Worship the Lord

WELS
Christ's Love, Our Calling.

Risks and Rewards in Selecting Music
Challenge 4: The wrong music on the wrong day for the wrong singers

By Michael Marquardt

We don't need any more distractions. We know how distracted many worshipers already are. They face a whole subscription of issues related to family, health, employment, school, bills, and priorities. We're concerned about members who don't attend worship regularly, yet regular worshipers may be just as absent as they fret about these things in their lives. Even worship leaders can be distracted as they go about their work in the service, especially if the service was not as well planned as it should have been and unexpected things go wrong. The goal of worship, including the contribution made by a choir, is to focus God's distracted people on the means of grace. However, choosing the wrong music on the wrong day for the wrong singers can end up creating further distractions. Consider how it might happen.

The wrong music
As the pastor, one of your favorite services is the Christmas Eve candlelight service. It's been a busy Advent. Though the choir director wanted to meet in August, you've had a hard time thinking about Christmas before Advent. So you tell him just to pick something and you'll work it into the service somehow. He tells you he's preparing "Carol of the Bells." You do your part to write a beautifully meditative service. You can't wait to hear the congregation sing "Silent Night! Holy Night!" *a cappella*. You read, "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." The anthem begins with a loud fanfare of trumpets and blazing organ registration. You listen to the words:

> Hark! how the bells
> Sweet silver bells
> All seem to say,
> "Throw cares away."
> Christmas is here
> Bringing good cheer
> To young and old
> Meek and the bold

You remember why that one never made it into *Christian Worship*. It says nothing about Jesus' birth or his redeeming work. The flamboyant accompaniment and spiritually vapid text distract the worshiper from the message you had intended to convey.

The wrong day
The service theme is taking up one's cross and following Christ. The proper for the day reflects that theme. You choose hymns that fit. You preach on the day's Gospel. The organist chooses music based on the hymns selected. The secretary finds a graphic for the front of the service folder that fits the theme. The Junior Choir director contacts you on the day the bulletin is printed and submits Natalie Sleeth's "Go Ye into the World." You hesitate, but because it's late in the game, there's not much you can do. It's a fine biblical text and catchy tune. The kids sing with gusto, their diction is impeccable, and it makes the adults smile. However, it has little to do with the theme of the day.

The wrong singers
The director of the Women's Choir discovered the beauty of Franz Schubert's Psalm 23 and scheduled her group to sing it on Good Shepherd Sunday. But her singers have difficulty navigating their parts. The first sopranos struggle to sing the high *G*s beautifully. The accompaniment is a little bit beyond the accompanist. The text is biblical. It fits for the Sunday. But the performance distracts worshipers from the message.

We've all been in situations like these. Most, if not all of us, have been responsible for situations like these. So how do we prevent them from happening? How do we make sure that we have the *right* music on the *right* day for the *right* singers? How do we

Mike teaches fifth grade and serves as school music coordinator at Peace, Hartford, Wis., where he also directs the church choir and assists in worship planning.

ensure that we proclaim a unified theme throughout the service? It largely depends on thorough planning, which takes a significant amount of time. Meaningful worship that focuses distracted people on one specific gospel truth is well worth the investment of time.

Choosing the right music on the right day for the right singers

When I plan well, I am able to choose great music, prepare my choir well, and the music serves as an integral part of the service. My best planning happens when my pastors plan well. Because they are in charge of the service, music selection should fall within the parameters they set. All who prepare music for worship—Sunday School teachers, LES teachers, choir directors, organists—need to know far in advance what each service looks like.

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For me this planning process needs to begin in July. This allows time to make selections and order music soon enough to receive it a couple of weeks before our first rehearsal. This lead time is necessary for score study, which allows me to be more effective in rehearsal and to get the best from my singers. My goal is to plan music for the entire choir season from Labor Day to Trinity Sunday. When I do this, I can place one music order, do administrative work in the summer, and focus more on teaching once the school year begins. With music planned for the entire year, there is still flexibility to make changes as needed. Sometimes pieces don't work out for the choir. Sometimes pastors need to change the service theme. Because of the advance planning, I am able to roll with eventual changes much more easily.

The music selection process starts with a meeting with the pastors. I need to find out several things from them before my planning can begin:

- Which services will not follow the lectionary (e.g. Mission Festival, Christian Education Sunday)?
- What order of service will we use for each Sunday?
- What elements of the service need choral assistance?
- Which psalms will we treat in a special manner?
- When will we use the Verse of the Day?
- What hymns will be chosen for the services?
- What new hymns will we introduce?

We discuss these items and make assignments for a follow-up meeting that typically takes place a month later. We bring our assignments to the next meeting, sort through the material together, and then start to create the planning framework. With these details worked out for each service, I schedule the church choir and school choirs, fill in cantors and small groups in services when choirs cannot participate, and then look for arrangements of verses, psalms, and hymns. The head organist fills out the organ schedule based on the varying talents of the organists. As

we finalize details, we provide all of the information in a central location on our network, which serves as a reference for worship leaders and for preparing worship folders.

Selecting music

I put choir singing dates in a notebook with information from our worship plan. This includes scripture references, hymns, psalm, and verse. As I begin to pick music, I look at what I've gleaned from subscriptions to music publishers. I know exactly where some pieces will go on the calendar, and I set others aside for the time being. I consult *Proclaim*, a resource from Concordia Publishing House that suggests several choral pieces for each scripture reading and psalm. Some are no longer in print, so count yourself lucky if you have these in your possession. Similar planning tools are available on the websites of Morning Star and GIA, though the lectionaries do not always line up. In Proclaim and in these online resources I look at some of the suggested anthems, noting which ones we have in our files. I look up others on the internet in case there are recordings or PDF samples available. I enter possibilities in my notebook for nearly every Sunday. After that, I check my files for pieces that fit and enter them in my notebook. Finally, I look at Verse of the Day and psalm settings and enter them. By this point I have a few dozen possibilities of anthems from which to choose. From that list I begin the process of selecting the twenty or so anthems that make the final cut.
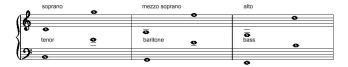
Text

I first look at the text. The text should fit the service theme, contain no ambiguities or false doctrine, and the poetry should be well written.

Music

After looking at the text, I look at the music. I look for music that has a pleasing melody, fits the character or mood of the text, is memorable, and has interesting harmony. If a piece meets those criteria, I proceed to considering the finer details.

Range and tessitura

The range (highest and lowest notes) and tessitura (the portion of the singing range that is most used) need to be within the capability of my singers. If, for example, the bass part goes well below the staff, the range is too low for the basses in my choir to sound good and be successful. If the soprano line stays at the top of the staff for much of the piece, the range may be acceptable, but the tessitura is too high and challenging for my sopranos to sing with a beautiful sound. They would soon be fatigued, may not sing in tune, and the experience for them would be unsatisfying. Picking music that makes my singers sound good helps them to enjoy the experience and avoids exposing their weaknesses. Just because singers can "hit" a note, it doesn't mean that they should. If it's not a beautiful sound, it distracts from the message.

Difficulty of the vocal parts

How do you know if a piece is too difficult? One excellent way to find out is to sing each of the parts. Watch for problematic intervals. Music with a polyphonic texture, where each of the vocal parts is an independent line, can sometimes be more difficult than music with a homophonic texture, where the vocal parts "stack up" on top of each other and move together rhythmically. How many parts of harmony can your choir successfully perform? When in doubt, less is more. Choirs with fewer men should consider SAB or two-part music. Psalms and hymns sung in unison with precision and creativity can be very effective. If the message of sin and grace can be clearly communicated without distracting errant notes and out-of-tune singing, then you can be confident that the music is within your choir's capability.

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Difficulty of the accompaniment

In addition to considering the difficulty of the vocal parts, evaluate the nature of the accompaniment. Consider whether your accompanist can handle the accompaniment, as well as how much the accompaniment supports the vocal parts. Some accompaniments double the melody, double the bass line, or support the rhythmic movement of the vocal parts. This is helpful for choirs with less independent singers. Hymn concertatos often feature *a cappella* verses which require singers to stay in tune until the accompaniment returns. While your singers work to develop this skill, you might have the accompanist play their parts through that section.

When the weeding process is done I look at the list of selections holistically. Have I included music from a variety of styles and eras? Do I have a good mix of *a cappella* as well as accompanied pieces? Is there a challenging and exciting piece or two for my choir to rally around? Did I include familiar as well as new pieces? Will all the new music fit my budget? Are there pieces that have roots in our Lutheran heritage and others that reflect the cultural make-up of my congregation?" After all that, I pick out at least a couple of chorales from *101 Bach Chorales*, type up my schedule, and order my music. Once the music arrives I can begin my score study, and my librarian can start organizing the music. Finally, we're ready for rehearsal.

The process I follow is not necessary in every detail for every choir director. I don't follow this planning model to the letter every year. The point is to be purposeful in all aspects of your worship planning. Plan far enough in advance so that all components of the service are consistent. Plan far enough in advance so that all participants have time to communicate with one another and prepare properly. Plan far enough in advance so that you minimize distractions for the worshipers in the pews and, lest we forget, the worshipers in the chancel and the balcony.

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Where to find the right music

Sign up for the mailings from as many publishers as you can. Some subscriptions are free and some are not. Most include a CD and a sample of the printed music. Below is selection of the many publishers from whom you can find excellent music.

- Northwestern Publishing House
- Concordia Publishing House
- Morning Star Music Publishers
- Augsburg Fortress
- GIA
- LiturgySolutions.com

You can also find gems for free at the Choral Public Domain Library (cpdl.org), but watch out for inferior editions.

When I go through the samples I've collected over the year, I sort them into three piles: keepers, possibilities, and rejects. The keepers group goes into my current planning notebook. The possibilities group goes in my filing cabinet for possible future use, and the reject group goes to the recycling bin. I save the CDs and copy the tracks I chose to my computer for use in rehearsal if needed.

Consider further ways of finding new music and new ideas for more effectively working with your choir. Attend choral music reading sessions presented by publishers and conferences; participate in the WELS National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts; join a professional organization like American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) or Music Educator's National Conference (MENC); join an area choir; attend concerts and services at other churches.

Making it easier to find the right music

Consider scheduling a series of work days for choir members to help you sort and catalog your choral music files. Go through each file, purging titles that you'll never use again, but being mindful to save what might still be useful to your eventual successor. Create a database in which you enter, at minimum, the title, composer, arranger, and season. Consider adding other information to the database like scripture references, hymn tunes, keys, voicing, number of copies, years used, and space for comments. Save this on your network or better yet in "the cloud" where others can access the file, like your choir librarian or your pastor. If your music files are not located near your usual workspace, place the director's copies in folders labeled by the seasons of the church year and by various thematic topics.

Find someone in your choir to serve as the choir librarian. Someone who likes organizational tasks can do that work for you so that you can spend your time planning for worship and preparing for rehearsals.

Talk about it. Discuss among your team what works best for them as they serve the congregation. If you are a pastor who looks solely at the words of a hymn before picking it, ask a musician for help evaluating musical matters. If you are a choir director who understands how to pick good music but struggles with evaluating texts, ask your pastor for help. Keep in mind that, in an open and honest working relationship, no one is attacking you or your feelings; everyone is working to prepare the best presentation of the gospel for the people.

As your team works together, grow in your understanding of worship together. As iron sharpens iron, you will reap benefits in your relationships with co-workers and in meaningful worship.

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Pastors and musicians working together
By Pastor Jeremy Husby

Planning worship requires a trusting relationship among the men and women involved. The shared goal is to plan services that are meaningful and that reach people in a spiritually edifying way. With that goal in mind, the methods and means may differ between personalities and personal tastes, but the motive is always the same.

This important mindset promotes honest and open discussion of personal tastes when choosing anthems, hymns, and songs. Your fifth grade teacher isn't trying to promote false doctrine when he suggests that the children sing "You Raise Me Up" by Josh Groban at the Easter Festival service. He knows that many Easter visitors will connect with that song. He knows that the children like it. He wants people to think of Jesus and our resurrection whenever they hear it.

But who decides if this song is appropriate? Should the pastor be an authoritative dictator who decides *ex easychaira*? Should teachers and choir directors have *carte blanche* to use whatever they want?

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