



"Preserving tradition with imagination"

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Table of Contents:

Learning to Befriend Our Fears

Paul Vasile

page 3

How Can I Keep from Singing?

Thoughts on Gnosticism, Voice Lessons, and Congregational Song

Abby Schoppe

page 5

Burford on Books

Martha Burford

page 7



Learning to Befriend Our Fears

Paul Vasile

My second year of graduate school, I registered for an elective in continuo playing. It seemed like a great way to round out my skills as a church musician and it offered the opportunity to play different repertoire than I usually encountered as a pianist. I went to the first class with a bit of nervous anticipation, which was kicked up a notch when the professor began with an exercise to assess our skill level. Each student was given an eight-measure melody with figured bass to sight-read in front of everyone.

I registered for the class to stretch myself, to gain new experiences, and to be able to perform Baroque music with more authenticity. But, approaching this moment of assessment, all I felt was fear: fear of being judged and inadequate. When an exceptionally gifted keyboardist played right before me, I was undone.

Intimidated and insecure, I stumbled through my excerpt, sat back down, and decided the class was too difficult. I went to the Registrar's office the next day and signed up for a choral literature class instead, embarrassed that I had even tried in the first place.

* * *

Learning spaces are challenging spaces. To gain a new skill requires humility and resilience, flexibility and fortitude. When we come up against our limitations, it can bruise the ego and cause us to doubt our ability or value. New experiences can also be disorienting as expectations and assumptions shift frequently. Sometimes it's so overwhelming that we shut down and step away completely, like I did.

But what I've experienced through Music That Makes Community (MMC) is that learning can be a joyful, enlivening, liberating experience. While we can never ease the discomfort that comes from learning a new skill or the jitters before sharing a new song (nerves are common to everyone, even world-class performers), it is empowering to name our fears, to befriend them, and look for the surprising lessons and gifts these uncomfortable spaces offer us.

At MMC workshops, a generous, gracious community of presenters and participants provide a foundation that supports learning and exploration. No one is asked to walk a tightrope of perfection or expertise but we model how to share the gift of song through mirroring and echoing, an intentional reflection or 'noticing' process, and small group work. Firm in the belief that we are all musicians and all learners, regardless of our experience or skill, we invest ourselves in the process of making music together. And the returns are significant, in personal growth and confidence, as well as the quality of community we create.

I invite you to attend a MMC workshop this year and join us as we create gracious, creative spaces for musical and personal growth. We're hosting events in Chicago, Cincinnati, Albuquerque, Los Angeles, Chapel Hill, and Southern New England. Develop or refine your skills as a song leader. Experience what happens when worship, singing, and learning are no long high-stakes propositions, tinged with fear of failure, but become life-affirming actions that help us discover who we are and who God is calling us to be.

Want to know more about our work, the theology that undergirds it, or get a sense of what our gatherings look and sound like? Enjoy this [introductory video](#).

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How Can I Keep from Singing? Thoughts on Gnosticism, Voice Lessons, and Congregational Song

Abby Schoppe

I can't be the only one who has made the twin mistakes of believing both faith and music to be primarily intellectual pursuits. Perhaps I can blame St. Paul. We all know passages like this one from Galatians: "For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh." Is it any wonder that so many faith traditions seem to imply a Gnostic rejection of the material world?

But this line of thinking can stray from a fully Christian faith. God made the physical world and called it good. And in the Incarnation, God chose to dwell in, and to redeem, God's own physical creation. We who serve in liturgical traditions know that sacraments are, to quote St. Augustine, "an **outward and visible** sign of an inward and invisible grace" (emphasis mine). With the exception of certain *in extremis* circumstances, I know of no church that would choose to celebrate Baptism without water. And how could we receive the Eucharist in the absence of bread and wine (or, okay, grape juice, depending on your particular tradition)? God created us not merely to await some hereafter but to fully encounter God now, in this physical life that God created.

You might think that, as a musician, this Incarnational theology would come easily to me, as I'd have figured out pretty quickly how dependent I am on my own body. But here too, I have often fallen prey to a dualized view of the world. Personally, I'm not any good at sports, I'm one of the clumsiest people you're likely to meet, and my friends will all laughingly tell you about my infamous lack of spatial reasoning skills. (Those IQ-test tasks where you have to fold shapes up into boxes? I definitely can't do those.) Music, to me, has often felt like a retreat (and perhaps a refuge) from the physical world – an art form in which one focuses on expressing the emotions of one's inner life. It doesn't help that most of us, at some point in our musical training, learned to spend hours in solitary practice, necessarily tuning out the world beyond our practice rooms or organ consoles. Even when I consider the physical technique of my playing, I often do so with a scientific detachment. "If I turn the angle of my arm by x degrees, I can play this arpeggio at y beats per minute." This sort of analysis can be necessary, for sure, but it hardly amounts to truly inhabiting one's own body.

In reality, to make music of any sort is an act of physical creation. I firmly believe this, cerebrally. But what has helped me begin to *know* it, in my heart and in my physical, visceral experience? Voice lessons. For most of my life, I've been a keyboard musician, playing the organ and (primarily) the piano. I've always done a little choral singing myself, I've directed church choirs, and I've accompanied many colleagues who are

singers. But it is only in the past two years that I have finally begun to seriously study voice. Doing this work has helped me to rediscover a truth that I had only fleetingly intuited before: when I sing, I (sometimes) am aware that my brain, my body, and my soul are all working together for the same purpose. Not always. There are days when I'm physically all out of alignment, full of tension in my lower back that is impeding my breath (isn't it remarkable how seemingly disparate parts of one's body impact each other?). There are days when I'm not mentally or spiritually present, obsessing over my own insecurities so busily that I can't let go and sing. But more and more, at least in the "safe space" of the shower or of my (infinitely supportive) teacher's studio, singing helps me to discover an experience of being completely one with myself: body, mind, and soul. It's a means of being fully alive in the particular moment I'm inhabiting, without excessive care for anything beyond the joy of "being." At its heart, it's a profoundly religious experience.

What am I to make of this discovery? The Jesuits would say that this sensation of union between body, mind, and heart is a sign of one's vocation. But I don't think that means God's calling me, at age 35, to drop everything and somehow become an opera singer (spoiler alert: my technique is nowhere near that good!) or even to change my understanding of what my "primary" instrument is. Maybe, instead, I'm being called to better value this gift of song that God has created in each one of us. Unlike all other instruments, the voice is the one built into our very beings. Unlike the piano, with which I am so familiar, the voice has breath as its agent – and don't we all know that the Hebrew word for breath and Spirit is one and the same? Unlike the organ, the voice requires air not just from any source but from our own lungs. And unlike the clarinet or other wind instruments, the material through which this breath vibrates is our own created selves. I don't think it's blasphemy to say that, when we sing (and especially if we are singing a sacred text) the Word is quite literally made flesh – God is being supported by our abdominal muscles, vibrated through our vocal folds, resonated through our facial structure, and articulated by our tongues and teeth!

And this, I think, is why singing lies at the heart of so many forms of liturgy and worship. There are plenty of other ways to use the arts in worship, and many congregations do wonderful work through other media, from visual art to liturgical dance. There are a variety of forms of musical expression in our churches – services can be led by piano, organ, guitar, instrumental ensemble, etc. But congregational singing is the one thing that we all have in common. Our great task, as leaders of the Church's music, is to ensure that each member of our congregation becomes comfortable sharing in this gift of song. This is an enormous, daunting, and glorious responsibility. What a gift it is when we on earth join our physical voices with those of the whole heavenly chorus! And when I stop to ponder the great privilege of this vocation, how can I keep from singing?

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Burford on Books

Martha Burford

One of my nighttime indulgences this winter has been to pick up yarn and crochet hook, curl up with a couple of dogs, and immerse myself in *Mozart in the Jungle*. My other pleasure has been to build on reading begun this fall while I participated in the fevered, deep reading of an online class with the Church Divinity School of the Pacific. I was aware, during the class, that my participation in liturgy was deepening because my language and sense of history had become bigger. The reading stretched me. The class has ended, but the

reading continues.

A little book written in the 90s titled *Better Than Life* extols the importance of reading. Author Daniel Pennac writes of the necessity of reading and the gift of reading. Reading is one of the ways we become more alert to what we do. It allows us to marinate ideas. As Pennac says, “Reading is a gift. Read, and wait. Curiosity can’t be forced. It must be awakened.”

I want to share a list of books. These are books I, for curiosity’s sake, recently read, am currently pursuing, or have stacked in a basket marked “next.” All of these are relevant to my work as a church musician and my life as a Christian. Some are easy to read straight through. Some beg close reading and slow going. Some are for coming and going. Thus, I offer them in the spirit of Daniel Pennac’s “Reader’s Bill of Rights” which declared for every reader the following rights: 1. The right to not read. 2. The right to skip pages. 3. The right not to finish a book. 4. The right to reread. 5. The right to read anything. 6. The right to escapism. 7. The right to read anywhere. 8. The right to browse. 9. The right to read out loud. 10. The right not to defend your tastes.

The following titles have much to offer about worship, about sacramental theology, about being awake, about music and worship, about honing our skills and deepening knowledge. Maybe you’ll see a title that piques your interest. For each title, there is a brief description by me or cited from a review. All of the authors have rich biographies, and I encourage you to hop online to learn more. If you are interested in more about why I share the title, email me at marthoooo@gmail.com; I love talking about books!

Doing Local Theology: a Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity, Clemens Sedmak. This is one of my favorite books, ever. Sedmak knows we are all theologians. His theses unpack a way of doing theology as a way of following Jesus. The first thesis: “Theology is an invitation to wake up: to be mindful and attentive.” If you’ve ever been intimidated by the word “theology” or tempted to assume that you are not a theologian, this book is for you!

A Theology of Worship, Louis Weil. This 12th Volume from the Church’s Teaching Series explores what it means, in worship, to manifest our ecclesial identity. If phrases

such as “ecclesial identity” scare you, make you roll your eyes, or intrigue you, allow Weil’s conversational writing to shepherd you into the language. In Weil’s words, “...’ecclesial’...refers to the essential nature of the church as the people of God, the entire community of baptized believers.” He explores the gathering and ownership of the community with chapters posing questions: “Which theology?” “Who Celebrates?” “Whose Music?” So much food for thought. I’ve shared excerpts with my choir more than once.

Worship as Theology, Don Saliers. I can’t believe I had not read this jewel, published in 1994, until now. The reviews on the back say so well, “Here is a text that integrates liturgy and life experience, doing and being, prayer and ethics, and theology and practice...” ~Bishop Rueben Job. “We have needed this book. In lyrically elegant and lucidly accessible writing, Don Saliers holds together matters which we too often find divided: worship and ethics, theology and aesthetics, epistemology and eschatology, words and enacted symbols.” ~Gordon W. Lathrop, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. This is one I will return to for the rest of my life and is another one with much food for thought for congregations, choirs, laypeople, and clergy.

Resonant Witness: Conversations Between Music and Theology, editors Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie. If you’re looking for something thick with many different textures to chew on, the topics are diverse and undertaken studiously. From essays on Modernism and Postmodernism, to theology in Bach’s vocal works, to improvising texts, to Karl Barth and Hildegard of Bingen, to the “Singing of Jesus,” this volume gathers profound endeavors from such diverse writers as Daniel K. L. Chua, Catherine Pickstock, Carol Harrison, John Paul Ito, and Margot Fassler.

Sacramental Theology: A General Introduction, Kenan B. Osborne, O.F.M. Osborne’s writing offered me new apertures for thinking about the sacraments, not so much because the ideas are exceptional but because he writes so clearly and hospitably. Excerpt from the back: “...a general introduction to the whole study of sacraments that analyzes them from the perspective of *the* sacrament that is Christ and the Church. Ecumenical in its presentation, *Sacramental Theology* sets out the complete teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and relates this to a wide range of Anglican and Protestant thought as well.”

Sacramentality Renewed: Contemporary Conversations in Sacramental Theology, Lizette Larson-Miller. This book is a “close-read, slow-go” for me, as I have to look up a lot along the way. It is so rich, and Larson-Miller’s excitement about the growing energy in conversations about sacramental theology is infectious. She opens with Chapter One with words from Rowan Williams: “Sacramentality is not a general principle that the world is full of ‘sacredness’: it is the very specific conviction that the world is full of the life of a God whose nature is known in Christ and the Spirit.” Within two pages, she explores the influence of Tertullian and Ambrose of Milan. I’ll probably still be working on this one months from now.

La Vida Sacra: Contemporary Hispanic Sacramental Theology, James Empeur and Eduardo Fernández. Important on so many levels, I will reread and reread this book. It

offers cultural windows and it also fed my soul in its affirmations about all of the moments and places in life that are sacramental. This Anglo girl has so much to learn from our Hispanic and Latino/a brothers and sisters. From the back cover: “Empereur and Fernández masterfully explore church sacraments and rituals conducted from a community-based Latino perspective. Not only is this book required reading for anyone wishing to be sensitive to the spiritual needs of the Hispanic community, but it also challenges non-Hispanics to consider what they can learn from Latinos to better enrich their own spiritual lives.” ~Miguel de la Torre. “*La Vida Sacra*...weaves together cosmic sacramentality, pastoral practice, and culturally relevant understandings of ministry.” ~Edwin David Aponte.

Opening the Prayer Book, Jeffrey Lee. This 7th Volume in the Church’s Teaching Series explores history, worship, theology, liturgical patterns, and more, through the lens of the development and life of *The Book of Common Prayer*. If you’re wanting to brush up, find some things you didn’t know, what’s better than Bishop Lee’s walking one through the BCP?

All Things Necessary: A Practical Guide for Episcopal Church Musicians, Marti Rideout. I would argue this book is a worthwhile read for non-Episcopalians, too. Nobody says it better than Marilyn Haskell on the back cover: “Can you be a church musician without the information in this book? Yes, but you will be a better one if you read, mark, and inwardly digest *All Things Necessary*.” I should keep a checklist on my desk for the number of times I’ve gone to this book to check on a question.

Ethics After Easter, Stephen Holmgren. Volume 9 in *The New Church’s Teaching Series* “focuses on questions all people of faith must ask: How will I keep my baptismal promises? How am I meant to live ‘after Easter’? (From the back cover). I have not started this one yet, but in today’s vitriolic climate with so much confusion and anger in public life, when I walk around with two phrases stuck in my head, “stick my neck out,” and “respect the dignity of every human being,” I am looking forward to this one as a Lenten discipline.

Christian Social Witness, Harold T. Lewis. This one, too, is part of my reading during Lent. Harold T. Lewis, well, just google him—amongst his contributions are the editing of *Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African American Hymnal* and authoring *The Recent Unpleasantness: Calvary Church’s role in the preservation of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Pittsburgh*. On the back cover of Volume 10 of *The New Church’s Teaching Series*: “*Christian Social Witness* surveys the teachings and witness of Anglicanism and the Episcopal Church concerning the Christian vision of a righteous social order, and examines the challenges of the new millenium.”

Well, there’s my current list. While writing this, I wonder what books others are reading that enrich your lives as Christians, as learners, as people on pilgrimages? Nonfiction, fiction, meditation guides? I’ll post some prompts on our Facebook page and would love for us all to share treasures.

After writing this, I shared it with CMF Board Member Elizabeth Blood. She responded that she is looking forward to CMF Facebook conversations about books. Adding that spiritual memoir is a favorite genre of hers, she mentioned Rachel Held Evans' *Searching for Sunday* and *Faith Unraveled* as worthwhile reads. In the fiction genre, though not religious in nature, she recommended Jodi Picoult's *Small Great Things* and shared the *New York Times* review: "With richly layered characters and a gripping moral dilemma that will lead readers to question everything they know about privilege, power, and race, *Small Great Things* is the stunning new page-turner from Jodi Picoult." So many books, so much sharing to do!

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Interested in writing an article or submitting music in future publications? Please email us at editor@churchmusicforward.com for more information! We would love to have you share your gifts with the Church Music Forward family.