

How is Music Chosen for a Worship Service?

By John Horman, Director of Music

It is not uncommon for congregation members to ask the question, "How do you decide what music to include in a worship service?" Now that I have passed the 5-year mark at First Church, I feel comfortable sharing some of the decision-making that goes into Sunday morning's music. It is my hope that the following explanation will prove interesting to congregation members and perhaps provide a basis for future discussions in regards to the musical content of our worship services. How I make musical choices isn't "rocket science," but there are aspects in the selection process which members might find interesting. Generally, I follow four rules of worship planning which are widely used by church musicians today.

Essential to selecting effective music is knowing what lectionary scripture(s), worship themes or sermon foci guide Sunday's worship. On a normal Sunday (Sundays other than major religious holidays or special Sundays set aside for special occasions) the Common Lectionary offers a set of 3-4 scriptural passages from which themes can be derived. The overall purpose of music in worship is to "enhance the Word." This is accomplished through opening and closing organ voluntaries, anthems, hymns and responses. I carefully read the selected scriptures and any commentaries I can find on them. As I read, I jot down major theological concepts to assist me as I search for music that matches and complements.

The first step is the easiest. What follows is more difficult. For anthems I am limited to what I have on hand in the church's anthem collection. Each year I add to that collection, keeping in mind the past year's insufficiencies and the need to cover a variety of genres and musical styles. Anthems are catalogued by voice part requirements (SATB), scriptural connection, seasonal and overall themes. Some very smart people who preceded me in my position made sure that anthems were carefully entered into a computer data base. Before computers music directors had to rely on card catalogues and their memories to keep track of anthem collections. I am very grateful for a well-organized database.

I select anthems with an understanding that it takes an average of 3-5 weeks to adequately prepare one. Volunteer choirs contain two basic groups of people -- those who are there every week and those who aren't. I need both groups, but this means that I have to rehearse in a creatively redundant fashion. A month of rehearsals (taking into account illnesses, emergencies, and blizzards) will usually yield a beautiful product to share with the congregation.

Periodically I send out "Attendance Intention" surveys so that I know who will be available to sing each week. This gives me the following week by week information:

- the overall size of the choir
- the number of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses I have available
- the makeup of each section (leaders and followers)
- consistency of attendance over a series of rehearsals

To successfully sing an anthem on any particular Sunday I must know if it's feasible -- considering the forces I have on hand, the music available in the files, and the number of rehearsals required to prepare the music. One aspect of this which is often overlooked is the comfort level of the choir itself as it relates to the difficulty of the music. The choir comes to church to worship just like the rest of the congregation. If they are uptight or overly anxious in regards to what they are singing, they can lose the opportunity to participate as worshippers. I remind myself regularly that our choir is an important part of the "corporate body" and they deserve to have a spiritual experience on Sunday too.

The three hymns for each Sunday are chosen from over 16 different hymnals, representing different denominations and worship styles. We only own two sanctuary collections in quantity -- The New Century Hymnal and The African American Heritage Hymnal. We maintain a paid licensing contract that enables us to use the hymns from hymnals we don't own. When you have time, flip to the back of the hymnal and notice that one of the indices is called the "Scriptural Index." This lists hymns according to what Biblical scriptures they illuminate. It is invaluable in locating and determining hymn possibilities. I keep an ongoing list of hymns we sing each week to ensure that we don't repeat the same ones and there is variety of styles.

There are new hymns written every day, and they can be found on websites like *The Hymn Society of America* or the *Board of Discipleship Hymn Website* or *Hymnary.org*. If a tragedy occurs anywhere in the world, there are hymn text writers who "put pen to paper" immediately. Not all of these new contemporary hymns are high-quality, so I do my best to determine quality. There is literally a smorgasbord of hymns from which to choose each week -- varying in style from traditional to Hispanic (with guitar and percussion), African American gospel and spiritual, global worship songs, and the list goes on.

In selecting hymns, I must keep in mind that hymns are classified as "congregational song" and not rehearsed ahead of time. If the hymn is unfamiliar, the congregation must learn the text and tune as they sing. This takes a positive approach with a brief introduction and encouragement beforehand. My goal is to enable active, meaningful participation. If I don't think a hymn will communicate its message, I don't choose it. Some hymns have wonderful texts and impossibly difficult tunes. Some hymns have simple tunes wedded to texts which are impossible to fit to the melodic line. It's tricky business navigating the waters of good hymnody. Matching familiar tunes with new texts sometimes is the way to go.

My opening voluntary, closing voluntary and offertory are usually organ or instrumental. Occasionally we have a vocal soloist for one or more of these musical selections. Whether organ, vocal or instrumental, if I can I "cross-match" themes or focal points in the service. When I first see what a worship service looks like on paper in rough draft form, I look for connective tissue. Do the musical sections of the service progress toward the sermon and then accent it afterwards as we head to the benediction? Are there a variety of moods represented? How many musical styles are represented in the service? Are we sticking with one style or are we looking for ways to address the wide diversity of our congregation?

It's not easy musically reflecting diversity in a worship service. I've learned over the years that it's better to connect with the "cloud of witnesses" and other worshipping communities than to make assumptions about what people of different backgrounds find spiritually satisfying. The President of Howard University, after speaking in one of our services, told me how moved he was by the choir's singing of Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" (choir, violin and cello). That didn't surprise me because the choir and instrumentalists had done an incredible job singing it. I think the worldwide worshipping community needs Bach, Mozart, Mark Hayes, Jester Hairston, and Pablo de Sosa. My goal is to over time (4-6 weeks) include as many varying styles and genres as possible. I once asked Pastor Fowler if he could tell by my musical choices what my favorite musical style and musical time period were, and he said "No." That's the way it should be.

So... there it is! There are four basic tenets which I follow to put together a worship folder:

1. The scriptural or sermon theme for the day
2. The music I have on hand to use
3. The makeup of the choir -- size and voice parts
4. The time it takes to rehearse and prepare music (considering its difficulty level)

There is one more consideration I'd like you to keep in mind as we explore the music of worship. I'm here every week. The choir and I cover a large amount of music in a 3-4 month stretch of creating music for worship. More than once someone has remarked to me that they wished we'd sing more music from a specifically different tradition. I quietly ask, "Were you here last week?" To help the congregation see the wider expanse of styles covered in a 4 to 6-week time period I plan to include an overview of worship music in the Horn. Periodically it will also appear in the church newsletter.

If you would like a nurture which explores some or all of the aspects of music planning, I've covered in this article, please speak to either me or Rev. Sam McFerran. I'd be more than happy to delve further into the subject. We don't need to agree — and I suspect a healthy nurture would reveal that, but we can always learn from each other. It's important to keep communication channels open so that voices with questions and/or suggestions can be heard. Let's continue this dialogue.