

THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE SEMINARY WHERE ARE WE?

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in the United States and Canada

American Guild of Organists Perkins School of Theology October 10, 2005

Indeed, I plainly judge and do not hesitate to affirm that except for theology there is no art that could be put on the same level with music, since except for theology [music] alone produces what otherwise only theology can do, namely, a calm and joyful disposition. Manifest proof [of this is the fact] that the devil, the creator of saddening cares and disquieting worries, takes flight at the sound of music almost as he takes flight at the word of theology.

From a letter Luther wrote to
Louis Senfl on October 4, 1530

I had been thinking about this talk last summer when I heard an interview with John Irving on NPR about his new novel, *Until I Find You*. It is the story of Jack Burns's lifelong search for his father, William, who was an accomplished organist and addicted to getting tattooed. I thought reading a book about an "ink addict" organist would be good preparation for this meeting. What I didn't know from the radio interview was that all of William Burns's tattoos were music. William had a body covered in notes and lyrics—some of them in places that are not often associated with sacred music. Toward the end of the novel, the tattoos are described as "Nothing but praise for the Lord—hymns of praise—and prayers of lamentation."

I want to begin these remarks by sharing a scene, early in the book, when Jack is a preschooler and another scene, toward the end, when he is grown. In the first scene, four-year-old Jack and his mother are in Amsterdam, where Jack's father had been organist at the *Oude Kerk*, the Old Church. Irving describes the organ:

It took (Christian) Vater two years to build the huge and beautiful instrument of 43 stops, which immediately went out of tune the moment that more than one register was pulled. The organ's failure was also vast—for over eleven years it was out of tune . . . It took . . . five years to fix it. Even so, the organ in the *Oude Kerk* continued to be out of tune most of the time. . . .

Jack and his mother visited the church and talked with an assistant organist about William, whom young Jack understood had the job of tuning the organ and sometimes playing it. "William not only kept the organ in better tune than anyone could remember; his practice sessions were both famous and infamous," the narrator tells us. Because of the busy schedule of services and events at the church, William did not begin practicing and tuning until late at night. The reverberation in the church was five seconds and outside in the middle of the night when William played Bach's D-minor Toccata, the

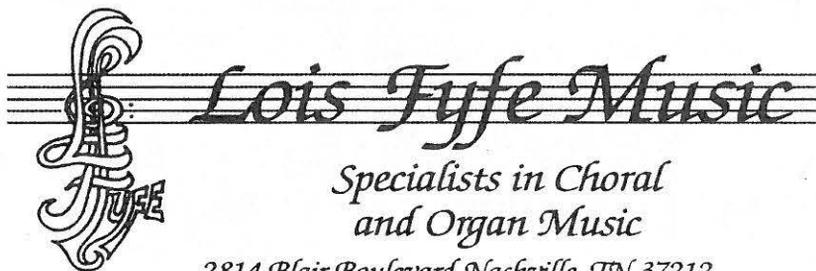
echo of the organ permeated the surrounding neighborhood—Amsterdam's red-light district. Some of the prostitutes came to the church on their way home and listened to William play (pp. 91–94).

Later in the book, an adult Jack returns to Amsterdam and finds out more about his father. Jack learns that William was the organist, not the tuner, and that he "had insisted that there be an organ service for the prostitutes—at the early hour of the morning when many of them stopped working. . . . He wanted them to come to the Old Church and be soothed by the music; he wanted them to pray." When church higher-ups expressed their doubts about a middle-of-the-night service for the prostitutes, William told them: "I'm just trying to make these women feel a little better. And if some of them hear Our Lord's noise in the music, what's the harm in that?" "Our Lord's noise?" Jack asked. "That's what William called (it). . . . He used to say that, if you could hear God's noise in the organ, you were at heart a believer" (pp. 587–88).

If you can hear God's noise in the organ, you are at heart a believer. The assertion resonates with me. I am a teacher and administrator—a word person—but when I worship, it is the music that centers my soul, moves my heart, and strengthens me for the journey.

I've taken to sitting in the balcony at the church I attend in Pittsburgh for two reasons. The first is that I like the view of the art glass, the chancel, and fellow worshipers that the balcony provides. The second is that the antiphonal ranks of the organ are located just above the balcony. We have a very talented young organist, Mark Reed, and he knows how to use these ranks in hymn accompaniment and organ solos. I can feel the music in the balcony; it reaches my bones as well as my ears. The pipes, like William Burns's tattoos, are full of "praise for the Lord—hymns of praise—and prayers of lamentation."

I don't come to this presentation as a neutral educational observer. In college, I learned to love Widor's "Toccata in F." Later, as a seminary faculty member, I was moved by my colleague Donald Hustad's improvisational hymn playing. He made old tunes take on new meaning. Sacred music makes meaning, I think, it does not just illustrate the meanings that words have. The congregation of the church I attended in Louisville sang the Doxology to the Ralph Vaughan Williams arrangement of "Old One Hundredth." Every Sunday, the organ praised God for me in ways that I could not with my words. Most summers, my wife and I spend a week at the Chautauqua Institution in New York, and the Massey organ is an important part of our enjoyment of that



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time. As I write this paragraph on Sunday afternoon, the sound of the antiphonal rank at Christ Church this morning is still ringing in my mind: "Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim . . ." The organ has made the "noise of God for me," and you now know the lens through which I will examine music and theological education.

I want to direct your attention to three areas: the characteristics of the current generation of seminary students, some data about education for church musicians in theological schools, and, finally, some description of the music education of MDiv students. I will be more descriptive than prescriptive, which I think is the appropriate place to begin.

The current generation of seminary students

A kind of conventional wisdom has emerged about the current generation of theological students: they are less well formed in the spiritual and denominational traditions of faith when they enter seminary than previous generations of entering students have been; they know less about the texts and theology of those traditions; they have less background in the practices of religious leadership than some earlier generations of students have had; and, as a group, they may be less academically talented.

This conventional wisdom cannot be tested precisely because there are no data by which we can compare current students with previous generations of students. There are, however, some empirical indicators that inform it.

- ATS provides a questionnaire to member schools that is completed by entering students. Last fall, 7,264 of them completed it, and their responses are instructive. About 50% of the students had undergraduate majors in the traditional fields of the humanities, and 50% had undergraduate backgrounds in business, sciences, education, engineering, mathematics, and social sciences. While comparable data are not available for students entering seminary in decades prior to the 1980s, only half of the current students have undergraduate backgrounds in the humanities, arts, philosophy, or theology. (*Entering Student Questionnaire, 2004, The Association of Theological Schools.*)
- Several years ago, the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education surveyed all ATS students entering first-degree theological programs. These data indicate that younger students—about half of the ATS master's level student body—are more likely to have undergraduate degrees in the humanities, are more likely to have had recent ministry-related

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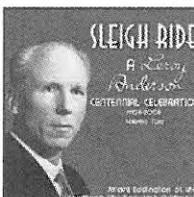
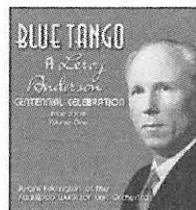
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1994–2004 Enrollment in MM, MCM, MSM Programs

School	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998	1997	1996	1995	1994
1	4	6	6	4	6	5	9	8	7	7	9
2	3	3	3	3	3	5	3	2	5	5	2
3	4	5	9	6	10	4	1	-	-	-	-
4	-	12	18	25	27	24	19	25	19	20	20
5	3	5	17	3	3	3	2	6	-	9	6
6	14	14	12	12	15	12	13	11	11	11	14
7	6	9	10	-	4	5	6	7	15	15	13
8	-	-	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	13	11	11	14	20	28	32	23	23	34	39
10	23	21	16	13	13	8	8	11	13	13	6
11	44	50	43	37	43	43	62	66	67	75	95
12	93	107	115	140	161	176	160	156	147	136	160
13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	207	243	261	258	306	313	315	315	307	325	364

Source: ATS institutional database

involvements, such as youth and campus ministry, and are more likely to have higher grades or other indicators of academic achievement. Last fall, students over the age of 30 comprised 42% of entering students. If the students in 2004 are like the students in the Auburn Center’s study several years ago, they bring important resources to theological schools, including life experience, more racial and gender diversity, and greater commitment to ordained and local church ministry than do younger students. (*Is There a Problem? Theological Students and Religious Leadership for the Future*, Auburn Studies, Auburn Theological Seminary, 2001.)

- Current seminary students differ from previous generations. They are certainly more diverse in race and gender than enrollments have ever been; 30% of students in ATS schools are racial/ethnic or international, and women comprise 36% of total enrollment. The student bodies of ATS schools went through a period in the 1990s when the average age of students steadily increased, but that trend seems to be reversing in this decade. (*ATS Annual Data Tables*, www.ats.edu)

The perception persists that current students are not as academically talented as the schools prefer, nor as ministerially experienced as the church needs. While we don’t have the comparative data, my sense is that this perception is true. While the top students are as talented as any, the top layer may be a little thinner than it once was and the bottom of student ability drags a little lower. This is not a “know-nothing” generation of students. It is a generation that has a wide range of life and cultural experience. It is also a generation with

considerably less experience in the humanities, in church work, and in the arts (other than the arts present in popular culture). Professors of Bible complain that fewer students know the biblical story; theologians complain that it seems harder for many students to construct a coherent theological position than earlier generations of students. Students have more to learn because they come knowing less, but there is no economic way to extend the three years of post-baccalaureate education that comprise the MDiv degree.

The characteristics of current students pressure the curriculum in many ways. Church officials are requesting more emphasis on evangelism, stewardship, and leadership. The work of churches seems to be getting more difficult, and effective leadership requires more skill, in my judgment, than it did a century ago. The world is changing, and theological schools need to do far more than they have done in the past to equip students to minister in a world that is increasingly pluralistic—religiously, ethnically, and denominationally. Religion has always attracted conflict, and currently seems to have more than its fair share. Sexual orientation, gender, life science issues, and medical ethics require sophisticated responses more than slogans and political posturing, and these issues pressure the theological curriculum. Education in sacred music, like every other area of study in theological education, competes for limited educational space in a crowded curriculum to prepare future pastors for needy churches.

Seminary education of church musicians

As best I can tell, theological schools have a limited involvement in the education of church musicians. Sixteen of the 251 schools in ATS offer master’s

degrees in music. Nine offer an MCM, MSM, or MM, and seven offer some version of the MA that includes church music. Typically, the MCM/MSM is a two-year degree, with about a third of the curriculum devoted to theological studies and the other two-thirds to studies in music, including a conducting or performance area. The MA programs tend to have less performance instruction from what I can tell. Unfortunately, the ATS statistics only allow us to identify MCM, MSM, and master of music students (the MA students get grouped into a general category of specialized MA programs), but those statistics say something interesting about the instruction of church musicians in theological schools.

The number of church musicians being educated in ATS schools is decreasing. In 1994, there were 364 students in the various music degree programs that ATS can track statistically. In 2004, there were 207—that constitutes a 43% decline across the decade. Two ATS schools have NASM-accredited schools of music with programs at the master’s and doctoral levels. In 1994, these two schools had MCM/MSM/MM enrollments totaling 255. In 2004, these same schools had a combined enrollment of 137—almost a 50% decline in the decade.

It is a rather significant decline, but why? ATS enrollments in almost every other area of study have increased in the past decade. Why has enrollment in programs for church musicians declined as much as it has?

It might have something to do with the same factors that contribute to the financial struggles of symphony orchestras in the United States, with (what I understand to be) the decline in music education in public schools and the absence of music other than the

multiple levels of rock, R&B, and country on FM radio—with the exception of the public station that plays jazz or classical. American society seems to be distancing itself from the kinds of music associated with high culture and embracing with ever more money and technology the music of popular culture. When is the last time you heard the “Star Spangled Banner” sung straightforwardly rather than in a stylized arrangement at a sporting event? I don’t have data for these assertions, so you’ll have to decide if I’m mouthing some baseless assertion or if there is some truth to it.

Worship patterns are changing, and maybe the declining enrollment in graduate-level church music programs reflects some of those changes. Good organs have most typically been found in larger membership congregations, and the newer, larger membership congregations differ from their predecessors. Many are housed in big box edifices that reflect an intentional architectural commitment to avoid the more traditional appearance of sacred space. Arts are abundant in these congregations, but they differ from traditional arts in worship. Recent data from the Hartford Seminary Institute for Religion Research indicate that 72% of larger membership congregations use visual projection equipment. In addition, 75–80% of churches use electronic keyboards, guitars, and drums, 43% include recorded music in the service, and 22% report that they use dance or drama always or quite often. While arts are present, they are not necessarily present in the form of a big organ and the accrued repertoire of sacred music. The study indicates that there are far more Protestant mega-churches than had been thought, and that these churches have a considerable influence on the patterns of worship adopted by smaller congregations. The kind of education that these worship arts require differs from the pattern offered in a typical seminary MSM program.

(http://hrr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_FACTsummary.html#worship)

The music education of clerical students

If figuring out how many musicians are enrolled in ATS schools is difficult, determining how MDiv students are educated in sacred music is even harder. Very few schools require a course in sacred music. Most typically, music education is embedded in other courses, so it is difficult to determine the kind of instruction that occurs by examining a school’s curriculum. To explore this issue, and to honor our location, I wrote the academic deans of ATS-accredited schools located in Texas and asked them to describe how church music was



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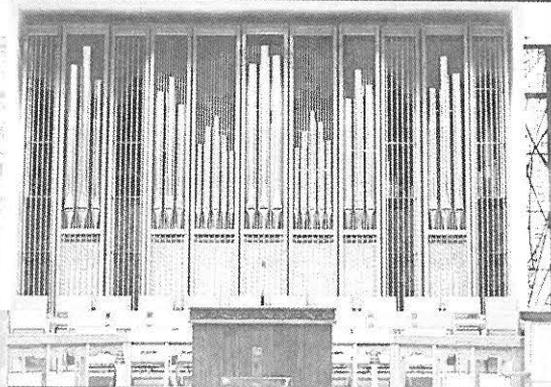
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taught to their MDiv students. These Texas schools include four mainline Protestant seminaries (Austin Presbyterian, Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University, Perkins School of Theology of Southern Methodist University, and Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest—with combined enrollment of 1,254), two Roman Catholic schools (Oblate School of Theology and the University of St. Thomas School of Theology—with a combined enrollment of 603), and three Evangelical Protestant schools (Dallas Theological Seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University—with a combined enrollment of 5,295). Four of these schools are university-related, and each of the universities has a program in music or the fine arts. One of these schools, Southwestern Baptist, has the largest school of church music of any ATS school. Together, the 7,149 students enrolled in these nine schools constitute just less than 10% of the 80,000 students enrolled in ATS schools last year.

The reports these schools sent in response to my request suggest that the schools vary widely in what they do. The variation does not appear to be a function of the school's mainline, evangelical, or Roman Catholic affiliation.

One mainline school provides no music instruction, and one of the evangelical schools provides none. Some of the schools have growing emphases. One of the mainline schools is in the process of receiving an endowed chair in sacred music, and one of the evangelical schools has introduced music instruction for all persons in the pastor track (24 of 42 classroom hours). Another school reported that 15 years ago there was a required music course for all MDiv students that was replaced several years ago with a course on worship that included some music, and most recently, that course has been dropped altogether. If these schools are indicative, music education for clergy is highly dependent on the school; while some schools are doing more with it, other schools are doing less.

From what I can tell, music education of future clergy reflects one or both of two patterns. The first is through chapel and choirs, and the second is through instruction in sacred music, worship, and liturgy.

Many of the respondents mentioned the importance of chapel and the kind of music education that it provides. One professor wrote that "we try to keep music in the air . . . with lots of student participation." At this school, there is a course that meets once a week for two

years that is "largely experiential, with little outside reading or writing, but lots of discussion, rehearsing, and working through the hymns and service music." Students form teams that plan daily chapel, and there is a chapel choir. Another professor wrote that "Seminary Singers is overwhelmingly for MDiv (students). . . . We model a (variety) of ways to engage the congregation through the choir and ways to integrate music and worship." He went on to say that the group gives about half of its attention to anthems and the other half to congregational song. The combination of participation in worship planning and musical presentation provides an important form of education in sacred music. Modeling in chapel is not always positive. One professor, discouraged with the way chapel worship has gone at his school, wrote: "the most significant current influence . . . in music and in worship is in chapel and . . . (it models) worship and music that . . . is weak biblically, theologically, literarily, historically, and aesthetically, and will leave especially our children and young people with a shallow and distorted concept of the Christian faith, the church, worship, and church music."

Future clergy are educated in sacred music in required courses that focus on music or worship and liturgy. One

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seminary requires all pastor track students to take a course that includes: "formal instruction in music nomenclature and its congregational leadership; formal survey of church music history; and informal daily discussions of lyric art and theological message . . ." One seminary that focuses on MDiv education offers courses ranging from "Choral Music" and "Corporate Worship" to "Responsorial Psalmody to Hymnody." This school is also starting a new center for the renewal of proclamation and preaching that will include an expansion of its music offerings. At one of the Roman Catholic seminaries, students are required to take an introduction to liturgy course that includes attention to the document, *Music in Catholic Worship*, as well as parts of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* that pertain to music. This includes issues such as the importance of music in liturgy, appropriate music for worship, and roles of music within the liturgy and text. The liturgy professor includes music . . . in the general discussion about the liturgical documents in that class.

From these cases, I think we can conclude that students at four or five schools are required as part of their MDiv education to have some exposure to sacred music, congregational song, and liturgical music. Many students are involved in planning and performing in chapel services. There are some schools where music is an area of study and growing importance, and other schools where music has been pushed aside. There are three or four schools where there is no formal instruction and some where the modeling provided in chapel or seminary worship is monochromatically contemporary. Some students are being educated, some are not being educated, and others are being misinformed.

A concluding observation

Mark Chaves has recently completed one of the best sociological studies of American congregations that I have ever read. He makes an important point in his analysis of congregational activity. He states that "Looking outward (from the congregations) we find that congregations probably contribute to our society's arts arena more extensively than they contribute to the social services arena or the political arena" (p.181). According to his data, 22% of American adults report that they "experience the arts" at their places of worship. These data compare favorably to the 16% of adult Americans who report attending a classical music performance, but less favorably to the 39% of Americans who report attending a popular music concert (p.191, Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America*, Harvard University Press, 2004). About 25% of the American population is in church on a typical

Sunday, and most of them will sing songs and hear music performed on a weekly basis. Where else will 25% of the population sing weekly, and where else will that many people hear music performed?

Musical tastes are changing, as they always have. Some congregations are declining as others are growing, as they always have. Some old texts are no longer sung, and a wide range of new texts and tunes are vying for the vacant space, as they always have. I hope the music that settles into long-term use will reflect aesthetic, biblical, and theological sensitivity, and—like William Burns's tattooed body—be full of praise and lamentation. After all, we need both in a faith that has a cross and an empty tomb. At the ATS Biennial Meeting following the 9/11 attacks, we asked representatives of seminaries closest to the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to describe how those events affected theological education that fall. The representative of one evangelical seminary with an extension campus near the World Trade Center site commented that they realized in preparing for their first chapel after the attacks that the kind of music they typically sang had no texts of lament. There were songs of praise, but not of lament.

In this pluralistic era, clergy cannot obtain all the education they need in seminary. There is too much to learn and too little time to learn it. Education extends into the practice of ministry, much as performance skills grow in the context of performing. Pastors are also educated in hymnody and music as they talk about hymn selection and forms of worship with the organist/choir director. I had lunch with my pastor during the time that I was working on this presentation, and he mentioned how much he was learning from our young organist.

Mary, my assistant at ATS, plays the organ at the Presbyterian church in Frankfort Springs, Pennsylvania. It is a sturdy brick building with its foundation stones set in the 19th century. Mary grew up in this church and raised her daughters there. The pipes are never out of tune because, like most churches, there are none. As long as the circuitry works, the organ plays. Mary arranges her schedule in the summer so she can play for vacation Bible school; she takes the role of music seriously in the small congregation's worship, and she will educate pastor after pastor—for whom this congregation will continue to be a stop on the way to somewhere else—in the elegance of simple congregational song and the importance of service accompaniment. She will help them understand, even if seminary didn't, that music makes meaning for people. I hope you will exercise a similar educational leadership.

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