

Just Faith NETWORK



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Western Christianity (April 21) and Easter Orthodox Christianity (April 28) just celebrated Easter, one of the most important high holidays in Christianity. From Handel's *Messiah* originally composed for Easter to the *Passions* written by Bach and other oratorio that were performed during Christian celebrations, **music has been an important part of Christian worship** for a long time, especially during the high holidays. As we are closing our liturgical year, this resource offers some reflections around **the role of music in our spiritual life and in the life of the Church**. Part of it invites you to a listening experience. You can use this material individually, taking the time to listen to each suggested piece of music or share the experience in a small group.

If you decide to gather a group, make sure to send to everyone the two documents that are included in this resource. When you get together, you can listen to the music and discuss the reflection questions that are suggested.

You will find below **two pieces**:

- 1) A listening exercise inspired by some theological reflections written by Swiss theologian and minister Maurice Baumann, who taught theology at the University of Bern for several years and is himself a musician. Now retired, he enjoys conducting various choirs.
- 2) A reflection on faith and music by opera singer Eileen O'Brien Denner. She lives in Des Moines/IA and provided us with some of her personal insights on the role of music in her spiritual journey.

If you are interested in exploring the relationship between spiritual grounding and work of justice, consider signing up for our new program, **Just Engagement: The Power to Change**, that addresses the role of advocacy from a faith perspective. Visit our [page](#) and consider enrolling your community for the journey!

The Art of Listening

Notes of introduction:

Music in Christian worship has been the subject of debate throughout our Christian history. The most significant debate took place during the times of reformations in the 16th century CE. While some of the Reformers were reluctant to use music during worship, fearing it would distract congregants from the Word of God, Martin Luther “enthused about music as the greatest gift of God after religion itself... preserved much of the glorious polyphony of Catholic practice [as well as] inaugurated a sort of musical democratization by which strong, simple melodies (the ‘chorales’) could be sung by the entire congregation.” (article in *The Guardian*) The use of vernacular German became his particular mark and transformed Church music into popular tunes that could be sung and understood by everyone. Johann Sebastian Bach represents the peak of the Lutheran practice.

In response, the Catholic tradition expanded its own musical repertoire and many composers contributed to it such as Vivaldi or Monteverdi. Due to this back and forth, one important shift happened in the Western tradition of Church music: the polyphony (music composed of two or more melodic lines) was significantly reduced so that the scriptural text could be heard and meditated and the music became more accessible.

“Perhaps something of modern music culture was inaugurated through this intensification of listening, by which music ultimately became the elevated, autonomous art of what is so often termed ‘classical music.’” (article in *The Guardian*) The art of listening was born and accompanied the development of the Western musical tradition. Let’s listen to some music!

Resources:

-Article *Wikipedia* on Church music: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_music

-Introduction to Protestant Music from the French Protestant Museum:

<https://www.museeprotestant.org/en/notice/protestant-music/>

-10 Greatest Pieces of Classical Music for Easter:

<https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/features/the-10-greatest-pieces-of-classical-music-for-easter/>

-Article on the Reformation and music in *The Guardian*:

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/aug/18/the-reformation-classical-musics-punk-moment>

Listening exercise:

As a Protestant theologian who has studied the history of Church music, Maurice Baumann emphasizes the invitation to listen that music offers. “Music is like a mirror, a reflection of the self. It doesn’t impose anything to the listener, it *is* simply there, present for the listener to seize it and interpret it. Thus, there is no real distinction between sacred music or profane music, classical or popular. Music only makes sense in its relationship with the listener, the one who receives it. Music is an event, a movement. It cannot be reduced to ‘one’ message or meaning without losing its richness. We know it, music is diverse and multi-layered and it can resonate for almost every single life experience that we encounter. Our fragilities, our sadness, our joys, our peaceful moments all find a sound of music!” In this monthly resource, we invite you to listen to several musical excerpts that mark two of the most important Christian celebrations, Christmas and Good Friday

I. Christmas

Let’s start with a few pieces inspired by Mary’s Magnificat in Luke’s gospel (Luke 1:46-55). First read the biblical text and then go through the listening exercise suggested below; take time to listen to the music, once or twice, then reflect for yourself or with your group around the questions that are offered.

*And Mary said,
My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,*

*as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.*

—Luke 1:46-55 (NIV)

- 1) Listen to the excerpt of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Magnificat* “Quia fecit” (2 minutes), composed for the text of Luke 1:49:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ft9ev1xobkM>

*Quia fecit mihi magna,
qui potens est, et sanctum nomen
eius.*

*For the Mighty One has done
great things for me, and holy is His
name.*

Reflections:

- 1) Why do you think Bach gave this aria to a man’s voice?
- 2) How does the music portray the Mighty One?
- 3) Bach uses here the tone of a very popular French dance, the Bourrée*; how do you understand this choice? What image does it give you of the Mighty One?

*Definition of bourrée: a 17th-century French dance usually in quick duple time or a musical composition with the rhythm of this dance. (Merriam-Webster)

- 2) Listen now to the first choir of Giovanni Battista Sammartini’s *Magnificat* (1:27 minute); born in 1700, his is a contemporary of J.-S. Bach but composing in Italy instead of Germany. Here we are listening to the very beginning of the *Magnificat*, Luke 1:46: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzUbLMbrfPs>

*Magnificat anima mea Dominum
Lord*

My soul magnifies the

- 3) Listen then to the exact same verse put into music by J.-S. Bach (2:51 minutes): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LhZ-tdZw7A>

Reflections:

- 1) What do you notice in the comparison?
- 2) What do you notice between the other excerpt of Bach’s *Magnificat* and this introductory choir?

- 3) How does each composer render Mary's exultation?
- 4) Is this a music you associate with praise?

II. Good Friday

After these three pieces based on Luke's Magnificat, let's listen to a couple of pieces written for the Passion.

- 1) J.-S. Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* ends with one of his most famous chorus that often left congregants crying on Good Friday, *In tears of Grief* (7:21 minutes), Bach uses here another dance tune, the Saraband*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18EMloAEugA>

Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder
We sit down with tears
Und rufen dir im Grabe zu:
And call to you in your tomb
Ruhe sanfte, sanfte ruh!
Rest gently, gently rest!
Ruht, ihr ausgesognen Glieder!
Rest, you exhausted limbs!
Euer Grab und Leichenstein
Your grave and tombstone
Soll dem ängstlichen Gewissen
For our anguished conscience shall be
Ein bequemes Ruheknissen
A pillow that gives peace and comfort
Und der Seelen Ruhstatt sein.
And the place where our souls find rest.
Höchst vergnügt schlummern da die Augen ein.
With the greatest content there our eyes will close in sleep.

*Definition of **Sarabande**: originally, a dance considered disreputable in 16th-century Spain, and, later, a slow dance that was popular in France. Possibly of Mexican origin or perhaps evolved from a Spanish dance with Arab influence that was modified in the New World, it was apparently danced by a double line of couples to castanets and lively music. It was vigorously suppressed in Spain in 1583 but in the

early 17th century spread to Italy and reached the French court, where it became a slow, serious processional dance. (Britannica)

- 2) Georg Frederik Handel's *Messiah* chooses a very different tone for Good Friday using the text of Lamentations 1:12 and the voice of a tenor to mark the death of Jesus, *Behold, and See if There be Any Sorrow* (1:17 minutes):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN4oTbNQzQQ>

*Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look around and see.
Is any suffering like my suffering
that was inflicted on me,
that the LORD brought on me
in the day of his fierce anger?*

—Lamentations 1:12 (NIV)

Reflections:

- 1) What do you notice in the comparison?
- 2) How does each composer render the gravitas of the moment?
- 3) Do you listen to Handel's *Messiah* differently if you place it in the context of Easter?
- 4) What images does the music invoke of Jesus' death and burial?

III. Concluding prayer

To conclude this listening exercise, we invite you to pray with the following words written by Sister Joyce Rupp for our Easter time (reproduced with permission from *Prayer Seeds*):

Creator of Joy, lift out of my heart any heaviness or deadly doldrums residing there. Turn my attention toward opportunities to rejoice: the colors, shapes, and sounds of beauty my eyes and ears unconsciously see and hear, unexpected kindness, the dawning of each new day, the quiet approaching of night, and all those little lifts of joy I can quickly pass by without noticing or offering thanks. Reach me with your Eastering joy and tuck me happily into your ever-present gladness. Amen.

Summoned by God Through Music

By Eileen O'Brien Denner

*Will you come and follow me
If I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
And never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
Will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown
In you and you in me?*

—Song, *The Summons*

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Letting God reach others through song is my passion and mission - in wherever that leads. And that has led to many places, people and experiences in South Africa, Haiti, Nigeria, Mexico, Dominican Republic and many places in the United States. But it was not always like that. It took me quite a few years to surrender with a “yes” to answer: “Will you come and follow me?” And God lovingly waited for my surrender.

I grew up with roots of music with a lovely Franciscan nun, Sister Olata, teaching me piano and singing for twelve years. She would cry at the feeling I played the piano with - even if my rhythm or notes were not perfect. She was the constant example of the love and care of Christ; indeed, she had chosen to follow the Lord. She embodied answering a call to serve God.

In the process of focusing on voice and opera performance in college, graduate school and professional singing, I often felt torn and drifting away from the values I learned from Sister Olata. To master singing opera included many long and challenging hours of technical practice including personal practice, voice lessons, opera coaching, music coaching, and acting. When I did finally surrender my ambitions to God, I found He can use all past and present efforts. I also have learned that once that a “call” is issued, it lives deep within and the choice is mine - be it any area of life.

God gave me a wakeup call deep in my opera focused career, when I returned to Iowa to visit a sick friend. I was spending a lot of time in New York City singing and auditioning.

My elderly friend summoned me to his home and asked me this question? “Would you walk with me in the days ahead?” His cancer had moved to his bones and the diagnosis was terminal and he wanted me to walk beside him. Without hesitation I said, “Yes, I will walk with you.”

The decision to stay in Iowa for my friend marked a crossroads in my life. I was no longer drawn to sing with great applause from others. I instead spent the next year listening, talking and soothingly singing to my friend to calm his pain and anxiety; I did so up until the sacred moment of his last breath. I found this experience to be profoundly intimate with God and my friend. In retrospect, I found in this “dying” process that I had returned to the Christ-centered values that Sister Olata nurtured. I had answered God’s call.

Had I not made a choice to be there for my dying friend, I would not have traveled alone to Nigeria to serve at an orphanage and experience how music is as essential as the air we breathe. One day, after practicing in the large Catholic church in Nigeria to sing the Psalm, I retreated to my room - I had no water, no electricity, no husband or family that traveled with me (the government decided when the electricity came on again). I was assigned guards as it was not safe for me to leave the rectory by myself. Where was God? Why did I get sent here?

I melted into a pool of tears one night when out of the darkness I could hear a sound from a distance. It was the most beautiful sound ever and it had vast heart and soul. It was people singing a familiar tune of “How Great Thou Art” with much fervor and in a different language. And the next day, I was able to sing the Psalm and sing together the one word we could all sing and understand “Amen” (which went on for about 15 minutes). Music was as essential as water and breathing.

Had I not answered the call to be with my dying friend, I likely would not have traveled to Haiti after a devastating earthquake to help arrange worship experiences for my short-term mission teammates and Haitian natives.

Early morning trips with the Haitian bus in what looked like a war zone of rubble was groups of displaced Haitian people amidst millions of tents singing to Jesus with great joy, prayer, fervor and agony all in the same breath. Music was a most profound cry of their heart. Then traveling to a mountain community in Haiti, my mission teammate and I were asked to work with the Haitian minister to arrange an evening worship. We met, prayed and planned. Then my teammate, the minister and I went to the front of the church at 7pm and we waited and waited for people to come. Nobody was coming and we thought the evening was going to end.

Then one by one, singing groups showed up to the church. First a group of children dressed in their best (I knew they had extreme poverty of eating one meal a day if

they were lucky) and then a group of youth dressed in their most beautiful outfits. Then entered a group of women dressed in bright beautiful skirts and dresses followed by a group of men dressed in suits with ties. Four music groups, community members and my teammates assembled in this very small church - all in the reality of poverty, a devastating earthquake, and the common language of Jesus and music. And these groups took turns and singing together, and we would join with them. The worship was infused with the power of the Holy Spirit.

This worship went on for at least 2 ½ hours. And, even though myself and my fellow travelers spoke English and the parishioners spoke Haitian we experienced profound community. At the end of the evening we sang, like in Nigeria, “Amen” at least three dozen times - the sound was heavenly.

After the program I could not help but see a most beautiful 7-year-old boy who looked healthy and did not look like malnutrition had visited him. From a distance, I saw a man carefully watch this little boy. From the outside of this man’s shirt I could see his ribs. I asked the minister about this man that was toothless and seemingly malnourished. He told me the man was the son’s father and that he ate very little and gave his son his food so his son would have health. I was deeply moved that this man, this father, who held such joy seeing his son sing and also lived with the purpose of giving his food so his son could flourish. I quietly handed the minister some money to bless the man. Six months later, I unexpectedly received an email from the minister showing me a picture of this father - with a beautiful smile from the dentures that the money was used for.

Music is a common language from a deep and loving God that surpasses all world boundaries.

I believe that had my mother not answered God’s call and sacrificed to make sure I had piano and singing lessons, I would have never had the life changing relationship with Sister Olata that prepared me to answer God’s call.

Reflections:

- 1) Will you come and follow Him?
- 2) Where is God calling you?



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