice of God is singing, and we get to join the polyphony.
- Clement of Rome noticed, however, that with the angels and the whole creation we sing – breathe – together with one voice.⁹

What do we sing?

- We sing true words, not false ones, so that, as John Calvin expressed it, venom is not funneled into our hearts.¹
- We sing honorable songs, not dishonorable ones, treating one another with the same respect God shows us.
- We sing holy stories, not corrupt ones. As the holy stories honestly contain the lament of our disharmony and strife, the song itself is driven by the Spirit and conspires against the corruption, so that, in the words of Julian of Norwich, all manner of thing shall be well.¹¹

How do we sing?

- In Paul's spirit we sing with joy and gratitude to the Holy Three who graces us with song.¹²

¹ Psalm 98:1.

² Colossians 3:16.

³ *The Christian Singers of the West* (2010), 49.

⁴ *Hexameron III, V, 23*, James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (1987), 130.

⁵ "Preface to the Bapst Hymnal," *Luther's Works* 53 (2010), 333.

⁶ *Israel's Praise* (1988), 53.

⁷ Jean Janzen, "O Holy Spirit," based on Hildegard, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006), # 399.

⁸ *Systematic Theology, Volume 1, The Triune God* (1997), 236, 226.

⁹ Clement of Rome, I Corinthians xxxiv: 5-7, McKinnon, 18.

¹⁰ Charles Garside, Jr., "Calvin's Preface to the Psalter," *The Musical Quarterly* XXXVII: 4 (1951): 571.

¹¹ Via T. S. Eliot, "Four Quartets," *The Complete Poems and Plays* (1971), 145.

¹² Colossians 3:16-17.

Reflection 2 footnotes:

ⁱ I Corinthians 14:7-11.

ⁱⁱ "Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae jucundae*," *Luther's Works* 53 (© 1965), 323.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, 3 (© 1965), 683-692, 696.

^{iv} Paul Grime and Joseph Herl (eds.), *Hymnal Supplement 98 Handbook* (© 1998), 140f.