

What was I thinking?

September 26, 2021



Looking Ahead

Steals On the Ear

There are some things that we learn in music that also apply to life in general. Two good examples are communication and timing, and they have been on my mind this week. They've come up in unrelated conversations, and when things keep coming up, I get the feeling God may be trying to get my attention and teach me something. I don't mean to skip over the music for this Sunday, but there is something not too far off that I want to get on your calendars and in your minds, so I'm borrowing a heading from part of our weekly bulletin: "Look Ahead."

Communication is what music's all about. We can play or sing all the right notes, but if we don't communicate our message, we haven't made music. Music that is sung has words. Instrumentalists have the challenge of trying to get a message across without words, other than a title and maybe some program notes or spoken words of explanation. During the romantic period (the 19th century), instrumental music was considered superior by many because it went beyond what words could convey. The organ teacher I wrote about last week loved that idea and he was often an enigma. After I graduated and moved on to another teacher, I went back to Augusta and played a piece for him that I was working on with my new teacher. It was a sonata, a piece of purely instrumental music. After I played it, I eagerly awaited his suggestions to improve my performance. He stood up and said, "Well, that's all very good. Now you just have to decide what you want to say with the piece." Then he walked out the door! I sat on the organ bench in stunned silence, though I wanted to yell, "What's

that supposed to mean?” but he was gone before I could find my voice. He always got me thinking but I never knew if I had the right answer.

Timing also came up this week, in teaching an organ lesson, teaching a new organ student about the importance of releasing notes (keys) on the organ. On a piano, after we press a key, the sound starts to gradually fade away. On the organ, the sound continues (mercilessly) until we release the key. We may think once we've played a note, our job is done, but if we forget to release it at the right time, it eventually becomes a wrong note. We have to know when to let go (another life lesson). Timing also came up in a discussion with church musicians about introducing new hymns and changing traditions. When is it time for a refreshing change? Or, in our incredibly chaotic time, when is it best to continue some familiar traditions? Paul Westermeyer calls church musicians “theologians of sound.” For us it's not just the playing and singing of music, but also deciding what to sing and play and when. We have to balance old and new, just like we balance loud and soft, slow and fast, major and minor, etc. My argument in this week's discussion was that while I do believe in introducing new things and building on our traditions, I'm not sure this is the best time to do that. Our lives have been chaotic for over a year and there's so much that has changed that has not been good. I think we in the church may need provide some stability and comfort, and some sense that there is solid ground where we can rest our weary “sea legs” for a while. The place we worship is called a sanctuary for a reason.

That's a long introduction to what I really wanted to write about, but hopefully it was worth it.

When members of our Chancel Choir started singing again at the end of May, and we were getting back to having some rehearsals, I started planning ahead. After such a long and difficult time when there had been so much loss, including the deaths of loved ones (and not just to Covid), most if not all of us were grieving in some way. I am among the many who lost loved ones during the pandemic. We were not able to do things we usually do when a loved one dies. It was very hard to gather with family and friends to give or receive condolences and comfort. We couldn't share meals and talk, and in many cases, we couldn't have a typical memorial service in church with a large gatherings of loved ones. Many postponed memorial services, some indefinitely. Our current situation has made grief much more difficult. We also shared in the grief of the world, where hundreds of thousands had died. We've grieved over the political division and broken relationships. We've grieved the loss of lives in many acts of violence. We're grieving.

With that on my mind I was thinking (as it seemed we were getting back to “normal”) we needed to do something musical to help us work through our grief, something to

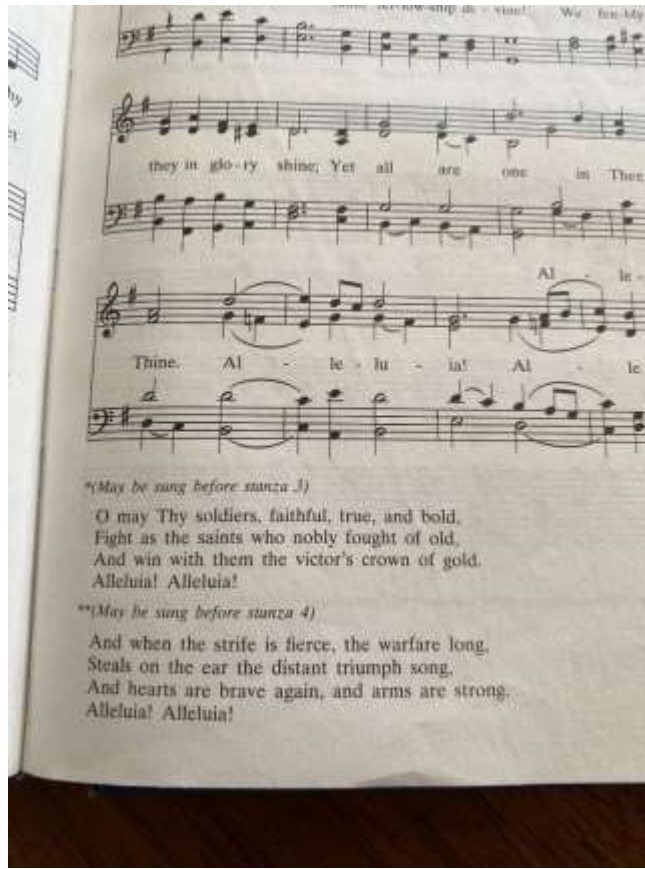
bring us comfort. I decided our choir would perform a work called *Requiem for the Living* by Dan Forrest. It is a requiem in the traditional sense with prayers for those who have died, but it also includes texts of scripture that bring comfort to those who are still alive, who are left grieving after death. We started rehearsing and making other preparations. But as time went on, to make a long story short, things were obviously not getting better in terms of the pandemic, they started getting worse again, so we made the difficult decision to postpone our performance (postpone, not cancel – we WILL sing this work at some point).

But I couldn't let go of the idea that in this time of grief, we needed to do something. I felt like I needed to do something. So, on Sunday, November 7, 4:00 p.m., I will perform an organ recital with an All Saints' theme. I've decided to call it *Steals on the Ear*.

Most of us know the hymn *For All the Saints*. What you may not have noticed is there are some additional stanzas in our hymnal that we don't usually sing. (We Presbyterians get nervous if there are more than four stanzas of a hymn.) The hymnal in our pews has six stanzas. The Episcopal hymnal has eight. The original hymn had eleven. I won't get into why we don't sing all of them in our church, but I am a little sad that we don't sing some of the stanzas in our hymnal. Some draw on imagery of battle and well-earned rest when battle is over. Our battles over the last year and more take many forms, and they are not over. We are weary. I was in that frame of mind when I looked at one of our "unsung" stanzas:

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

My hope is that in the midst of our strife, we might hear that distant triumph song coming from those who have joined the Church Triumphant, and we may find out hearts braver and our arms stronger.

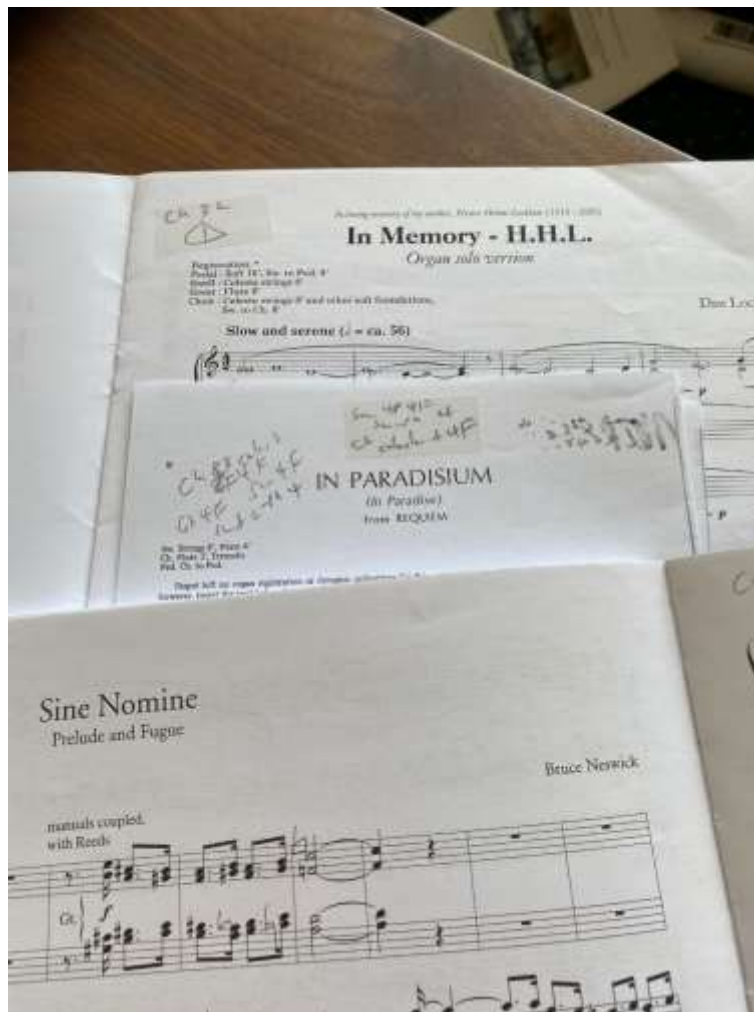


I will write in more detail closer to the recital, but for now, I encourage you to put the date on your calendar and plan to be there. Bring friends and family who have lost loved ones. I will make it my goal to offer as much comfort, solace, and triumphant song as I can on our wonderful organ.

The program will include a sonata by Mendelssohn, a triumphant work which includes the Lutheran hymn version of Psalm 130, *Out of the Depths*. I will play a work by North Carolina composer Dan Locklair that he wrote in memory of his mother. I learned it after the death of my mother, as part of my grieving and healing process. I will play an organ solo arrangement of *In Paradisum* from Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem*, which was part of Jill Crim's memorial service.

On a Saturday morning, probably fifteen years ago, I finished practicing at my church and wandered up the street to an All Saints' service at The Cathedral of St. Philip Episcopal in Atlanta. It was not a big service, no choir, not a big congregation. I sat in the balcony and heard some wonderful organ music performed by the composer himself! I don't know why it's taken me so long to learn it (other than it being very difficult). Maybe it was waiting for the right occasion, and this is it. It's a prelude and fugue (double fugue, actually) on the tune *Sine Nomine* (*For All the Saints*). The

composer is Bruce Neswick, one of my heroes and someone who has become a friend, colleague, teacher, and mentor. His setting of *Sine Nomine* begins majestically, continues reflectively, builds joyfully, and ends triumphantly. It “steals on the ear the distant triumph song.”



Our time has given us much to grieve, but it’s been hard to do that grieving. We’ve had to learn the Marine slogan: “Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome.”

Mark your calendars: *Steals On the Ear*, Sunday, November 7, 4:00 p.m.

God be with you till we meet again.

John