

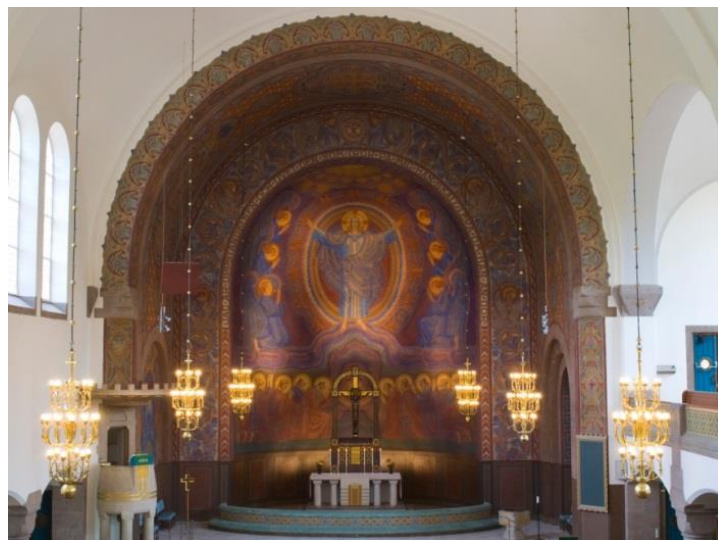
”Send, holy maiden, a resonant chord!”
On the organ and congregational song
Per Högberg, PhD

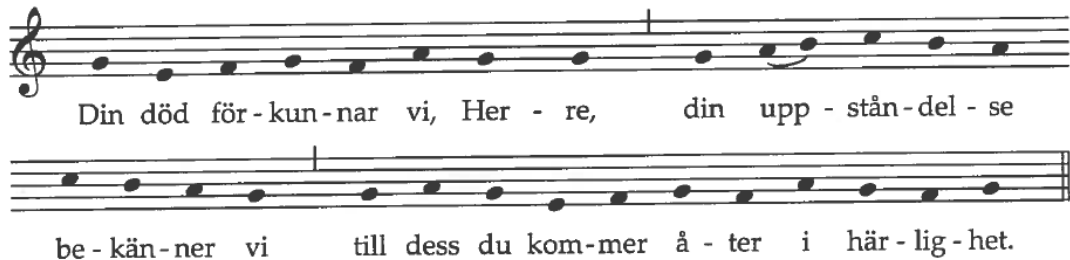
Introduction

Since the Lutheran Reformation and the age of orthodoxy, congregational participation in a shared service has been a pillar of the worship tradition in the Church of Sweden. This is expressed not least in congregational singing, and leading congregational song is one way in which church musicians contributing to shaping the liturgy. Organists probably often think of their job as playing hymns for the congregation to sing. In my doctoral dissertation, *Organ Singing and Hymn Playing: Performing Congregational Song* I offered a twist on that way of thinking in an attempt to penetrate the artistic process underlying the act of musical interpretation that takes place in organ-led liturgical hymn singing. This interpretive act demands more of the organist, in terms of musical competence, than mere technical prowess. In the context of the worship service, a liturgical organist is not a soloist but a partner with many other participants, including the congregation, in an interactive event. Heinrich Leopold Rohrmann’s exhortation for organists to pay special attention, from their benches, to congregational singing, is an invitation for them to relinquish the notion of *playing* hymns on the organ, and instead allow their instruments to *sing* with the congregation, in a process of interplay and ”organ song”. This interplay provides fertile soil for joint learning. The conjoining of poetry and music opens up new landscapes of liturgical and artistic implications that invite our reflection, both alone and together. Ultimately, this interactive manner of learning allows participants to become one another’s teachers. I believe a vocal approach is fundamental for the interpretation of both church music and the liturgy. Experience of such an approach is also a useful tool for teachers of liturgical organ.

”The Ascension”

As organist at the Vasa Church in Gothenburg, my station at the detached console of our organ affords me a view of a magnificent chancel painting by artist Albert Eldh, entitled ”The Ascension”. I see the painting whenever I play from the west gallery, whether as a soloist, together with other musicians, or (last but not least) in partnership with the congregation and its singing. The painting is a visual depiction of the acclamations we sing at the celebration of the Eucharist in the Vasa Church:





”We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection until you come again”

Closest to the floor, at the level of the altar, I observe the suffering Christ with arms and hands outstretched on the cross. But when I lift my gaze, the transparent crucifix reveals the resurrected and triumphant Christ. His arms and hands are still outstretched, but now not nailed but free. They extend in an open and welcoming embrace.



As a choir director, I find it essential to begin with the very same gesture: the opening of arms. With arms wide, I place my trust in the choir members and invite them into a relationship with me, their director, to sing and make music together. In fact, looking again at the chancel painting, I can imagine the triumphant Christ as choir director! With open arms he invites the entire congregation to join him in forming a choir, the choral instrument that is the vocal foundation of the liturgy.

But of course, I should be writing about congregational singing and the organ. Why the focus on choral music? Let me begin by offering a few historical perspectives.

Historical perspectives

- "Attend scrupulously to the singing"

The role of the organ as the leader of congregational singing in the worship service is a relatively new phenomenon. Sweden has a domestic organ building tradition that stretches back to the eighteenth century, but it is important to recall that as late as the mid nineteenth century, some sixty per cent of Swedish churches still lacked an organ. At the turn of the nineteenth century, meanwhile, congregational singing was at perhaps its lowest ebb. The organ was supposed to be a knight in shining armor that would regulate and elevate congregational song by supporting and leading it.

In Heinrich Leopold Rohrmann's organ method from the very early nineteenth century, Rohrmann quickly identifies a double purpose for the organ accompaniment of hymns: "to help the congregation stay on pitch, and to aid in the promotion of true devotion and edification". He then asks *how* hymns should be played, and answers that they should be played simply. How to do that? Rohrmann says it is essential for organists to "attend scrupulously to the singing". He underlines the relationship and the hierarchy between hymn singing and organ playing. "The organist should listen to how the singing is progressing. For the congregation does not exist for the sake of the organist, but he for hers; consequently he must adapt himself to the singers and guide them". This emphasis on *simplicity* further leads him to say: "Chorale singing, when treated with the proper lack of affectation, is in itself so deeply sacred and moving that it can hardly be surpassed by any other kind of music". Also worth noting is that Rohrmann invokes the concept of art, and says it is necessary for an organist to possess special talent in order to be able to master this art. He asks how organists should go about practicing the art of playing chorales, and suggests two tools: resignation to "long practice" in combination with "frequently listening to good organists". He singles out one primary and fundamental skill: namely the ability, through practice, to acquire and maintain a "knowledge of figured bass; for this is the first necessary requirement for suitable expression. You cannot select the correct and appropriate chords without a knowledge of chords. And to acquire and apply this knowledge requires not only the gift of quick apprehension but also the habit of sedulous and indefatigable practicing". Note the connection forged here between theoretical knowledge and its practical application in music. A kind of ethics and aesthetics of service is also on display: "The organist should not touch the keyboard simply for his own pleasure, or for the diversion of the congregation. I say again: let the organist forget neither the value of his service nor the nature of the place where he discharges it".

- New notation indicates choral singing

The years around 1800 were also a kind of watershed for the notation of chorale settings: that is, the written music organists relied on when playing hymns. The early nineteenth century saw a shift from figured-bass settings to fully written-out four-part settings of chorale melodies. In figured-bass settings, the notated bass and melody lines gave the keyboardist enough information to render the music in a simple two-part setting with one voice per hand. But it was also expected that keyboardists would be able to use the notated figures to improvise a setting in more parts. Given that organists varied in skill level, probably the sounding results ranged from simple two-part settings to rich polyphony. Organists did as well as they could in service of both a practical and aesthetic purpose.

The rise of four-part settings came along with a trend toward musical and rhythmical equalization. Chorales received slow, even wearisome musical treatments, not least in their function as hymn tunes. New research shows, however, that Johann Christian Haeffner's 1820 hymnal, which has been much-discussed and roundly criticized in this connection, has probably been misunderstood. It was not meant to be just a book of instrumental settings for organists to play from. Its chorale settings were also intended as choral music. Congregational singing of

the period was marked by "chaos and confusion", and the proposed solution was for congregations to sing hymns in four-part harmony! In his foreword, Haeffner writes, "Each melody has been set in four parts, thereby giving the first part a specific harmony". He continues: "But note well, each part is written to be sung, and itself constitutes its own song or melody, which agrees with all the others". And again: "A chorale is, in its essence, a song and not an organ piece...A chorale is a song and must therefore be so treated." Haeffner further emphasizes the special nature of hymns when he writes, for instance, "Our chorales thus originated as songs for the congregation, meant to be sung by a mass of people at once".

Haeffner's hymnal, as we know, has frequently been associated with an immensely slow hymn-singing tempo. But here are his own words on the matter: "... in most churches a tiring custom prevails of playing the chorales so extraordinarily slowly, as if this was an integral part of their excellence, with the result that the congregation, which has to sing them, though possessed of the hardest lungs cannot maintain the endless sustains...this unharmonious and objectionable practice is expressly forbidden by current canon law: Chapter XII Section 2. 'Music on organs or other instruments must not be sustained for so long that it hinders the congregation from praising God in their own voice, which they should do properly and as one body, neither too fast nor too slow.'"

Past and Present

- HIP

Even these few glances at the history of congregational singing give us crucial information about the early nineteenth century view of hymns and chorales as fundamentally vocal music, of different ways of notating chorale settings, and of what was expected of organists and their contributions to hymn singing.

Is there anything here we might carry forward into the congregational singing of today? Perhaps it is almost provocative to suggest that conditions around 1800 could help define a new orientation for the craft of liturgical music in the early twenty-first century! But I hope to convince readers that this is possible. For decades, the performance practices of "Western art music," "classical music," "folk song," etc. (feel free to insert your own preferred musical designator) have sought to incorporate historical perspectives. Our interpretive choices as musicians have been and continue to be affected by the influence of historically informed performance/practice (HIP). It is now fairly self-evident to perform, say, the cantatas of J.S. Bach on original instruments, in original temperaments. It would seem natural to investigate the "HIP perspective" for liturgical organ music as well.

- Room for the organ?

In contrast to the mid-nineteenth-century situation, almost all Swedish churches today have organs. Frequently they are old instruments. The melodies and settings in our hymnals also span the ages, from the medieval period to the present. As organists we have to work with a large body of historical music and make it function in a modern liturgical context. This state of affairs raises both questions and challenges, not least in regards to musical interpretation.

"The organ's use in Swedish Zion praise/As long as its pipes sound to lead the church in song." Abraham Abrahamsson Hülphers' apostrophe to the organ as the leader of congregational song was written in an age when a Swedish organ building tradition had been established in response to a rising need for organs to support hymn singing in the worship service. The present hymnal of the Church of Sweden contains much material that dates back to the "first" hymnal of 1695/1697. Revisions to language, melodies and chorale settings notwithstanding, our age and liturgical context belong to an unbroken, living tradition of congregational song dating back to the Lutheran Reformation and the age of Swedish empire. But is Hülphers' opinion of the organ still relevant to how we play and sing hymns today, given the pluralism, the diversity of

style and genre, that characterize our repertoire of congregational song? Not to put too fine a point on it: is there *any* future for the organ as a singing participant in the worship services of the Church of Sweden?

The editorial page of a Swedish periodical for church musicians, *Kyrkomusikers tidning*, addresses current opinion on the future role of the organ and even its survival as the chief church instrument. There are basically two points of view: 1) "The organ is an asset to, and should mainly be used for, those core activities that will comprise the Church of Sweden's mission even in future: the liturgy, the worship service"; and 2) "The organ is an excellent instrument for allowing us to demonstrate, through research, the ways that previous generations were inspired to artistic expression through the organ art itself and through congregational song. A good knowledge of this aspect of our cultural heritage is necessary to undertake relevant conservation and preservation efforts".

In my opinion, church music can benefit from academic reflection on both past and present perspectives, drawing on e.g. hymnological and musical scholarship. This must affect our capacity for musical interpretation; potentially lacking vocal or instrumental ability should be subordinated to an increased competency aimed at learning to relate to both past and present contexts when making music. That past and present constantly interact in a tradition-shaping dynamic is, I think, a standpoint we must adopt if we want to construct a relevant foundation for hymn playing and singing today: congregational singing is one of the cornerstones of church music as a whole. Indeed, based on my reading of the chancel painting by Eldh in the Vasa Church, I would go so far as to suggest that congregational singing is the hub around which all church music revolves.

The art of playing, singing and celebrating

Congregational song, the central hub of church music, is part of the liturgy, a sounding interpretation of the liturgy. We may thus also consider it as an artistic interpretation of the liturgy. In this text, I suggest that it is helpful to understand congregational song as an interaction between organ, organist and the singing congregation. Let me further suggest three specific practices involved in this artistic interaction:

- *The art of singing*
Here I mean the use of the human voice in the fine-meshed process of densification that occurs in the shifts between speech, word and song.
- *The art of playing*
By this I mean technical skill in using the organ as an instrumental tool to lead the congregation in song.
- *The art of celebrating*
Here I mean the art of living a liturgical progression in which speech and song, activity and rest, silence and rejoicing all move in one direction, from the west end of the church to the east, from earth to heaven, from baptism to the Eucharist, from organ to altar.

The content of each practice does not exist in isolation but rather the practices cross-fertilize one another:

- *The art of singing* is, as an organist, to let the organ be one of the (choir) singers in the congregation
- *The art of playing* is to involve all who take part in congregational song—organ, organist, and singing congregation (human voices)—in the progress of the liturgy, its flow and play, which in an artistic sense is the ontological foundation of congregational song.

- *The art of celebrating* is the art of expressing the artistic and liturgical unity that consists in the representation of Christ, the celebration of the Eucharist and the performance of congregational song.

To gain security in my artistic practice as a liturgical organist, I need to identify the process by which congregational song is created. Congregational song is music of a special nature, in that it requires the active participation of both a professional musician and amateur singers. As an artistic expression, it arises out of an encounter between a professionally trained organist and a musically untrained singing congregation. Its creation requires an encounter between—to put it a little bluntly—the artistically aware and the artistically naive. I use these terms here in isolation, specifically to describe the creative process that gives rise to congregational song, which involves congregational singers singing perfectly normally and with no requirement for any vocal or other (musical) training. This is the sounding foundation for our artistic expression—which we might also describe as an encounter between the artful and the artless. Or an encounter between the artful and the everyday. Or an encounter *within* the everyday, as Johannes Johannsson, composer and former rector of the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, suggests: “The musical experience goes far beyond what we are capable of putting into words. And yet the elements of music are all quite mundane. Scores are collections of ink dots on paper, violins are built up of wood and gut, organs of lumber and sheets of tin, and the voices of the choir are Mrs. Petterson and Mr. Lindvall’s voices, which we hear every day on the municipal switchboard, or coming over the bus loudspeaker to tell us, ‘Next stop Nobelvägen’”. The everyday is built up into the artful, which in rare moments of epiphany brings our chaotic life to a temporary halt and illumines it, and which calls to us in a special way. And the epiphany of music is also at heart a reminder that God became man and walked among us....”

What I would like to call an “epiphany of congregational song” is another reminder of the Incarnation: the art of singing, playing and celebrating is the art of expressing the artistic and liturgical triptych that consists in the representation of Christ, the celebration of the Eucharist and the performance of congregational song.

“Send, holy maiden, a resonant chord/Up the snow-strewn aisle to salute your Lord!”

Thus poet Erik Axel Karlfeldt calls to St. Cecilia on a snowy day, in his poem “Winter Organ.” I wonder, though, if Karlfeldt was also thinking of the organ itself, the “queen of instruments,” in its liturgical encounter with Christ the King. Or perhaps the organ and the singing congregation together are the bride awaiting the bridegroom, Christ, with and in shared song. For that is why we gather, Sunday after Sunday, on the Easter of each week, to celebrate the Eucharist and Christ’s death and resurrection “until he comes again.”

Celebrate the liturgy and let it sound!

In conclusion, let me offer a few pieces of encouraging advice for the musical interpretation of congregational song in the liturgy:

- Play less, sing more!
- If your song requires instruments—treat them like singers!
- If your instrument is the organ, practice so that your hands, feet and everything else you play with are set free to vocalize! Listen to good examples!
- If your music is a chorale setting, think vocally and perform it like a choral piece!
- Listen to the innate sound of the liturgy: identify, follow and support it. Reinforce it when necessary!
- “Make” less music for the service. Celebrate the liturgy and let it sound!

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