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Exploring Christian Song (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Exploring Christian Song. M. Jennifer Bloxam and Andrew Shenton, eds. Lexington: Lexington Books, 2017. ISBN978-1-4985-4990-5. xix + 238 pages. Reviewed by Karen A. De Mol, Ph.D., Professor of Music Emerita, Dordt College.

Christian scholars in the Reformed tradition stand on the foundation that every discipline, as part of all creation, belongs to Jesus Christ our Lord, and all of life is lived out *Coram Deo*—before his face. We strive to discover and demonstrate what Christian scholarship looks like in our particular discipline. What distinguishes a Christian approach in linguistics, music, history? What does Christian scholarship look like in chemistry, mathematics, engineering? A central mark of the Reformed approach is the framework of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration: What is revealed about creation in my discipline? How has the fall distorted the areas of biology and theatre? How does Christ's redemption affect chemistry and history? What will restoration look like in music and engineering?

This is a profound and productive foundation. Might there be other approaches? Another can be *what Christian scholars pay attention to*. That approach is prominent in *Exploring Christian Song* (Lexington Books, 2017), newly published by the Society for Christian Scholarship in Music.

The Society for Christian Scholarship in Music (formerly the Forum on Music and Christian Scholarship) was founded in 2002 as an association of scholars interested in “exploring the intersections of Christian faith and musical scholarship” (www.scsmusic.org). SCSM seeks faith-based understanding of all aspects of music, from theory to performance, historical research to composition; many of the papers presented at the conferences and subsequently detailed in the semi-annual newsletter represent this wide range. A central activity is its annual convention, at which papers are presented by SCSM members, who include musicologists, music theorists, ethnomusicologists, and theologians. On the occasion of its 15th anniversary, SCSM published a volume composed of the strongest conference keynote addresses, papers, and student presentations. As it turned out, all the chapters of

its first book relate to church music, resulting in the book's title, *Exploring Christian Song*. It is to be hoped that this title does not reinforce the mistaken belief by many that Christian scholarship concerns only church music; even publishers can quickly assume that any proposed work of Christian scholarship is about church music. SCSM is to be applauded for understanding that the scope of Christian music scholarship is much broader, and encouraged in its mission to produce research, papers, and future publications representing that breadth. I look forward to sequels to this first book, manifesting that breadth.

So what have the scholars represented in this collection addressed? Several threads emerge: the selection of topics, emphasis within those topics, and attention to factors left out by other scholars. For example, they address not only the musical materials and structure of pieces but also the purpose of the pieces in life and liturgy, and the influence of theology and faith in the imagination of the composer. Summaries of chapters with each of these foci follow.

TOPICS

The role of Christian song in Christian unity is the focus of “Song as a Sign and Means of Christian Unity,” by Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, who examines the role that songs from ancient times to the present have played in Christian unity. Tucker sees three arenas in unity. First, she considers *possible intentions of unity* by tracing the use—across languages and later across denominations—of various songs, including the ancient text *Phos hilaron*, the texts of Isaac Watts, and CCM (Christian Contemporary Music), musing on whether and how the sharing of these songs between and across the churches “may be an unconscious or even a conscious means of furthering and encouraging the cause of Christian unity” (13). Then she details *intentional efforts*

to express and promote Christian unity through a commonly used body of song, efforts that have resulted in, for instance, published song collections by the World's Student Christian Federation and the World Council of Churches, a multi-denominational hymn book produced in Australia, and the well-known song collections of the Taizé Community in France and of John Bell's Iona Community in Scotland. Finally, Tucker describes a *specific inter-denominational effort*, in which Methodists and Catholics sought to embrace together the hymns of John and Charles Wesley, particularly the Eucharistic songs. In all these efforts, Tucker discerns the seeking of the fulfilment of Paul's prayer—that "with one voice" the churches may "glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5-6) (19).

FACTORS

Another thread is the discernment of faith-related factors left out in other research. Common in musicological publications, dissertations, and conference papers are analytic studies of music—analyses of the structure of specific pieces or of the development of a genre. What the authors of *Exploring Christian Song* also factor into such analyses is the influence of worship context and devotional life.

For example, a common scholarly task is to identify the sources of musical materials, as, for example, identifying the original monophonic chants used as the basis of later polyphonic choral works. There has been much attention to how chants became the basis of polyphony; and that is the starting point of M. Jennifer Bloxam's essay, "The Late Medieval Composer as Cleric: Browsing Chant Manuscripts with Obrecht." But less attention has been paid to the impact of "the lived experience of daily worship on the compositional choices of composers of sacred polyphony. A man's clerical status was not simply the incidental framework within which he plied his musical craft; his experience of ritual and its plainsong, internalized over years of daily participation, profoundly shaped the polyphony he created to adorn religious services" (29). In identifying the chants used in the fifteenth-century polyphonic music of Jacob Obrecht, Bloxam relates Obrecht's choices to his unusually well-documented life—his immersion in the services of the church as a child,

choirmaster, and priest—positing that his musical choices arose from deep devotional experience. In his selection of segments of plainsong to use in polyphonic settings, the position of the plainsong in the liturgy mattered more than pleasing melodic shape. In addition, he selected texts for exegetical ends, "working as a teacher and preacher of the faith through music" (4).

Another chapter addresses the devotional and liturgical use of documents and compositions, often ignored by iconographical studies focusing on genre and place. Melody Marchman Schade's "Reading Ottaviano Petrucci's Early Motet Prints as Devotional Books" describes sixteenth-century motet prints as relatively small, easily portable books that were actually in the hands of many laypeople, as were *horae*, small prayer books, which enabled individual reading (as compared to group reading or listening) and hence "solitary practices of devotion and piety" (57). Reading them enabled contemplative reading tied to prayer, similar to *lectio divina*. The texts of motets can be read silently as devotional exercises, enhanced by the worshiper's holding the book as well as by hearing the music.

Engaging more recent music, Timothy Steele addresses not only musical structure and context but also purpose. In "Zoltan Kodaly's *Geneva Psalm 50: The Composer as Prophet in an Age of Crisis*," he writes that Kodaly "understood the need to speak prophetically—that is, to bring the word of God to bear on particular issues in the church and in society, enable men and women to see their circumstances from God's perspective, and admonish them to act in obedience to that word" (132). In the context of an extensive history of the Hungarian people's situation and response during the harsh regimes of Nazi Germany and subsequent Soviet communism, before, during, and after World War II, in which the Hungarian church failed to oppose the oppression of the Jews, Steele describes Kodaly's choice of Psalm 50 as a Psalm of judgment. In Kodaly's setting, text-painting in musically harsh terms expresses the grim judgment of God in Psalm 50; by incorporating the rhythms of both the Genevan Psalm tunes beloved by the Hungarian people and Hungarian folk music, he implies that the judgment applies to the Hungarian church. Thus Kodaly's *Geneva Psalm 50* is a form of musical preaching, a prophetic utterance, enabling

Christians “to respond to the deep inner crisis that Hungarians faced after the war: a spiritual crisis rooted in both the circumstances that led to and followed from the Hungarian Holocaust and the imposition of an aggressively anticlerical regime” (Soviet Communism). *Geneva Psalm 50* is both a warning and a call to repentance (134).

EMPHASIS

Along with *what Christian scholars pay attention to*, one could note *what Christian scholars emphasize*. The Orthodox faith of contemporary Polish composer Arvo Pärt is no secret. However, Andrew Shenton’s chapter brings it to deeper levels of awareness. Shenton provides a detailed analysis of Pärt’s *Magnificat* of 1989 according to the linguistic model of Umberto Eco and the classic and rigorous music analysis system of Jan La Rue (*Guidelines for Style Analysis*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1971 and 2011), showing how this landmark piece exhibits a pinnacle of the development of Pärt’s compositional style. But that technical musical analysis is not the final goal of his paper. In “Magnificat: Arvo Pärt, the Quiet Evangelist,” Shenton reveals how Pärt’s compositional process was undertaken for the purpose of achieving union with God and “exegetes” the piece as “part of the hesychast

tradition—one in which practitioners seek divine quietness through contemplation of God” (155). Further, Shenton claims that Pärt is “evangelizing Christian theology not just to the initiated, but to a much wider and more diverse audience” (155)—Pärt the evangelist.

Other chapters, focusing on topic, factors, and emphasis, address theology and musical conventions in the cantata arias of J. S. Bach; the librettos of the oratorios of C. P. E. Bach and G. F. Telemann as a religious response to Enlightenment skepticism; the practice of “tuning up” in black preaching as it relates to Gospel song; and a sonic approach to the theological content of congregational music, particularly praise and worship music. In a concluding chapter “Bridging the Old and the New in Contemporary Contexts,” Ghanaian scholar J. H. Kwabena Nketia lays out the challenge in his country of moving “from mission Christianity wrapped in Western attire” to African Christianity, with music that successfully incorporates the tonal patterns of African music and acknowledges the instrumental and other conventions that tie songs to specific contexts.

Readers may be interested in the topics of specific chapters or in the whole as an approach to Christian scholarship in music.

Looking for Dawn. James Calvin Schaap. Alton, Iowa: Floyd River Press, 2017. Amazon Digital Services LLC. ASIN: B078L72CDL. 349 pages. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Associate Professor English, Dordt College.

“You should read Faulkner in the dog days of August,” my sister once advised me. “That’s when he’s best—in the sweltering heat.”

If Faulkner should be read in August, James C. Schaap’s *Looking for Dawn* should be read in February, well after the January thaw and before it has become apparent that deep winter on the northern plains will ever relent. *Looking for Dawn* leans into winter. The lashing winds of the prairies that spirit ghosts of snow across open roadways are both a beautiful, animating life-force in the book and a deadly killer, and that’s just as it should be.

Looking for Dawn is Faulkner-esque in another way, too. As the book opens, news has broken that a Lakota teenager, Dawn Burnett, has attempted to take her own life via exposure: she has somewhat

inexplicably driven into a ditch in the middle of nowhere as a northwest wind bears down on her in sub-zero weather. Exploring what has led her to this action, *Looking for Dawn* follows multiple narrators in and around the fictional town of Cottonwood, South Dakota—a northern-plains version of Jefferson, Mississippi, one of Faulkner’s fictional settings—to uncover the buried past.

Dawn’s actions are not really that inexplicable if you know the whole story, but only a few characters have any idea of the story. Woody Dekkers, long time Cottonwood history teacher, is one of them. Woody and his wife, Tienieke, are the primary narrators in *Looking for Dawn*, and they piece together the story for us in a twenty-four-hour period that runs from first news of Dawn’s