

Giving Voice to the Spirit – a Musician’s Calling

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Crumley Lecture at Roanoke College

March 30, 2006

When Dr. Benne called me I was honored and humbled to receive his invitation to be with you today. Roanoke College, a sister institution to Valparaiso, has been known to me in various ways over the years, and, I am aware of Bob’s work with the Center for Religion and Society. We had become acquainted in the time he spent as Senior Lilly Fellow at VU. Curiosity drew me to the website of the Center and it was there that I discovered that the Crumley lecture was given by a “prominent Lutheran.” I admit my first reaction was shock and bemusement! Me? A “prominent Lutheran?” In recent years I have begun to grapple with the fact that I am now middle-aged. Like everyone who goes through this rite of passage (and I suppose its better than the alternative of not going through it) I have slowly and inevitably accepted the fact that I am no longer the youngest – a position I held in a number of academic and musical circumstances for many years.

How had the boy born into an upwardly mobile Episcopalian family transformed himself at middle age into a prominent Lutheran? I suppose this is the ultimate theme of my comments today. And it is my fervent hope that in these next 45 minutes you will see how my personal journey found its conversion and transformation, coalescing into a thoroughly personal and Lutheran identity. I cannot speak adequately to the prominent portion of that description, but the Lutheran part I embrace with enthusiasm.

My second thought was that perhaps Roanoke has an unhealthy obsession with Concordia College in Moorhead, MN. I began my full-time academic career at Concordia in 1987.

The Dean who hired me? Your President-emeritus, David Gring, who I am delighted to see today for the first time in a number of years. Although I have only just today met President O'Hara, we, of course, share this connection as well.

Who knew? All paths in Lutherandom eventually lead back to Moorhead, MN.

Let me begin this afternoon with what I imagine is a familiar quote:

“Every person surely has a calling. While attending to it he serves God. A king serves God when he is at pains to look after and govern his people. So does the mother of a household when she tends her baby, the father of a household when he gains a livelihood by working, and a pupil when he applies himself diligently to his studies....Therefore, it is a great wisdom when a human being does what God commands and earnestly devotes himself to his vocation.”

Feeling chagrined at having immediately admitted to being something less than a genetic Lutheran I figured it would be smart to begin by quoting Martin Luther. Roanoke, similar to Valparaiso, rightly seeks to remain connected to the basic lessons of the great reformer. As articulated by legendary VU President O.P. Kretzmann, a fundamental part of the VU journey has always been “Athens and Jerusalem.” Learning and Faith.

“Giving Voice to the Spirit - a Musician's Calling” is the title I chose for this lecture. And, in spending a number of months thinking about it I am witnessing to the fact that for me, faith and music are inseparable. The sacred and the spiritual are alive in all musical acts. I am going to share with you experiences which have made this statement one of truth for me, and although I don't have a dramatic story of a terrific thunderstorm in which I fell to the ground saying, “yes, St. Cecilia, I will sing!” I do see my life path, my calling, my sense of vocation as having a certain inevitability.

(mus ex 1 – Dona nobis pacem, J. S. Bach)

Who better exemplified the idea of vocation than J.S. Bach? His music gave voice to the spirit in an unrivaled manner. And this final movement of B minor mass that you have just heard was Bach's valedictory compositional, theological and personal statement. It was his final ultimate act of vocation, if you will. We musicians love to quote Luther's famous statement that, next to scripture, music holds the highest place as "the excellent gift of God." Two hundred years after Luther, B minor mass gives a profound voice to this fundamental idea of Lutheranism.

Bach exemplifies the idea of vocation for a musician – he followed the call, because ultimately its resonance within him was impossible to deny. He saw his "beruf" his work (or profession) as a means of instructing the congregation of the St. Thomas Church and glorifying God's word. When my students are struggling with career choices and wondering if music might be one of those options, I often tell them that we choose music because it chooses us -- we realize at some point that we are unable to live life without giving voice to our own gift each day.

I mentioned a fundamental idea which motivates the work of Valparaiso University – Athens and Jerusalem --and I am grateful to have found my way to a place which takes seriously its dialogue about vocation – about seeking one's call and living in service to it. A bit later I will discuss in greater detail a musician who had a powerful influence upon countless musicians (including myself), Robert Shaw. Mr. Shaw spoke a simple and elegant truth when he said, "the arts are the Flesh become Word." The fundamental union of words, music and spirit which called me to this path, continues to inspire within me a desire to give voice to the spirit.

In organizing my thoughts for today several questions came to my mind, and, in my final attempt at verifying my genuine Lutheranness I am going to approach the primary portion of my remarks in three (3) major areas:

1. How did I discover this calling to the musical life? Or, "Hearing the voice."

2. What is the process of developing one's gift and forming it into vocation? I call this "Honoring the voice."

3. Over a period of years I have recognized my calling, my "beruf" (to return to Luther's terminology) in two distinct areas: teacher/conductor and solo performer. Much like one's faith journey, the challenge is to honor this calling each day. I will discuss this as "Living the voice."

"Hearing the Voice"

When I was a young boy it was clear that God had put something unusual in my throat. My early recollections are of singing in the Bellevue Boys Choir where I grew up near Seattle. My younger brother joined me in this activity and it allowed us to wander seamlessly from brotherly boxing matches into fearlessly floated musical phrases. He went on to a legal career and although I'm sure there must be some good lawyer joke that would fit here I will resist the temptation. I remember singing solos in front of audiences from probably around age 9 or 10. A less musically ambitious, but more poignant memory is singing along with the family player piano -- joined by my father (I believe there once existed a cassette tape of one of these sessions -- my students would pay serious money for that I think!). My father also loved singing as a boy and I was very struck by the full circle of his life, when in his old age he found singing again to be important. Voice teachers can find countless articles and books about the trauma encountered by adolescent boys as they suffer violent and sudden shifts in vocal range associated with voice change. My singing voice, somewhat middle-ranged and clear as a boy, just slid south gradually and became an adult voice that is high-ranged, and thankfully, still mostly clear. Later I would discover that Bach liked to write music for the tenor voice in a particularly high range that fit this unusual timbre and tessitura of my voice -- more on that later.

While I began the process of discovering my musical gift, I think I had typical ideas associated with those of us born into the baby boomer generation – the unspoken ideas of “success” revolved around socio-economic status. Both of my parents were children in the depression era and lived with modest economic conditions – as adults they achieved a higher level of economic status than their parents – arguably the most powerful part of the American Dream for their generation. In my younger years I often felt that the unspoken expectations revolved around this classic American ideal of measuring oneself against the economic success of his/her parents. My grandfather was a railroad worker, so my father, the medical doctor, plainly exemplified success. Michael Bennethum summarizes this idea in his book, “Listen God is calling! Luther speaks of Vocation, Faith and Work:”

“Daily labor is a great provider of worth for most adults who hear early in their lives ‘make something of yourself.’ A person’s job title, security, and salary grade are important measures of that person’s value in society. ‘Habits of the Heart,’ that landmark treatment of modern individualism, puts it this way: ‘ It is a widely held middle class – and American- view that through work one gains self-respect and the ability to control, at least in part, one’s environment.’”

Most of us would agree that we live in a time and a society of excess – that our desire to acquire things outweighs the desire to make a difference in the lives of others. My parents insisted that education was the key to living life well. While that education involved book learning and academic success, to be sure, they also saw to it that we (myself and my three siblings) were baptized and confirmed – that we had the opportunity to understand our lives in relation to the church. I didn’t think it all that extraordinary, but as I look back I am amazed that they gave me every chance to explore my gifts and to learn about music, to discover my vocal potential, and, when the time came completely endorsed my plan to go to the University of Southern California as a “music-theater” major (the music theater part always gets a hearty laugh from my wife, Maura). I tried the music theater thing for a brief time and soon figured out that navigating a musical score was going to be simpler for me than navigating a stage

(although I think most of us teachers would say our work involves high levels of acting from time to time).

As I was making some final revisions to this talk about one week ago, my older brother called. He told me he was delivering a talk at a community event that evening – so, I said, “I’m working on a speech as well.” He asked me the topic and when I told him, he said he had found it helpful to remind people of three things: one, working at something about which you are passionate will enrich your life; two, it will enrich the lives of others; and three, when you are gone, people will remember you as someone who made a difference.

You should have invited him to give this talk! But to my good fortune I guess – he is not Lutheran! In a few moments I am going to talk at greater length about how one’s calling is cultivated and nurtured by others, but I use this story to illustrate that values are instilled at many deep, and sometimes, unspoken levels. Providing experiences for our children, our students, for many around us – these till the soil in ways we can often not see – it is the power of an environment to shape the sense of calling. I had no idea that my brother could so eloquently sum up the call of a life lived in service to others.

(Mus Ex. 2 – PLU Choir of the West, R. Vaughan Williams – Lord, thou hast been our refuge”)

I first heard this recording early in my freshman year at the University of Southern California, and 30 years later, these words and the tone that propels them reach deep into me and offer a truth that I find absolute. It was something new to me – I could sense that not only could they sing their song very well, but that they believed it! At an innate level I understood, perhaps for the first time the inseparable qualities of faith and musical expression.

In his book, “The Other Six Days (Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspective)” R. Paul Stevens states the following:

“ My late colleague, Klaus Bockmuehl, offered a useful metaphor to show the relationship of the human, Christian and personal vocations. A wedding cake has a large base (the human vocation), a smaller layer built upon it (the Christian vocation) and a still smaller layer at the top (the personal vocation). They are interrelated, each building on the other. The Christian is not exempt from the human vocation....but there is another dimension of the call of God as shown in ‘call’ language in both testaments. And finally each of us is a called person. But that call is some combination of the human and Christian vocations that is unique to our own person and life path.”

My reaction to the music you just heard reflects part of the hypothesis from Stevens’ book. My response to this music was visceral and immediate – a response which brought me the first real connection to my human vocation. This formative experience would also lead me on the path of understanding it at that next (higher level, if you will) layer of Christian Vocation. These notes combined with that text serves as my own personal metaphor of the integration of human and Christian vocation being realized as personal calling.

“Lord thou hast been our refuge from generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made, Thou art God from everlasting and world without end.”

These words from Psalm 90 are combined with the ageless quality of Issac Watts famous hymn text: “O God our help in ages past our hope for years to come.” Not surprisingly when I read Psalm 90 it is only the melody constructed by Ralph Vaughan Williams that comes immediately to mind. We all have instances in our life which connect us to past events, people, places. This work which was for me the classic “aha” moment is echoed at each convocation beginning the academic year for Valparaiso University when the hymn “O God our help in ages past” is sung.

So strong was the impact of this performance that I almost immediately gave up my personal ambitions of being a solo music performer, or so I thought (it would take me more years to recognize that my aspirations or success as a solo performer could also serve as vocation). That moment in time literally caused me to give up those ambitions in favor of seeking out this “strange” “special air” (L. Bernstein) created by choral music.

I had begun to “Hear the Voice.”

“Honoring the Voice”

The conductor of that performance was Maurice Skones. He was without a doubt a thoroughly genetic Lutheran, reared on the farm in Cutbank, MT and schooled at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN under the tutelage of Paul J. Christiansen (I know, it’s amazing isn’t it – yes -- Concordia again, where I would have a faculty appointment some 40 years after Dr. Skones matriculated). While it took the better part of two years, I began a process of transferring to Pacific Lutheran University to be a student of Dr. Skones’. His musical expressiveness and his passionate (though quiet) leadership was legendary. A significant amount of his pedagogy (unlike mine) was unspoken. But, we felt **it** in his gestures, saw **it** in his eyes and sensed **it** in the music we shared.

His influence was the first and probably most important one in nurturing my path in “honoring the voice.”

So, what was “**it**?”

My friend and colleague, Weston Noble, describes this experience as those moments when a musician becomes so open to the experience that they go into a “special world.” He found this expression from Leonard Bernstein, who said: “Any great work of art is great because it creates a special world of its own.”

Weston takes this idea further into the realm of Christian vocation I believe:

“Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:23: ‘I pray to God that your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ We are tri-partite in nature; spirit, soul and body.....our spirit is that part of us that allows us to reach outside ourselves, beyond our body and soul.”

I believe it this dimension which I experienced that day in 1977. It was the ignition point upon which my musical life would be built. The truth of “honoring the voice” has been for me a continual recognition that God placed around me at crucial points in my life many individuals who taught, nurtured and guided. I would have eventually found my way to a realization of personal vocation without some of those mentors -- but I think it would have been very difficult and a lot bumpier. We require the divine providence provided by parents, teachers, brothers and sisters.

Another example of finding and living in that unique air of great musical works was powerfully formed by our relationship with Mr. Shaw. Maura and I enjoyed many experiences with him during the last ten years of his life, primarily through a choral group which he formed in France. Anyone who knew Robert Shaw came away with unique experiences and many stories. He was a remarkable combination of earthy work ethic and lofty idealism. As I was writing this I imagined that he and Martin Luther would have really gotten along well – seems to me they both enjoyed the very human and the very divine aspects of living life. As Mr. Shaw said once in one of his famous letters to a choral ensemble: “We may take our personal inspiration from the text, but when it comes to the transmission of that text, it’s work gloves, overalls and sweat.” Beruf, indeed!

I can’t go forward without at least giving you a short story or two about Mr. Shaw. We recorded on a number of occasions with him and he was often noisy – humming, stomping and moving about or the like as the recording was progressing. Once, when he

became particularly demonstrative, the recording engineers called him on the phone placed next to the podium (they had already issued a few gentle rebuffs via the speaker, which everyone could hear). We knew what the conversation was about and Mr. Shaw was not pleased. After a few moments of protest liberally sprinkled with colorful metaphors, as I recall, Mr. Shaw proceeded to sit down, remove his shoes, duct tape his mouth and swing back on to the podium indicating that the session could now continue.

He knew of our Lutheran choral tradition. F. Melius Christiansen, the great granddaddy of Lutheran college choirs had been made famous (among other things) by insisting upon a pure tone with little or no vibrato – thereby creating a very clear texture and much more absolute intonation.

My first meeting with Mr. Shaw was memorable. He sat on the other side of a relatively small room in a school in Souillac, France listening to me sing the ‘Benedictus’ from B minor mass. When I had concluded, he looked at my resume and then at me over the top of his glasses:

“it says here that you teach at Concordia College in Moorhead?”

“yes, Mr. Shaw, I do...”

(Getting up out of his chair and coming across the room toward me)

“How the hell do you teach there and sing like that.”

I was, of course, momentarily stupefied by this comment, but he and I engaged in a brief, but interesting conversation about the history of choral tone among Lutheran college choirs. I soon understood that he was offering a genuine compliment – although it hardly seemed so at the moment.

Maura and I remember our experience of singing Rachmaninoff’s Vespers under Mr. Shaw’s direction with special fondness.

(Mus. Ex #3 – Rachmaninoff - Vespers, The Robert Shaw Festival Singers)

Earlier I gave you a very brief quote and I would like to share the entire context with you now. It shows Mr. Shaw in a more sanguine moment than some of my other stories and gives context to what I hoped you may have felt in listening to Rachmaninoff:

“The arts are the Flesh become Word. That ‘the Word became Flesh’ is familiar doctrine. – But what about the reciprocal miracle? The daily possibility of Matter becoming Spirit? Paint onto canvas in one century turned into tears six centuries later? Words onto paper today flung into a theater tomorrow to change a life the year after? Little spots of ink transfigured into a miracle of symphonic sound join thousands of listeners and performers in a rare community of Brotherhood? Art is the flesh become Word.”

Through many musical experiences in life I can testify to the reality of the word becoming spirit. And through the many who have helped me in furthering my sense of vocation I recognize it is their teaching which has helped me to “honor the voice.”

“Living the Voice”

Hearing and Honoring the voice involved elements of vocation that I believe were discovered through largely external sources. Or more accurately, the awakening and nurturing of gifts that occurred through outside influences. These formative experiences helped me to shape an idea and begin a process of giving voice to the spirit in a larger sense – a sense that goes beyond self.

As I completed my graduate studies I imagine I was like most individuals who are completing advanced degrees – getting a job, any job would be terrific. The opportunity to teach at Concordia was, of course, a bit of good timing and immensely good fortune. I found at Concordia an ethos that reflected my own undergraduate experience and the realization of my dream ever since that day in 1977. Although I was the teacher, I look back on those years as ones in which the students taught me a great deal as I begin the

process of “living the voice.” Several things occurred in my last year at Concordia which shaped part of this ongoing process. At the Christmas Concert in 1994 I conducted “Dona nobis pacem” of B minor mass (which we heard earlier). My students did not know what I did at that moment – that this was likely the last Christmas Concert I would conduct at Concordia (a possibility that indeed become reality as I accepted my position at Valparaiso a couple of months later). By the current standards of Baroque performance practice that version of the work would be considered a failure – 275 voices in the chorus, 80 in the orchestra – the Bach purists would have a heyday. But, I remember the distinctly joyous quality of honest performance – again with a community that believed sincerely what it was performing. Watching those students give of themselves with genuine passion, with an extraordinary openness to the music and its message – this made a deep impression on me of a level of musical commitment that I hoped I could always cultivate.

It was also a Concordia student, whose name I can no longer recall, who helped me to see the interrelatedness of my life as a performer to my life as a conductor. I had often viewed them as oppositional – as if the teacher/conductor part of me was living in true vocation and the performer part was the evil twin – attempting to thwart the call. In the years immediately after 1990 I began to discover the possibilities of my singing voice – and especially how it related to singing Evangelist in the Bach Passions. I received an important invitation to sing one of the Bach passions, but its timing was awkward and would cause me to be away from my students at a particularly crucial juncture of our rehearsal process. I didn’t know what to do, so I asked my students their opinion. The next morning I arrived at my office and found a note from a soprano in the choir who told me that it was her opinion that I should go and participate in this performance. She went on to speak in simple but elegant terms of the possibilities created when one honors his/her gifts. She told me that the gift of my performance given freely to others could serve God in ways that I could not foresee. I was quite floored at the simple and pure insight of this young person. I began to look at my vocation of personally “giving voice to the spirit” in a very new way. Another element had been added to further wed my human and Christian vocation into its unique personal calling.

This step helped me to begin to see that the vocal instrument I possessed, a gift from God could uniquely serve Bach and the Gospel by voicing the role of the Evangelist:

(Mus. Ex 4 – J.S. Bach - St. Matthew Passion)

Even if you don't understand any German I imagine you recognized this portion of the passion narrative. The Evangelist begins with the text: "and from the sixth hour darkness came upon the earth, until the ninth hour. And, at the ninth hour Jesus cried aloud and said 'Eli, Eli, lama sabbachthani,' The Evangelist translates Jesus' words from Hebrew into German (the English translation: "That is: My God, My God, why have you forsaken me"). In typical fashion, Bach creates something very special in this critical moment of the story by heightening the harmonic tension and extending the vocal range for both the voice of Jesus and the Evangelist – it is a very unique and intimate moment. Those who are familiar with "St Matthew Passion" also recognize this as the spot where the famous "halo of strings" around Jesus' words is removed. Once, after a performance I had a member of the audience say to me, " I have listened to many performances of St. Matthew Passion over the years, both in person and on recording. I always wait for this moment. I know it is coming and I have often thought of the surprise it must be for the first time listener. I have often wanted to hear it again as if it were the first time – but I know this to be impossible. Today, however, I waited for that moment and when I heard the words, "mein Gott, mein Gott" tears spontaneously leapt from my eyes, as if I were hearing it anew." This listener marveled at the moment and ascribed his reaction to the musical qualities that he heard; I, however, saw it as a moment of pure, genuine spirit, of Flesh truly becoming Word.

In the same year as this performance another media event had captured the attention of large parts of our country: Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ." I wrote about the juxtaposition of these events for *The Cresset*, the journal devoted to the liberal arts published at Valparaiso University. *The Cresset* devoted this particular edition to J.S.

Bach in the year that we inaugurated The Bach Institute at Valparaiso University. I related part of the story that I just told you, but in a larger context:

“As a teacher I can attest to the challenges of teaching new generations to love the venerable master (Bach). The contemporary age does, indeed, allow space to spawn appreciation of this music and its message...in January 2004 we performed Bach’s St. Matthew Passion in the Chapel of the Resurrection. We began on a cloudy, breezy winter afternoon, and as the second half of the Passion brought us close to the moment of Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice the sky grew dark and snow began to fall from the clouds. When the Evangelist sang “and from the sixth hour onward there was darkness covering the land” the Chapel was dark with only some natural light of deep hues coming through stained glass. At that moment it seemed as if performers and audience together collectively held their breath. Waiting. Watching. Wondering. Wondering anew about this sacrifice. I have been involved in some forty performances of the great Passion, but none have come close to this sense of palpable understanding on the part of listener and musician.

I have often considered the question: is Bach relevant to the twenty-first century? Arguably, film represents the most powerful and omnipresent art form of the twenty-first century. And yet, the St. Matthew Passion offers the ultimate means to understanding Christ’s sacrifice.”

This particular performance was led by another important teacher and mentor – Maestro Helmuth Rilling. And, large parts of its eloquence must be recognized as springing from Maestro Rilling, whose very life sums up the idea of vocation.

Howard Swan, one of America’s great choral conductors said it this way:

“If we can bring the best that we have in music to God as a sacrifice – an offering – then this becomes truly a part of our worship experience. Through inspired music we praise

and pray and preach. With the prophet Isaiah we can answer the question, ‘Who will go for us?’ ‘Here I am, send me.’”

“Giving voice to the spirit” cannot be described in mere words – it must be felt, heard, honored and lived:

(Mus ex. 5, V. Williams – Lord, thou hast been our refuge)

This is the closing section of “Lord thou hast been our refuge” -- the magisterial work of Ralph Vaughan Williams that you heard earlier. Did anyone notice the words? In this closing section it says:

“And the glorious majesty of the Lord be upon us.
Prosper thou, O prosper thou the work of our hands,
O prosper thou our handiwork.”

I will admit to you that I looked in Luther’s Bible at Psalm 90. The word, “work” occurs twice in this last verse of the Psalm. Could he have possibly have translated this (as we know he did in the New Testament) as “beruf.” No, he didn’t. He understandably used the more general and universal term, “werk.” But it is this quality of work which permeates Luther’s fundamental theology. It empowers the musician, or any other person, to return to the simple task of honoring that to which we are called. Vocation demands that we respond with generous loving kindness to the community in which we live.

Earlier I described to you a performance of “St Matthew Passion” at Valparaiso. A few weeks after that I had the opportunity to perform the same work with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Returning to VU, a group of my students said to me: “Performing ‘St. Matthew’ with the LA Phil must have been the highlight of your musical life.”

I asked them to imagine themselves, several weeks prior, in the Chapel of the Resurrection, surrounded by Bach's music in that space – remembering the sense they felt breathing life into those musical moments, singing those words.

There was silence.

I could sense them re-living the telling of the Gospel story in our beautiful Chapel.

They were “hearing the voice,” and I knew at that moment they would seek to honor it and give it new life – that new generations would “give voice to the spirit.”

Notes on sources quoted

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