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Full, Conscious, and Active...Listening?

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Abstract

Active participation by Christian laity in singing is a goal assumed by all liturgical leaders, scholars, and musicians. Is singing, though, the only form of active participation in liturgical music? What about listening? Drawing on discussions of listening by Aaron Copland, Frank Burch Brown, and Ronald J. Allen, it becomes clear that listening well is an active task, one for which musical leaders must prepare their congregations. Lay people should be encouraged to both receive music as a gift and to search out what it means in relationship to the congregation, the day, and the liturgical context. Congregations also need to be equipped with the background necessary to perceive the music in question, such as information about the composer or implications of a text being sung or the musical means employed. Finally, the emotional atmosphere of a piece, the musical content or language, and the relationship between performer and congregation are all critical components in the listening that takes place in worship. As church leaders equip congregation members to commune at the Lord's Table, so church leaders should give congregations a glimpse of how the music of choir or organ or other instruments can be a vehicle for grace and for encountering God's presence.

About the Author

Heather Josselyn-Cranson is the director of the music ministry program at Northwestern College. She has earned degrees in music composition, sacred music and liturgy from Bates College and Boston University School of Theology, and has served as a minister of music at congregations in Florida, Massachusetts and Russia. An active scholar, she has published articles on music in emerging churches, how translation affects the hymns of Charles Wesley, and women's participation in the chant of medieval monastic communities.

Dr. Josselyn-Cranson's composition and hymn writing have also received attention. Her choral compositions for the musical *Terror Texts* received a special commendation for Distinguished Achievement in Choral Music from the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in 2009. Three of her recent hymns have also won awards: "Every Day We See the Traces" won second prize in the Jesuit 25th Anniversary Hymn Contest sponsored by St. Peter's Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2011; "Planets Humming as They Wander" won the Boston University School of Theology Hymn Competition in 2010; and "We Cannot Know What Worship Is" received second prize in the Congregational Justice Song Contest sponsored by the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee in 2009.

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Full, Conscious, and Active...Listening?

by Heather Josselyn-Cranson, Th.D.

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In 1963, Pope Paul VI urged the Catholic Church to foster “full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations” among the laity. This call resounded among liturgical leaders, scholars, and musicians. The latter imagined full and active participation in the musical life of the Church, vigorously supporting congregational singing as the realization of this goal. We find an example of this congregational focus in the work of Miriam Therese Winter, a Medical Mission Sister, scholar, and composer. Winter explored the Vatican II legislation in her 1983 doctoral dissertation, later published as *Why Sing? Toward a Theology of Catholic Church Music*. In that work she demonstrates this attention paid to congregational singing. When considering the “music makers” of liturgical music, she describes the congregation first.¹ When turning to the theological factors underlying the changes that Vatican II fostered, she mentions “*actuosa participatio*” at the outset. Winter claims that the lifting up of active congregational participation in the Church’s music and liturgy “is the key to understanding the changes in liturgical practice that resulted from Vatican II.”² While she cites the Constitution on the Sacred

¹ Miriam Terese Winter, *Why Sing? Toward a Theology of Catholic Church Music* (Washington D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1984), 177-179.

² *Ibid.*, 217.

Liturgy as allowing, at times, the congregation’s silence, she focuses her attention on the singing of the congregation, the reasons for congregational song, and suggestions for how to strengthen this singing.

The pursuit of active musical participation among the laity spread to Protestant church musicians and scholars as well as Catholic ones. Paul Westermeyer speaks well on behalf of this interest among those of many different denominations. Early in his book *The Church Musician*, he declares his preference for the term *cantor* because that word “highlights the people’s song. And that is what [church musicians] are mainly about.”³ He explains this preference in contrast to other terms for the position, such as director of music or minister of music, since these do not clearly make “reference to the people’s song, which is what calls the church musician into being in the first place and defines his or her primary obligation.”⁴ Throughout his book, Westermeyer keeps the singing of the congregation as a touchstone, reminding musical leaders in the church that all their musical work, including choir rehearsals or organ practice or arranging music or directing ensembles, exists to support the congregation’s own music making.

Certainly, congregational singing is to be fostered. Yet the question remains whether or not congregation singing is in fact the only form of active participation in liturgical music. Scholars and practitioners often contrast singing, understood as active music-making, with listening to music, understood as passive. This judgment, however, may be hasty. Can listening require active involvement? Even further, what should worshippers listen for when hearing music in the liturgy? In what ways does, or should, liturgical listening differ from listening to

³ Paul Westermeyer, *The Church Musician*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

music at a concert or in another situation? And how does listening to music in worship compare to listening to other components of the liturgy, such as a prayer or a sermon? This article will consider these questions with the hopes of presenting some practical guidance to help church music leaders invite their congregations into a more active form of liturgical listening.

First, one must consider the possibility of an active form of listening. Since singing and playing music are necessarily active, does this mean that listening to music must be passive? Western culture assumes that music makes up a background or soundtrack that lies underneath the things that really matter. We find this not only in the visual media outlets of film and television but also in daily situations. Students “listen” to music while studying for exams, and businesses pipe in music, or muzak, which purports to boost productivity or incite shopping without being noticed. In these instances, the users intend music to be almost unnoticed while still being audible. This seems to be the opposite of active engagement with music.

Insight from the field of literature, however, suggests that it is not only possible but preferable to be an active listener. Teachers of literature, from elementary school through college, seek to foster active reading among their students by equipping students to heighten their awareness of the text and increase their ability to interpret the text. Strategies for active reading vary, but they all serve as tools to help the reader focus carefully on both minute details and overarching themes within the work. The work of the reader supplements and answers the work of the writer in creating the experience of reading.

If active listening is, then, possible, what might it involve? We will explore several voices offering their own perspective on the work of listening and how it is best accomplished.

First, we find some possibilities in the thoughts and writing of one of America’s great composers: Aaron Copland. In his 1939 book *What to Listen for in Music*, Copland addressed the general public, members of whom might find themselves listening to music at the concert hall without knowing much about the music they hear. In order to guide his audience toward more active forms of listening, the composer identified three kinds of listening that happen at concerts: sensuous listening, expressive listening, and musical listening.⁵

Sensuous listening, which Copland calls the “simplest way” to listen to music, happens when “a kind of brainless but attractive state of mind is engendered by the mere sound appeal of the music.”⁶ While admitting that the “sheer pleasure of the musical sound itself” is enjoyable and an important part of the experience of listening to music, Copland warns against “abuse” of this form of listening. Those who indulge in this

go to concerts in order to lose themselves. They use music as a consolation or an escape. They enter an ideal world where one doesn’t have to think of the realities of everyday life. Of course they aren’t thinking about the music either. Music allows them to leave it, and they go off to a place to dream, dreaming because of and apropos of the music yet never quite listening to it.⁷

Copland admits that the notion of “expressive listening,” the second type of listening he describes, is a difficult one. In response to some composers (and, no doubt, listeners) who think otherwise, he affirms that “all music has a certain meaning behind the notes and that the meaning

⁵ See Chapter 2, “How We Listen,” in Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 9-19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

behind the notes constitutes, after all, what the piece is saying, what the piece is about.”⁸ Yet he hesitates when it comes to determining what this meaning is with any specificity. Copland encourages his readers to remain content with a “general” understanding of the meaning, and he warns them that they cannot expect others to interpret that meaning in the same way. Indeed, he cautions “if it is a great work of art, don’t expect it to mean exactly the same thing to you each time you hear it.”⁹

The composer clearly prefers, however, the third form of listening that he introduces: the “sheerly musical.” People engaged in “musical” listening attend to the nuts and bolts of the music itself: melody, form, rhythm, tempo, timbre, harmony, and so on. Copland asserts that this type of listening provides the greatest challenge for non-musicians, and he dedicates the remainder of his book to explaining and demonstrating the terms listed above and others.

While Copland’s tri-partite description of musical listening helps set forth some ways of understanding what congregations might experience when faced with a choral anthem, organ voluntary, or other musical offering, he writes from and for the context of the concert hall. The relationship of spirituality and music, and the role of music within the worship service, do not enter into his discussion. A second author, with a different point of view, begins to address some of these issues. In Frank Burch Brown’s *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, the connection of music and visual art to faith is constantly kept in mind, even if this connection isn’t always acted out within the liturgical sphere. Burch Brown focuses his work, as the book’s

⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

title suggests, on matters of taste and aesthetics, yet he briefly discusses the component tasks of responding to music: perception, appreciation, and appraisal.

Regarding perception, Burch Brown writes that “experience and expectation condition what one actually hears – what one perceives and thus ‘takes in.’”¹⁰ He demonstrates this by comparing the reactions to Bach’s cantata *Wachet Auf* of Burch Brown’s undergraduate students to those of informed listeners of classical music. Ultimately, he finds that “they are *perceiving* the music of the cantata differently...The two audiences are simply not taking in the same work.”¹¹ He also considers another auditor of Bach’s work: Biscuit, Burch Brown’s dog, who has heard every note of Bach’s Cantata 140, *Wachet Auf*... [but who] has not heard the work that Bach composed. Certainly she has heard an array of sounds; beyond that she may have perceived qualities and patterns of sound that we could call in some sense aesthetic. The work as religious art, however, emerges from what we human beings hear *in* the sounds.¹²

Burch Brown then suggests that listeners must enjoy as well as “take in” a work of art in order for it to function religiously. This enjoyment somehow allows the artwork to express meaning in a way that less aesthetic theological discourse cannot:

the truth, as heard *through* the music, as heard delightfully and beautifully *in* the music, may be rather different from the truth abstractly conceived. Artistic embodiment may open up new levels of spiritual vision and create a satisfying sense of church and

¹⁰ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste* (New York: Oxford University press, 2000), 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

community that might otherwise remain inaccessible. But that can transpire only if one can appreciate, enjoy, or be moved by what one is perceiving in the art.¹³

Yet such religious enjoyment must be guided by the purpose of the artwork itself, according to Burch Brown (broaching a topic he explores in greater depth in his later book *Inclusive Yet Discerning*). He warns that artists and audiences or congregations should constantly consider whether or not “the kind of enjoyment called for by the medium actually [undercuts] the message.”¹⁴

Burch Brown writes that perception and appreciation allow a viewer or listener to then judge, evaluate, or appraise the work of art in question. Here, he raises questions of the permissibility of “sentimental” religious art, the role of enjoyment within Christian worship, the aims of religious art compared to those of secular art, and the culturally learned nature of much of our taste and our judgment. As much farther as he travels in the context of *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, Burch Brown’s opening thoughts on perception, appreciation, and appraisal constitute one of the great philosophical gifts of that work.

This entrée into the connection between music and religion helps us consider a new source of insight. The liturgy provides other opportunities for listening besides musical ones. Scholars of homiletics have inquired into how congregations listen to sermons, providing insights that may assist us in understanding how they listen to music as well. Results from a 1999 study on this topic suggest that congregation members listen primarily through one of three “settings:”

¹³ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴ Ibid.

ethos, logos, or pathos.¹⁵ These terms, arising from Aristotle’s thoughts on rhetoric, speak to the relational, logical, and emotional connections that a speaker makes with her or his audience. While speakers and preachers ought to attend to each of these aspects of their presentations or sermons, those who conducted this study found that individual congregation members believe ethos, logos, and pathos to be of varying importance. Some listen to the sermon for connections that are forged or displayed between preacher and congregation. Others follow the logical arguments that are made in the content of the sermon or homily. Still others seek to be moved or touched emotionally by the pastor’s words.

Moreover, the success of one “setting” allows a second or third to take place. So, for example, if a “logos listener” finds a compelling and rational argument in the preacher’s sermon, that listener is better able to feel emotions conveyed or called up by the sermon. Or if an “ethos listener” is satisfied that the relationship between pastor and congregation is being maintained, he or she can more easily attend to the logical content of the sermon.

While many other voices might provide helpful ideas regarding the possibility of full, conscious, and active liturgical listening, it may be well to pause here and glean what suggestions these voices from the fields of music, aesthetics, and homiletics have for us.

While not tackling the question of liturgical listening directly, Copland and Burch Brown offer some helpful preliminary thoughts. They also prepare us to attend to the difference between concert listening and liturgical listening. Copland reminds us that listeners can react to the sensuous experience of being bathed in sound, to the meaning of the sounds, or to the sounds

¹⁵ See Ronald J. Allen, *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship, Content, Feeling* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2004).

themselves, as the products of dynamics, timbres, harmonies, melodic intervals, and so on.

While Copland finds the last of these three to be the most important for concert-goers, we might question how the three forms of listening function in the sanctuary. Music may provide the opportunity for worshippers to rest in the sonic offerings of organ or choir, an experience which may speak to them of God’s embrace of and connection to humanity beyond what Burch Brown calls “the truth abstractly conceived.” Such a musical function reminds us of the understanding of music as a gift from God, a concept shared by countless church theologians and liturgical leaders throughout the centuries. Yet we might wonder, along with Copland, about the abuse of this form of listening. Do congregations shut themselves off from a deeper understanding or experience of music by attending only to the atmosphere it creates?

Copland’s description of listening for expression, or meaning, seems even more promising. Church musicians and pastors usually include music with a particular meaning in mind: an apt expression of a theological point, or a reminder of the liturgical season, or a reflection on a particular scripture passage. These worship leaders would no doubt rejoice if members of their congregations used the listening experience to search for these connections and expressions. Such an approach has the added benefit of strengthening the unity between music and liturgy, encouraging members of the congregation not only to assume that the music relates to what has come before it and what will follow, but asking them to actively seek out these links. It also supposes the active participation of the listener, who must attend carefully to the music and work to understand its meaning and its relationship to the entire service. Even here, however, the exclusive use of this style of listening might curtail music’s ability to be music.

Must the congregation always seek to interpret this art form into theological truth or left-brained linguistic formulae? Can music serve the congregation by simply *being* music?

Copland’s third form of listening, which he names “musical,” presents the greatest challenge from a liturgical context. While Copland instructs us that attending to form, harmony, dynamic, tempo, and other technical aspects of music provide the best way to listen in the concert hall, it is questionable what benefit such attentiveness brings to the worshipper. Does the perception of sonata form within a piece of music heighten its liturgical impact? Should the liturgical listener focus on timbre and texture, and for what purpose?

Burch Brown’s three components to taste offer other suggestions or reminders. While his third step, appraising, may be less necessary for congregation members than for musical and liturgical leaders, the congregational tasks of perception and appreciation caution all who oversee a congregation’s musical expression. Burch Brown counsels musicians either to choose pieces that their congregations are capable of “taking in” or to provide the preparation necessary for them to do so. Music that is beyond the congregation’s understanding will be not heard, and thus cannot be listened to. Likewise, the author reminds leaders that the congregation’s ability to find pleasure in the music will allow it to find meaning. While leaders should not allow aesthetic pleasure to be the only guide in making musical choices, this concern cannot be ignored.

Likewise, we can extrapolate many ideas on congregational music from Allen’s study on listening to sermons. In particular, we might wonder if the ethos, logos, and pathos “settings” obtain among congregations as they listen to music. Some listeners might naturally listen for musical form, as Copland counsels in *What to Listen for in Music*, in a rough musical equivalent

of the logos setting. While the similarity of “logos listening” and the “sheerly musical” listening Copland describes might tempt us to equate pathos and ethos with Copland’s other two forms of listening, the other categories do not align as well as this one does. Yet there may be connections: it might be, for example, that individuals prefer to listen to music in a familiar style, since this reinforces the connections between performer(s) and congregation, much like the ethos setting that Allen describes. If this is true, that would provide congregational music leaders with an added caution in introducing new music in their churches. Such introductions must be done slowly, not only not to overwhelm the musical abilities of the congregation, but also in order to avoid disturbing the relationship between congregation and music leader(s). The pathos setting might bear some relationship to Copland’s sensuous listening, with its prioritization of feeling. In any case, Allen’s study reminds us that each of these musical aspects reaches different members of the congregation. And, even more curiously, each affects the congregation’s ability to perceive and appreciate the other aspects. Congregational musical leaders must remember that the way the music affects the relationship between congregation and leader, the musical (and linguistic) content of the piece in question, and the atmosphere that the music evokes are all inter-related.

The preceding discussion of listening strongly affirms that listening well is an active task, one for which musical leaders must prepare their congregations. Just as students of literature learn to use various tools to approach the text, we must help our congregations approach the task of listening with expectation and preparation. And the studies and opinions explored here suggest some possible tools for this task. Following Copland, we might encourage our

congregation to both receive music as a gift and to search out what it means in relationship to the congregation, the day, and the liturgical context in which it features. Following Burch Brown, we should equip our congregations with the background necessary to perceive the music in question, whether that be information about the composer or the genesis of the piece, insight into the meaning and implications of a text being sung, or an appreciation of the musical means employed in the piece. We must also remember that the congregation's ability to enjoy the music is one important facet of the liturgical functioning of the pieces we select. Finally, Allen reminds us that the emotional atmosphere of a piece of music, the musical content or language, and the relationship between performer and congregation are all critical components in the listening that takes place in worship.

Possibly, however, even more than specific means for helping a congregation to listen actively, we need an image for what that might look like. Offering our congregations a comprehensible comparison might assist them in understanding the need to listen actively, and the promise for what such active listening might yield. What follows is one such comparison.

We assume that the members of our congregations know how to eat, and are familiar with eating. Yet we do not expect this familiarity to equip them to commune at the Lord's Table. Instead, we teach about this special kind of eating in sermon and in religious education. We sing about it, we talk about it, and we communicate to our congregations the importance of preparation. We do not want them to come to the Eucharist with the same expectations they bring to the breakfast table or the lunch counter. Indeed, we help them to understand Christ's

promise to meet us, mysteriously, in bread and wine, and we encourage their expectations of such a meeting.

The music of choir or organ or other instruments is not a sacrament. Yet it can be a vehicle for grace and for encountering God’s presence. Giving our congregations a glimpse of such possibility may help stir them toward full, conscious, and active listening.