

What was I thinking?

June 20, 2021



Some days it's easier than others.

Most of us have heard some version of “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.” I found various versions of it, among them an African proverb, and a quote by Desmond Tutu: “There is only one way to eat an elephant: a bite at a time.” With all due respect, I’m not sure there’s only one way to do anything.

I think we understand the point though. When we have something big before us, some big project or challenge, it can seem overwhelming (if not impossible) when we look at the thing as a whole. It is tempting to say, “forget it; that’s too hard!” We have had some proverbial “elephants” placed before us over the last year or more, and we’ve not had the appetite for them.

Musicians know this, though we have to be reminded or remind ourselves sometimes. We have a new piece of music before us, maybe something our music teacher assigned or something we heard that impressed us. We are excited when we think of performing the piece and how much others are going to enjoy hearing it, but then we look at pages and pages of notes. It sounded great when someone else played it, but it looks impossible to us. The first time we try it, we may attempt to “perform” it right away, but often the piece falls apart before we get very far. So, what do we do, give up? Maybe, but we may be missing something really good if we do.

The purpose of this series of articles called *What Was I Thinking?* has been for me to explain to you my thought process in choosing music for our worship services. It’s more time consuming than you might think, but I usually learn something during that

process, and I try to share that with you so the music and its place in the worship service will be more meaningful to you.

But sometimes, after the music has been selected, I learn something new. Somehow the circumstances of life make the music have a new meaning. I find something in the music I didn't expect, see, or hear before, and I think that's God at work getting my attention and teaching me a new lesson. That is true this week.

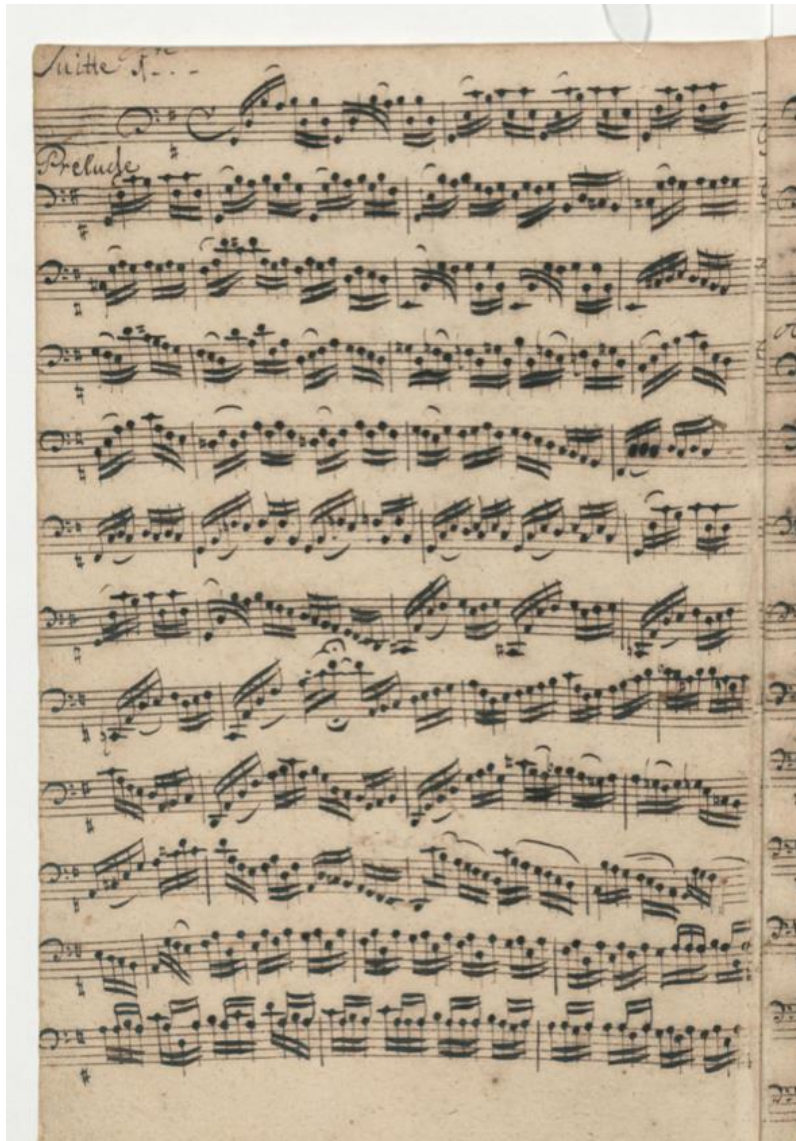
Sunday, our choir will be singing an arrangement of the well-known hymn *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. The choir's parts are pretty straight-forward. They sing the hymn melody together and in canon (like a round). The composer/arranger, Roland Martin of Buffalo, NY, made the anthem interesting by adapting part of Bach's Prelude from the Suite No. 1 in G for cello as the accompaniment. Martin transposed Bach's music from G to the key of D. It's a much better key to sing the hymn in but if a cellist plays it, it drives them crazy because it's in the "wrong" key. But Bach's music, with some adapting, works well as an accompaniment for the hymn. The practice of combining two or more pieces of music (called "quodlibet") goes back to at least the 15th century. They say good composers borrow, great composers steal. I'll let you decide what Ron Martin did.

This particular anthem is good for a summer Sunday. The choir can pretty much sing through it once and it's ready to go. But then there's other music I've been practicing lately and our choir has begun learning and rehearsing, all to be performed in the fall. Some of that music, even if it's been played or sung before, but especially if it's new, takes some time. It will take time to learn the notes, the rhythms, the words, and that's just the building process. I "attended" a virtual sacred music conference presented by Indiana University last week, and choral conductor likened learning a piece of music to building a house. We plan, then we build, then we decorate. It takes time, but it's worth it in the end. If you look at the whole "musical elephant," it seems impossible, but if you break it down and work on it little by little, you find you can do it.

Our anthem, or rather Bach's cello suite accompaniment, reminded me of something I had seen a while back. It's a video of the great cellist Yo-Yo Ma performing and talking about the music he's playing. He begins with the prelude from the same Bach cello suite, and he explains that it's the first piece of music he learned on the cello when he was four years old. Watch and listen to this link, at least the first five minutes (but I encourage you not to stop there):

[Yo-Yo Ma: NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert - YouTube](#)

Yo-Yo Ma explains that learning that piece by Bach was a gradual, one-day-at-a-time process, and he says, “It’s actually not painful to learn something, if you do it incrementally.”



He learned the piece a little at a time and gradually put it all together. He likened the process to doing homework and said that “some days, it’s easier than others.”

He began learning the piece at the age of four and has been living with it all his life. In the video, he also plays more of the same Bach suite and tells of playing it for the weddings of two friends, and of playing it again at their memorial services.

In the beginning, some pieces of music are just a bunch of notes, sometimes so many it seems impossible to learn and not worth the effort. But little by little, day by day, bite by bite, if we work on them, we can master them. When we do, we can look back and see all what we've accomplished, what seemed impossible at the beginning. Once we've put in all that hard work, that piece of music becomes a treasure to us, one that we will sing or play again and again through the years, and it will take on more meaning over time.

So, musically and otherwise, we've had some big challenges put before us. We still have challenges ahead and when we look at them, they seem impossible. It's tempting to give up. Some days are really, really hard. Some days (hopefully) are easier than others.

Remember the story of Jesus and the disciples out in a boat in the midst of a storm? Jesus was asleep. They woke him up saying "do you not care that we are perishing?" He calmed the storm and then asked, "Why are you afraid?" That seems odd, but if we admit it, we're human. Sometimes we're afraid and overwhelmed. I think God understands that. That reminds me of another phrase I've heard throughout this pandemic – "We're not all in the same boat, but we are on the same journey." We're fellow travelers and we've been in some rough waters, but if we help each other and if we keep at it, we'll make it to our destination. One bite of the elephant, one measure of music, one paddle stroke at a time, we'll make it.

God be with you till we meet again.

John