



**Approaches to Teaching
Sacred Music
in a Secular Context**

By Joshua R. Jacobson, Robert P. Eaton, Catherine Connor-Moen, Anthony Leach, and Thomas Lloyd

Editor's note: The following is a transcript from a panel discussion on this topic held at the 2006 Eastern Division ACDA Convention. Thomas Lloyd was convener for the panel discussion.

LLOYD As choral directors, so much of the great repertoire we are privileged to work with is religious in nature, liturgical or otherwise related to religious traditions. And yet religion is one of the most contentious issues of our time.

Religion is an intensely personal subject, but in today's world it is a very public and political one as well. Internationally, religion is often used to justify violence, even against peaceful civilians. But even in our local communities, religion can be as much a source of division as unity. As choral conductors, presenting sacred music in secular contexts in public schools, colleges, or independent community choirs gives us a unique opportunity to help build a more constructive understanding of our religious differences.

JACOBSON Here's an experience I had recently: last semester with my college chorus, I was conducting, among other things, Ives' *Psalm 90* and Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. Each week I spent some time explicating the texts to the students so they would understand the words they were singing. I did not present the Psalm texts as dogma; I was analyzing the lyrics as poetry. I also showed the students how Ives was influenced by

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Emerson's Transcendentalist theology and how Stravinsky had a spiritual re-awakening shortly before his symphony was commissioned. After a few weeks, one of the students walked out of rehearsal, and later I was told that he had walked in protest, because he was an agnostic. I had offended him by explaining the context of the lyrics.

Another experience: a few months ago I attended a concert by some Sufi musicians. On the program was a unique Psalm setting by Wojciech Bobowski, a Polish Christian who was captured by Ottoman Turks in 1640 and taken to Constantinople, where he converted to Islam and became a court musician. I was fascinated by his Turkish adaptation of Genevan psalmody. At the time, I was planning a concert of psalms with my Zamir Chorale. I had ample music from Jewish and Christian traditions, but here was a rare opportunity to include an (anomalous) Islamic tradition. I asked the leader of the ensemble if he would be willing to perform this Sufi music on my upcoming concert. After initially agreeing, he called me back and told me that he couldn't do it. Why? He said that in the ten-minute slot in the concert he would not be able to create the proper Sufi spiritual atmosphere.

Well, I had to live with that, but it made me think. We, as choral conductors, are generally quite comfortable performing sacred music on secular concerts. But think about it—on the concert stage are we performing “sacred music” or “musical settings of sacred texts”? We can have a “spiritual” experience in a secular concert; it can be a “peak” experience—but is it a religious experience? The custom of performing sacred texts in secular contexts probably dates back to the Enlightenment. Remember that Beethoven programmed movements of his *Mass in C* on the same concert as his fifth and sixth symphonies in 1808, and the *Missa Solemnis* with his ninth symphony in 1824.

What role does faith play in a musical performance? When I, as a Jew, conducted Bach's *St. John Passion*—which was a real struggle for me, by the way—did I bring something different to that piece than a believing Christian would? I think so. Would a Christian conducting Bloch's *Sacred Service* bring a different perspective?

One other incident: it was the first time I had conducted a performance of Handel's *Messiah*. At the party after the concert, one of the students, Terry Buckley, turned to me and said, “How can a Jew like you conduct a piece like Handel's *Messiah*?” After I picked my jaw up off the floor, I replied, “Look, to some extent, I'm an actor. Actors can put themselves into any role they are given to play, different from their actual personas. So while rehearsing and performing this piece, I can play the appropriate role.” But the question still remains; did I bring something to that experience that was different from that of a pious Christian? And if so, is that a problem, or an asset?

I vividly remember December assemblies in elementary school. All the children were expected to sing Christmas carols. I more or less sang along, until we came to the words “Christ the Lord.” Even as a small child, I understood that I could not in good faith sing those three words. I was made to feel like “the other.” How many of my colleagues realize that singing carols is more a communal experience than an artistic experience?

Can we solve this dilemma by being more inclusive? I get a

lot of e-mails like this, "December's coming up; we've got this concert of Christmas music, can you recommend some Hanukkah pieces?" I remind you that Hanukkah is not the Jewish Christmas. Hanukkah is a minor holiday and most of the Hanukkah music you'll find was actually created in a futile attempt to balance out Christmas concerts. But keep in mind that you can program Jewish music the other eleven months of the year, too. Because the worst thing we can do, ladies and gentlemen, is to program music only because it's politically correct.

I can feel comfortable conducting a requiem, a mass, a passion, or a *Messiah* in concert because I can relate artistically. But I cannot feel comfortable singing Christmas carols, because the intent of the performance is usually an expression of a shared religious community, of which I am not a part. It would be a grave mistake if, because of the confusion of these two approaches, conductors were pressured to eliminate the artistic experience of performing sacred music

in secular concerts.

LLOYD Christmas is an interesting issue because it's a situation where these issues really come to a head, in part because there's so much great Christmas music. Carols are wonderful melodies and there are other longer seasonal works related to them. When I came to Haverford 10 years ago, there had been a regular Christmas concert up until then, and I did away with that because I wanted to do other literature rather than just Christmas music and didn't want to be tied into that. But in my fourth year we had a big concert in early November so we had time after that to do other things and we still had to do a full concert again on campus in December.

So I talked to the students, asking, "shall we do a holiday concert?" It was interesting to me that the Jewish students in the choir were the ones most interested in doing the carols. They were familiar with the music, loved the tunes, but were never able to sing them in a secular context. So for them to be able to sing carols

in a college concert and enjoy them without overtly religious trappings was a treat—they responded to the aspects of the season that the earlier Christians adopted from the so-called "pagan" traditions around them: light within the darkness of the solstice, the warmth and security of home, family, friends, the innocence of a baby in the midst of a dangerous world. So for these Jewish students, a secular concert allowed them to sing religious carols, because it was clearly not a worship context and they felt free to enjoy the music without feeling that pressure.

JACOBSON In his book *Operation Shylock*, Philip Roth writes, "God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and he gave Irving Berlin 'Easter Parade' and 'White Christmas,' the two holidays that celebrate the divinity of Christ, the divinity at the very heart of the Jewish rejection of Christianity. And what does Irving Berlin do? Easter he turns into a fashion show and Christmas into a holiday about snow."


Actually, it wasn't just Irving Berlin. In almost all of the popular American Christmas carols, there is no church, no Jesus. You have snow and snowmen, roasting chestnuts, family reunions, sleigh-bells, Santa, reindeer and presents. After all, Christmas is an official American holiday, and there are many people who are quite comfortable with blurring the lines of separation between government and religion. But it is one thing to broaden your horizons by experiencing music of twentieth-century Brazil or sixteenth-century France or nineteenth-century Russia. It is quite another to join in a ceremony, the theology of which is a denial of your own. Some ecumenical experiences work; others don't. There should be a difference between performing *Ave Verum Corpus* as part of the church liturgy and as part of a concert.

EATON Most of my experience has been in public school with church music and community chorus as an adjunct. My own bias comes from a New England background in which religion is very personal and not evangelized. Consequently, I find that even when working with church choirs I do not teach religion. I try to relate text to music, to musical


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gesture, and to let their own beliefs carry them the next step. I try to put things in cultural context and certainly explain the text and the music, because even in the church situation many people don't make

we might be singing because it is good music. Understand what you're singing about; understand what the composer was trying to say, have some understanding about the cultural context of the composer

many more emotional highs when they are given the freedom to take themselves into the music rather than try to mimic what I might dictate. We need to have confidence that the music can speak for itself.

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the connections of text and music.

In the school situation, if you ask teenagers as they listen to their favorite tune over and over again what the song is about most of them have no clue. They just listen. They make no connections between text and music. I find in the school environment, whether it's religious or secular, Dowland or Verdi, it requires a concerted effort to make the students aware of what they are singing about.

For example, when you deal with text like Victoria's *O Magnum Mysterium*, you grapple with how to get students to relate to the sense of awe and mystery that's reflected in the music. We try to find something in their experience with which they can relate that will elicit that same feeling. Few students would respond to the religious connotations. I keep telling them that they are performers, just like actors and actresses on a stage. Their role as musicians as they are performing a piece is to play the role, to reflect the meaning and emotion of the composition. They don't have to agree with the text, just communicate it. If they are playing a villain on stage they act, they don't play a villain in real life. The same thing is true in our approach to music. Simply relate the text to the music, the musical gesture and the feeling.

My experience is that students in my choirs really enjoy the Mozart *Regina Coeli* or Vivaldi *Gloria* far more than they do anything more popular or secular

and what they are trying to say and then later you can personalize or internalize it in the context of your own experience.

I take the same approach with a church choir. There will be some people in the choir who will be totally moved by what they felt was a religious experience and others—it was just a nice piece. That is perfectly acceptable. I don't have to convince them, I don't have to teach them philosophy or religious ideology, just an understanding. I think my singers have

LLOYD One of the things you touch on is really central to our discussion. That is, when we perform music, we have no control over how it is taken in, interpreted, or what meaning is drawn from it by either performers we're directing or the audience. That's a wonderful thing in a way. And what it does then is gives us freedom to be very specific about the music itself, about the relationship between the text and the music, what the text is saying, what the composer's perspective was. By being more specific in this way, I think that frees people listening or singing to bring to it what they will in a more personal way.

I think dancing around the specific nature of the text, whether it be religious or secular, does the opposite. It really doesn't give people enough to respond to, in a way. When I coach students in art song literature, I tell them they need to have a point of view about the song. Why do you have to sing it? Why did the composer have to write it? If you have an answer for these questions, even if

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the audience can't guess what you have in mind they will have a sense of something much more particular going on and it will prompt things in their minds that are much more specific than if you give a glazed-over generalized kind of performance that doesn't seem to have a point of view.

CONNOR-MOEN It's very interesting to hear what both Josh and Bob had to say. I come from a very similar background as Bob, having taught in a public school. In one respect it was easy when I began my career. The place where I taught, Norwood, was a very homogeneous community about 20 miles south of Boston when I first started to work there—primarily Irish and Italian Catholic. We would end our junior high concerts singing "Silent Night" to the whole community and that was the way it was and everybody was quite happy with it.

Over the last ten years, the change in demographics has been extreme. Quite a

large number of Black, Asian, and Muslim students have moved into the district. As an educator it is wonderful to look out and see that sea of faces with different experiences and different backgrounds. One recent incident brought into focus how there is a certain tension between excitement of welcoming new cultures into the community and a sense of loss of valued traditions of the past. We have always ended our high school performance with a big group sing-along of the "Hallelujah Chorus" from *Messiah*. People from the community come up to the stage, join in, and that's how we always ended our performance.

Our choirs and our bands have gotten very large which is a wonderful thing from a programming point of view, but it begins to present real logistical difficulties as well. So this year we tried a number of solutions, none of which we were happy with. We stated in the program that the band was going to play the "Hallelujah Chorus" by themselves without the choir.

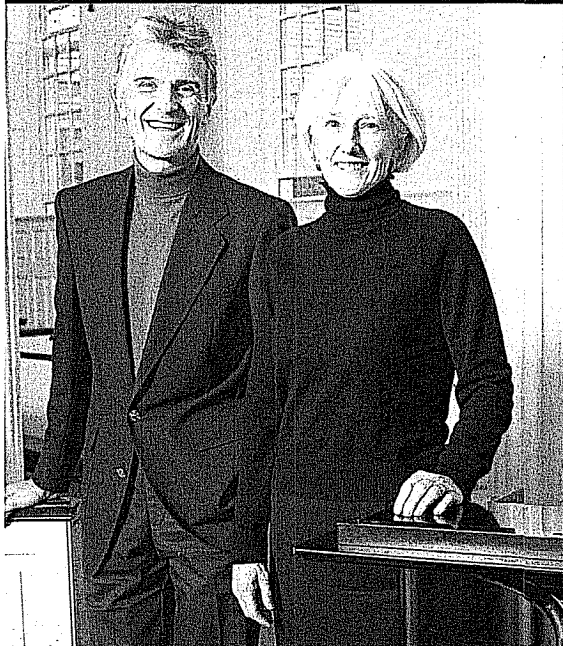
We explained that this only a temporary solution due to sudden growth, and that we would be looking into doing this more successfully in a future year, and wished everyone a wonderful holiday season.

I can't even begin to describe the uproar this caused! The first letter (from a parent of a child I took to sing at the Vatican last year.) equated me to a "heathen atheist" taking all Christmas out of the holiday concerts. This response was probably encouraged by all the press coverage the "Holiday" versus "Christmas" controversy in retail stores was getting. We had a variety of letters to the editor about "getting that music program under control." We had anonymous phone calls from pay phones to principals and superintendents protesting the perception that we are no longer allowed to sing Christmas carols in our elementary schools. This was very disconcerting, very upsetting, and based on a lot of false information.

In a panic, my elementary school



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teachers went through all their old programs and came up with lists of how many Christmas songs they had done in recent years, how many songs reflecting the Jewish tradition, the African-American tradition, how many were sacred, with graphs and charts, etcetera.

I truly believe in a comprehensive choral program. I'm very proud that in our community we have a Renaissance Madrigal group that does a great deal of sacred music, we have a larger choral program that does many wonderful masterpieces from larger major works. Not only do we have to justify to our students, what we sing, what we teach, how we teach it, but I think it's important that we justify to our communities that we have a very comprehensive music program as a result of a great deal of collective thought and consideration. But how do we convey that to our parents, to our school committees, to our greater community?

We have tried in our community to always teach from a historical perspective. We spend a great deal of time talking about the history, the time period of the piece, the background of the composer, the social context, such as with the spirituals that have come out of the African-American struggle of slavery, and so on.

And each student has to understand the text, where this music is coming from, what this composer was trying to say. But it's not only a question of understanding; it's a question of respect of culture, of the years of tradition behind this kind of music, a respect for the expressive intent of the composer. For public middle-school and high-school students, who are just beginning to sort out their beliefs, which in many cases start out as a reflection of what their parents think, it is important to find a place where they can experience that feeling, that respect, that passion, that commitment.

No, they don't have to believe what the composer believed. But in the human condition, there's a commonality; we have the same kinds of emotion—but we may get to those feelings a different way. To be able to tap into those feelings in their performance, in their understanding, in their approach to the music, I feel is very important.

LLOYD You touch on the emotional is-

ues of interpretation, discerning what a composer has in mind, what they felt compelled to say musically, which are all very important. It's a difficult line to draw between translating religious fervor or the emotion of faith in a way that can be transposed emotionally according to the individual perspectives of the students. It takes a lot of trial and error to be able to do that in a way that really conveys the sense of emotional conviction imbued into the music by the composer in a personal way without making anyone feel that they must share the composer's faith.

Singers should feel free to transpose the religious motivations of the composer and liturgical implications of the text into their own personal perspectives in order to fully engage the music. Without that, the whole musical experience becomes much more detached from the material in a way that not only has less meaning to the singer but less musical impact as well.

CONNOR-MOEN I think every child, and every one of us has a certain comfort level, a level of what we are able and willing to share. Looking back to when we were children, we can remember adults saying, "well, when you grow up, you'll understand" or responding to revealing your first love with "well, that's puppy love – infatuation – you'll get over it," as your heart is on the floor.

As I look at my own students, I think their experiences are valid for where they are, and if you are trying to get them to express a feeling, a sense of respect, an emotion, you can't judge their experiences. If you are talking about a deep feeling of loss, none of us can grasp that feeling of loss from the Holocaust or the African-American slavery tradition. Thank God. And yet many can relate to the feelings of loss of a parent, a child, their first love, or a pet. You can't ask them to tell you about it; that's not our business, but you ask them to try to touch that feeling of loss, that feeling of pain, just to have a sense of where that composer is coming from, or where their performance is coming from. There's a fine line there, but the depth of the performance you'll be getting, the sense of respect that those students will then bring is no longer a

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piece of paper with notes on it—it's truly an experience, it's an emotion, it's a moment. That's what music is really about, to say what nothing else can truly say.

LEACH We do District and Regional choirs in Pennsylvania and I told this district choir, three weeks ago, fabulous kids, grades 10–12, my job is to help you be a storyteller. You don't have to believe in the story, or like the story. Some of the stories were in Latin, some by African-American composers, Japanese composers, just a great array of stuff. The audience is going to know whether you are telling the story because they're looking into your eyes. You don't have to believe in the story yourself, but you certainly have to stand and deliver, and then they're going to connect positively with you. And they did. Over those three days, we got it together and it was fabulous.

Now, I'm bilingual. What do I mean by that? On the one hand, I've been black all my life and even though I live in this huge world, I have a framework as an African-American, especially in music, that imbues a track in me that I constantly refer to because my mom's a musician, she's been a church musician, so I came up knowing some stuff. And so when I was able to connect within that musical context, I thought, that's cool.

But I kept that part of me, coming out of the African-American church music tradition, separate as time went

on. I became a music educator and did my music educator thing, and I did my African-American thing, and it wasn't until my last high-school job, just outside Washington, D.C., in 1987 when the two worlds really came together. I was taking my high-school choir to England

other Monday through Friday. I thought, hmmm, maybe it's time to do a Gospel Choir at Springbrook High School.

Well, wouldn't you know.... I put out an appeal and the room was filled with kids; believers, non-believers, Muslim students, Jewish students. No auditions.

How do we marry what the composer has on paper within this huge arena of beliefs and non-beliefs and challenges?

and Scotland. I was asked to do music for the annual Black History Month Assembly. Y'all know, we do that. So I put a little gospel choir together and it was cute, and fine. We got on the plane and went to England; we went to Scotland. Recently I was reviewing the videotapes, and six kids from that gospel choir were in my high school choir and the audience was like at a football game when those six kids sang their gospel songs in the concert. I thought, oh, I'm missing something. Remember, I'm separate, I'm doing this Sunday morning, and I do this

You all come. Hmmm. Did that for 3 years. Talked to those kids. As time went on, my choral program was very successful. I said, should this be part of the curriculum? NO, we don't it to be part of the curriculum—we just want to do this because we like the music. Oh, OK.

Now, because I'm a music educator, I'm a little savvy. OK, we can do this much about Jesus and we can't do that much about Jesus and there's a ton of repertoire, gospel, spirituals, that has no reference to Jesus. It may very well be sacred but all spirituals are not sacred. All gospel music is not sacred. It is a personal expression, so don't be confused there.

So, I left and went to Penn State in 1991, minding my own business, trying to get this Ph.D. Somebody called and said will you do the music for the annual Martin Luther King banquet. I said I don't have a choir, but I'll invite some kids to do it. Well, this choir is Essence of Joy today. Now, somebody says, ooh, Penn State's Gospel Choir. No. This is not Penn State's Gospel Choir. There is a gospel choir, they are student directed and they rise and fall on that student leadership. This choir bears academic credit, so in this secular institution we do music from the African and African-American tradition, sacred and secular, always.

However, we do gospel music. We do it real well; I don't apologize for that, but we do African music and we do it



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real well, and every now and then, we'll find ourselves in a context where I'll have to say Okay, "Jesus is Love" today and in explaining one of our songs for an elementary school audience. So now we get into the politically correct thing, and we've avoided that discussion today. How do we marry what the composer has on paper within this huge arena of beliefs and non-beliefs and challenges? And I simply go with what has already been said today: if you're doing quality repertoire, it speaks for itself. Consequently, rather than having to explain why we do what we do to a school board, or to a principal, or to a parent, or to a kid, why can't we do what we on one hand have been trained to do and be really, really smart. I don't mean in a negative way but be really articulate and intelligent in how we serve up whatever we do with our repertoire.

So then, as I've resolved my bilingual thing, I discovered that the resolution was always in me. First of all to value and to honor the traditions that I know and am fluent in. But at the same time, as my mother said to me when I was a teenager, "Tony, you're going to be successful, but you're going to have to know our music from the African-American community and do it better than anybody else. And, you're going to have to know their music and do it better than anybody else in order to be legitimate in the eyes of some people." And she did not lie.

So the deal for us as music educators is that if you think that you can rest on what you learned at Oberlin, Eastman, Penn State, 15, 20, 25 years ago, I've got a story for you. You'd better get over it, because there's a whole other world emerging around you. And when you look at your audience, Catherine told us how her community has changed so drastically in the last ten years—our whole country has changed. Here we are—struggling with this idea of sacred music in a secular context. There's no right, wrong, or easy solution. The dialogue has got to be open. But first of all, we have to reconcile, as Bob said, our own bias and/or our own unreadiness as far as all this is concerned.

LLOYD Just to bring our discussion to a close, it strikes me that sacred music

of any tradition offers something both to the religious community and to the community at large, something that can't be found elsewhere: a sense of mystery, a sense of awe. Even though we usually associate these senses with religious feeling, they can be experienced in a secular context as well, and are often missing in the sacred.

A couple of weeks ago when I was rehearsing Verdi's great "Dies Irae" from the *Requiem* and took a stab at trying to describe the sense of fear that the music conjures up so powerfully. I suggested to the students it was something akin to being alone in the woods when there's no traffic around, with the sense of extreme quiet almost deafening in our ears, the vastness that conveys, and the smallness of our place in the midst of all that—or of being in New York, in the middle of a busy avenue at mid-day and just being overwhelmed by the variety and number of people there are in the world.

That vastness, the awareness of the larger reality that encompasses us, and to which humankind has attributed a wide variety of both sacred and secular meanings—this is something that music can convey far more richly and powerfully than mere words. And it is a perspective our world so desperately needs in order to see beyond the divisions and violence that plague us.

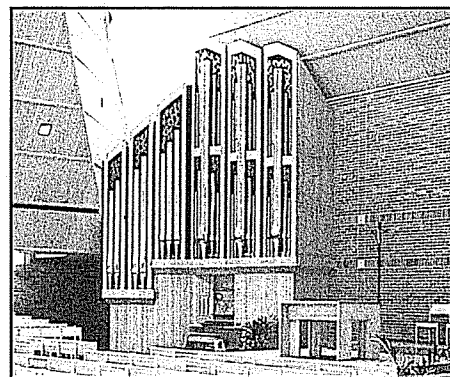


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JUNE 11-15

Children's Choirs

Michael Burkhardt, Professor of Music,
Director of the Carthage Choir, Carthage
College, Kenosha, Wisconsin

Music in the Contemporary Church

May Schwarz, Professor of Church Music &
Director, M.A. in Church Music Program,
Trinity Lutheran Seminary

JUNE 18-22

Music and Worship in the African American Tradition

Raymond Wise, Affiliated Professor of
Church Music, Trinity Lutheran Seminary

Handbells

Jane McFadden, Composer, Arranger,
Handbell Director, Christ Lutheran Church,
Columbus, Ohio

JUNE 25-29

Perspectives in Choral Conducting

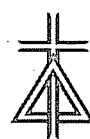
Lynda Hasseler, Professor of Music, Director
of Choral Activities, Capital University,
Columbus, Ohio

Music Technology for Church Musicians

Justin Riley, Adjunct Instructor, Capital
University, Columbus, Ohio

*Courses for graduate credit or audit.
Credit may be applied to M.A.C.M.*

For further information, please call or e-mail:



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