

Music at A&P

Worship and Culture



I recently read a fascinating article in the English newspaper *The Guardian*, in which the author examined a remarkable phenomenon: while smaller parish churches are declining and closing at an alarming rate, over the past decade or so, English cathedrals have seen attendance surge. The author attributes the renaissance

of the cathedrals to their diversification as cultural centres, and a down-playing of their roles as specifically Christian houses of worship in the traditional sense.

In my opinion this is an over-simplification. However, the author does raise a number of interesting points:

1. In our culture, Christianity is no longer the norm;
2. Our society has needs that are not being met by the various “-isms” that are on offer, e.g. individualism, secularism, consumerism, etc.
3. The Church (and cathedral-like churches in particular, apparently) is well-placed to reach out and embrace that society.

Point 1 hardly needs discussion; those of us who strive to live faithful lives in the world know all too well how counter-cultural our beliefs and practices are. While we are aliens in a foreign land, we have a wonderful opportunity to be salt and light to everyone we meet, to mix a few scriptural references! Point 2 is also self-evident: the increasingly frenetic pace of our society, the politics of division, the breakdown of civility in our public discourse etc. point to a profound emptiness in the lives of many around us.

Point 3 brings us to the crux of this essay: how do we at the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul bring hope and comfort to a broken world? We have many various outreach ministries, but the one I can best speak to is that of music and worship. Our church is richly blessed in many ways: generous benefactors who have left us a large endowment that allows for all sorts of extraordinary ministry; a beautiful building that is ideally located; a sophisticated and diverse urban community; a diverse, gifted, and loyal congregation; a dedicated and enthusiastic staff and clergy team; a great choir and organ; and a further list that could fill pages. Trusting that God will reward our faithful efforts, we put those gifts into His service as a gift to our neighbours, regardless of their faith or creed.

We aim for reverent, well-planned and substantial worship services that speak to the present while celebrating the treasury of sacred music handed down to us over the centuries.

At St. Andrew and St. Paul, we sing and play hymns and great sacred music of the past and present in a living, breathing, worshipping faith community. Word and music are united, in that we strive to coordinate the readings, sermon, hymns, choral and organ music into one seamless whole that speaks to the moment. In a sense, every Sunday is All Saints and Remembrance Sunday to us, as we see, hear, sing and say the truth and beauty that our

ancestors have left to us. We can truly “Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness”, as the hymn text says.

We seek out partnerships with community and performing arts organizations whose goals may intersect with ours, in the interest of touching a larger audience with our message of love, joy and hope.

Whether it’s with *l’Ensemble Caprice* (Good Friday), the Montreal Symphony (Maison du Parc AIDS Hospice Benefit Concert), or the McGill Chamber Orchestra (Handel’s *Messiah* this December 13), we’ve forged relationships with other orchestras that allow us to present great choral-orchestral works in the church. Good Friday evening is a worship service in which we observe the Passion of our Lord, but even in the concerts with the other two orchestras, our status as a church choir singing in its own church home lends a sacred significance to the performances that could never be reproduced at *la Maison symphonique*. Our partnership with the CBC in the CBC Christmas Sing-In is unique in Canada, and allows us to broadcast the joy of Christmas to well over one million Canadians and Europeans each year, not to mention the 1,500-plus Montrealers who pack into our church and Bourgie Hall every December. In early July 2017, we are delighted to host the opening worship service of a joint National Convention of the Royal Canadian College of Organists and American Guild of Organists, which will be attended by over 1,000 church musicians from across the continent.

We do all of these things not primarily in order to mount the best performance of say, Brahms’ *Requiem*, though of course we aim for the highest possible standard in everything. Our main goal is the worship and God and the edification of His people; the great music of the past and present is the language through which we musicians express ourselves, and with which we can bless the listener.

Returning to that question of our role in a post-Christian society: music (especially instrumental music) is a somewhat less specific medium than the spoken word for communicating a message; even the Reformer John Calvin (who was deeply sceptical of music’s appropriateness in worship) recognized that music touched parts of the soul that language could not reach. Through our music and with our beautiful building, we can lovingly embrace visitors who may not share our faith, and send them a message of God’s unfailing love. At the same time, we can celebrate our rich Western tradition of sacred music, not only by performing the music well, but by performing it in its proper home, at the heart of a vibrant faith community. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

Jonathan Oldengarm