Music in Worship

The Holy Act of Singing

by Jennaya Robison

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There is a quote long attributed (perhaps mistakenly) to Saint Augustine: "The one who sings prays twice." Misquotation or not, the phrase names a truth every choir has felt in its bones: the human voice becomes a thin place between heaven and earth. Tom Trenney, a composer, conductor, and organist, calls the space between conductor and choir "holy ground."[1] That space is built on trust, vulnerability, and shared longing of the people who gather there. It can trace the lines that run from our first infant lullabies to the anthems that accompany our funerals, and that prove, again and again, that singing is no mere ornament; it is sacred.

The Holy Act of Creation

Long before the church had creeds, it had choruses. Songs wandered with the exiled Hebrew people, and Paul and Silas shook a prison's foundations with midnight hymns. There is a soundtrack of singing that accompanies every poignant moment in our lives. Why? Because singing gathers the self. The inhale disciplines the body, the vowel shapes focus the mind, and the act of resonance draws emotion out of hiding. When you sing, you do not merely say, "I believe," you embody belief. Breath becomes Spirit (the Hebrew *ruach* knows no difference), and flesh becomes Word. No wonder Augustine, or whoever first uttered the phrase, heard a double prayer in a single song.

Singing serves a didactic purpose that is obvious to anyone who has ever taught a child the ABCs or used music to memorize something for a test. During ancient times, this was essential when there weren't printed resources. For those who could not read, singing and memorization became the way we conveyed the stories of our people. Frank Senn's *Christian Liturgy* notes:

> [T]he Hindu did not regard music only as a useful aid in the memorization and recitation of texts; chanting also fostered a state of meditation that enabled the person to break away from the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and be absorbed into the spirit of the universe.[2]

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* narrates the creation myth of Tolkien's fictional universe. Scholar Bradley Blazer describes Tolkien's creation myth: "Music, art, and literature are all acts of sub-creation expressive of the divine essence in [humans]. In this way, [humans] share in the creative power of God."[3] A story from Tolkien's *Silmarillion*:

> There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Iluvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made. And he spoke to them, propounding to them themes of music; and they sang before him, and he was glad…
>
> Then Iluvatar said to them: "Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. But I will sit and hearken, and be glad that through you great beauty has been wakened into song."[4]

Tolkien's creation myth can be viewed through a lens that aligns it with the biblical creation story. God exists outside of all time and space but is the sole origin of existence. The angelic beings (the Ainur), as divine offspring, are not physical, but spiritual beings who each embody the mind of God. These beings establish a hi-

erarchy, one of creator and cocreators.

Humankind has equated music with the divine for our entire existence. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras, who lived in the second half of the sixth century BCE, proposed that the cosmos was governed by relationships so profound that only heaven could explain these mysteries. These ideas predate Christianity with the concept of *music of the spheres*, a Pythagorean doctrine that postulates harmonious relationships among the planets.[5]

The Hebrew tradition of music is evident throughout the Old Testament, most prominently in the Psalms and in the prophecies in Isaiah and Ezra. These songs of praise and community were meant to give voice to every human experience, the worship and praise of God, and the rebuilding of a community plagued by exile and destruction. In Job 38, God answers Job, saying:

> "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you shall declare to me. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"[6]

We are the cocreators. As in Tolkien's myth, the Creator imparts to us themes of music. Each theme is carefully and uniquely created for each individual. We are gifted these themes to become collaborators in the universe. The Creator calls to us to "make in harmony together a Great Music,"[7] and God calls us to respond to these gifts as individuals, but also in community. God has created a theme within us, but we are called to create harmony with each other.

The Holy Act of Singing

Communal singing is not only an act of worship in a faith community or an artistic endeavor in a choir, but it is a physical transformation. The holy act of singing bonds individuals on an artistic level in ways that we can see and hear. At the same time, the act of singing impacts the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of participants in a way that nurtures the sacred ground of being human. In an article about choral singing, researchers at Oxford University note:

> [S]inging has been shown to improve our sense of happiness and wellbeing. Research has found, for example, that people feel more positive after actively singing than they do after passively listening to music or after chatting about positive life events.[8]

Singing individually certainly has health benefits. There is the simple act of creating something beautiful

for others to enjoy—elevating the human experience to something artistically transcendent. As a solo artist, we can give voice to many human struggles through text, melody, and expression. It is a vulnerable act and one that can be humbling and terrifying for even the most confident person. It is no wonder that public speaking is one of the most common adult phobias (ahead of fear of death, spiders, and heights!).[9] Research has also concluded that singing can combat feelings of loneliness and isolation and release endorphins and oxytocin.[10] These feelings can be heightened by singing *together* in a group setting. Our breathing and heartbeats sync up when we sing together.[11]

For many, the roots of singing are deeply personal and formed early. Memories of singing alongside family in church—whether from the pew or the choir loft—often linger with particular clarity. A familiar hymn such as "Holy, Holy, Holy" can hold layers of meaning shaped by childhood curiosity, family voices, and questions first asked in wonder. Musical formation often begins in these intimate spaces, shaped by parents or mentors whose instincts for harmony and expression seem almost effortless. Moments of shared singing, whether in a local congregation or in a grand concert hall, become lasting imprints.

Later experiences in academic and church settings can bring these early impressions into sharper focus. Conversations about the role of hymnody, liturgy, and contemporary expressions of worship often reveal tensions between spontaneity and tradition. For some, liturgical music may initially feel constrained or overly prescribed. Yet the deeper insight remains: hymns, songs, and choruses tell the stories of the people. They carry collective memory, giving voice to generations who have grappled with the same questions, joys, and struggles. In doing so, they offer a framework for understanding the present, grounding individuals and communities in a shared narrative that continues to unfold.

Holy Ground

There is an invisible triangle that exists between the conductor, the choir, and the music. The space between conductor and choir can be a chasm, or it can be a bridge. The relationship between these two is, as James Jordan describes it in *The Musician's Soul*, "a union, a bond, a connectedness that brings human beings so close spiritually that they almost become one equals on the same playing field."[12]

There is an implicit level of trust that one must demonstrate as a conductor whose hands do not make the sound; they only invite it. There must be trust on the part of the singer, too, whose instrument is their body. There is no room for blaming a faulty reed or a sticking key when the music produced comes from you. Both sides proceed from trust and with an incredible amount of vulnerability. Hymnbooks are often placed

in the hands of children before they can read, and music has a way of lodging itself more deeply than many sermons. In one congregation, a typically reserved senior pastor came to the choir in tears between services. He shared that his ninety-five-year-old mother could no longer remember his name or recognize her family, despite being brought to church each week. That Sunday, as the choir sang the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" in the arrangement by Peter J. Wilhousky for Veterans Day weekend, something unexpected happened. Looking out into the congregation, he saw his mother, usually unresponsive, singing. For a brief moment, music became a sacred vessel for memory, reconnecting her to something deeply embedded within her.

Conclusion

The holy act of singing is older than scripture and wider than denominational borders. It has pulled communities out of exile and many of us through pandemic livestream fatigue. It will, if we steward it well, carry the community (whether that be the church, the classroom, or community choirs) into whatever brave new worlds await.

But this future is not guaranteed. It depends on what we choose to value, what we choose to teach, and what we choose to sing. If we reduce singing to product, polish, or performance alone, we risk losing its deeper power. If, however, we honor it as a practice of presence, of listening, of shared breath, then it remains what it has always been: a means of forming people, not just programs. CJ

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NOTES

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[2] Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Fortress Press, 1997).

[3] Bradley Blazer, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth* (Regnery Publishing, 2023).

[4] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (HarperCollins, 1991).

[5] James Haar, "Music of the Spheres," *Grove Music Online* (Oxford Music Online, 2001), https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.19447.

[6] *New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition* (National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 2021).

[7] Tolkien, *The Silmarillion.*

[8] Jacques Launay and Eiluned Pearce, "Choir Singing Improves Health, Happiness—And Is the Perfect Icebreaker," The Conversation, October 28, 2015, https://theconversation.com/choir-singing-improves-health-happiness-and-is-theperfect-icebreaker-47619.

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[10] Sibylle Robens, Alexandra Monstadt, Alexander Hagen, and Thomas Ostermann, "Effects of Choir Singing on Mental Health: Results of an Online Cross-sectional Study," *J Voice* 38, no. 6 (November 2024):1397–1406, https:// doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2022.06.003.

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[12] James Jordan, *The Musician's Soul* (GIA Publications, 1999).