

What was I thinking?

October 3, 2021



Sing/Play to the Lord a New Song

One of the best things I've learned from my teachers and mentors is that we should never stop learning. In a live-streamed interview this summer, Marilyn Keiser said something she's said before: "Never stop learning new music: new organ music, new service music, and new choral music." Learning is a life-long process, or it should be. Another colleague, friend, and mentor, Bruce Neswick, has said the same. He calls it having a thirst for knowledge. He says if you don't have that thirst, you might as well hang it up and become an accountant or something. (No offense to any accountants out there. I hope you love what you do too!)

I think I've learned more since I finished school than I did in school. That's not a criticism of my teachers or the schools I attended, it's just that there are "life lessons" and real-life experiences you can't get from a textbook or a class. I remember graduating from college and thinking I knew it all. I'm glad I continued with my education and was humbled to find I have a lot to learn, and I always will. There is no end to it. I would make a lousy accountant so I'm still trying to learn about music.

Over time, I also found out there's more to our work than just our "job." In school I learned about beautiful music that could be played on a grand organ or sung by a big choir of trained singers. In my first job as an organist, I played an old electronic organ with tubes like an old television set, and like an old TV, when it didn't sound right, I had to bang on the side of it with my fist. That was hard to do in a subtle way during communion. I've been fortunate to play pipe organs in every church job since, but they are not always perfect. In one church I had a 14-rank organ originally built in 1883. Other than the electric blower motor, the rest was all mechanical and there was

always something that needed to be fixed. The heavy action of that organ sent most of us who played it to physical therapy for tendonitis.



In that same church, when I started, there were six singers in the choir, and that was when everyone was present. In that choir (as in every choir), I learned, or was reminded, that singers are human beings and have other things going on in their lives beside church choir. I didn't learn in school what to do when a soprano is crying in church and when you ask if she's OK, she says her husband hit her, or when a bass says he's going to be out for a while because he's going through a divorce. I didn't learn in school how deeply moving it would be to play and have the choir sing for the memorial service of a choir member's son who died of AIDS. While preparing for and doing that service, I also found out two of the sopranos had a shy brother who seemed to be hanging around listening while we rehearsed and sang. He was too shy to join the choir at first, but he eventually did. That sad memorial service was meaningful to him because he had recently lost his partner. The big lesson that I continue to learn is that while training, practicing, developing technique, and learning notes are all important, it's the life experiences that make music truly moving. That's probably more true in a choir than anywhere else.

In this odd year when most summer conferences took place online, I missed talking with colleagues, sharing ideas, attending services, recitals, and concerts, as well as going to reading sessions where we get to hear new music. The online conferences did

include some reading sessions. It's a good thing I saved money on travel expenses and conference fees, because I managed to spend some money on new organ music. With our choirs on hiatus for so long, I still have a backlog of choir anthems yet to be sung.

Not long ago, I played a new prelude on the tune BUNESSAN by English composer Alan Bullard just before we sang the hymn *Morning Has Broken*. For last Sunday's postlude, I played a new setting of the tune FOUNDATION by American composer Jeffrey Blersch just after we sang *How Firm a Foundation*. On the first Sunday in September, I had planned to play a new prelude on the tune LAND OF REST by American composer Pamela Decker. The musical setting of our communion liturgy we are currently singing is based on that American tune. Unfortunately, I was sick that Sunday and did not play, so I moved the piece to this, the first Sunday in October, which is not just a communion Sunday, it's World Communion Sunday. I'm getting some good use of my newly purchased music and I hope you are too. There will be more to come. On Christmas Eve, I'm planning to play a new (to me) piece called *A Wreath of Carols* by a Winston-Salem composer named Margaret Sandresky. I had the honor of meeting her and playing some of her music while in Winston-Salem. The Christmas piece is in a collection I learned about through Marilyn Keiser's recitals this summer. Margaret Sandresky's music is being played a lot this year because she celebrated her 100th birthday this year! She's been in Winston-Salem since 1923, but she was born in 1921 in Macon, Georgia. It's interesting not only to learn new music, but to learn about the composers and their music.



This Sunday, the choir is singing a communion anthem called *Shepherd of Souls* by American composer Alfred Fedak. I was fairly sure we had sung it before, but the choir didn't seem to remember it, so it may be new to us.

You may wonder if it's really worth it to spend all this time and money on music. Aren't there more important things in the world? Jesus said, "Consider the lilies of the field." He said, "even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." Why does this matter? Some believe, as I do, that beauty in art, music, poetry, and in worship, can inspire us, move us closer to God, and can make us better people, which in turn will inspire us do good works. In her book *Always a Guest*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes that these words from Jesus about beauty are in the Sermon on the

Mount, “snug up against other commandments such as, ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you.’” Beauty does make a difference.

Back to the topic of learning being a life-long process - these days it's hard to plan for the future. We don't know what next month will be like, or even next week. We don't know what tomorrow will bring. Dr. Baer shared a story of a pastor being asked recently what his vision was for the church for the next year. The pastor pointed out that we can't see next month, much less next year. He said, “We're going to love God and love our neighbors. I don't know how or what it will look like, but that's what we're going to do.” Many of us in the working world are asked about our goals. If we're not setting goals and checking them off, we're not working like we should. But I heard somewhere that the church is not goal oriented, it's journey oriented. We will continue to do what we do, to worship, serve, and learn about God, and to love and serve our neighbors. There's no goal, no finish line to cross where we can say we're done. We keep learning and using what we've learned to serve God and make the world a better place.

God be with you till we meet again.

John