

What was I thinking?

for Sunday, October 18, 2020

Be Glad and Rejoice!

Back in 2019 we were finalizing plans to celebrate our church's bicentennial. In the area of music, three particular plans had formed. One was to have a concert of music written specifically for or having some connection to the history of our church. That concert took place in February, 2020 B.C. (Before COVID-19). A month later, as we all know, everything changed, and our plans were postponed.

One plan was to commission some music to celebrate the bicentennial. There was talk of commissioning another choir anthem, but we already had commissioned anthems, including one written not long ago, so we let that idea go. Still, it's our bicentennial and we needed to do something to mark the occasion. I started thinking about an organ work and I mentioned the idea to Kathryn Nichols because she and Carl are friends with organist and composer Charles Callahan (who was the consultant for our Schantz organ), and the Nichols have commissioned Dr. Callahan to write other organ works over the years. Kathryn was very happy about the idea, and she and Carl made a generous contribution to cover the cost.

Charles Callahan and I started an e-mail correspondence in March 2019, and we began discussing ideas. We went back and forth about possible hymn tunes, I mentioned tunes that have special meaning in our church, Charles would say he had already written a piece on the tunes and wanted to do something new, we talked about a freely composed organ piece, but we just couldn't find something we both felt was right. This went on for almost a year, then Charles proposed another idea - a collection of celebratory postludes on hymn tunes that could be used throughout the year. In early 2020, we received a manuscript copy of:

*Be Glad and Rejoice!
Ten Postludes on Familiar Hymn Tunes
for Organ
by
Charles Callahan*

It was so nice to receive such a great gift, made possible by the Nichols, and Charles Callahan, especially at a time when things were just beginning to get really difficult in our world.

It also occurred to me at our bicentennial concert that we had commissioned pieces for former pastors, but we didn't yet have anything to celebrate our new Senior Pastor, Ryan Baer. So, with the Nichols' blessing, I added this dedication to the new collection of organ works:

*In celebration of the Bicentennial of First Presbyterian Church,
Athens, Georgia,
and in honor of the calling of Dr. Ryan Baer as Senior Pastor
Dr. John Coble, Director of Music and Organist*

(Kathryn insisted that I add my name to the dedication too, something I was not keen to do at first, but Kathryn doesn't take "no" for an answer.)

The original plan was to premier these pieces on Sundays through the rest of our bicentennial year. But, we entered the season of Quarantide, and began livestreaming our services, which at first didn't go as well as we hoped, especially when it came to music. We decided to wait until things went back to "normal" so we could do these festive postludes with a full congregation present. Obviously, that didn't happen as quickly as we hoped. It got put on a back burner.

Over time, the quality of our livestreamed services has improved greatly, including the sound of music. I was getting tired of waiting for "normal," so when I chose the hymn O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing for this coming Sunday, I thought of Charles Callahan's new setting of the tune AZMON in our new collection. I just had to do it. So, this coming Sunday morning, don't turn us off before the postlude! It will be the premier of one of the pieces in our new bicentennial collection!

POSTLUDE ON AZMON

Charles Collaen...

Moderato, maestoso $\text{♩} = 76$

Handwritten musical notation for measures 1-4. The piece is in 3/2 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first system shows a piano introduction with a forte (f) dynamic and a marcato articulation. The right hand plays a series of chords and moving lines, while the left hand has a simple bass line. A fermata is placed over the final note of the first system.

Handwritten musical notation for measures 5-8. The right hand continues with chords and moving lines, while the left hand has a simple bass line. A mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic is indicated. A fermata is placed over the final note of the second system.

Handwritten musical notation for measures 9-12. The piece transitions to a 6/8 time signature. The right hand plays a series of chords and moving lines, while the left hand has a simple bass line. The dynamic is marked as Legato.

Handwritten musical notation for measures 13-16. The right hand plays a series of chords and moving lines, while the left hand has a simple bass line. A fermata is placed over the final note of the third system.

Handwritten musical notation for measures 17-20. The right hand plays a series of chords and moving lines, while the left hand has a simple bass line. Dynamics of piano (p), mezzo-forte (mf), and piano (p) are indicated.

Stop thief!

When I got to the organ console last Saturday morning to practice, I found this:



Who in the world would take organ stops?

(Actually, they do make nice keychains.)



Tune in next week to learn about “the mystery of the missing draw knobs.” It has to do with the third plan in our bicentennial celebration.

Other music this Sunday

Hymns:

Sunday’s scriptures include the Magnificat or Song of Mary from Luke 1, and the Song of Hannah from 1 Samuel. The Magnificat, “My soul magnifies the Lord,” is what Mary said or sang soon after she learned she would give birth to the Christ child. The Song of Hannah is similar: “My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.” If you’ve seen a musical before, when the action stops and someone suddenly bursts into song, this is the scriptural equivalent. These canticles or songs begin praising God, and both go on to explain why – because God has put down the mighty and lifted up the lowly. God turned the tables. God was also fulfilled promises made to Abraham and his offspring. Paul Westermeyer says that these were revolutionary texts, not appreciated by dictators. Women, of all

people, were not supposed to speak up and talk about the mighty being put down!

O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing is Charles Wesley's text which he headed, "For the Anniversary of One's Conversion." The original had eighteen stanzas, and "O, for a thousand tongues" is the beginning of the seventh stanza. The tune AZMON is music by Carl Gotthelf Gläser (1784-1829) arranged by Lowell Mason (1792-1829).

The hymn Song of Mary is a paraphrase of the Magnificat. Mary's words were not in response to the angel Gabriel's visit, but to her cousin Elizabeth (mother of John the Baptist) greeting her as the mother of our Lord. The tune MORNING SONG is attributed to Lucius Chapin (1760-1842). It has undergone many changes over time, and it also goes by the name CONSOLATION.

Abide with Me is usually sung in the evening. "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;" which made me wonder at first why it was suggested for this Sunday. I assume it's in keeping with the Hannah's and Mary's words about God lifting up the lowly: "help of the helpless, O abide with me" seems fitting. Since we don't have many evening services, we usually enjoy a chance to sing this beautiful hymn.

Organ music:

They say necessity is the mother of invention. I wanted a prelude on our hymn version of the Magnificat, and didn't have one I liked, so I decided once again to create my own by improvising. As I practiced improvising on MORNING SONG this week, I began to realize the tune has many similarities with an Advent/Christmas hymn, The Angel Gabriel. In fact, I found myself making "mistakes," unintentionally mixing up the two tunes, so I stopped fighting it and, well, we'll see what happens on Sunday. The offertory is a setting by Bach of the Lutheran chorale version of the Magnificat.

It feels a bit like Advent in October, but it's felt like Advent since March. We've been waiting for a long time, but God hears the cries of humble servants. Fear not.

“I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.”

God be with you till we meet again.

God bless,

John