

Tune Me, O God
Choir Appreciation Sunday
Psalm 96; Revelation 5:11-14
Sunday, June 14, 2009
by Dr. Frank Trotter

I've been playing the piano since the age of four and the organ since the age of fifteen. Along the way I played various brass instruments in my high school band and discovered in college that I had a respectable baritone voice when I was named the bass section leader in the Concert Choir.

I've heard my share of music jokes across the years, most of which have to do with being in tune or in harmony. Here's a brief sample of some of the groaners that musicians are famous for.

Question: What's the difference between a French horn and a coffin?
Answer: The coffin has the dead person on the inside.

Question: If you were lost in the woods, who would you trust most for directions? An in-tune oboist, an out-of-tune oboist, or Santa Claus?
Answer: The out-of-tune oboist, because the other two don't exist.

And to make sure that singers are included in this joke sampling, here are some that feature each of the four voice parts:

Question: How does a soprano change a light bulb?
Answer: She just holds on and the world revolves around her.

Question: Why do altos sway from side to side while singing?
Answer: It's harder to hit a moving target.

Question: What do you call ten tenors at the bottom of the ocean?
Answer: A good start.

Question: How do you tell when the bass is at the front door?
Answer: He can't find the key and doesn't know when to come in.

Just to make sure that I also include conductors or directors in my sampling, here's one for those who attempt to get singers or instrumentalists in tune with each other.

A musician calls the symphony office and asks to speak to the conductor. "I'm sorry, he's dead," comes the reply. The musician calls back 25 days in a row, always asking the same question, and always getting the same reply from the receptionist. Finally, the receptionist asks him why he keeps calling day after day with the same question. With great relish, he says, "I just like to hear you say it!"

As a musician myself, I enjoy poking affectionate fun at my avocation and what is the vocation for many. Although musical jokes have been around for centuries, it is a fundamental premise in music theory that being in tune and in harmony with one another is essential for music to work.

Yehudi Menuhin, one of the premiere violinists of the twentieth century (1916-1999), was also a respected theorist and something of a musical philosopher. He said, "Music creates order out of chaos: for rhythm imposes unanimity upon the divergent, melody imposes continuity upon the disjointed, and harmony imposes compatibility upon the incongruous."¹

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and winner of the Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes, once addressed the student and faculty at Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. His theme was the distinction between despair and indifference. He asked, "Why are people indifferent? Don't people understand that indifference is probably the worst plague that exists in life? It is worse than despair. Despair is a beginning. Despair can inspire you to create great works of art, music, literature, philosophy, theology. Despair evokes compassion, but indifference is the end. There is nothing beyond... What is education, what is life, what is friendship, what is love, what is beauty, what is joy if not our own impulse, our own pulsation, our own protest against an indifferent society, against an indifferent world that you now are called upon to conquer, not with violence, but with words; not with cruelty, but with compassion; and surely not with hatred, but with a sense of exultation."²

John M. Buchanan, a well-known Chicago pastor, says that he prays every time the music stops and the lights go down and the holy hush descends in

¹ "Yehudi Menuhin Famous Quotes,"

http://www.quotemountain.com/famous_quote_author/yehudi_menuhin_famous_quotations/.

² Elie Wiesel, "The "Danger of Indifference," Commencement Address 1992, Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania.

this place, the following thoughts: “Startle us, O God! Startle us with the wild improbability of what we say we believe. Startle us with the incredible beauty and goodness of the affirmations this place, and our being in it this morning, represent.”³

Music prepares him for the sacred journey, to come into touch not only with the presence of the Almighty, but also with the needs of the world. For him, the worse thing he could do would be to shut the stimulus of music and worship out in order to keep one’s soul undisturbed and “un-startled.”

Christina Rossetti, the British poet of the nineteenth century, is well known for her poetry, many of which have been set to music. One of them captures for me the relationship that we, at our very best, seek to have with the Lord God who called us into being:

Tune me, O Lord, into one harmony with Thee
one full responsive vibrant chord;
unto Thy praise all love and melody, tune me O Lord.
Thus need I flee not death, nor fire, nor sword.
A little while these be, then cease to be,
and sent by Thee not, these should be abhorred.
Devil and world, gird me with strength flee the flesh,
and arm me with Thy word:
as Thy Heart is to my heart,
unto Thee tune me, O Lord.

Today, all of classical and sacred music understands the importance of the life and music of Johann Sebastian Bach. But it was not always so. In 1722, the Town Council of the City of Leipzig, Germany was looking for a new Kantor in the School of Saint Thomas and organist for the church of St. Thomas. This was no ordinary search for Leipzig has a rich musical tradition. It is hailed as the birthplace of Richard Wagner, the city that educated Wolfgang von Goethe and Robert Schumann, the place where Martin Luther debated Roman Catholicism with Johann Eck, the site of Felix Mendelssohn’s artistic direction.

³ John M. Buchanan, quoted at “Homiletics Online,”
http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=music+%2B+worship.
Rev. Buchanan is the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and the editor and publisher of *The Christian Century*.

When the Town Council conducted their search and ranked the candidates, however, they did not immediately recognize the talent that was in front of them. Their first choice, Georg Telemann, declined their offer because he did not want to leave his beloved city of Hamburg. Christoph Graupner, their second choice, was unable to negotiate a release in the contract he already had with the royal family as the Court Choirmaster at Darmstadt. With great reluctance, the Town hired a young man named Johann Sebastian Bach in May of 1723 for the position. What they began to discover over the years was that Bach was not only an extraordinary musician and composer, but he was also a deeply spiritual man who saw his relationship with God as the central focus of his life.

Music historians inform us that on many Bach manuscripts can be found certain Latin letters. At the beginning of a manuscript are often the letters “J.J.” and at the end are “S.D.G.” The “J. J.” stands for “Jesu juva” (meaning “Jesus, help me”) and the “S.D.G.” stands for “Soli Deo gloria” (meaning “To God alone be the glory”).⁴ In between the J.J. and S.D.G. are some of the most uplifting compositions and music phrases ever heard by human ear.

There are many musical styles that are very different from the music of Bach – gospel music, for example. In 1992 Garrison Keillor put together a gospel quartet called the “Hopeful Gospel Quartet” that sang at Carnegie Hall. In his introductory remarks at the beginning of the concert, Keillor told the audience, “[Gospel music] is music that says that God loves us and that we live in a universe of love and yet we’re capable of doing rotten things, and that not all of these things are the result of poor communication; some of them are the result of rottenness. People do bad, horrible things, and they cheat and they lie and they corrupt the government, and they poison the world around us, and then when they’re caught, they don’t feel remorse, they just go into treatment. They have a nutritional problem or something. They explain what they did; they don’t feel bad about it — there’s no guilt, there’s just psychology. That’s why we need gospel music.”⁵

Over the centuries, no matter what our musical taste, those among us who have come closest to shaping their whole lives to God’s will are those who

⁴ “Bach’s Spiritual Life,” http://www.copperwiki.org/index.php/Bach's_Spiritual_Life.

⁵ Garrison Keillor, Introduction to a concert by the Hopeful Gospel Quartet, Carnegie Hall, New York City, 1992, found on “Garrison Keillor & the Hopeful Gospel Quartet”; <http://www.prettygoodgoods.org/product/show/4321>.

pray: “Tune me, O Lord, into one harmony with Thee one full responsive vibrant chord; unto Thy praise all love and melody, tune me O Lord.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.