

What was I thinking?

April 25, 2021



Reflections on a royal funeral (or any other worship service)

It's been an interesting week, and I've learned some very good things from unexpected places. Learning is, or should be, a life-long process. It's good to learn new things.

Sometimes we learn by making mistakes, sometimes we learn from the mistakes of others. Sometimes we learn by being reminded of things we already know but have forgotten. We're never too old to go "back to school."

This Sunday is Youth Sunday, and our great Director of Youth Ministries, Kim Ness, gets thrown into the wonderful world of worship planning with the added challenge of creating a service that will be led by a group of teenagers. That makes for a lot of moving parts, and there are many cats to herd. So, here's to Kim and another Sunday led by our talented youth.

When I started writing this series of articles called "What Was I Thinking?" it was with the intention of finding a way to stay connected with you, our worshipping congregation, at a time when we feel so disconnected due to this pandemic. But I also wanted to give you a better look at what goes into planning music for a worship service, literally showing you what I was thinking.

In our usual order of worship, we have three hymns, some responses, prelude, postlude, and a solo or anthem. Don't we just pick some of our favorite hymns? Don't I just come in on Saturday morning and dig through a pile of organ music to

find something I can pull off on Sunday morning? Nope. But I do know colleagues who plan that way.

No, what usually happens is I'm given scripture and a sermon topic, and I go to work. I read the scriptures (imagine that) and start looking for hymns that fit the scripture. I start a list. Sometimes there are obvious choices that come to mind. I also consult a number of planning resources in books and online. I make a list of every possibility I can find, which is sometimes long, and other times is unnervingly short. Then I start checking or crossing off possibilities, not according to "what I like," but according to what works best. The purpose of the music in worship is to reinforce the message in the scripture and sermon. I also consider the service as a whole, and where these hymns and other pieces of music will fit. I consider joyful/meditative, fast/slow, loud/soft, old/new, and I even consider what keys things are in. That's something Dr. Marilyn Keiser taught me to do in worship planning and in planning recitals and concerts – does one piece of music flow easily to the next? We try to avoid jarring changes from one thing to the next, unless that is the intent!

The point is, not just any old thing will do. Music has to fit with the scripture, sermon, and theme of a service. It also has to be the best we have to offer. If worship, including music, is our offering of thanks and praise to God, it should reflect just how grateful we are and just how worthy of our praise God is.

During this pandemic, though I've missed being able to gather with people in-person and traveling to conferences, it has been good to take advantages of things like Zoom, which allows us to connect with people around the world in ways we wouldn't otherwise be able to. I'm happy that my alma mater, Indiana University, has been offering a series of online talks with organists from the UK. I've been surprised by the variety of perspectives and situations. Some of these organists are women who have jobs in cathedrals which have, until now, only been held by men. There is also a great emphasis on performing the music of women composers.

This past week, the featured guest was Benjamin Sheen from Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford. Benjamin told several interesting stories. One was about the recent death of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. The death of a member of the royal family is a big deal, not something observed by one funeral; it is acknowledged across the UK. Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford was told to have an Evensong service (sung evening prayer) in memory of Prince Philip that very evening. They were given just 3 ½ hours' notice to perform Evensong! Cathedral choirs in England are a bit different. They are in residence, including choristers and choral scholars who rehearse almost every day and are used to singing multiple services each week. Still, 3 ½ hours, and that was with many singers off on holiday after Easter who were called to come back.

Benjamin also talked about singing as a boy chorister in the choir at St. Paul's Cathedral in London under the direction of John Scott. Benjamin said Scott was quite demanding and insisted on singers (and organists) giving their very best at all times. It didn't matter if they were singing for the Queen's Jubilee (which Benjamin did as a boy), or if it was a regular Tuesday night Evensong service. Scott said you never know who might be there, and who might need to hear and be moved and comforted by their music. Every service is important.

Also this week, I came across two articles about the music for the Duke of Edinburgh's service. One was a short piece written by Peter McMullin who worked in a renowned music shop in Oxford. He commented that the music for this funeral was intimate (due to our current situation) but also powerful, and was part of a moving service that people shared across the world. Four singers, one conductor, one organist, eight trumpeters, and one bagpiper showed the power music has to bring us together. He pointed out that the best of the UK was shown, not by footballers (soccer players) scoring goals or celebrities doing "celebrity things," it was these four singers, an organist, a choir director, trumpeters, and one bagpiper giving their absolute best, all after being forced into near silence for over a year. McMullin pointed out that music and the arts get sidelined or seen as elitist, but when the circumstances called for it, the artists stepped up and delivered their very best. He also pointed out the importance of singing in all walks of life, from helping children benefit from learning music to helping awaken something in a person with dementia, just to name a few.



The other article was written by the famous John Rutter. He borrowed a quote from Henry Mancini, composer of many great film scores. When movies had their first screenings (which the composers weren't usually invited to), Mancini always asked if anyone mentioned the music. Usually they didn't. Rutter went on to write about the importance of movie soundtracks. How would *Laurence of Arabia* be with the sound turned off? How scary would the famous shower scene in *Psycho* be without the famous shrieking violins? I would add how scary would the movie *Jaws* be without the well-known half step played in the low strings, starting slowly and getting continually faster and louder? Not so exciting without the music, yet the music is often taken for granted.

Music in worship is not meant to be background music; it is an integral part of the service. Rutter wrote in detail about the planning of music for the Duke's service, well-planned, but thrown the curve of pulling it off under pandemic constraints. Rutter pointed out that music in a church service is not usually all by one composer. It is the church musician's job to plan music that will fit together and flow. Music by different composers, from different time periods, that fits liturgically and flows musically. Hymns, psalms, anthems, solos, instrumental music, organ music, all fit together and are part of the service, and as my teacher taught me, even the keys the music is in matter, as one key flows smoothly to the next as if they were part of a great Beethoven symphony.

Rutter goes into much more detail, and if you want to read his full article, here is a link:

[Did they mention the music? | John Rutter](#)

I'm not trying to say no one loves or appreciates us poor musicians. I know you do. You tell me that all the time. But there's a lot that goes into planning service music that goes on behind the scenes. Even when you do take notice of the music in any worship service, what you hear is the tip of the iceberg. It's the result of many hours of digging through hymnals, choir music, solos, organ music, trumpet music, and yes, for next Sunday, bagpipe music (which has its own challenges), not to mention the many hours of practicing, and that is after many years of taking lessons and practicing.

Why go to so much trouble? It's only church. It doesn't have to be good. In fact, some think it shouldn't be good because it's in church. I will never understand that. One of the most offensive things I've ever heard was when a university choral director rehearsing a university chorus said, "Oh, come on! You sound like a church choir." It was not meant to be a compliment. If it wasn't for church choirs, much of our choral music wouldn't exist.

I was taught and I still believe that our music in worship, however grand or humble it might be, is an offering of thanks and praise and prayer to God. Worship is a verb. It's something we do. We worship God in response to all that God has done for us. I don't know about you, but that's a big deal to me. I think God is worthy of our very best. I don't work so hard just because I'm being paid to do so, I do it because that's what I think God is worthy of.

OK. Enough preaching to the choir (and our friends). One other story comes to mind, something that happened to me when I was a student at Indiana. I had gone home to Augusta (GA), maybe for Christmas break, I don't remember. It was Saturday and time to fly back to Indianapolis so that I could play for my church on Sunday morning. I learned a valuable lesson – if you work in a church, don't fly on Saturdays, especially not on the last flight to wherever you're going. The flight was canceled due to heavy fog and I was stuck. I made the dreaded phone call to my Episcopal priest saying I couldn't get back for Sunday morning services. I apologized profusely (and I was afraid I might lose my job!). She was very kind and understanding. There wasn't anything I could do. So what would they do on Sunday morning? Who could or would play on such short notice? The priest said not to worry about it, they would just have the service without the organ. When I did get back, I feared the church would be very unhappy with me. I asked the priest what happened. She said they sang the hymns without accompaniment. I continued to worry but I'll never forget what she told me. She said it was one of the best things that could ever happen in terms of music in our services. She said it made the congregation very aware of what the organist contributes to the service. I never thought of it that way. Ever since then, I have made it a point to fly home on Fridays if at all humanly possible! I'm not going to test that theory every again.

But you know what? For the last year, the tables have been turned. I can probably speak not only for myself but also for our pastors and other worship leaders when I say we are now very aware of how much we miss you in worship! You have no idea how much I miss our choirs and our congregation singing in our services. We will be so glad when we can get back to “normal” and be singing again. I will never take that for granted.

God be with you till we meet again.

John