

INSPIRED MUSIC MINISTRY

Mary J. Morreale

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah? 1 Kings 19:11-13 (King James Version)

Sometimes I ask the same question that God asks Elijah. What am I doing here? What am I doing in music ministry?

Inspired Music Ministry sometimes seems an inconsistent term. There are times when inspiration seems to be the last item on a long list of duties. In fact, music ministry can sometimes be anything but inspirational!

Think of the hours that an organist and choir director (sometimes the same person) puts in every weekend, holiday, and holy day. The minister of music works when most of society is at leisure and with much less than desirable pay! What inspires church musicians to get up early on a Sunday morning after a late Saturday night? Have you ever practiced in sub-degree temperatures and accompanied the vacuum cleaner (always in the wrong key) and even louder conversations?

This makes me want to give up my vocation calling at times. There are many options for running away at the "giving up" point. There's quitting; heaven knows there are plenty of church jobs available. Where's the inspiration?

At the giving-up point, angels of inspiration can sometimes only be seen in retrospect. When I was five years old, my dad bought me a little chord organ. The local accordion teacher was my first teacher. One day, Mr. Muzzy came into the house beaming from ear to ear with an accordion for me to try out (actually, try on!). I think that my mom was inspired when she took one look at me sitting on the couch with this monster instrument in my lap and said, "It's so big on her, I think we'll stick to the organ!" Thanks, Angel Mom, that was truly inspirational!

Then there was my first job as organist of my home church when I was 14. I was hidden well up in the loft and "allowed" to play at the 8:00 A.M. Mass. There was no pay involved, because I was working for the Lord of course! One Sunday after Mass the local music teacher took the time to come up to the balcony. He said to me, "You are the worst organist I've ever heard," then turned on his heels and left.

The inspiration to keep going at that point came in the form of a thought angel, offering real food for the soul: "You will eat those words." I entered into my practice with even more resolve and vigor. I don't know if he

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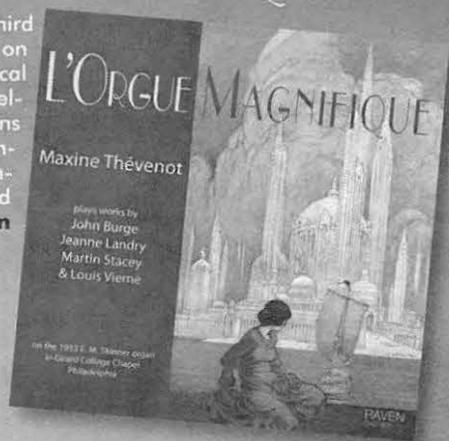
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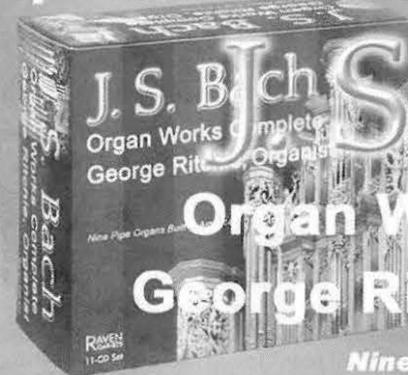
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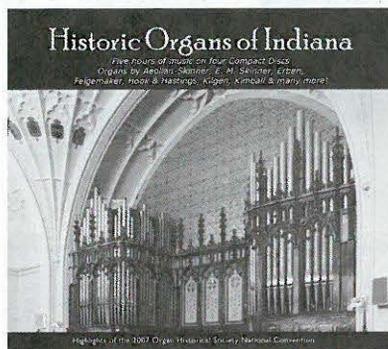
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ever knew that I earned a master's degree in organ performance from the Eastman School of Music and have played hundreds of recitals, but nonetheless he was an angel to me in my journey.

So what are we music ministers doing here? We certainly all have experienced inspired music ministry. Consider those early morning practices in the empty, acoustic-perfect church with the sun streaming in through the stained glass windows? How about seeing the expression on the choir

members' faces just as they finish a most beautiful rendition of an anthem never done as heavenly in rehearsal? Reflect on the pause following the music, the prayer, the dance, the sermon, richly unifying and awe-filling and refueling? Inspired.

Some of these guidelines have served as reminders of inspiration to me:

Stop, look and listen. It is as simple and as difficult as that. Stop what you are doing. Look at this moment. Listen to your heart.

Follow the strongest, most loving energy and listen to what it says to you. When "follow" comes to mind, go there. You will be inspired by life itself.

Stop and look at your loved ones. Really look at them, into their eyes. Listen to them with your heart. Stop and look at your choir, at your colleagues. Listen to them. You will be inspired by love itself.

Inspiration can come dressed in the strangest costumes at times! Think about that noisy tenor and the outspoken soprano. Listen to them. They need that loving energy most of all. You will be inspired by your community itself.

Really listen again to the music. Hear the music as if for the first time. Leave perfection behind. Enjoy, have fun with music. Try something new. Listen through music to the Spirit that sings in your soul.

Listen to God. Ask. Pray, converse, listen. You will hear the word, feel the nudge, and notice. You will see with new eyes and experience with fresh wonder. It will make you stop. Stop. Look. Listen.

Is God in the wind? the earthquake? the fire? Where is the ultimate, the base of inspiration itself? After, I look for the ultimate answer to the question, WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?

We are seeking a sound of that still small voice, the whisper, and the sheer silence.

I have kept a quote from THE AMERICAN ORGANIST of September 1981. At a regional convention in 1981, Thomas Stewart, then senior pastor of Buffalo Westminster Presbyterian Church, spoke these words:

It may be, friends, that you have been battered or seduced into believing that you are worth as little as you are being paid. It may be that your assaults on the cliffs of beauty and elegance and excellence have left your fingers raw and bleeding—and your spirit in the same condition. It may be that, perhaps only for a phrase or a line, the music and the word came together and you felt indeed God was truly praised and truth accurately represented, the majesty and beauty of creation. The very act of creating was done there at that brief time. The music of the spheres was sounded, and possibly heard.

A sound of sheer silence. The sheer silence that follows the moment when music and word come together, truth is accurately represented, and you know the majesty and beauty of creation. That is Inspired Music Ministry.

Mary J. Morreale is a professional musician, pianist, organist, composer, and initiator of Empower Innovations. She facilitates programs for retreats, conferences, groups, and individuals, and is in private practice in music therapy in the Washington, D.C., area. She has served as music coordinator and pianist at the Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua, N.Y., for several years. She currently is organist at the First Christian Church in Falls Church, Va. She has degrees in music performance from the Fredonia School of Music and the Eastman School of Music. In addition, she is a board-certified music therapist with a specialty in music and spirituality.