

Meeting God in Song
Bulletin columns St. Thomas More 2023

Week 1

This is the first of a series of meditations on the extraordinary power of sacred music as a medium for communal prayer. To our music ministers, may these deepen your love for our art and inform your craft. And for all, may these deepen our prayer.

Immersed in Sound

From the womb to worship we are immersed in sound. This immersive quality of sound makes it an effective medium for emotion, for community, and for praying in the Spirit because these are immersive experiences.

In grief, our world is heavy and shaded toward the gray. In joy, it is brighter, its colors more vivid. Songs offered from a place, of grief that has been transformed by an encounter with the risen Lord, immerse us in that encounter and transform our grief. Songs offered from a place of joy, invite us to walk, skip and jump alongside each other.

The next time you are at Mass, close your eyes and listen with an open heart. (Listen through God's ears.) At Mass, we are in community. We are immersed in the auditory witness of our brothers and sisters.

Encouraged, we desire to encourage. We enter the song to add to this miracle: the sound of a worshiping community is the sound of the Spirit moving through the people.

Music ministers practice their art to prepare the way for this miracle of communal worship. Baptized in sound, we experience physically a spiritual reality: we are in community, in the Spirit and moved and sent to live our baptismal call as the body of Christ incarnate in the world.

Next week: Music is body language.

~ Bob Sandford, STM Choir Director. bob@stmkc.com

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Meeting God in song
Week 2 - Feast of Corpus Christi
Music is body language

Made in the image of God, we are made to be in relationship with God. The Spirit fulfills our stewardship of desire and means so that we, in our finite humanity, may meet infinite Deity. This miracle of intimacy with what is beyond us is possible because the Spirit moves and opens the whole of who we are to receive it.

All these things that make the encounter possible are rich beyond the reach of words and all find a home in sacred music.

One way the Spirit opens us in song is through the body. Music is body language. When sacred song moves us, it reaches the heart unhindered through the body.

This is familiar to those who have experienced Jesus in the Eucharist. He offers himself, body and blood, humanity and divinity and the gesture registers bodily. We take him in, he goes straight to the heart and we live him as the body of Christ in the world.

We can encounter our incarnate Lord physically in the Eucharist, sacred songs, symbols, in nature and each other because we too are incarnate. The heart's capacity to know and express the most sublime truths of soul and divinity lives in the body. The body is eloquent, not verbose. A gesture can gather a world.

What the body understands in a single gesture can take a lifetime to unfold. Our lives are held in the arms of a father extended to us, his prodigal children.

Sacred songs invite us into the encounter that birthed the song. The body is the first to recognize the gesture. When we are moved by the song, we have begun hearing and accepting its invitation. The music minister's preparations begin with being moved. We strive to make the most of music's power to move hearts that all may hear and accept its invitation and live the encounter into the world.

Next week: to express what is beyond words

~ Bob Sandford, STM Choir Director. bob@stmkc.com

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Meeting God in song

Week 3

To express what is beyond words

Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1

Like a song, this passage from Paul invites us into the encounter that inspired it. What he is offering is more valuable than words alone, for it leads us to their source. This is the birthright of the born-again: experiences of Divinity that add substance and conviction to hope.

At the threshold of hope, Divinity within reveals itself as the substance of our conviction. This revelation cannot be fully held in words because it runs deeper than we know and farther than we've traveled.

Divinity is ever meeting us at the leading edge of our becoming fully what we are. While this will always be just beyond words, if we don't find some way to hold these experiences, they can slip through our fingers.

Sometimes God, speaking the language of the soul, will offer a burning bush (Exodus 3:2) - a scripture passage, a symbol, an image, a song, a story, a memory reimagined, - something substantial that, if we stay with it, will continue the work it began.

We hold these encounters in our hearts and allow them to work on us by meditating on their images, searching for words, telling the story; by dancing them, painting them and singing their songs. These responses are reciprocal gestures in a relationship. We, in our limited humanity, embrace infinite divinity who embraces us.

Music is a language for this mutual embrace. It gives a way of holding a mystery that has a hold on us. Because music is body language, it is uniquely suited for expressing and experiencing what is beyond words. It makes way for us to know in our bones the substance of our conviction.

Music welcomes what runs deeper and farther than we have traveled. By the light of its divine creative spark, ours is an art of possibility that clears a space for Divinity to meet us at the leading edge of our becoming fully what we are.

Next week: Risk and the divine creative spark

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Meeting God in song

Week 4

Risk and the divine creative spark

We are made in the image of the creator of all. Created, we share in God's creative nature. We are creative by nature. If you doubt this, consider: we create relationships, we create community, we create safe havens for children to play and discover who they are. When we create and when we play, we live the divine creative spark and share in God's generativity and healing power. This is where creativity and spirituality are the same thing.

Developmental psychologists have written volumes on what is wrought when children play. Volumes could be written about what is wrought when music ministers play.

Abraham offered hospitality to men who turned out to be angels.

The music minister offers hospitality to the divine spark wherever, whenever, and in whatever form it appears so that, like Abraham and Sarah, we will be fertile again and blessed beyond measure with the offspring of our faith (Gen 18:1-15).

Even when the music ministers stick to the notes on the page, if they and all gathered in worship stay open to the moment, to each other and to the Spirit, we, God and neighbor, will co-create transcendent moments that give a foretaste of heaven and what Christian community is called to be. This is the sound of the kingdom of God under construction.

Cultivating, praying and serving with an open heart is risky. It can be terrifying, actually. We don't really know what might be asked of us or what might happen next. We *do* know that God enters in most powerfully when we, like Mary, risk an open-ended "yes."

A song sung from an open heart clears the way for God to work in us and through us. Open-hearted, we inspire open hearts. When children are unabashedly themselves, we smile and our hearts are released a bit from what binds them. The divine light of a child guides us safely back home to our own fertile imagination - our share in God's generative and healing power.

When music ministers are ready to welcome angels in disguise, we open the door to blessings that number as the stars. And when we are hospitable to the muse in our music, we proclaim liberty to what is captive in us all and invite all into a fertile faith.

Next week: The rhythm of creation

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Meeting God in song

Week 5

The rhythm of creation - part one of two

*There is an appointed time for everything,
and a time for every affair under the heavens.
A time to give birth, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to uproot the plant.
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to tear down, and a time to build.
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance...*
Ecclesiastes 3:1-3

The unifying image of this poem is the rhythm of creation. It holds the poem together the way rhythm holds creation together. The poet's art embodies this truth: the rhythm of creation infuses everything, gives everything its place and a time.

In Genesis 1, God creates to the seven-day rhythm of work and rest. The rhythm of God's creating is in God's creation. And the rhythm of our days unites the domestic to the divine.

We are conceived in rhythm. We gestate in rhythm. We grow in the womb to the pulse of our mother's heart and breath and circadian rhythms. Rhythm initiates us into this world before we are born.

In due time, labor pulses our passage from womb to world. We breathe and our immersion holds. At birth, one cord is cut; another one endures. "Evening came and morning followed. The first day." Gen 1:5. The body remembers the lesson of the womb: rhythm is our umbilical cord to creation.

We hunger, we eat. We breathe; in and out. The sun and moon take turns. Tidal waters rise and fall. Seasons flow one into another as we learn to crawl, walk, run, speak, sing, dance, write, paint, play and work.

At funerals, as we gather a life, Ecclesiastes 3 gathers all of life, the occasion, those who passed and those who remain in the rhythm of creation. Rhythm in song can share in this power to connect all things to a cosmic context. Rhythm in sacred song recollects our place and time in God's creation and in our worshiping community.

Next week, part 2: How rhythm holds creation, songs and communities together

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Meeting God in song

Week 5 & 6 in two parts

Part two: Rhythm holds creation, songs and communities together

*There is an appointed time for everything,
and a time for every affair under the heavens.*

Ecclesiastes 3:1

We hunger, we eat, we fall with the sun, asleep. And moon and sun take turns. Tides rise and fall. Seasons flow one into another as we learn to crawl, walk, run, and dance; speak, sing, write, paint, play and work.

If somehow we were able to subtract rhythm from the cosmic equation, we, our songs and all things that are would cease to be. We do not have such power. This mental math may rouse our hearts, but creation chants on, unphased, in phrases far longer than human breath. Stars are born. They collapse. They die. Planets spin in orbit.

Sacred music participates in the miracle of being. It frees us from the mental math that can uproot us. It proclaims that everything has a time and place. It invites us into the embrace of the Creator, who is as close as our breath. It opens our mortal lungs to draw the Spirit's breath and sing of eternity.

Children internalize the rhythms of routine as a bodily sense of safety, trust, hope and belonging that extends far beyond childhood. Rhythmic motifs hold a song together as a style, which holds a community together in worship. When sacred songs are composed and offered with this intent, the integrity of the song brings unity to a community.

Rhythmic motifs welcome us in and help us find our place. They help us feel at home. They engender a bodily sense of safety, trust, belonging and hope that extend far beyond the song.

Rhythm holds creation, songs and communities together.

Our consciousness is altered toward the sacred when we enter the rhythms of words, of walking, dancing, the rosary, the Mass and sacred song. This power of rhythm begins with our experience in the womb.

In adulthood, our body memory of being immersed and open as a child in the womb becomes available to us as a way of being immersed and open to creation, to each other and our Creator. We pray in rhythm and the body remembers this. And, as eternal Divinity entered the rhythm of history at the appointed time, it enters our songs.

Next week. Elements of prayer: The rest

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Meeting God in song

Week 7

Elements of prayer: The rest

Music is so conducive to prayer that it seems to have been crafted from it. The very elements of music embody spiritual truths. The last two weeks we considered rhythm; This week, the rest.

Thus the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed. On the seventh day God completed the work he had been doing; he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation. Genesis 2:1-3

Like the passage of days that mark time in the story, a rest marks the passage of phrases. A rest is a blessed moment in the rhythm of any creative work. It makes room for what just happened to gather to its full effect until what follows arises organically from it. Prayer in a time set aside does the same.

In the rhythm of respiration, the rest is the breath gathering itself. It is a still voice calling us to a periodic prayer of presence toward what we are making. It is practice for gathering our lives to God.

Music and churches inhale seekers and exhale disciples in the same rhythm that birthed the universe. Singing and living this rhythm connects us to the generative and regenerative Creator of All.

A rest is a respite and an invitation into the regenerative power of God. Artfully rendered, it makes time for the Word to gather to its full effect so that we can arise from it.

The musical rest is a seed of God's seventh day gaze toward creation. Planted and tended in song, it can, like a force of nature, root, spread and thrive even in the most unlikely places in our lives.

Next week: The sound of listening

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Meeting God in song

Week 8

The sound of listening

Musicians train themselves not just to listen, but to hear. Some, once their hearts catch even a whisper of something profoundly beautiful, dedicate a lifetime to this practice so they are ready to receive in all fulness what lives in songs.

Musicians listen to themselves; they listen to each other. They react and adapt in the moment to tend the living heart of the song. Even when every note and word are scripted, listening honors the song as a living work.

When the music matters, open ears and open hearts are one. Ensemble musicians give themselves to something larger than themselves - a unifying intention that makes claims on them that are both personal and communal. What holds the song together, holds the ensemble together. This makes songs vessels for community.

When everyone commits to this communal art, the effect is stunning. The hearts of all are lifted at the fulfillment of some of our holiest desires. The sacrifices of communal life seem as nothing in the light of the joy of being unified in all diversity toward transcendent purpose.

We are close to the sacred here. All that remains is to turn an ear toward God and music becomes prayer. We listen for God who sings, plays and prays in us and through us. Music ministers invite us into this by living it.

When music is prayer, listening to each other and listening to God in each other are one act; the sound we are in, the community we are in, and the Spirit we are in, are inseparable.

In sacred song, the sound of listening is the sound of the kingdom under construction. We hear, respond and adapt in the moment; voice added to voice, spirit added to spirit, we build an act of worship. This sets up a chain reaction. What a mighty sound that can be, like the sound of a rushing wind in the sanctuary.

Next week, The power of place: sung prayer in sacred space

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Meeting God in song

Week 9

The power of place: sung prayer in sacred space

I inhale as I open the main doors to the sanctuary. I cross the threshold and exhale as if I have been holding my breath for this moment. The space opens up and wide - to God above who is here among us, in every direction.

Before you open that door, look around. Feel how close the walls and ceiling are. Perhaps this is the narrow gate. Perhaps it is a re-birth canal. In one motion, open the door, open yourself and cross the threshold.

Architects guide our passage through a space to create “reveals.” The building shows itself as we move through it. Church architects design passageways to reveal God to us as we move through them. Passageways are an architect’s prayer for us, offered in the media of brick and mortar, glass and wood. Prayer - the relationship of divinity and humanity - lives in the very materials.

Sacred architecture, prayer incarnate, first affects us bodily. We know this. Flesh and blood, we genuflect, kneel, and stand and our posture embodies prayer. If you want to know what crossing that threshold meant to the whole of who you are, listen to your body.

All pathways in the church lead to the place of the sacrifice of the Mass. Sit in any pew and it will turn you, torso, shoulders, head and eyes to the front where ink on paper becomes the living Word and bread and wine become body and blood. When our singing is directed to where all pews point, notes become prayer.

The passage into sacred space, the orientation and direction of its paths, the placement of the altar, in short, all the prayer that formed the building and lives in its materials forms sacred music’s orientation, direction, and intentions. The space that prepares us is ready to receive our prayer.

The resonance of sacred space is at once physical and spiritual. When the sister arts of architecture and music work together, the temple we are and the temple we are in, resonate as one.

Next week: Stories of welcome from our choir

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Meeting God in song

Week 10

Stories of welcome from our Choir (part 1)

Our first rehearsal for the coming choir season is Wednesday, August 23 7pm. This marks the first full season of combining St Thomas More (STM) and St. Catherine's (SC) adult choirs. This is a milestone made of living stones in the story of the Catholic church in south Kansas City.

We have sung together before. We combined during the pandemic to sing from the pews for Triduum at SC. Soon after the announcement of SC closing, STM choir members sent a card filled with welcome notes. Since then, the choirs combined for Good Friday at SC and Pentecost at STM.

From Kathy Vervaecke

When I attended my first STM choir practice, it was with some trepidation - would the choir be welcoming? Would I know any of the music? Would I be surrounded by friendly, compassionate singers that would assist me in acclimating to this new choral environment? I was a long-standing member of the choir at St. Catherine of Siena parish, where we were an extremely close-knit family, and I was, "Dipping my toe in the water," fairly quickly upon the closing of our parish. Was I moving too quickly? Did I require more time to heal? There was only one way to discover the answer, and that was to move forward in faith, and rely on God's gentle urging that I felt in my soul.

As usual, when I am being lead by the Spirit, I had nothing to fear. The members of the STM Choir welcomed me with open hearts, and an appreciation for my willingness to join their family so quickly. They surrounded me with their voices and their hospitality, and immediately invited me to the Sandtrap for an after-rehearsal meal! They showed me the ropes, instructed me on the logistics - location of the music, where to sit, etc. - and surrounded me with strong voices, to increase my comfort level in learning new pieces of music. They welcomed me to my new home.

Next week: Stories of welcome from our choir (part 2)

Meeting God in song

Week 11

Stories of welcome from our Choir (part 1)

Meeting God in song

Week 11

Stories of welcome from our Choir (part 2)

Music ministry is most effective when the music ministers pray what they play and sing with open hearts. If we send sound out like we would a sacrificial pawn while we stay safely behind, our song will sound hollow. If we pour hearts into a song, our relationship with our creator and each other will live in our sound. Sacred song is meant to make love of God and neighbor audible and love entails risk.

Sacred music is most effective when the music ministers trust each other. This begins with welcome. When we are welcomed and affirmed and, as the need arises, held in prayer, by our fellow music ministers, we and our ministry are blessed.

This is Mai's story, addressed to prospective choir members. She joined the choir last year.

We are overjoyed to extend a warm welcome to you as you consider joining our choir.

I was once in your shoes. I was nervous but looked forward to contributing to something greater than myself. The warmth and acceptance I encountered from the very first rehearsal were overwhelming. The choir members were not only talented musicians, but they were also kind-hearted, supportive, and understanding. It was a community that I didn't realize I needed at that particular time in my life.

Returning to church after years away was a significant step for me, and the choir became my haven, a place where I found healing, and a sense of belonging. The power of music, combined with the genuine connections I formed with my fellow choir members, helped me regain strength and rediscover my joy.

If you choose to join our choir, you will be welcomed with open arms. We believe in the transformative power of music and the bonds we create through shared experiences.

We eagerly await the opportunity to meet you, to hear your voice blending with ours, and to share in the joy and beauty that awaits us all.

With warmest regards,

Mai

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Meeting God in song

Week 12

Stories of welcome from our Choir (part 3)

As we start a new season of service, on behalf of all our music ministers I ask for your witness, prayers and participation. Please witness to the gifts of those around you who might be called to serve in music ministry. Pray for our music ministers as we merge the music ministries of two churches - STM and St. Catherine of Siena. And...

The church calls us to “full, conscious and active participation” in the Mass. The music minister’s primary role is to model, invite and support this. We serve because we know that, by the power of the one who sings through us, communal expressions of faith strengthen the faith of all.

Choir starts with rehearsal this Wednesday 7pm in the choir loft. There is still time to join us. Here is a story of welcome from choir member, Tom Bauer.

When Marie and I moved to Kansas City in 2015, we searched for a church to call home. Our first visit was to the 9:00 am Sunday Mass at St. Thomas More. We were overwhelmed with the welcome we received. We felt at home. We felt the presence of Jesus.

One Sunday, Kathy Grier sat behind us at Mass and heard us sing and after Mass asked if we would like to join the choir. We had sung in small choirs before but did not read music or have any formal training. We said we were sure we wouldn’t pass the audition. She smiled. There was no audition. Anyone who liked to sing and learn would be welcomed.

We joined the choir the next weekend and found a new home. Everyone was so encouraging, friendly and supportive. Our new STM family became a treasure to us.

If you love to sing at Mass, we invite you to join this wonderful family of new friends, serve your St. Thomas More Community and sing for the Glory of the Lord.

~Tom Bauer

Next week: Ensemble music, the art of community

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Meeting God in Song

Week 13

Ensemble music, the art of community

I have witnessed this at least three times: at choir rehearsal everybody seemed irritable. When the singers talked, they grumbled. And when they sang, they sounded like soloists all singing more or less at the same time. We forgot to pray. So we prayed and we sang and we sounded like a choir again - many voices, many colors of sound; many singing as one and many praying as one.

There is hope in this sound. This is us living Jesus' call to be one as He and the Father are one. Music ministers deliberately cultivate the soil from which this miracle of communal prayer springs, not to keep it for themselves, for then it would wither and die, but to invite and encourage all into the song.

Ours is a mustard seed ministry rooted in a necessity of the heart: We simply must share this. The ensemble musician knows that when we offer even the smallest seed, we are giving ourselves to the care of something alive and beautiful that, by some miracle of our shared humanity, infused with divinity, is far greater than the sum of the parts.

Music ministers desire this miracle in all its potency. Like a force of divine nature, this desire draws us together and binds us and calls us to invite others to add to this precious gift. This is our conviction born of experience: once you have heard the sound of an entire congregation singing as one, your heart will remember and sing to you its desire for that taste of heaven again and again until that day when we will sing together with the angels and the saints at the foot of God's throne.

Music ministers are anointed into a lifelong vocation when that heavenbound sound leaves its indelible mark on our souls.

This bulletin column series is based on a book in progress, *Meeting God in Song: How Music Opens Us to the Sacred*. If you would like to be notified when the book becomes available, email me at bob@stmkc.com.