

Protagonist Corner

Should Bad Singers Be Allowed in the Choir?

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Many years ago, a man told me about singing in a small church choir which had a woman in it who could not carry a tune. She blasted out her part a quarter tone flat. My friend tried to stand as far away from her as possible because he could not sing his part with her singing out of tune into his ear. Another woman, a trained singer, told about attending a local church. Listening to this particular church's choir was a painful experience for her because several singers had no musical talent. The quality of the choir was a hindrance to her worship.

Another person echoed her sentiments: "Why would a church hire an expert to fix the roof yet allow those with no musical talent to participate in the choir? If a person is not a gifted singer, that person should become involved somewhere in the church where his or her gifts could best be used." One man added, "Why do we have choirs in the first place? Isn't the congregation supposed to participate together? The whole concept of the choir is opposed to liturgy which involves participation."

Worship is not a performance with the sanctuary being a concert hall. However, this idea is a difficult concept for ministers, worship leaders, and congregational members. I am a Presbyterian minister and worked as a professional violinist and violist prior to seminary. As a result, there is always a tension inside me between worship and performance.

While in college in the early 80's, I directed a small church choir. One year for Palm Sunday, we worked for weeks on a very difficult contemporary cantata. The schedule allowed only one rehearsal for the narrators, elders, and organist, but on that day there was a major snow storm, and we had to cancel.

When Palm Sunday finally arrived, I was a nervous wreck. Yet, something extraordinary happened. The choir and other participants were more attentive than usual, and the Spirit of God was present as we sang. There were mistakes to be sure, and visitors may have wondered about some of the musical problems. The piece told the powerful story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Our presentation of it also told the story of 21 men and women who were determined to proclaim the gospel even though they were unprepared. And aren't all of us unprepared to proclaim the gospel?

Letty Russell's model of the "Household of Freedom"¹ can shed light on the question, "Should bad singers be allowed in the choir?" The image of a "household" holds much baggage, for too often the "house" is a dangerous place, which is evident in the amount of sexual abuse and domestic violence prevalent in our society. However when one carefully unpacks Russell's image, one will see this "household" does not mirror our cultural understanding of the home.

Russell points out that the image of the household is peppered throughout the Old and New Testaments. It is evident in the story of the family of Israel as well as those who were later grafted onto that family through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.² When told his mothers and brothers wished to speak to him, Jesus

answered, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:46-50). In the New Testament, a house becomes a prevalent metaphor for Christ’s resurrected body and for the church.

This metaphor for the church has many characteristics. First, all may participate. Paul’s instruction concerning the Lord’s Supper is an example of this, but there are many others. A second characteristic of this household is the lack of favored sons or daughters. In fact, the normal hierarchies are dissolved. A third characteristic is that everyone is challenged to try something new. Uneducated fisher folks learned how to preach. Martha was challenged to listen to Jesus rather than to be busy with chores.

Worship is part of the household’s life together. It is both our act and God’s action. We enact worship using sermon, prayer, and music, but it is an action of the Spirit stirring deep inside us in often imperceptible ways that enlivens our worship. In my Palm Sunday story, the choir performed an act while God’s Spirit was active in kindling the worshipping community to go out and serve.

Often music in worship and other settings is intended only for contemplation. If we wish to hear great music, we go to the concert hall and listen to the symphony. When we wish to see great paintings, we go to the museum. However, Roger Sessions, an American composer, points out that this way of listening to art is a recent phenomenon. Composers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance wrote their music for church services and for secular occasions, or it was composed for amateurs who had received musical training as part of their education. Sessions believes that a listener is a true participant. By listening, one is sharing in the work of the composer and the performer and, to a greater or lesser extent, receives a sense of the music performed.³

Many folks have told me that poor music in a church service inhibits their ability to worship, which I understand since I find it difficult to worship when the music is flawed. What we are really saying is poor performance inhibits our ability to *participate* in worship. In the Household of Freedom, music touches the tender places inside while rousing us to go out and follow Jesus. The 21 members of the small choir I directed were proclaiming the power of Jesus’ triumphant death and Resurrection. They were also proclaiming, “You know our hurts and struggles, yet look at what God is doing in our lives! God will do the same for you!”

At Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia, there’s a gospel choir whose songs always push members to clap, sing, and be energized for ministry. Bob, one of the members, sustained a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) several years ago and after a TBI, it’s pretty common for a person to have difficulty inhibiting one’s emotions. When the choir sings, members often clap and move, but Bob takes it one step further. In addition to swaying, he moves his arms in a swooping motion, and there is such joy on his face. It can be distracting if you’re a visitor and don’t know his story.

However, the Household of Freedom knows he is a retired man whose life was broken apart due to his accident. The Household of Freedom also knows that despite his many challenges, he serves God with reckless abandon in a way many of us fear. Every time the Household of Freedom watches him, it is reminded of the power of

God in his many challenges and how God prevails in the vicissitudes of life.

In this way, music functions as more than contemplation in the worship service. It is where God's story of Christ's Resurrecting power and the Household's story come together in powerful, healing ways. The choir in worship must embody the Household of Freedom. Members of the Household should be free to sing in the choir, even if they do not sing well. In this household, members are encouraged to try new things. Members are encouraged to discover new ways to participate in the storytelling.

Sometimes, we talk about the church choir in terms of its quality. People will say, "We have a wonderful choir. They sing beautifully and add much to the service." However, this is not the choir's purpose—for in the Household of Freedom, the choir is to be understood by how it helps the whole congregation grow in our relationship with God, in our relationships with each other, and how it helps move us to action. This is what it means to sing in the Household of God and what congregations must consider when addressing the question, "Should bad singers be allowed in the choir?"

Notes

1 Letty Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

2 Ibid., 37.

3 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 25.