

# “The Music of Joy and Celebration”

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First Presbyterian Church  
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania  
Colossians 3:12-17

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This morning we thank our adult choir and our children’s choir for their wonderful and inspiring music; for their commitment in leading us in worship through music.

Thank you! Thank you!

John, we very much appreciate all of your hard work, hours of preparation, and talent that you share with us every week. Through your leadership and the choirs’ commitments we are all greatly blessed! Through music you bring us joy and celebration!

Thank you! Thank you!

And John, knowing that you are always looking for new choir members, in my research I came across something that may be of help. It is a “Choir Proficiency Test.” So for all of you possible new choir members out there, here we go:

Please select the option that will enhance the quality of the performance. (You might want to use the pencil in the pew, and note your answers.)

1. You are entering the choir loft on Sunday morning and suddenly trip and fall down. You should:
  - a. Assume a kneeling position and break into fervent prayer.
  - b. Pretend that you've had a heart attack.
  - c. Crawl into the nearest chair.
  - d. Begin speaking in tongues.
  
2. You are a soprano and count incorrectly. As a result you boom out a high "C" one measure too soon. You should:
  - a. Slide into an inspired "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing."
  - b. Look triumphant and hold on to the note.
  - c. Stop abruptly in mid squawk but keep your lips moving.
  - d. Sink to the floor in shame.
  
3. After all those long hard choir rehearsals, you show up twenty minutes late for the Christmas musical. You should:

- a. Climb into the back row of the choir from the baptistery.
- b. Enter pretending to be a soundman checking cables and then suddenly slip yourself into the choir.
- c. Turn the lights out in the church and slip into the choir during the blackout.
- d. Read M. Stephen's pamphlet "Techniques for Tardy Appearances."

4. While singing, you discover you have only one page of a two page hymn. You should:

- a. Hum for your life.
- b. Sing "watermelon, watermelon, watermelon."
- c. Try to get another hymnal out of the choir rack with your feet.
- d. Sing the first page over again.

5. Inevitably that dreaded big sneeze occurs toward the end of the choir special. You should:

- a. As you sneeze, come down hard on your neighbor's foot to create a diversion.
- b. Try to make it harmonize.
- c. Sneeze into the hair of the choir member in front of you to muffle the noise.
- d. Sink to the floor in shame.

Count the number of A's, B's, C's, and D's you checked and find your proficiency rating below:

4 or more A's...there is nothing more you need to know to be a first rate choir member.

4 or more B's...your church choir reflexes are fully developed and you should do well in choir.

4 or more C's...your church choral experience is spotty but your team spirit is on target. You will be an asset to most any choir.

4 or more D's...it is recommended you take soccer or group therapy counseling.

John, I hope I've been of help.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century English poet Joseph Addison penned these words,

“Music, the greatest good that mortals know,  
And all of heaven we have below.”

On this Choir Appreciation Sunday - the precious, dare I say intoxicating gift of music is on our minds.

I wanted to quote from one of the greats of Western Music - none other than Bach himself. But, alas - I could not find anything that would be fitting. Other than music, he wrote little, we know little about the man. He did get so angry with a student he drew his sword and called him a very nasty name.

Karl Barth, one of the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Theologians loved Bach's music. Barth was sure the angels in heaven played Bach and perhaps only Bach.

How wondrously blessed we humans are - with the gift of music!

Addison's poetry resonates -

“Music, the greatest good that mortals know,  
And all of heaven we have below.”

I've felt that declaration many times in my life. From listening to a symphony at the Kirby, to being taken up by voices on the Broadway Stage, to listening to Tchaikovsky's "Violin Concerto in D" - over and over again on CD, to experiencing worship Sunday after Sunday with our Choir, our soloists and John - escorting us beyond ourselves - to a height of beauty and wonder only the soul can take in.

How could one live without music? I know its possible but not to be recommended!

Today, we once again say thank you to our Choirs and our Minister of Music – John Vaida.

Parents - enable your children to experience music.

- Have them learn an instrument.
- Encourage them to sing in a Chorus - at school, at church.
- Adults – it's never too late.

This morning I want to uplift the music of Joy and Celebration, specifically through the great composer – Bach.

Music - the Arts - expands and enhance our lives!

We live in a technical culture. We know how to do things, how to make functional items and how to steer our employees towards greater and greater productivity.

Now on one level this is basically a sound, helpful process. Much has been added to our existence in regards to technology.

But, there is a price to be paid, when this mind-set overwhelms the psyche.

*“What works is valuable.”*

*“Functionalism reigns supreme.”*

*Knowledge is seen as a way to increase one's skills.*

And in turn we suffer from a limited vision of reality.

Philosopher theologian Langdon B. Gilkey critically proclaims:

A technical culture is voracious, devouring; it consumes

all the other non-technical aspects of culture by turning everything into a skill, a knowledge of how to do it, a means. Only art remains resistant.

*In art the human soul (if I may use that term) is released from the bondage of pragmatic skillfulness, and is opened to the deeper questions of meaning, purpose, the transcendent.*

The positivistic enterprise that has been developing since the Enlightenment has recently been exposed as an entirely inadequate philosophy of existence.

In a sense - we are much more than the sum of our parts!

*The gift of art, of creativity - enhances our experiences. It helps to shape us and allows us to soar into the clouds of "more than mere meaning" of "mystery".*

*We encounter the work of art. We do not just look at it, or listen to it, or feel it. We, in a real sense dialogue with it. We recognize part of ourselves and yet the image or sound is so much more. There is a surplus value. There is a feeling of "Yes, Yes, I sense it, I commune with it, and yet I am at a loss to comprehend this experience. It is of myself, my world, and so much more!"*

Theologically, religiously speaking - this is an encounter with the transcendent.

Gilkey further states:

Art opens up the truth hidden behind and within the ordinary;  
it provides a new entrance into reality and pushes us through that entrance.  
It leads us to what is really there and really going on.

There is no doubt that Religion and Art are inextricably tied together. A common element within both is the creative drive to go beyond the empirical, mundane level of existence. The human heart is restless. It cannot, it will not accept a static conformity of existence, as the definition of life. Both Religion and Art speak to the whole person. They speak to the ethereal joys of the imagination, to the angst, the tragedies of our individual and corporate lives. They elicit our exuberant laughter and our most intense pains.

Through Religion and Art, we can weave a tapestry of existence that takes the various strands of imagination, and weaves them into a work of art that gives value and meaning to our lives.

One such artist that has continued to strike the chord of our hearts and minds, was the man of musical genius, Johann Sebastian Bach.

Bernstein once remarked:

“Bach, a colossal syllable, one which makes composers tremble, brings performers to their knees, beautifies the Bach lover, and apparently bores the daylights out of every one else.”

I was young once and I guess I can imagine a time when Bach bored the “daylights out of me”. Shakespeare was the same.

But thank God for a little maturity!

We must keep in mind Art is not meant to be tepid, not elevator music. It is to capture the soul. It is to place us off balance. It is to take us where “no man has gone before”. (I think Captain Kirk would agree, although I’m not sure of Mr. Spock.)

Bach was in a similar situation that we find ourselves in today.

He was a near contemporary of Voltaire, the person who “...seems to embody the spirit of the Enlightenment in its assault upon the Church.”

The church and the arts were on a collision course with the Enlightenment. Utilitarianism was King. Again, what worked was of value.

Bach was a church musician. He was a mixture of Orthodoxy and Pietism. He took his faith seriously, as can be heard in his numerous compositions.

Although Bach, as well as others of yesteryear and today - wrestled with his faith.

“I believe, help my unbelief”.

He used this text to write a cantata. (BWV 109)

Bach affirmed throughout his works the principles of the Reformation.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone, and the doctrine of the sole authority of the Scriptures. He opposed the Enlightenment Rationalism of his time.

In another Cantata (Ambrose Cantata 309) he “...graphically describes the vain efforts of human reason and human morality to rise by their own effort.”

The Aria reads:

“Crash down in ruin, arrogant bombast!”

Here is a description of Bach's religious life:

Bach was "not an amorphous spirituality without intelligible content or historic roots, but (he possessed) a very definite faith that was as vital and palpable for him as the stones of the Church of St. Thomas in Leipzig..."

*In our time of fast foods, 30 second news up-dates, abridged books, T.V. programs that introduce an issue and disarm it in 30 minutes - we have a tremendous need to stop and smell the roses of artistic endeavors. One such glorious time is in our worship. Our choir presents to us weekly that art called Music, that enhances the total experience of what it means to commune with God.*

When our thoughts fail and our mouths are stopped - the music takes over and we fly to the heights of wonder and recognize the inner pains of who we are - and find a release toward our God.

Bach's music - shares the gospel in a way that mere words cannot.

Music - breathes life into us!

The Music of Joy and Celebration!

As we live in this culture of quick, simplistic, synthetic, often spurious considerations - may we refuse to be overcome by the blandness of the age.

May we see and feel in the Arts in music- the journey of the spirit, and may we bathe in the depths of the classical expressions of the human predicament and the Redemption they elicit.

The Music of Joy and Celebration!

"And all of heaven we have below."

Amen.