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Someone is always unhappy with the music

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Aug. 19, 2011 My Table Is Spread

Music is the lit dynamite of liturgical debates. It is the struck match in a parched field; the gasoline-soaked rag stuffed in a bottle and tossed, flaming, into the crowd. Music is a marker: ?Thee?s to the right; You?s to the left. Please, no talking.?

I once walked into the Bishop DeFalco Retreat Center in Amarillo, Texas, and paused at the sign prohibiting firearms. I looked around for the other sign directing me to the hymnody conference.

I?ll admit to having sympathies with both camps. (This is not a virtue; this is a personality type.) After a pastor once described the ubiquitous ?70s anthem, ?Here We Are,? as ?the hymn to the obvious,? I could never hear it again without wincing at, or, counting down the litany of the obvious:

Here we are. *Check.*
All together. *Check.*
As we sing our song. *Check.*
Joyfully. *Does vigorously count?*

And I admit to hoping we never have guests at Mass when some of the ?hymns to ourselves? are sung: We are builders ... we are dreamers ... we are clay pots ... we are servants ... we are bridge builders ... we are bridges ... we are hands across the bridge.

Perhaps it is the jumble of visual imagery that undoes me, as I picture myself as both builder and bridge and hands across it, spanning from this land to one faraway. Where do I put my tools when I grasp those hands across the ocean? Where do I put my giant torso? My sequoia-like legs? What happens if I sneeze? ?Hello, Tokyo. Hello. Come in, please.?

Those hymns make me long for ones that sing of who God is, and has been, and shall forever be. The implication here is that if you can figure out which one is God and which one is you, and which one, by nature alone, calls forth hymns of praise, you?re off to a good start.

I mean, I?ve watched those TV shows where they track down the women -- and they?re mostly women -- who inspired the rock songs we all know by heart. I?ve seen Ritchie Valens? actual ?Donna,? who turned into a mortgage broker. A nice older lady with a blonde rinse to cover the grey. One look is sufficient to convince that

the line, ?Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,? isn?t about me or any of the rest of the bridge crew.

So, when my friends Jerry and Yvonne asked me to help them track down some hymnody for the funeral of Jerry?s father, who died last May at the age of 96, I was happy to help. I was happy to help, both out of friendship, and out of curiosity. Because the one thing the ?Bring back the St. Basil Hymnal? crowd has going for it is that most of us don?t know those songs.

My siblings and cousins and I all remember Tulia punch (a carton of sherbet scooped into a glass punch bowl filled with ginger ale) fondly, as a staple of formal occasions in our childhood, but when we served it at my daughter?s bridal shower, I saw how the gentle mist of memory had obscured the sensation of drinking a cup of granulated sugar dissolved in a cup of water -- that is, a cup of sludge.

My friend Jerry grew up across the street from his parish church in Baltimore. The family had so many boys in such close proximity to the sacristy that they routinely served both daily and Sunday Masses. It was a devout home, and Jerry?s father remembered with fond regret the hymns of his childhood that were lost to *Gather* and *Ritual Song and Breaking Bread*. The songs he requested for his funeral were three: ?Mother, at Your Feet Is Kneeling,? ?O Sacred Heart! O Love Divine,? and ?Heart of Jesus, We Are Grateful.?

Tulia punch, or treasure? I was going to find out.

?O Sacred Heart! O Love Divine? is written in 6/8 time and marked andante, though the recording I heard was played allegro, definitely allegro. The opening bars have a sprightly music hall sound that led me, at first, to believe that either ?The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze? was set to the tune of ?O Sacred Heart? or vice versa. Whatever the order, it?s hard not to picture a church organist who looks like he left his job at the Shakey?s Pizza Parlor of my youth (Derby hat, striped shirt, gay (18)90s?) just in time to make the 11 o?clock Mass.

?Mother, at Your Feet Is Kneeling? is about God ... sort of. It belongs to that class of hymns praising the one (lower case ?o?) who can get you out of trouble when the Father and the Son are in a bad mood, which is always. We might call a collection of these Marian hymns ?Don?t Bother Your Father.?

The lyrics are addressed to Mary, as the one, famously, who leaves the back kitchen door of heaven unlocked even when the front gates are padlocked against you.

Dearest Mother, tell my Jesus
How I love Him fond and true
[You talk to Him; He never listens to me!]
And, oh, Mary, dearest Mother,
Tell Him I belong to you.
[He likes you!]

Apparently, that tactic doesn?t work too well, because the next verse goes like this:

Plead for me when Jesus judges,
Answer for me when He asks
How I spent so many moments,
How perform?d so many tasks.

[Translation: Plead for me when at six He drives up,
Speak, dear Mother, lest His temper rise up,
Tell Him how well I cleaned my room,

Save me, o save me, from eternal doom.]
The message of ?Heart of Jesus, We Are Grateful,? seems to be that Jesus? heart, if not his mind and will, comes close to Mary when it comes to mercy. Sort of like: ?You know your father loves you even if he doesn?t show it.?

When my friends returned from Baltimore, I asked them about the funeral. They answered together, ?The music was terrible!? Proof, I suppose, that they did indeed go to Mass, where someone is always unhappy with the music.

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