

## **When We Sing: Conversations with Alice Parker and Friends**

(Video. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994. 30 Minutes. \$39.95)

Since what we will sing and how we will sing it is one of the great problems in the liturgies of all churches, and especially of the Catholic Church, it is always interesting to see a film in which these issues are discussed. This video is made up of excerpts from seminars in New York and Chicago conducted by composer and author Alice Parker. The participants come from many churches, and what they say and sing tells us a good deal about the state of worship in American churches.

The strength of the video is that it repeatedly declares that everyone can and should sing. I think the point might be stronger if it also mentioned that not everyone should sing everything. There is no reason for a choir not to sing some parts of the service by itself. There are many gifts, and we should not pretend we all have every single one of them. It is troubling that, while several speakers voice hostility to choirs, none express similar qualms about song-leaders or “cantors.” I cannot help thinking that this is because the seminar participants are, for the most part, song leaders, and they see a real choir as competition. One of the speakers talks about choirs splitting the congregation, but nothing splits the congregation more radically than the division between a “cantor”—worst of all one with a microphone—and the rest of the congregation.

Alice Parker herself says the choir and the organ “de-voice a congregation.” That seems contrary to all my experience. The churches I have attended where the congregations sing best—where those who can sing parts, sing parts, while those who can only sing the melody, sing the melody, and those who can only croak, croak with joy—are those that have strong choirs and great organs. It is much easier to croak along with a loud organ and a good choir than with a folk group or a song-leader. Without the choir and organ, the croakers hear their own weak, unsupported voices, feel naked and exposed, and quickly become too intimidated to open their mouths.

What in fact does silence congregations is the single song-leader or cantor. I cannot count the times I have stood in Catholic churches and heard about half a congregation try to sing the first verse of a hymn. The cantor at the microphone, however, quickly takes over. As that voices fills the room, more and more people fall silent, and the cantor who has silenced them by making her or his own voice the center of attention, tries to hector them into singing by raising his or her arms into the air. The cantor, not the hymn or the subject of the hymn, then becomes even more the center of attention. That sort of thing, not organs and choirs, is what “de-voices” people. And people are certainly not silenced when a choir or soloist is appointed to sing a piece that is not congregational: the congregation participates by listening. They are “de-voiced” when a cantor or song-leader hijacks a hymn or psalm.

I have a similar objection to what Alice Parker says about teaching new songs. She wants the musician to come out from behind the key-board and “line out” hymns—that is, sing each line solo and let the congregation echo it. But “lining out” is in fact a bad way to introduce a hymn. The best way to teach a hymn is to have the organ play it, the choir sing it, and the congregation hold the music in their hands. (Seeing where the notes go up and down with the words helps even those who cannot read music.) By the last verse—if we sing all the verses—the congregation will know the song. Lining out was a necessary technique before the invention of cheap printing or of Xerox machines, but now it is too often simply an excuse for indulging a song-leader’s ego. The song leader wants to be the center of attention so that people focus, not just on the hymn and its subject, but, as Alice Parker says herself, on “the expression on my face.” The allure of the spotlight is, of course, something many of us understand, and it can seduce us even in church, where our attention should be turned to God. Nevertheless, it is a temptation we must fight, not one we should indulge.

The emphasis on new hymns in this video is itself troubling. Do not misunderstand me: I like good new music and I do not want a static repertory. I do think, however, that we need to build on the body of hymns that has been handed down to us. We cannot expect truly good hymns to be produced with any regularity, and so we would be foolish to sing mostly new

things, when we have the treasures of centuries—music by Palestrina, Luther, and Vaughn Williams, texts by Cardinal Newman, Christina Rossetti and Catherine Winkworth. Yet the idea in this video seems to be that we will sing mainly new tunes and only new words. (Aside from the Nicene Creed, only two texts used in the video date from before 1900, and we hear only a brief snippet of one of them.)

The emphasis on new hymns is troubling for another reason. Congregations sing best when they know a good deal of the repertoire. The Mennonites singing four-part harmony a cappella in the video are holding hymnals, not missalettes or sheet music, and I would bet they have achieved the confidence they display because they have been able to learn a body of music over their whole lifetimes. In fact, when congregations already know most of the music they are asked to sing, they are stronger singers of new songs, too. Constant innovation means that the congregation never hears strong, confident singing—and that they are always dependent on the song-leader. (I am afraid the composers who speak on this tape have a similar vested interest in rejecting the past: we have to cut out something if we are ever to sing new hymns. But we don't have to clear-cut the hymnals so they can plant their own seedlings.)

One of the two older texts included in the video is a setting of a William Blake poem, “Can I See Another’s Woe.” The tune is pleasant, and it would be wonderful if it were sung in church occasionally. The trouble is that, like every other song on the video, it is entirely positive about humanity. The Blake song asks, “Can I see another’s woe and not be in sorrow too?” Rhetorical questions tend to demand the answer, “No.” I want us to recognize that the answer for all of us is, “Yes, I must admit to my shame that I can see another’s woe and not be in sorrow—both because I am a selfish, fallen creature and because the amount of human woe that I see while walking down the street in any American city is so great that no one but Christ himself could bear the sorrow if he felt it all.” The video does not include even one penitential song—no “Amazing Grace,” no “Just As I Am,” no “De Profundis.” Repentance is evidently no longer a feeling worth putting into song.

I am saddened that several speakers in the video seem to distrust the idea of excellence in church music. Parker speaks slightly of “correctness,” and, indeed, correctness should not be a fetish, but we should try to achieve it if we can. Later, she seems to sneer at the churches with big organs and great choirs—and even says that an average voice is better than a great voice. Another speaker wants to get rid of not only choirs and organs, but even of harmony. (I preferred the speaker who called harmony a spiritual exercise: unity in diversity.) Yet another speaks slightly of beauty itself. What we see here is the ecclesiastical version of what I must deal with in education every day: dumbing down. Excellence and beauty are mistrusted, care and skill are ridiculed, and anything requiring effort is devalued, while the sloppy and the spontaneous are privileged. We are not living in an age when the church is devoting too much of its energy to perfect rituals of great aesthetic beauty: we are living in an age when it is hard to find a service that is not sloppy. These speakers are either fighting the last war or simply adopting the values—the very questionable values—of the larger culture.

Similarly, I am troubled by the anti-intellectualism that Don Saliers expresses. In his first speech in the video, he takes a dismissive tone and declares that the knowledge of God is not in the definitions of theology, but in the broken singing of a hymn—not even, evidently, in the strong, confident singing of a hymn. Why not be tolerant and say that it is in both places? At the very least, we should not privilege the emotional and sneer at the intellectual. We can easily imagine what Saliers would think of someone who dismissed a fervent, singing Christian who couldn’t define the hypostatic union, but he does just the same thing in reverse.

The section on the “Poetry of Hymns” offers many insightful comments on the language of worship. I was pleased to hear the story about the small children asking to sing, not the insipid songs that are often foisted on young people, but “Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones.” People actually like rich language and are not frightened by a “thee” or a “thou.” (“Ye,” “Thee,” and “Thou” were not archaic as long as they were regularly used in prayer and hymnody.) I was glad several speakers suggested that we need not dumb down hymns. I especially liked the comments of Carl. P. Daw, himself the author of several fine hymns, who recognizes that people

feel valued when the liturgy presents them with language that is richer than the “commercialese” that dings on them constantly. I wish the hymns actually performed in the video had more often been in the sort of language he describes. Too many of them are bland.

Daw seems dead right when he says that liturgical poetry “needs to reek of the tradition.” But the hymns in the video suggest there is hardly any tradition at all. There are almost no old songs—none, really, of the classic Protestant or Catholic hymns. It is especially odd—or especially sad that it is not odd—that in a video on singing in church funded by the Archdiocese of Chicago there is not a scrap of chant either in English or in Latin.

The one foreign language heard in the video is not Latin, the traditional language of the church, not the Greek of the gospels, not the Hebrew of the old testament, not any of the ancestral languages of American ethnic groups. It is Swahili, which is part of the tradition of hardly any Americans—and certainly not of African-Americans: their ancestors were abducted from West Africa; Swahili is an East African language. There is no reason to dismiss the Anglo-European tradition, as some speakers do. It is, after all, the tradition of almost all those who appear in the film. It is not necessary to denigrate one’s own culture in order to value the cultures of others. Real tradition seems to be despised by too many of the speakers.

In general the video seems both clumsy and self-congratulatory in its attempts at diversity and multi-culturalism. A white man conducts the Swahili Credo; later he talks about how “the gospel is now on its way back to us” from non-European cultures. Early in the film we are shown a very brief clip of a black gospel choir. Yet there is only one black participant in the seminar. For the most part the attempt at diversity is simply a patronizing idealization of non-Europeans, who are hardly present except on the lips of white guys. I know it has become a commonplace to say that blacks and women are more spiritual than uptight white men. But while some blacks and women may find that sort of groundless flattery gratifying for a time, in the end they will see it as just as offensive as the old stereotypes that masqueraded as praise: Blacks came to dislike being praised for their rhythm, and women got sick of the Victorian idea that they were angels in the house, too pure for the work-a-day world. Furthermore, since no

black woman speaks in the film—and a black man only once—it seems especially patronizing to use a photo of a black woman as the title logo for each section: I am sure blacks would rather have their say than be used as mute symbols of religious fervor.

The film's discussion of altering the texts of older hymns to make them more inclusive is good, but I wish the speakers had given examples. I showed the video to a colleague of mine—a feminist who has published books on Sylvia Plath and Willa Cather and who sings in an Episcopalian choir. She went ballistic when a female speaker talked about people being “seriously wounded” by “non-inclusive language.” “Seriously wounded!” she said. “There's the cult of victimization again: women are so fragile that they melt when they hear the word ‘He.’ They'd rather muck around with the tradition they claim to care about so much—rewrite history, really—rather than accept it with its flaws.” (On this issue, I would suggest consulting Margaret Doody's article on the hymn revision—“Changing What We Sing” in The State of the Language, U of California P, 1990.) I was troubled that “inclusive language” was the only sort of revision that the speakers discussed: it wounds many of us when we are asked, in the name of reform, to sing pablum, or worse, bad theology.

The hymn that closes the film sums up my most serious problem with the video. “What is This Place?” has a wonderful tune, but I wish the text had been analyzed more. It is almost entirely about the singers themselves. That is not all bad: one legitimate subject for hymns is to praise God for making us into Christ's body, the church. But when the congregation sings about itself, there is always the danger that they will become the focus. In this song, the singers come close to bragging about how great they are. I am especially troubled by the line, “We are each other's bread and wine.” I suppose there is some sense in which a Christian can say that is true. But it does leave open the question, what do we need Jesus for? Why did Christ die for us, when my fellow singers are what I feed on—and when I am evidently able to feed them? The hymn does not mention Christ at all: the community has taken His place. We seem to be very close to saying that we are self-sufficient, a very odd claim to make in a song that is to be sung while people come to encounter Christ.

I am troubled that throughout this video the focus is first on the song leader, then on the community, and hardly at all on Christ. Why does no one talk about song as an offering to God. Why does no one demand the best possible song, so that the offering is a worthy one? Bishop Jeffrey Rowthorn says, “I want to emphasize the beauty of the worshipers themselves.” That, of course, is the last thing we should emphasize. Worshipers should lose themselves in a liturgy that is directed to Christ. That is when we are most beautiful—not when we concentrate on ourselves as worshipers, but when we forget ourselves and concentrate on the beauty of Christ.

The production of the video is well done for the most part. There is, however, an unfortunate element of false advertising in the elaborate title shot of Madeleine L’Engle, since she appears nowhere else in the film. Also, I found all the shots of nodding heads annoying. I would prefer just to hear what the speaker has to say, without the visual image nudging me and saying, “How true. How true.” A head shaking vigorously in disagreement here or there might have been a nice balance.

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