

Beyond “Special Music”: The Church Choir’s Role in Worship

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A church choir’s work in worship usually follows a particular pattern: anthems at the offering, introits, hymn descants, and perhaps the occasional cantata. These contributions are often labeled “special music,” implying that choral music enhances, but is not integral to, worship itself. This session examines the church choir’s vital role as worship leader, teacher, and model for intergenerational collaboration. Particular attention will be given to the use and integration of choral music throughout the worship service. Lists of repertoire and resources will be provided, including repertoire for children’s choirs and music from non-Western traditions.

the challenges of the term “special music”

- Is choral music in worship more than decorative?
- Historical overview of vocal/choral music in worship

utilitarian arguments for choral music

- theological functions
- liturgical/communal functions
- leading “the people’s song”

integration opportunities

- hymns and other assembly songs
 - the *concertato* principle
 - teaching new hymns
 - introducing hymns
- proclamation of scripture
 - gospel motets
 - “near gospel” motets
- prayer responses
- benedictions and charges
- creating worship ritornelli

integration rationales (program goals)

- involving children
- singing intergenerationally
- sharing from other cultures and languages
- highlighting liturgical seasons

Featured Repertoire (score & recording links)

[*A Universal Blessing*](#) – Alice Parker
[performance](#)

[*Bwana Awabariki*](#)
[performance](#)

[*Easter Introit*](#) – John Ferguson
[performance](#)

[*Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song*](#) – arr. Zebulon M. Highben
[performance](#)

[*Lumière de Dieu*](#)
[performance](#)

[*Silence, My Soul*](#) – Francisco Feliciano (*text by Rabindranath Tagore*)
[performance](#)

[*Stay with Us*](#) – Egil Hovland
[performance](#)

[*Unity*](#) – Glorraine B. Moone & Rev. Freddie Washington, arr. Daniel M. Cason II
[performance](#)

[*Words from Two Women*](#) – Jane Marshall (*texts by Mechtild of Magdeburg & Teresa of Calcutta*)
[performance](#)

Additional Hymn Concertati

[*Balm in Gilead*](#) – arr. M Roger Holland II

[*Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation*](#) – arr. Anne Krentz Organ

[*Day of Arising*](#) – Carl Schalk

[*I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light*](#) – arr. Kristina Langlois

[*O God, Beyond All Praising*](#) – arr. Richard Proulx

[*The Church's One Foundation*](#) – arr. Dan Forrest

Choral Hymn Stanza Collections

Choral Stanzas for Hymns, [Volume 1](#) & [Volume 2](#) – various composers

Five Choral Stanzas, [Set 1](#) & [Set 2](#) – David Cherwien

Hymn Stanzas for Unison Choir, [Set 1](#) & [Set 2](#) – various composers

With Angel Choirs, [Set 1](#) & [Set 2](#) – Michael Burkhardt

Additional Gospel Motets

[Come Unto Me](#) – Victor Johnson

[Dixit Maria](#) – Hans Leo Hassler

[Early Easter Morning](#) – Jennifer Kerr Breedlove

[Esto Les Digo](#) – Kinley Lange

[Feed My Lambs](#) – Natalie Sleeth

[Hosianna dem Sohne Davids](#) – attr. Bartholomäus Gesius

[I Believe This is Jesus](#) – arr. Undine Smith Moore

[In the Breaking of The Bread](#) – Zebulon Highben

[My Sheep Hear My Voice](#) – Leland Sateren

[Osanna filio David](#) – Franz Schubert

[Peace I Leave with You](#) – Amy Beach

[Whoever Would be Great Among You](#) – Ronald A. Nelson

Anthologies, Songbooks, & Hymnals

[African American Heritage Hymnal](#). GIA Publications, 2001.

[Agape: Songs of Hope and Reconciliation](#). Oxford University Press, 2003.

[Music by Heart: Paperless Songs for Evening Worship](#). Church Publishing, 2008.

[Santo, Santo, Santo: Cantos para el pueblo de Dios \(Songs for the People of God\)](#). GIA Publications, 2019.

[Singing in Community: Paperless Music for Worship](#). Augsburg Fortress, 2017.

[Sound the Bamboo: Christian Conference of Asia Hymnal 2000](#). GIA Publications, 2006.

[The Augsburg Motet Book](#). Augsburg Fortress, 2013.

[This Far by Faith: An African American Resource for Worship](#). Augsburg Fortress, 1999.

Works Referenced

Robert Buckley Farlee, ed., [*Leading the Church's Song*](#) (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998).

Helen Kemp, "A Case for Children's Choirs in Churches," in Zebulon M. Highben & Kristina M. Langlois, eds., [*With a Voice of Singing: Essays on Children, Choirs, and Music in the Church in honor of Ronald A. Nelson*](#) (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 2007).

Carlos R. Messerli, "The Gospel Motet for Today," in James Freese, ed., [*This Is the Feast: A Festschrift for Richard Hillert at 80*](#) (St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, 2004): 97-120.

Paul Westermeyer, [*Te Deum: The Church and Music*](#) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

Paul Westermeyer, [*The Heart of the Matter: Church Music as Praise, Prayer, Proclamation, Story, and Gift*](#) (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001).

John Witvliet, ed., [*A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship*](#) (Dayton: Choristers Guild/Calvin Institute for Christian Worship, 1999).