

Sing All, Sing Often – Excellence in Congregational Song

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“Sing all,” says John Wesley in his third Direction for Singing (*Select Hymns*, 1761). Evidently not everyone shared his enthusiasm, for he adds: “Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.”

I was a mediocre violinist in my Grammar (= High School) orchestra. The First Violins were led by Ralph Holmes, already outstanding, who made his solo debut, age 13, playing Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto (1st movement) with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at London’s Central Hall, Westminster.

Nurtured in a musical home, Ralph had a natural talent. He studied with established violinists and practiced two to three hours every day. His excellence came, I think, from that combination: nurture, talent, study, and practice, practice, practice.

I don’t know, but I suspect that Ralph developed a vision of how to interpret a work, and what he wanted to communicate through it.

Great actors also study, practice, and develop a vision. When they succeed, their character takes on a life of its own: “After the movie *Blood Simple*,” says Frances McDormand, “everybody thought I was from Texas. After *Fargo*, everybody's going to think I'm from Minnesota, pregnant, and have blonde hair. I don't think you can ever completely transform yourself on film, but if you do your job well, you can make people believe that you're the character you're trying to be.” “The whole essence of learning lines,” says Glenda Jackson, “is to forget them so you can make them sound like you thought of them that instant.” When I went

to Roman Catholic Mass for the first time, the printed words came alive as the Presiding Bishop did precisely that.

“Acting provides the fulfillment of never being fulfilled,” Jackson continues. “You're never as good as you'd like to be. So there's always something to hope for.” I shall call this quality Expectation.

The performance keynotes of Nurture, Talent, Practice, Vision and Expectation can be applied to congregational song. I shall do so, drawing on and adding to my book, *Praying Twice – The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000). By congregational song I mean anything sung by a group of people assembled to worship God, not as a presentation to some other group, but as a vehicle for their worship.

Vision

In nineteenth century Britain, as earlier, group singing was part of life, in the pub, Music Hall (Vaudeville) and church. Today's culture prioritizes listening to music over singing together. So why bother with congregational song? Why not follow cultural norms, turn off the organ, cover the keyboard, and hand out headsets?

Against these trends, musicians, clergy and worshipers all have an interest in wholehearted congregational singing. Congregational song has been a vital part of Christian worship from the beginning. A hallmark of renewal movements, it has survived attempts to suppress it, and has flourished through opposition and persecution. By nature, it is inclusive, inviting everyone to join in. It is corporate, bringing us together as the body of Christ. It is corporeal, a body-experience. And because body and spirit are inseparable, heartfelt singing lifts our spirits.

Thus, if congregational song is in trouble, rescuing its “holy pleasure” (Charles Wesley) is a common concern and goal.

Sidebar: “Innocent Sound Recover”

One morning in 1746, Charles Wesley preached in the seaport of Plymouth, England. When Royal Navy sailors tried to drown him out with an obscene parody of a popular ballad he promised them a better song, wrote it, and introduced it that same evening. Its opening shows that Wesley knew and loved his audience –

Listed into the Cause of Sin,
Why should a Good be Evil?

Music, alas! Too long has been
Prest to obey the Devil.

In other words, music has been enlisted (“listed”), in the wrong navy: forcibly enrolled (“prest”) into the Devil’s service, just as many of the sailors had been forcibly taken by Press Gangs.

Wesley’s new song asks -

Who on the Part of God will rise,
Innocent Sound recover, . . .
Musick in Virtue’s Cause retain,
Rescue the Holy Pleasure?

It ends with a Gospel proclamation:

JESUS the Soul of Musick is;
His is the Noblest Passion;
JESUS’S Name is Joy and Peace,
Happiness and Salvation:
JESUS’S Name the dead can raise,
Shew us our Sins forgiven,
Fill us with all the Life of Grace,
Carry us up to Heaven.

(The full story is in my book *Praying Twice*, Chapter 1 and Appendix)

Nurture

Two things especially nurture congregational singing: proximity and good acoustics.

When a space is too large worshippers scatter and their singing fades away. As John Bell puts it (approximate quotation), “If I am more than six feet away from you, I don’t sing, because you might hear me. If I am less than three feet away, I do sing, because I can hear you.”

Acoustics for congregational singing are not served by a performance-oriented sound system delivering amplified sound to a muffled space. In general, a singing congregation needs acoustically reflective surfaces as near as possible to the singers. For example, carpets absorb sound and negate the sound-reflective quality of a floor. Where essential, they should cover the minimum area necessary. Otherwise, banish carpets from worship spaces, in favor of attractive, sound-reflective alternatives like quarry tile and wood parquet. In the words of (I think) an American Guild of Organists' lapel button, *Carpet Bedrooms – Not Churches!* (For a thorough discussion, see *Acoustics of Liturgy: A Collection of Articles of the Hymn Society in the U.S. and Canada* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991).

Leadership and Expectation

How to teach and lead congregational song? However excellent, the music of piano and organ differs from vocal sound. The best leadership is from an instrument that sounds like a singer – in other words, a human voice. Thus, as many authorities advocate, we need a song leader, or cantor.

A human being is the best teacher, because human beings will be singing the song. Trained or untrained, a good song leader will sound not “operatic” but invitational, offering a plain sound that encourages us to join in. I know a superb song leader with a reedy, faltering voice. When she sings, you sometimes wonder if she can finish the line. She always does, and everyone sings back confidently. Her musical skill, confidence in the song, and willingness to let us hear her less-than-wonderful voice, give encouragement and inspiration.

If you are a song leader, teach by having people hear you sing the melody. Mostly (and in most parts of the world), people learn a new tune by hearing it, and joining in. So do that. Have people put away songbooks and hymnals, and learn the melody by ear.

Song Leader, Choir Director, Pianist, and Organist – all need a commitment to congregational song and an expectation of what it can become. Here is Alice Parker conversing with an imaginary church musician. Expect more, she says. Envision your congregation as a treasury of ears, voices, minds and hearts. “That’ s all that we need to make music.”

“A congregation is supposed to make beautiful music?” the musician asks. Yes, she says, a church musician needs to know how to draw song out of people. “But none can do better until their leader expects them to do better.” (Alice Parker, *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991, pp. 3-4).

Talent

With very few exceptions, everyone can sing. When we speak, most voices vary in pitch as well as rhythm. Singing organizes these variations. If you can imitate a fire siren, you can change pitch, and therefore, in principle, you can sing. Most people find it hard to speak for long in a monotone, even when striving to sound robotic.

When I first went to church, I sang because everyone else did. Time and time again I have been in congregations who sing for the joy of it, and sing well, smiling affectionately at the man who drones off-key or the woman who cuts through concrete. Congregational song is healthy when people know they are accepted, want to express their faith, and feel sufficiently convinced about it to sing together, offering themselves to God.

Practice

How often does your congregation sing? *Many congregations sing half-heartedly because they don’t sing often enough.* If they sing only two hymns and a doxology in worship, and never sing at potlucks, in committees, and whenever else they gather, they simply won’t get enough practice. And if they never sing unaccompanied, they won’t discover how good human

voices sound on their own. What percentage of weekly worship time is devoted to congregational singing? Ten percent? –Too little. Twenty percent? Surely not enough. As a rough measure, try forty percent. Sing hymns, choruses, and other short songs. Have at least one unaccompanied item every week. Sing short prayer responses instead of saying them. Find them, compose them or have them composed: many musicians will welcome the opportunity.

Interview members of choir(s) and congregation to find out what singing means to them. Sing something easy or familiar whenever people gather. Treat such singing as natural, needing neither justification nor commentary.

Though often untapped, musicality flourishes whenever it is encouraged and developed. Alice Parker describes how a roomful of Mennonites changed her view of what we should expect from congregational song (*Melodious Accord*, p. 5):

One voice began a familiar hymn. On the second note, the entire room joined in the most beautiful four-part hymn singing I had ever heard. It gave me a vision of what hymn singing must have been in days past and could be again in days to come. It made me realize that where there is an unbroken tradition of good singing, children grow up hearing their parents and neighbors sing and recognizing that they love to sing. It is the norm. They simply join in.

In a perform and-listen culture, congregational song will thrive only if the rest of us nourish it as resolutely as those Mennonites. Here, as elsewhere, excellence springs from practice, practice, practice.