

Music and Religion

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In September 1967 Lyndon Johnson was President. Thurgood Marshall became the first African American Justice of the United States Supreme Court. In Vietnam the United States Marines launched a search and destroy mission in Que Son Valley. In four days 114 Americans died. That fall, in Washington tens of thousands of Vietnam War protesters marched. Allen Ginsberg led the protesters in singing a chant that was intended to “levitate” the Pentagon. In the music world in the fall of 1967, the Doors were banned from the Ed Sullivan Show because they sang “Girl we can’t get much higher,” instead of “Girl we can’t get much better.” That fall the musical “Hair” opened off Broadway in New York City. And in September 1967, Richard Darne became our organist and our music director here at Cedar Lane Unitarian Church. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship.

Music has been an important part of the life of this church, starting with our founding in 1951, when members played vinyl records during the service and tried to sing along with the All Souls congregation, as the sounds of the All Souls organ came across a loudspeaker connected to a telephone line.

Music in liberal Protestant services dates back nearly five hundred years. It has its roots in the changes that Martin Luther made in the roman catholic liturgy. Martin Luther said:

I have no use for cranks who despise music,
because it is a gift of God. . . . My heart bubbles up

and overflows in response to music, which has so often refreshed me and delivered me from dire plagues.

Martin Luther encouraged the development of trained church choirs writing:

. . . one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in his wonderful work of music, where one voice takes a simple part and around it sing three, four or five other voices, leaping springing round about, marvellously gracing the simple part, like a square dance in heaven . . .

Luther’s greatest musical reform was congregational singing. In the Middle Ages the liturgy was almost entirely restricted to the priest and the choir. Luther developed hymn singing by the congregation. Music was the point at which his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers received its most concrete realization. This was the point at which Lutheranism was thoroughly democratic. All the people sang. In 1524 Luther published a hymn book. He set singing practice during the week for the entire congregation, and this played a major role in the growth of the Protestant church in Europe. A Jesuit complained that “the hymns of Luther killed more souls than his sermons.”

In Britain until about 1700, both Anglican and nonconformist congregations sang from *The Whole Book of Psalms Collected into English Metre* by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins, published in 1562. The title page said:

Set forth and allowed to be Sung in all Churches, of all the People together, before and after Morning and Evening Prayer; and also before and after Sermons; and moreover in private Houses, for their

godly Solace and comfort: laying apart all ungodly Songs and Ballads, which tend only to the nourishing of Vice, and corrupting of youth.

In the 18th century Isaac Watts and others started writing hymns that, because they were not versions of Scripture, gave room for greater freedom of expression. He recommended faster, more robust singing. Watts published his book *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* in 1705. John Wesley and his brother Charles seized on the new forms with enthusiasm. They made hymn-singing an important feature of their ministry. Wesley's appeal was largely to working classes and their hymns were often used in large open-air meetings. The Methodists soon began to write new tunes for their hymns in a secular style similar to songs sung in pubs.

In 1761, John Wesley published his now famous instructions for singing in church:

- I. Learn these tunes before you learn any others ...
- II. Sing them exactly as they are printed here without altering or mending them at all ...
- III. Sing All. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can ...
- IV. Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength ...
- V. Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony ...

VI. Sing in Time. Whatever time is sung, be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it ... and take care not to sing too slow ...

VII. Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself or any other creature ...'“

Unitarian worship leaders add our own eighth rule:

VIII. Stop reading ahead to see whether or not you agree with the words.

What made the hymns of the 18th century so different from their old metrical psalms was their expression of personal religious thoughts and feelings in vigorous, emotional language. They spoke of God's love for sinners, of salvation for the individual, of the liberating powers of Jesus, of the inner experience of the Holy Spirit, of the strength to withstand oppression and the promise of future glory. By the end of the 18th century, hymn singing was widespread in nearly all denominations.

Today when religious communities gather to worship, the hymnal is often the written document that binds them together. When I sit in another church or temple waiting for a service or a program to start, I often pick up the hymnal and look through it. In particular I read the preface or the introduction for clues about the theology of the congregation.

When Richard Darne arrived at Cedar Lane in 1967, this congregation was singing from the “blue book” called *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, published in 1964. It used classic hymns, but it also reflected the religious humanism of Unitarian Universalism in the 1960s. In the 1970s however, Unitarian Universalists in Bethesda and across the country started to notice that almost every reading and every hymn was written by a white

male. We white males tend to be self-centered. Here are a few titles from that 1960s blue hymnal:

Dear Lord and Father of Mankind
Our Friend, Our Brother, Our Lord
O Brother Man

By the 1980s, women in Unitarian Universalist congregations felt comfortable singing only one of these hymns. It was called *Turn Back O Man, for Swear Thy Foolish Ways*.

So in 1993, the Unitarian Universalist Association published *Singing The Living Tradition*. Now fourteen years later it remains very popular. In addition to the United States, it is used in Unitarian churches in Canada, New Zealand and Scotland.

I know music is important to me and to others, but I am not sure why it is important. I wonder: Why do the religions of the world employ music in their worship? What is accomplished by the vibrations from the organ, the piano and from our throats? What is the purpose of the hymns Sunday morning? When we sing, I wonder about what we are doing.

As a rational Unitarian I have turned to scientists for answers. Charles Darwin thought music helped humans find mates. He suggested that early men and women, unable to express their love in words, “endeavoured to charm each other with musical notes and rhythm,” as birds do.

Geoffrey Miller, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of New Mexico, looked at thousands of jazz, rock, and classical music albums and noted the age and sex of the musicians. In every genre of music, he says, men produce about ten times as much as women, and their output peaks at around age 30 near the time of their peak reproductive years. “Good musicians, particularly good singers, attract sexual interest,” Miller says. “Successful male

musicians are notoriously promiscuous and produce many children. That is how people pass on the genes for musical ability.”

However, not all researchers agree that our choir sings to make themselves look sexy. Hajime Fukui, an evolutionary psychologist in Japan, maintains that music reduces sexual activity. In one study, Fukui gathered thirty-five male students and thirty-five female students, measured their hormone levels, and then played them half an hour of music of all types. Afterward, the men’s testosterone levels had gone down and the women’s had gone up.

Fukui believes that when humans formed communities, we developed ways to alleviate sexual tensions. “We may assume that their solution was music,” he says. If music lowered testosterone levels in men, it made them less sexually active. If it increased testosterone in women, it made them more aggressive and less social. The net result was less sex, and less sexual tension. “National anthems, work songs, party music, and war music all have the same effect,” he says. “They diminish fear, relieve tension, and boost people’s sense of solidarity. Music moves people, throws them into a trance like state, and paralyses their ability to think logically.”

In yet another study, neurologist Barry Bittman of the Mind-Body Wellness Centre in Meadville, Pennsylvania, gathered a group of ten people and had them beat hand drums for an hour while a music “facilitator” conducted. Afterward, Bittman took blood samples. The drummers, he found, had heightened levels of immune cells called natural killer cells that seek out and destroy both cancer cells and cells infected by viruses. A control group that read in silence experienced no such upsurge.

Bittman believes that group drumming, through its camaraderie, support, exercise, and music making, signals the brain to heighten the immune response and may help the body fight off infection. “I

am not saying I have a cure for cancer,” Bittman says. “But what I am saying is that we have a very important step in understanding a delightful, enjoyable, and fun way for people to reverse the stress response in a way that leads us to positive biological changes.”

Personally, I suspect that we associate music with a loving, cooperating community. Anxiety in humans arises from a feeling of separateness, of isolation, of loneliness. Our singing together brings us together into a community. We experience a unity, a harmony. We feel whole and complete. If we have this experience several times with the same piece of music, then we begin to associate that music with a feeling of wholeness. Later when we are alone, we can sing these hymns to ourselves and feel again the wonderful associations of community.

In September 2007, George W. Bush is President. Clarence Thomas is the second African American to serve on the United States Supreme Court. In Iraq the Department of Defense confirmed the deaths of seven more American soldiers. In Washington, thousands of anti-war demonstrators march to the Capitol. In the music world, regional auditions were just completed for the seventh season of American Idol. And here at Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church, Richard Darne is our organist and director of our music ministry.

Richard, thank you for forty years of music. The hymns and the singing of the choir give us a spiritual lift each Sunday. Music is good for our spiritual health and our physical health. The sounds of the organ travel to our ears, enter the cells of our body, and touch our hearts. Thank you.