

# Choosing and Using Choral Music in the Local Church

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Adapted from an article that appeared in *Reformed Worship Magazine*, #84, June 2007.

[www.reformedworship.org/magazine/article.cfm?article\\_id=1847&id=86](http://www.reformedworship.org/magazine/article.cfm?article_id=1847&id=86)

I have been directing church choirs for most of the last thirty-five years; and, in my experience, the single most challenging task is to find the right music for the choir. I dread the idea of buying sixty copies of something that will not work well in the service; and because our rehearsal time is so limited, I don't want to spend even twenty minutes rehearsing an anthem that will not be edifying for the body of believers. Clifton Baptist Church is a congregation of about 250 adults (and lots of children). We have a large concentration of seminary students and faculty; and, because we are two blocks from the Kentucky School for the Blind, we have about ten active members who are Braille readers.

## CHOIR NUMBERS AND SCHEDULE

Our un-auditioned choir consists of 40-45 regular participants, but rarely do we see more than 30 at any one time. Perhaps half of the singers are well-trained choral musicians. Several of our choir members are blind and learn the music only from Brailled copies of the texts. The choir sings an anthem about four out of five Sundays. (I think it is strategic and wise to have some services that do not include special music by the choir.) At any given time, there are 8-10 octavos in the choir folders. We rehearse on Wednesday evenings for about eighty minutes, and normally have a ten-minute brush-up rehearsal on Sunday mornings. We normally take about six weeks off during the summer and a week or two after Christmas. Our worship leadership also includes an instrumental ensemble of about 8-10 players.

## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Most of our choir anthems are done with piano accompaniment only. We have an historic Pilcher pipe organ (1937) that we use sometimes for the choral accompaniment. If we are doing something that calls for it, we will add obbligato instruments (flutes, violins and violas, and brass) and a rhythm section of electric bass and drum kit. Five or six times a year, our choir anthem is completely unaccompanied. We choose not to use prerecorded accompaniments of any kind.

## HEART LANGUAGE

We use a variety of musical styles—from *Messiah* excerpts to arrangements by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir. Somehow, with the Lord's help, we are able to avoid the idea that the choral participation is a form of entertainment. I strive to select texts and musical settings that will help our people connect to the truth of God. The texts must be understandable and consonant with the emphases of the Scriptures; and the music must elevate the text in an interesting, delightful, and beautiful way. Our congregation's heart language includes things that are simple, but never simplistic—child-like faith, yes; childish expression, no.

## CHOOSING FUNCTIONAL CHORAL MUSIC

I must confess that it is very rare that I choose choral selections to go specifically with the morning's sermon. I have a very high view of preaching, but I don't think that the best role for the choir is in

punctuating or emphasizing the preached Word. I am much more likely to use the choir as a leading voice in the congregation's other acts of worship. Most of our choral selections fall into one of these categories:

**General praise, Psalm-like adoration or thanksgiving**—usually towards the beginning of the service, something that goes well with Psalm 96, 98, or 100.

**Preparation for prayer**—something that will remind us of the Lord's care for his people and his desire for us to "pour out our hearts before him" (Psalm 62:8).

**Preparation for confession of sin**—texts that remind the congregation that we are desperate sinners in need of a Savior. "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it."

**Acknowledgement and celebration of God's amazing forgiveness**—Hallelujah! What a great Savior we have in Jesus. Sometimes the choral selection highlights the idea of Wesley's hymn text: "No condemnation now I dread. Jesus and all in him is mine."

**Introducing a hymn or song to the congregation**—a choral selection that ends with the congregation singing the last stanza, or with the congregation singing refrains throughout. Many publishers are featuring choral octavos that give the assembly a key voice. This is a fabulous way to use the choir as the facilitator of vibrant congregational songs of faith.

**Contemplation on the Cross of Christ or preparation for the Lord's Supper**—We celebrate the Lord's Supper monthly on Sunday mornings and twice a year at special evening services. Often, our preparation for the Table is a choral meditation.

**SOURCES FOR NEW (AND OLD) MUSIC:** Where do I locate anthems that will work for our congregation and choir?

**Sample packets**—This is difficult for me. Even with demo CDs and annotated lists from the publishers, it is almost impossible for me to make good selections when I stare at a sample pack of music. The boxes and packets pile up in the corner or next to the piano. My wife, however, loves to sort through stacks of choral music. She will sift through a hundred anthems and pull out six or eight that she thinks will work for our church (or our summer music camp). Then I have the luxury of looking at the short list, ordering four or five of those that I think will work nicely. I love Doris Stam.

**Conferences and reading sessions**—This is a bit easier because one can actually hear the anthems being sung by real people.

**Trusted colleagues**—I think the vast majority of the choral pieces that I select are ones that were suggested to me by friends, colleagues, choir members, and former students who know me and know our church. I try to reciprocate by spreading the good news about anthems that really work.

## **SPECIFIC TITLES**

What works for one congregation may not work at all for another, but perhaps a list of anthems that have been useful and edifying for us will be helpful to others who are choosing and using choral music in local churches.

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**This list does not include our choir's important role in teaching new hymns and worship songs. We do that regularly. Several of these anthems are used once a year, others about once every other year. Notice that music for Advent, Christmas, and Holy Week are listed separately at the end of the general list.**

## **Choir Anthems used 2003 through December 2009**

Ah, Holy Jesus (Ferguson, Augsburg)  
Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed (Govenor, Beckenhorst)  
All Good Gifts (Penny Rodrigues, Brookfield)  
All Good Gifts (David Schwoebel, Hinshaw)  
All the Way My Savior Leads Me (Crosby/Tune: Abbotts Leah, manuscript),  
All Things Are Yours, My God (Vajda/Schalk, with congregation)  
Awake, My Heart, with Gladness (Govenor, Brookfield Press)  
Be Thou My Vision (Ferguson, Augsburg)  
Blessed Assurance (arr. Sterling, Glory Sound)  
Bring to the Lord a Glad New Song (Perry/Parry/Jerusalem, Jubilate Hymns/Hope)  
By the Gentle Waters (Berry, Church Street)  
Canticle of Fellowship (Courtney, Beckenhorst)  
Canticle of Praise (Phillips, Glory Sound)  
Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation (Raney, Hope)  
Come, Christians, Join to Sing (Hayes, Glory Sound)  
Come Down, O Love Divine (Vaughan Williams/Down Ampney/White, Selah)  
Come to the Waters (Boice/Jones/arr. Kaiser, Hymns for a Modern Reformation)  
Consider It Joy (Kendrick)  
Fairest Lord Jesus (Gil Martin, Hinshaw)  
Festival Canticle (Hillert, Concordia, with congregation)  
From All That Dwell below the Skies (Schwoebel, Hinshaw)  
Give Me Jesus (Traditional/Courtney, Beckenhorst)  
Go Ye into All the World (Harlan, Shawnee)  
God Is Able (Machen/Cymbala, Word)  
God of Grace (Getty&Rea/Larson)  
Hallelujah (Boice/Jones/Kaiser, Hymns for a Modern Reformation)  
Hark, I Hear the Harp Eternal (Early American, manuscript)  
Have You Not Known (Scott, Concordia, with congregation)  
He Was Wounded (Courtney, Beckenhorst)  
Holy Heart (Ijames, Beckenhorst)  
Holy Is the Lord (Schubert/Bock, Gentry)  
Holy Is He (Holy, Holy, Holy) (Cloninger/Clydesdale, Word, with congregation)  
How Can I Keep from Singing? (Lowry/Arr. Nelson, Augsburg)  
How Deep the Father's Love for Us (Townend/arr. Shackley, Hope)  
How Lovely Is Your Dwelling (Pote, GIA) 3/12/06  
I Need Thee Every Hour (Dean, Smyth & Helwys)  
I Surrender All (Potts, Daybreak)  
I Will Glorify Your Name (Berry, Van Ness)

I Will Joyfully Sing (McDonald, Purifoy)  
Idyll of Praise ("This Is My Father's World," Courtney/Beckenhorst)  
If You Search with All Your Heart (Courtney, Beckenhorst)  
It Is Well with My Soul (arr. Sterling, Glory Sound)  
Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring (Bach/arr. Carl Stam, with congregation)  
Jesus, I Adore Thee (Thomas Aquinas/Caracciolo, Roger Dean)  
Jesus, My Lord, My Life, My All (Burroughs, Lorenz)  
Jesus, Our Soul's Delightful Choice (Watts/Ward, ReformedPraise.org)  
Jesus Paid It All (Sterling, Shawnee)  
Jubilee (Card/arr. Williams, manuscript)  
Lamb of God, What Wondrous Love (Pedtker/Fauré, Gentry)  
Let All the People Praise Thee (Sleeth, Lorenz, with congregation)  
Let Everything That Has Breath (Gomez/Brooks, Word)  
Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled (Burroughs, Carl Fischer)  
Lord, It Belongs Not to My Care (Baxter/Schalk, Augsburg)  
Majesty and Glory of Your Name (Fettke, Word)  
Make a Joyful Noise unto the Lord (Harlan, Shawnee)  
Mercy's Free (Jukes/Shute, Concordia)  
Mind of Christ (Hayes, Lindsborg Press)  
Moses, (Medema, Word)  
Music of Thy Name (Courtney, Beckenhorst)  
My Shepherd Will Supply My Need (Wilberg, Hinshaw)  
New Song (Kauflin.Hayes, Monarch/Lorenz)  
Not for Tongues of Heaven's Angels (Dudley-Smith/Jonas, GIA, with congregation)  
Not unto Us (Eggert/Cherwien, Concordia, with congregation)  
O God Beyond All Praising (Holst/Proulx, GIA)  
O God, We Kneel before Your Throne (Hopp, GIA, with congregation)  
O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus (Francis/Litton, Harold Flammer)  
O Wondrous Love (Cook/arr. Greer, LifeWay)  
Of Whom Shall I Be Afraid? (Pote, Harold Flanner)  
Offertory (Ness Beck, Beckenhorst)  
Order My Steps (Burleigh, Hope)  
Praise His Holy Name, (Hampton, Earthsongs)  
Praise to the Lord, the Almighty (Hill, Hal Leonard)  
Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty (Distler)  
Praise the Lord, Ye heavens Adore Him! (Althouse, Bock)  
Prayer of St. Richard of Chichester (White, Oxford)  
Psalm 46 (John Ness Beck, Beckenhorst)  
Psalm 139 (Pote, Chorister's Guild)  
Psalm of Comfort (Harlan, Brookfield)  
Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart (Schwoebel, Beckenhorst, with congregation)  
Shepherd Me, O God (Haugen, GIA, with congregation)  
Shouts of Joy (Bray, Alliance)  
Sometimes a Light Surprises (Courtney, Beckenhorst)  
Song of Celebration (Pote, Hope)  
Speak, O Lord (Getty/Townend, arr. Ferguson, MorningStar)  
Take and Eat (Joncas, GIA, with congregation)  
Taste and See/ Psalm 34 (Bower, manuscript)  
Thanks (McGruder/Cymbala, Word)  
The King of Love My Shepherd Is (arr. Wilberg, Oxford)  
They Who Wait upon the Lord (Nygard, Hal Leonard)  
Think on These Things (Childs, Santa Barbara)  
This Little Light of Mine (Turner, St. James Music Press)  
Thy Will Be Done (Courtney, Beckenhorst)  
To Thee I Die (Scott, Hinshaw)  
Turn My Heart, O God (Haugen, GIA, with congregation)  
View the Present through the Promise (Troeger/Hopp, GIA)  
What Is the World to Me (Bach, manuscript)  
Wings of the Dawn (Spencer, Shawnee)

Worthy to Be Praised (Smith, Lawson Gould)  
You Are the Light (Steele/Fettke, Lillenas)

## **ADVENT & CHRISTMAS ANTHEMS**

And the Glory of the Lord (Handel)  
Before the Marvel of This Night (Vajda/Schalk, Augsburg)  
Children, Run Joyfully (Dufford, OCP, with congregation)  
Christmas Night (Rutter, Oxford)  
Come and See (LeBlanc/Greer, Word)  
Come as a Child (Cloninger/Hayes, Word)  
Creator of the Stars of Night (Cox, MorningStar)  
Emmanuel (Manion, OCP)  
Gloria in excelsis Deo (Pote, Hope)  
Glorious Light (Getty/Hannah, ThankYou Music)  
Glory, Glory, Glory (Williams/Barrett, Glory Sound)  
How Beautiful upon the Mountains (Carter, Hinshaw)  
Immanuel (Card/arr. Williams, manuscript)  
Infant Holy, Infant Lowly (Willcocks, Oxford)  
Jesus Came to Dwell Among Us (Harlan, Brookfield)  
Lo, How a Rose (Distler)  
Lord, You Were Rich (Houghton/arr. Bergs,  
ReformedWorship) Nativity Carol (Rutter, Oxford)  
O Come to Bethlehem (Schram, Carl Fischer)  
Rejoice, Rejoice the Savior Comes (Doddrige/St.  
Martin's/Burkhardt, MorningStar)  
There Shall a Star Come Out of Jacob (Mendelssohn,  
Schirmer)  
Wake from Your Sleep (Schutte, OCP)  
When Love Came Down to Earth (Townend/ arr. Shackley,  
Hope)  
Who Is This? (Dunstan/Ferguson, MorningStar)

## **PASSION & EASTER ANTHEMS**

All Shall Be Well (Dudley-Smith/Foley, OCP, with  
congregation) Behold the Lamb (Rambo/Clydesdake, Benson)  
Blessed Be the One (Larson, Shawnee)  
An Easter Celebration (Courtney, Beckenhorst)  
Easter Hodie (Dudley-Smith/Hustad, Hope)  
He Is Arisen! (Liebergen, Carl Fischer)  
He Is Not Here! He Is Risen (Pote, Hope)  
He Is Risen, He Is Lord (Berry, Hal Leonard)  
He Was Wounded (Courtney, Beckenhorst)  
I Know That My Redeemer Lives (Medley/Duke  
Street/Hopson, GIA, with congregation)  
Lenten Song (Wesley/Hayes, Hinshaw)  
MESSIAH But Thanks Be to God  
MESSIAH Hallelujah  
MESSIAH Since by Man  
This Is the Day (Leavitt, Concordia)  
Thy Will Be Done (Courtney, Beckenhorst)  
Who Will Call Him King of Kings? (Ferell/Helvering, Word)  
Yet It Was His Will (Briggs, manuscript)