



Musical Instruments and Musicians in Worship

Where have all the organists gone?

The Canadian Reformed Churches are at a liturgical-musical crossroad. I'm talking in particular about the musical instruments and the musicians who play them. There's a declining number of organists. Now, this isn't a new observation. Among others,¹ Dr. James Visscher, one of *Clarion's* familiar voices and now a retired pastor, raised the issue already almost a decade ago when he asked whether the organist will go the way of the dinosaur (Vol 53, No 10). At the time, some readers may have considered his *clarion* call mildly humorous and a little overboard. Others, no doubt, chafed. His observations, however, proved to be a reflection of reality, and an accurate forecast of developments since then. Not only is there a shrinking supply of organists, as Pastor Visscher said back then; in some congregations, there is not even a single organist.

Indeed, that trend has continued. Sometimes pianists are asked to play the organ, even if they haven't been trained to do so. Alternatively, churches have turned to the piano to replace the organ. Pianists, after all, are quite plentiful.

Look both ways ... and back!

When you're at a crossroad, you have to keep moving. But it's always a good idea to look both ways. And ... to use your rear-view mirror. When we do this at the liturgical-musical crossroad at which we find ourselves, there's hardly any question about what place the organ, especially the beloved pipe organ, has had among us.

Over the past centuries, in fact, the organ *"has come to be an integral part of the service of the Western Church."*² The Canadian Reformed Churches are no exception. Considering the present trend, however, one wonders what the future holds for the organ in worship.

Alternatives?

Along with the trend of a shrinking supply of organists comes the question of what the alternatives are. Is it time to introduce other instruments in worship? Besides, if there are more trained pianists than organists, should piano play a more dominant role? Also, considering all the other musical instruments that are available and the wide variety of musical talent within the body of Christ, should these be employed? Does the Bible warrant, maybe even command, the use of a broad spectrum of instruments? You hear lots of people asking these sorts of questions in our churches these days.

Wisdom needed!

Those aren't the only questions that need answers, of course. Godly wisdom dictates that we should also be asking what practices and choices best serve the unity and edification of the congregations and the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. By its very nature, any discussion on music in worship can be quite charged and emotional. Universal experience confirms that music has the power to be either unifying or divisive. Clearly, Christians desire unity, not division, if our hearts and motives are in step with the Spirit of Christ.³ As church musical scholar Erik Routley has written, *"it should be one of the marks of the church's special genius that its music can be satisfying both to the musician of fastidious standards and to the nonmusical*

worshipper."⁴ Neglecting or ignoring such an important matter as music in the worship of the church, and how that music is made, would not merely impoverish the church; it would also dishonour God. Carl Halter, another church musical expert, once said:

*"The church which neglects its music or assigns to it a purely pedestrian function robs itself outrageously, and it flies in the face not only of the experience of the church but also of the will of God."*⁵

The Bible's teaching on music and song largely confirms these notions.

What now?

Singing and making music to the Lord is one of the pivotal liturgical activities of Christ's church in her Lord's Day worship services. There are weighty biblical and church historical grounds for devoting considerable attention to which musical instruments are most suitable for inclusion in the church's song. What are the best criteria for making this choice? How did the organ become the preferred instrument to the exclusion of others in most Canadian Reformed Churches, as in many other churches? What alternatives are there, and what might be the reasons for exploring them? Why is this topic so emotionally charged? How do factors such as architecture, finances, culture, location, congregational size, and musical expertise influence the selection of instruments and musicians? How can we move forward without despair, cynicism, and division? How can we praise our God in music and song as joyfully, skillfully, and pleasingly as we are able?

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Endnotes:

¹ E.g., H.F.W. Roth, "A Dearth of Organists: What Now?" *Reformed Music Journal* 14 no. 1 (January 2002); P. Janson, "Editorial: O' Shortage of Organists," *Reformed Music Journal* 4 no. 3 (July 1992).

² Gerhard Kappner, "The Church Service and Music," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 12 (1956): 254. Cf. John Ferguson, "Instrumental Music in Service to the Text," *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* Vol. 4, *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, Robert E. Webber, ed. (Nashville, TN: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), bk. 1: 394.

³ Erik Routley, *Music Leadership in the Church* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), 90.

⁴ Ibid, 91.

⁵ Carl Halter, *The Practice of Sacred Music* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), 11.