

Even Choir Girls Get the Blues

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September, 1958. New town, new church--St. James's Episcopal, New London, Connecticut. The nine o'clock family service. Me in my Mary Janes, age eleven, with my sisters and parents in a pew on the center aisle. As the congregation rose for the first hymn, the St. Cecilia Girls' Choir, thirty-eight girls ages 10 to 17, processed in pairs, the little ones in front. Their robes and beanies were royal blue. They walked tall, and held their hymnals up as they sang. They were goddesses.

Six weeks later I was one of them. Two years later, I had my first organ lesson from the Director of Music, Beatrice Hatton Fisk, on the four-manual Austin. A year after that, at age fourteen, I played and conducted my first full substitute gig at that very service: choir rehearsal, prelude, postlude, hymns, canticles, offertory anthem--the works. I got paid: fifteen dollars!

Organ lessons, lots of practice, and a certain amount of talent pulled me along that path. But it was the years of rehearsing and singing with the choir that made a church musician of me--that put our phrasing into my hymn tempos forever, and engraved the old pointing of the canticles onto my bones. Every one of us could sense of the flow of a well-conducted liturgy. We exchanged sly and scornful glances when strange substitutes fumbled the "*Venite*" or failed to cadence on a G Major chord for the doxology exactly when the priest received the offertory plates.

What did all of this accomplish, besides turning us into frightful little liturgical snobs who used Anglican chant as a shibboleth to identify and repel outsiders?

Most simply, it kept us and our families coming to church every week. Absences were not encouraged. Choir also kept us in the church, or drew us back, as adults. John Westerhoff has written that the Episcopal church loses 90% of the children it rears. The 10% who stay or return are those who were acolytes or sang in children's choirs--who took a meaningful role in the adult worship of the congregation.

In addition, our triple repetition of every hymn, canticle, and piece of service music--learned at the Saturday practice, reviewed at the Sunday warm-up, and sung at the Sunday service--gave us the texts and tunes of the Hymnal 1940 as our spiritual mother tongue. That music and those words resonate for us as they cannot for people who learned them later or less well. The words I sang as a child are there now for prayer and meditation: "Forever singing as they shine, the hand that made us is divine"; "The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod"; "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven".

Socially, the choir gave us a chance to grow up in an all-girl, age-mixed working environment, in which we rehearsed and performed every week, imitated our elders, served as role models for the younger ones, and acquired and passed on the culture and traditions of the group. We had no idea how important that was, and how rare. There were no girls' sports leagues then.

Musically, our weekly performance schedule turned me into a good alto sight reader very fast--especially in that first, terrified seventh-grade year when all the anthems and most of the hymns were new. At home, besides drumming away at minuets for solo performance at some distant recital, I learned to pick out my part on the piano and match it, then to play both parts and sing mine, then to play only the other part and sing mine--because I had to, to keep up on Sunday. I was an apprentice, tossed into a working environment I mastered partly by exposure at rehearsals, and partly by figuring out how to teach myself the skills I needed to do my job.

I did not get the full cathedral-style choir regimen, that immersion into solfege, music theory, score study, and instrumental lessons which has been the nursery for so many composers--Lassus, Bach, Haydn, Schubert, Henry Purcell, John Blow, Orlando Gibbons, John Stainer, Arthur Sullivan, and William Walton, among others. My choir director couldn't give it to us, because she didn't get it herself. She couldn't have. She was a girl.

Girls and women have sung in parish choirs for a long time. English paintings and engravings of post-Restoration unvested gallery choirs often show some of the members in bonnets, alongside male singers and instrumentalists, leading the congregation in metrical psalm settings, and performing anthems. Some of those choirs were good, and many of them were very, very bad.

In the 1840's, when Oxford movement-inspired parish priests instituted Catholic liturgical practices, the Tractarian musical reformers did a tremendous amount to improve the repertoire and standard of singing in the parish churches. Their newly-formed, intensively trained choirs often put the neglected and slovenly cathedral choirs to shame. The dissemination to all parishes of the periodical "The Parish Choir" provided every sympathetic priest with essays on liturgical reform, reports of the successful founding of new choirs in parishes around the Empire, and music: Anglican and Gregorian chant settings for the Psalms, settings of canticles and service music, and anthems, with instructions for their teaching and performance. By the end of its five-year existence, this one little magazine had provided a complete music library for any parish that cared to use it.

Local practice on who got to sing this revived music varied widely. In some cases, men, women, girls, and boys all sang together, and it's interesting to trace the varieties of churchmanship reflected in what they wore and where they sat. Some ununiformed but unsurpliced choirs had boys in belted smocks and girls in matching dresses, capes, and poke bonnets. At least one parish put surpliced boys on one side of the choir stalls, and white-caped girls on the other. Some choirs put surpliced men and boys in the choir stalls, and women and girls behind

the men or in the first two rows of the congregation, so that the appearance of an all-male surpliced choir was maintained. In some parishes women and girls routinely sang in choirs, and in some they were allowed in if there weren't enough boys to sing the music up to the desired standard.

But so far as I know, whenever a parish could afford to provide intensive musical training for its choristers, either through the establishment of a cathedral-style choir school, or through the month-long residency of a professional choir trainer, these opportunities for formal training were limited to boys and men.

I think many historians would agree that the Oxford movement in some respects reinvented a medieval past that never existed. I would say our present collective unconscious has formed an ideal of church music based on an Oxford movement past which never existed: a past in which girls and women do not sing in church. This imagined past lives on in places like St. Thomas's, Fifth Avenue, with its justly famous boys' and men's choir and boarding school for the choirboys, and no choral opportunities whatever for women or girls.

So at St. James's, New London, we were lucky to have our choir on any terms at all. Sort of lucky. The boys' and men's choir were paid, and we were not. They sang at the 11:00 principal service. We sang at the 9:00 family service. They got the summer off. We didn't. They sang the midnight service at Christmas. We sang the midnight service, and again on Christmas morning at 10:00. On Easter, they sang at 7:30 and 11:00 with a big breakfast in the parish hall between. We sang at 9:00 and 11:00 with no breakfast. I learned to be a wreck on Christmas and Easter. I learned to carry my own jellybeans.

So we were second class citizens. But still the luckiest of the unlucky, for what other females participated in the conduct of worship besides us? The ladies of the altar guild did their work before and after the service. We were the only females who suited up in vestments and did our stuff in public. Every lay reader, every acolyte, every usher, and of course every priest, was male. The vestry was male. So were all the pronouns in the prayer book Sunday services. So was God. Being girls made us inferior, barred from the altar forever.

What was it about being a girl that made us inferior? Not our brains or our singing ability, or our capacity for work. Especially because we were older, on average, than the boys in the boys' choir, we were smarter and better at music. They needed us to pull off the big pieces, like the "Hallelujah Chorus" on Easter. It must have been just being a girl. It must have been our ...you know...*organs*...that we never mentioned in church, or very often anywhere else, except when we sang about Mary's*organs*.

We sang about them at Christmas. Well, we sang about her *lap*, in "What child is this, who laid to rest on Mary's *lap* is sleeping?" But for the biggies, the processional and recessional hymns, we sang about Mary's organs, but not her name. In "Hark, the Herald Angels" we got "late in time, behold him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb". In "O come, all ye faithful," we got: "Lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb".

The literary use of the part for the whole is an ancient poetic and speech technique--think of the castaway crying, "A sail! A sail!"--but somehow this use of "womb" for "Mary" bothers me, especially if the hymn never gets around to mentioning Mary by name. What if we had songs praising Livan Hernandez that went, "O glorious elbow" and never mentioned *him*? Mary's organ isn't a person. Her organ is a vessel. And a vessel is an object.

So Mary, like us choirgirls, had, or even was, this organ. And God (who made it) didn't abhor it.

Well, isn't that special.

It is certainly true that God's becoming incarnate as a human being is a staggering act of humility. A promotion this was not. But for us, working every week in a sex-based caste system, God descending to become human somehow got mixed up with the male condescending to the female.

And being female was a rap we couldn't beat.

I used to think all the girl stuff didn't matter, that I could be grateful for the musical and spiritual heritage and slough off the rest. It doesn't seem to have worked out that way. Why else, the first time I saw girl acolytes, did I want to run up to congratulate them, and then make myself not do it, so they would think what they were doing was normal? Why else, when I first attended the ordination of a woman priest, did I cry so hard? Why else, when last year in Charlotte I heard the all-girl trebles of the Welsh cathedral choir of St. David's singing "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord", did I tear up all over again?

Maybe I'm just an easy weeper. Or maybe there is a special heartache in having been offered half a loaf. My anthem subtext was, "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go *part way* into the house of the Lord".

Our tiny slice of Christendom gave us a double whammy. Even more than other protestant denominations, we Episcopalians had the sex-based liturgical caste system I've described. But unlike Roman Catholics, we had no culture for the veneration of Mary to make up for it.

In my low-church diocese we did not sing the Gregorian hymns which portray her. We did sing "The snow lay on the ground", which mentions Anne as well as Mary, and two of my favorite anthems were Katherine K. Davis's arrangement of Eccard's "When to the temple Mary went" for treble voices, and "The Angel Gabriel from heaven came", now in the Hymnal 1982. And of course we had the "Magnificat". We didn't sing it every Sunday--even then, choral evensong was a rarity--but in those communion-once-a-month days we sang it at Morning Prayer on most of the Sundays in the Advent and Christmas seasons.

It was good to have music for someone on our team. But it wasn't quite enough.

What is the outlook for Episcopal girl musicians now?

Oddly enough, it is through those who cling to the dream of an inviolable, all-male, Oxford movement past, that girls are now getting some of their best opportunities. In some

British and American churches and cathedrals, proponents of all-male choirs have staved off integration by establishing separate and equal choirs for girls, along guidelines propounded by the Royal School of Church Music. As the age of puberty continues to decline, and boys mature physically before they do musically, the girl choirs will become separate and better, whether singing treble repertoire or mixed-voice anthems with men.

The girls' choir movement has implications beyond those of the church's commitment to social justice within its own precincts. In my fifth season of conducting a women's chorus, their sound is the sound I dream in, and their performance of Magnificats and Ave Marias has given those texts new depth for me. I am not the first person to feel Marian connections when faced with an all-female choir. Brahms wrote his "Marienlieder" for his women's chorus in Hamburg, only later transposing them for their published, mixed-voice version. Sophie Drinker, the sister-in-law of the biographer Catherine Drinker Bowen, formed a women's choir at her home in Philadelphia, and was known to snarl of church performances of the Magnificat, "How can Mary's joyful words be pronounced before the altar by little boys in surplices?"

There's a newly formed girls' choir at the Washington National Cathedral. At 7:45 every weekday morning, twenty-four middle- and high-school aged girls practice in the choir room under the superb direction of Bruce Neswick. I was lucky enough to attend one of those rehearsals earlier this month, and a couple of weeks ago I got Joseph McClellan's review of their first Evensong from the Washington Post: "The 'Magnificat' sounded particularly appropriate sung by girls..." Now, when I hear an all-male performance of the Mag, I think, "That's *our* song," and I always hope to hear, rising from the pews around me, soprano and alto chanting: "Take it back! Take it back!"

These days I get more and more attached to Marian hymn and anthem texts. I want to spend more time with Mary, spiritually and musically speaking. I don't want to join in the movement to deify her, to make her the fourth person of an expanded Trinity. I want to know her as a human being, something other than the image of perfect, pink-and-white meekness off a devotional bookmark. I want to know her as the human, Jewish parent in whom Jesus' humanity is anchored, as his divinity is anchored in God the father.

I want her songs back in their proper context in Luke 1. It is a partial truth to say that the "Ave Maria" is Gabriel's greeting to Mary. The first part of it is, but the second part, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb", is the greeting of her much older cousin Elizabeth to Mary at the Visitation. The Magnificat, which follows immediately, is Mary's response to Elizabeth. This is a conversation between two miraculously pregnant Jewish women. On the highest level, these two texts are girl talk. Of course the Magnificat is modeled on Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving, in 1 Samuel, for her longed-for pregnancy. The allusion adds a dimension to its meaning, just as Jesus's cry from the cross takes on new meaning for us when we learn it is his invocation of Psalm 22.

I want the Magnificat back as a central liturgical text. If we can't have it at daily and Sunday evensong, we can have it during most of the church year whenever we sing Morning Prayer, not just in Advent. If we always do Eucharist, we can sing a Magnificat in place of the Gloria, or as a post-communion hymn, all the way through Advent and Christmas.

I want the excised stanza of "In the bleak midwinter" restored--you know, the one with "a breast full of milk and a manger full of hay". I want to see the medieval Easter play of the three Marys performed at the Easter Vigil. I want the Visitation on May 31 celebrated with enormous fanfare and lots of music. I want my team to get some serious playing time.

The nice thing about founding an organization is that you can twist its purposes to suit your personal agenda. Women's Voices, half of whose members are here tonight, will be giving a concert on January 31st and February 1st whose first half is a musical biography of Jesus from Mary's point of view. It includes Brahms's arrangement for women's voices of Johannes Eccard's mixed-voice piece on the Visitation, a spiritual by Undine Smith Moore on naming the baby, Daniel Gawthrop's setting of Madeleine L'Engle's poem, "Mary speaks", which is a *pietà* in music, and Brahms's Easter motet "Regina coeli", among other pieces.

Tonight we will sing two brand new "*Ave Maria*"s from our program. This is a pre-première. The first, by Oregon composer Lana Walter, uses medieval text interpolations, or tropes, in a rhythmically bouncy setting. Most 19th and 20th century *Aves* are pretty soft and sappy. Lana's is not. This setting makes it sound as though Mary's pregnancy was actually a good idea. We have claimed this "*Ave*" setting as Elizabeth's song. Maybe the bouncy rhythms are the pre-natal John the Baptist leaping for joy, as reported in Luke 1.

The second "*Ave*" is by Katherine Dienes, a 27-year old New Zealander who has been an English woman cathedral musician for several years, first at the Roman Catholic cathedral in Liverpool, and now as assistant organist and director of the girls' choir at the Anglican cathedral at Norwich. This is truly an otherworldly piece, a prayer to Mary, whose hummed drones and overlapping melodic cells invoke the acoustical environment and speech patterns of a convent litany. Katherine went to an Anglican girls' day school in Wellington; her early compositions, which we have also performed, were for the choir there.