

What was I thinking?

August 22, 2021



We need music

Last week was a hard week. On Monday alone I had several conversations, by phone and e-mail, with people about things they were struggling with, about broken relationships, sadness, and grief. Then of course there's the news we're all watching, local, national, and from around the world. There is our struggle with the pandemic and what should or shouldn't be done, the horrible situation in Afghanistan, and something that is a national news story with a personal connection, the earthquake and more tropical storms hitting Haiti. I know I'm a sensitive person and all of these things get to me, but it's hard to see how anyone could look at all of this and not be sad or depressed (not necessarily the same thing).

It all seems overwhelming. Any one of these personal, national, and international situations would be difficult on their own, but with all of it together, it feels like "piling on." We can feel a little helpless, like there's nothing we can do to help. Sometimes I think to myself, "what can you do? You're just a musician."

I remember having that feeling in 2009 when Kate and I were part of a mission trip to Haiti with members our church in Atlanta. I wanted to go, but I thought I was basically going to be a set of helping hands, doing whatever I was told to do, somewhat of a human pack mule. I'm not a medical doctor, I don't speak French or French Creole, so I would just do whatever manual labor I was asked to. Going to Haiti can be a shock. You learn just how fortunate most of us are. Things like air conditioning, running water, food, clothing, and medicine are taken for granted by most of us. Things in Haiti are much different. On our trip we took some slightly scary boat rides and some very rough rides in the back of a pickup truck. (We've

heard stories about later mission trips where one of the boats sank and the pickup truck wrecked and overturned.) We did a lot of walking to reach the people scattered around the island of La Gonâve. With my backpack, I was a walking medicine cabinet.

I was surprised when Pere Soner, the Episcopal priest who oversaw (among many other things related to the church) the St. Francis school where we stayed. When he found out I was the musician from our church, he sent word that he wanted me to meet with him, the headmaster of the school, and the band director/music teacher. I couldn't imagine what this would be about, but when we met, they told me the school had a band, and they had a waiting list of students who wanted to be in that band. They had some instruments, but as you can imagine, unprotected in the climate of the Caribbean, they were not in good shape. They said they needed instruments, they needed supplies to repair and maintain the instruments they had, they needed music to play, method books, etc. "Need" was the word they used. I was shocked. These people needed clothes, food, medicine, water, and many other things. But to hear them say they needed music?

One morning as school was starting, our group went out into the courtyard to watch and listen. There was indeed a band that looked and sounded somewhat like a Dixieland band. Their instruments were pretty rough, and it was an odd instrumentation, but they made it work. I also noticed that for lack of a music stand, one musician had sheet music clipped to the back of his shirt with a clothes pin, and the person behind him was reading from it. The students (not the band) all had on their uniforms, the headmaster had on a suit and tie, they played and sang their national anthem, and when the children filed off to their classes, the band played a jazzy version of "Roll Out the Barrels." (Not sure if they had those words in mind or if they even cared.)



Part of our journey home included a stop in Port-au-Prince, and a visit to the Episcopal Cathedral there. Pere Soner was anxious for me to play the organ, the only

pipe organ in Haiti. While we waited to be let into the organ loft, we admired the artwork in the cathedral. They didn't have stained-glass windows, instead there were murals of biblical scenes on the walls. We noticed all of the biblical characters were dark skinned. Imagine that!



When we got back to Atlanta, I started a project to collect some instruments, reeds, valve oil, slide grease, corks, pads, etc. for their band. We held benefit concerts and instead of charging admission, people donated the old band instruments from their attics, bought them in pawn shops, or just gave money so we could buy them. We collected a lot of what was being requested. Now the problem was how to get all of these instruments and supplies down there. It was hard enough to get clothes, food, and medical supplies there, but those in charge were working on a plan.

In January 2010, we were getting ready to make another trip when the earthquake hit. It was horrible. A country that was unimaginably poor in “normal times,” was reduced to rubble and chaos. La Gonâve itself didn't take the worst damage, but it was just after Christmas break and students who were in school on the mainland had gone back to Port-au-Prince. Some who worked on the mainland had lost jobs and homes and people were fleeing to La Gonâve, a place that already had trouble feeding and caring for the their own. Now they had thousands more to worry about. One of the e-mails I still have from that time, written by one of the leaders of our Haiti group in Atlanta described the scene. She said the first words she heard from Pere Soner were “Haiti is destroyed.” She went on to write, “He is grieving tremendously. On Wednesday, he had to personally deliver the bodies of 3 children back to Mirebalais to his own family. He is hurting terribly and needs our prayers. Others in the compound are struggling with ‘why Haiti, again?’ Someone said to me, ‘Why does God hate Haiti?’ Wailing continues all day and night.”

Why does God hate Haiti? Can you imagine feeling like that? Wailing continues all day and night. Though this isn't as important as human suffering, we heard the sad news

that the cathedral we visited had been destroyed. The home base of the Episcopal Church in Haiti was in ruins.

Given all of that, I assumed our project to send musical instruments was pointless, inconsequential. There were real problems to solve and real, basic human needs to be met. Then someone came to me and said they were sending a plane with supplies directly to the island of La Gonâve, landing on the beach. I was told Pere Soner wanted the musical instruments. I couldn't imagine taking up valuable cargo space with them, but we did. We packed up trumpets, flutes, clarinets, supplies, etc. in plastic containers, taped them shut and labeled them "St. Francis School." I was told if anyone else found out there were instruments of any value in those boxes, they would be stolen. Those connected to the school would know what was in the packages and would get them to the right place. So, I e-mailed Pere Soner and told him the news. This was his response:

Dear John my Friend, I remember you as well.

How great to hear from you in this special time that we are living in Haiti. Your mail brings to me much hope, thank you for thinking with us. You cannot imagine how this news makes me happy because we are at the time where we need more than ever the music instruments in order to keep stable the young people, it's very important.

We appreciate your effort, hoping you will continue to send more.

Once again, thank you so much my friend,

May God bless you,

Pere Soner+

There was that word again, "need." They needed many things, but among them was music to soothe their souls and keep their spirits up.



Hearing news of the recent earthquake and more tropical storms, I couldn't help of think of the situation more than ten years ago, and I don't know that they ever recovered from that. It made me very sad to think they are asking again, "Why does God hate Haiti?" Can you blame them?

That story also came to my mind because of our current struggles here. You may have sensed in worship in the last few weeks a dip in our spirits. We thought things were getting better, but our hard journey through this pandemic is not over. We even seem to be losing ground sometimes. It's hard.

In giving our choir some pep talks, I've reminded them that we have a job to do, and our current situation makes it more important than ever. Our job is to lead our congregation in worship with music. We make a musical offering to God, first and foremost, but we also minister to the people with the music we sing and play. Music has the power to lift our spirits, to heal us, and we need to use that right now. It's not a luxury, it's a necessity.

In an address to music students at Boston University, piano faculty member Karl Paulnack said some things that I think could easily apply to church musicians. He said we're not meant to be entertainers. We're not selling anything. There's nothing that needs to be sold. Paulnack said musicians are like "a sort of therapist for the human soul, a spiritual version of a chiropractor." He says we get people's insides lined up.

I hear some of my calling in these words, but it's not just me. I'm a leader preparing choirs to be leaders. It's their calling too. As one who studied music and have it for my primary vocation, I feel like I have been given a responsibility to share what I have learned. The charge below is addressed to music majors, but I encourage all of you to use music or to at least take advantage of it beyond mere entertainment. It can heal your troubled soul.

To All Music Majors

“If we were a medical school, and you were here as a med student practicing appendectomies, you’d take your work very seriously because you would imagine that some night at 2 AM someone is going to waltz into your emergency room and you’re going to have to save their life. Well, my friends, someday at 8 PM someone is going to walk into your concert hall and bring you a mind that is confused, a heart that is overwhelmed, a soul that is weary. Whether they go out whole again will depend partly on how well you do your craft.” - Karl Paulnack (Director of Music Division and member of the piano faculty, Boston University)

God be with you till we meet again.

John