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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



More Than Worship: Sacred Music as a Resource for Teaching and Learning

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When I go to work in the morning, the first thing I do is read the Bible. I read a bunch of commentaries, take a bunch of notes, then prayerfully reflect on the text. Then I set to work coming up with a meaningful and compelling way of communicating my interpretation to my listeners. Then I lift the piano lid.

You see, I'm a composer of sacred music.

At its heart, my job is to present an interpretation of Scripture to my listeners in a way that is interesting, convincing, and spiritually valuable.

Unfortunately, few Christians ever hear my sacred music. That's because I don't write choral anthems or praise songs. I write sacred concert music: classical works that responds to themes, ideas, and texts from the Christian tradition. I've written a piano trio inspired by the book of Job, a song cycle that sets Rilke poems, and a brass quintet that explores the concept of *perichoresis*. (Humblebrag: of this piece, Walter Brueggemann wrote to me: "I am not a great theologian but have pondered "perichoresis" for a long time. This is the finest exposition of that thick idea that I have encountered." Be still my beating heart!)

Now, if I wrote a lot of choral music, I wouldn't be complaining nearly as much. But today, most of history's great church music composers face the same problems as me. While we do hear choral works by Bach, Handel, and Mendelssohn occasionally on Sunday mornings, the place where we usually encounter their sacred music is in the concert hall.

This is an example of a strange irony: though most of us have nearly unlimited access to the corpus of great sacred music—either live or on Spotify—we Christians rarely have the chance to intentionally explore its spiritual value in the context of Christian community. As a result, we are missing out on the many ways sacred music can contribute to our lives as Christians—beyond its role in worship.

In this post I'd like to provide a case study of a way that a different approach to sacred music can contribute to our work as educators.

First, take about 15 minutes to listen to three new musical settings of Psalm 148 (scroll down for texts and info about each setting). Each was written in 2019 by a contemporary composer representing a different Christian tradition: Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, and Armenian Apostolic.

Now that you've listened, let me ask you a question: which of these pieces interpreted the psalm correctly?

Obviously, this is not the right question to ask. Yet it's a familiar one, as it's the one that so many students initially bring to the task of Biblical interpretation. And as educators, we know that ridding a student of this hermeneutic habit is the very first thing we need to accomplish in our classes.

Listening to these three musical settings makes this easy. Each piece is an authentic, honest, and personal response to a rich and mysterious text. Each provokes us to think about the psalm in a completely different way: not just encouraging us to provide different interpretations of the psalm, but to ask completely different kinds of questions about it—and of ourselves. Heard back-to-back, the three settings testify incontrovertibly to the possibility—and, I might add, the *necessity*—of complementary, mutually-enriching interpretations of the same text.

If we are going to teach the next generation of pastors, theologian, and laypeople, we know that these are the attitudes toward Scripture that we need to promote. More than anything, we need to convince our students to devote themselves to a lifetime of continuous exploration and re-exploration of our tradition. Beyond that, we need to encourage them to develop an attitude of humility, an awareness of the contingent nature of our own interpretations, and the courage to ask complex questions and follow them where they may lead.

Sacred music helps us accomplish these goals. It opens up the field of interpretation by inviting us to engage with the Bible in ways that are not ideological, simplistic, or narrow, but instead subjective, affective, and open-ended. But this can only happen if we think creatively

about new ways to use it in our classrooms and our churches. My new organization Deus Ex Musica, which developed the project culminating in the videos you watched, is my own humble attempt.

For more than a millennium, composers have given us unique, powerful, and provocative musical interpretations of Scripture. They continue to do so today. In a world that increasingly promotes simple, ideologically-driven solutions to problems, I think sacred music has the potential to remind us that our tradition is rich, mysterious, and resistant to easy answers. Whether you are an educator, pastor, or layperson, I encourage you to seek out opportunities to explore the ways it can contribute to your ministry and your life of faith.

Thanks for listening!

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