

The Bencke Family in Japan



November 2021: 90 番



MASKED



UNMASKED (first time I've seen some of these students' faces!)

How does music help us worship God?

I think if most Christians were asked this question, our first impulse would be to address the lyrics of hymnody. After all, it is in the best of hymnody where Scripture is set to music, biblical truths are built on melodies, rhythms, and harmonies, and where the history of the Christian church intersects with today's body of believers.

Sacred music in Japan is primarily limited to hymns composed between 1860-1880 that have been translated from English or another European language into Japanese. These hymns have been, like in the United States, clearly delineated and used within specific denominations. In recent decades, both in North America and in Japan, there have been more attempts to share across denominational lines the rich hymnody that has been created. Nowadays, it is not uncommon for a Lutheran congregation to enjoy music from the ancient church (Be Thou My Vision), or Lutheran heritage (A Mighty Fortress), or Roman Catholic tradition (Here I am, Lord), or even Assemblies of God/Pentecostal traditions (Shout to the North).

One thing I ask my students when I am teaching hymns to the choir is whether they understand the text and whether they know where the text came from. Usually the answer is "no" on both counts. Interestingly, once I've provided some of this information, they seem to sing with more courage, as though once a connection has been made with another time, culture, or tradition that they have more on the table to offer in their interpretation of the text. It is always interesting to me to examine the source and inspiration of hymn texts and how these texts were eventually set to music.

But what about instrumental music? How does that help us understand just a little bit more about God when it is included as a part of our worship? Is it about creating atmospherics? Certainly, music has the power to evoke a certain ambience. Music can function as a "mood relaxing" agent, when it is slow, without rhythm, and with blurred boundaries of harmonic motion. Or it can set our feet to dancing with a kicking back-beat and interesting melodic or rhythmic hook.

Some of the prayers of our hearts...

Thank you, Lord, for your abiding love. While we fail to recognize your real presence in our lives, we live in the faith of our baptism that you are the source of all beauty in the art that we create. Help us to remember the promise of your everlasting presence as we enter a season of waiting and darkness.

Lord, we ask for your peace as our family enters another holiday season separated by the miles and travel restrictions. We ask that you keep our daughter Emilie safe and free from loneliness while she experiences a second Thanksgiving and Christmas without her parents and sister with whom to celebrate. God of provision, we trust you will find people with whom she can enjoy the holidays and rejuvenate for the upcoming semester. We look forward to the day when we can travel freely again and trust that you will provide that opportunity in your time. May we wait in joyful hope.

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Instrumental music for worship has much more to offer than just helping worship leaders to establish a mood. The music itself, the very sounds of instruments either alone or in combination with others is a response to God's goodness. We don't make music to "help worship be holy." We make music because the very act of creating music by a group or individual and another group or individual listening to it is a unified act of solidarity in offering praise to God. Participation in music is not simply the act of singing or playing an instrument. By listening, we are receiving the offering of the player and offering our response of gratitude or transformation to God. As we move into Advent and then Christmas, here are some thoughts about how to listen for God in the sounds of music, both sung and instrumental:

1. The sound of a triad chord, 3 tones to create a unified sound, reflects the Trinity!
2. The ascending line of a melody can often be aligned with ascending toward heaven.
3. The sound of brass is an ancient way to make a proclamation. What better way to proclaim the Good News than with brass?
4. Long, sustained notes bring to mind the eternal and ever-abiding nature of God.
5. Minor keys seem to remind us of our brokenness and need to repent.
6. Improvisation - sometimes we hear this in jazz or gospel - embodies the freedom that gospel proclaims and makes possible.
7. Unison singing or sounds remind us of how we are one body.
8. Bells have long been associated with joy (wedding bells at Windsor) and sorrow (tolling bells at Notre Dame Cathedral). Emotions are part of our humanity, which is mapped out in the psalms. There is not a single human condition that is not referenced in the psalms. The musical work of handbell teams is both heard and seen. The unifying of 14 individuals to create a single melody that sounds as though it is from one player is again, a representation of how the body of Christ is diversity within our unity and unity within our diversity.
9. Repetition. How many times do we need to seek God's forgiveness? How many times has God reiterated His love for humanity? How often did Jesus speak of and demonstrate loving one another? The Scriptures are repetitive, but always headed toward their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.
10. Tension, release, and delay are all used within any phrase of music. It would be very unsatisfying to sing only the first line of "What a Friend we have in Jesus," even though the single phrase is a truth. The delay of gratification in singing to the end of a phrase or stanza, or hearing an instrumental work to the end is fulfillment. The promises given to Abraham are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and when time is fulfilled, we will be joined with God in heaven with all the saints.

Home assignment 2022 ...is a GO!

If your congregation is interested in having us come to see you in person, please consider this possibility for next summer! While the dates are not confirmed, a likely scenario will be August and some September availability. Look for more information in February!