

A Choral Congregation

by Donald Schell

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As I was in the early stages of writing this article a little over a year ago, Kathy Rohrer, a musicologist from Princeton and lover of congregational music, was visiting St. Gregory's. She suggested I read Alice Parker's *Melodious Accord, Good Singing in Church*. I found this book invaluable, and it sharpened and clarified my thinking about congregational music in more ways than I fully remember. Parker has long experience as a choral conductor and was Robert Shaw's arranger for his chorale, but her current work focuses on understanding and enhancing ordinary people's congregational singing. My quotations of Luther and Heschel in this article are borrowed from *Melodious Accord*.

"Your singing was a revelation to me" one newcomer to St. Gregory's said. Such a work of God can happen in any congregation that really invites people to sing. In a future issue of *God's Friends* we will consider whether particular kinds of music and texts invite revelation (and when and for whom). This article will discuss how singing - a bodily, emotional experience that asks us to listen and join in - leads us into prayer and creates the community we are called to be.

For those who have never attended St. Gregory's, I should say that St. Gregory's liturgy is largely sung (including nearly all the prayers of the presider and some of the liturgical cues of the deacon). Some at St. Gregory's who sing wholeheartedly might be reluctant to describe their singing as prayer. Yet wholeheartedness hints at something more than simple pleasure at making music. And maybe singing can help us all rediscover how close prayer is to ordinary human experience. Certainly praying when we sing at St. Gregory's allows us to pray together better than our great diversity of beliefs could otherwise allow. We have always worked to invite everyone to sing, encouraging especially people who feel inept, unmusical, and self-conscious.

Together leaders and congregation shape an inclusive, flowing, musical event-congregation by joining in, and leaders by listening to the congregation's natural, living pace and to the music's expressive invitation.

When we sing together, we give and receive, listen and speak, wander and find our way back. Prayer and revelation begin as people give themselves to the music. Revelation comes from singing our best and most invitingly and includes giving ourselves to one another. It happens as we listen to the sound we are creating. And revelation comes through our specific bodily participation in the music and in the physical discoveries of singing the text. Singing together with openness and willingness to share and join the group, we make something beautiful and holy.

Our sung and embodied prayer may be the most important thing we do at St. Gregory's. The power of the Holy Spirit is moving as people breathe together making music. We don't always say that our music at St. Gregory's is prayer, but we know it is holy, so holy that we risk inviting everyone (explicitly including "non-musicians" and first time visitors) to join in wholeheartedly. That invitation is risky not because it might jeopardize the music, but because it can pose a challenge to the feelings of those who believe they can't sing.

A recent conversation with a woman who described herself as a "non-singer," provoked a startling insight: "Non-singers" are simply people who do not know that singers constantly make mistakes. People become singers by hearing mistakes and learning to correct them. And singers continue to make mistakes. As singers listen to themselves moment by moment they hear both pleasing and displeasing sounds. Just as driving a car requires constant small corrections to speed and steering, singing requires constant adjustments to tone and pitch. Anyone who can hear and recognize music and who recognizes a sound coming from his or her mouth that doesn't fit the music has begun to sing. The next step is harder to describe and easier to demonstrate, but it's still worth saying. The right notes have a physical sensation, a resonance we can feel in our chest and sinuses. Music-making is

a very physical experience.

There are many physical sensations of singing. Breathing changes when we sing. We become conscious of it, as we are when we're exercising. Physiological changes produce other bodily responses. Some people feel moved to shift posture to sit upright or stand alert so breath and voice flow more easily. Some feel an urge to make large muscle movements in legs, hips and belly. In other ways too, the body seems to want to move, to stretch or bounce or swing with the music. Not all the physical sensations that accompany singing are pleasant. Sometimes we strain and tighten the throat to force out notes that seem too high, for example. Sometimes simply singing loudly or trying to stay with the long, long phrases an organ can play will make us breathless, lightheaded and dizzy. Really singing out (or singing a good long song) can give a "rush" from the steady deep breathing. Much of our physical response comes from the added oxygen that strong, steady inhaling and exhaling bring to the brain. And oxygen (with the help of the intellectual and spiritual mystery we call melody) enhances and intensifies thoughts and feelings.

Physical sensations make a continuity with feelings and emotions, and singing often makes people smile or cry. John of the Cross said, "Pray with the feelings as long as you can." Music prays by the feelings; it unleashes them and lets them flow. John's contemporary, Martin Luther, agreed with John about feelings when he called church singing, "second only to the Word of God," arguing that music encouraged the disheartened, mellowed the proud, and even softened the vengeful. He said music was like the Word of God because, "By music are all the feelings swayed." So music may provoke joy or sadness, and memories may come up as we sing, though something in the singing makes it easier to welcome painful feelings in peace and let them be. Singing a whole range of feelings, a sweet longing touches us, and we let the music lead us into rhythmic movement and dance, and also into peaceful, dynamic stillness.

Singing is "in-spired" as we begin to breathe together. Music that prays easily follows natural rhythms of our bodies especially the rhythm of breathing. Music that prays easily bears the marks of breath's steady rhythm. Breathing as we sing makes the heart beat a little faster, like a lover's. Heartbeat is the other most important rhythm in our singing. Heartbeat is our built-in quiet percussion section.

But breath that gives birth to melody presents a paradox - we "hear" melody in a continuous flow, but breath is not continuous at all. If we consider this, we'll notice that we don't actually hear music. Noise and sound are the stuff of our hearing - they are of the moment. And no single moment can contain music. Music lives in time and appears in understanding as memory and imaginative expectation hold moments of sound together. The mind's ear creates music's continuous flow from succeeding, disconnected moments of sound, and anyone with some hearing and a normally functioning brain will recognize music when they hear it.

Singing is communication; like a conversation, it requires both listening and ongoing interpretation. We make music by imagining the music in our minds, breathing in, and exhaling as we move our vocal cords. And then we give ourselves to the song by listening. Even if we sing alone in the shower or the car, unless we listen to our own voice creating the song, there is no song. And singing together takes this listening to another level of spiritual practice. In a group if we sing without listening to each other, we get many individuals singing at once in as many voices as there are in the room. But, Alice Parker observes, "if we listen as we sing, and sing to our listening, our singing joins us together...forging a group identity where there were only individuals and making a communicative statement that far transcends what any of us could do alone. This is a paradigm of union with the creator." From the physiology of singing we have come to communication and to love.

A member of St. Gregory's once described sitting in the rain, front row center, for an open air performance of Othello. Iago stood alone centerstage a few feet away speaking his long, dark soliloquy to Brian, the sole remaining audience member who had not fled for cover. "It was unforgettable theater" Brian said, "the love that actor and audience always offer one another was so palpable between us. I felt how the communication between us was as much a part of the play as the text." We feel underlying commitments to one another as we sing together. We sing our love, and in singing the love is among us. Alice Parker says that good singing forges good congregations, and that people singing together become the congregation they can be as they discover and develop that congregation's own unique voice.

"LISTENING TO GREAT MUSIC IS A SHATTERING EXPERIENCE, THROWING THE SOUL INTO AN ENCOUNTER WITH AN ASPECT OF REALITY TO WHICH THE MIND CAN NEVER RELATE ITSELF ADEQUATELY." "SUCH EXPERIENCES UNDERMINE CONCEIT AND COMPLACENCY AND MAY EVEN INDUCE A SENSE OF CONTRITION AND A READINESS FOR REPENTANCE . . . THE SHATTERING EXPERIENCE OF MUSIC HAS BEEN A CHALLENGE TO MY THINKING ON ULTIMATE ISSUES." "I SPEND MY LIFE WORKING WITH THOUGHTS, AND ONE PROBLEM THAT GIVES ME NO REST IS: DO THESE THOUGHTS EVER RISE TO THE HEIGHTS REACHED BY AUTHENTIC MUSIC?" -- Rabbi Abraham

One Sunday two important voices had to miss our small 8 a.m. Eucharist-Caroline, a strong, encouraging lead soprano, and Rick, a steady, clear tenor. That morning Michael, another solid tenor, and I, a baritone, were the de facto leaders of the congregation's singing. I felt it instantly as Michael and I collaborated throughout the singing of "Martyrs," a wonderful old modal tune from the Scottish Psalter, and again as we grounded the chanting of the psalm. When other singing leaders are present, Michael and I sometimes go our own way, pushing or pulling the tempo. If Caroline and Rick are there singing, the congregation can stay together despite Michael's and my willfulness. Without any discussion, we knew this Sunday we had to work together. I listened more to Michael and felt him listening more to me. Both of us were singing a little more "softly" than we usual do, and working to stay much more closely together

than when we count on cover from Rick and Caroline. We were forging a musical consensus to invite the congregation in. Fourteen other people were counting on our consensus to hold and encourage their voices. Michael and I were balancing. Our sung prayer was making us more a community, as Alice Parker described, "When we sing together, we create a community, a communion in sound."

St. Gregory's congregation sings without accompaniment. Some congregations include an organ or other instruments in their voice. Instruments bring additional gifts and challenges to nurturing the congregation's best voice. I recall visiting a church with a large, beautiful pipe organ and an excellent organist who, unfortunately, did not play as a singer. Organists tell me that the best church organists often sing quietly as they play to phrase music for the natural breath of untrained singers. This organist was certainly not doing that. His good musical ideas made solo musical sense for his instrument, but not for human voices.

He was not remembering that the congregation's voice is a creature of people breathing together. Like their primitive cousin the bagpipes, pipe organs breathe by constantly pressurized mechanical or electric bellows. This constantly pressurized air chamber enables an organist to sustain a note indefinitely or produce a continuous unbroken musical phrase of any length whatsoever. Singers can't do that. Trained singers learn to conceal their breathing when a composer demands long, sustained phrases. But a congregation sings differently from trained singers, because good congregational singing celebrates breathing! People singing for their own pleasure shape and interpret the musical phrases to their breathing. If an organist, or any music leader, doesn't respect the natural shape of breathing, people will quit singing or sing half-heartedly, trying to follow phrases that don't invite them.

Some organists also play too loudly, an example which lead singers in congregations should NOT imitate. There is a difference between leading and forcing. Some organists "lead" congregational singing by force, counting on the awesome authority and overwhelming sound of their instrument. Such leadership is really domination, intimidating people to conform or keep quiet. A tidal wave of sound from any one source (even a lead singer) will drown all human voices in its path. When everyone (especially the strong singers) is invested in serving the congregation's one voice, each voice is invited in and will find its right contribution to the whole.

I think I hear one pattern to our unaccompanied singing at St. Gregory's that shows how many of us learned to sing with organ accompaniment. Particularly on our most familiar music, we fall into long phrases sung slowly, reaching for a musical form that has no reference to human breath or the natural length of a sustainable sung phrase. Without an organ's cover, such singing sounds choppy and unnatural. We have begun examining each piece we sing, asking what is speech rhythm here and at what tempo can we create logical, spoken phrases and natural breaks for breathing. Pieces which were once suffocating are now finding new inspiration.

At St. Gregory's, a significant part of our singing is in four-part harmony. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his otherwise delightful book, *Life Together*, claimed that shared congregational singing could only happen when everyone was humble enough to sing the melody. Bonhoeffer was exactly right in his emphasis on humility or mutuality in singing, but our experience says he was mistaken about singing in parts.

Individuals singing any part (even the melody) can sing in a way that shouts, "Listen to ME!" But whatever part we sing, if we actually listen to one another and work to blend our voices, our voice becomes a humble and loved servant of the whole. If we can both listen and sing with a whole heart, each individual's singing can enrich the singing of everyone including the melody singers who are not reading music, but joining in by ear.

Prayer in singing comes from our bodies and our listening. It moves to an active, conscious and specific love of those who sing with us. The one who helps this happen is a lead musician, for us at St. Gregory's, our music director, Sanford Dole. In the Episcopal Church, the rector (at St. Gregory's, Rick Fabian and myself) is officially responsible for the music. Rick and I have always delegated musical leadership to a skilled professional director both at St. Gregory's and, before that, when we worked together at the Episcopal Church at Yale. Sanford is the eighth such director we have worked with, and we are delighted with him and grateful for the way he and so many others have shaped our singing. Alice Parker draws on Rabbi Abraham Heschel to explain the benefits of such a practice. Following Heschel, she says the music director is, "Ba'al tefillah, the Master of Prayer." Jewish synagogue tradition remembers what we have discovered over the years, that the cantor is a spiritual leader.

Making the congregation's voice a voice of prayer is a selfless work of imagination, invitation, encouragement and discipline. The song leader, even more than the clergy-president, is master of prayer, because the song leader is teaching the congregation to listen and to pray their feelings and longings. Sanford, as music leader, offers his own voice to lead the voices, his listening to inspire our listening, his love of music and congregational song and his loving, accepting face to give people courage to open their mouths and sing. Partly following Alice Parker's advice, Sanford, Rick and I agreed Sanford would conduct the congregation, marking rhythm with his hand as he led us with his voice. In all this, the actual stuff and substance of the singing, it is our music leader's love that brings the congregation's voice (and their prayer) to life.

At St. Gregory's, Sanford Dole serves as master of prayer for our 10 a.m. Sunday liturgy. But we sing at every St. Gregory's service, and faithful lay volunteers in the master of prayer role give life to our sung prayer for each Saturday afternoon Eucharist, early Sunday morning Eucharist, and our weeknight Taize Prayers Round the Cross.

Committed leaders and our congregation's willingness to sing even when our numbers are small have meant we are always listening, giving ourselves to the congregation's voice, and heeding a master of prayer. It has been for us a path toward love for one another and into the mystery of God's love that is implicit in singing together. I offer this article in gratitude for a tradition we have built up over so many years, a practice that has made St. Gregory's a "choral congregation," as our music director delights to call us. And I offer our readers from other congregations our experience and whatever encouragement, support, discoveries or ideas may serve your practice of singing to know one another, love God and feel God's pleasure.