

All together now: The power and beauty of sharing music

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 25, 2006](#) issue

"O sing to the Lord a new song," the psalmist urges. I've always imagined someone in the back pew saying, "There's nothing wrong with the *old* song."

The conversation with songwriter John Bell in this issue takes us inevitably into the "worship wars," in which music is one of the battlefields. Bell is an accomplished musician whose compositions, like the music of the Iona community, of which he is a member, is inventive, theologically authentic and musically strong.

Church music says something about our ecclesiology and our Christology, not to mention our anthropology and aesthetics. When we argue over whether to sing Bach or praise choruses, we are also arguing about the nature of the church and the authenticity of its witness.

Music is powerful. Parents sing to infants from birth. Mothers-to-be play music for their babies in utero. One of my most poignant memories is of my infant granddaughter lying in the hospital after open-heart surgery with tubes and wires connecting her to a battery of monitors. The doctors had literally paralyzed her to allow her heart to heal. The mobile fastened to her crib softly played, over and over, a Mozart divertimento.

For ministers, music is often the essence of worship. We're so focused on the mechanics of the liturgy and on the sermon that it's the music that carries us along. Dostoevsky said somewhere that when his faith faltered and he found himself doubting, the music of the church and the singing of the congregation held him up. William Sloane Coffin wrote about music: "In times of desolation, God alone has comforted me more; and when the world seems bent on madness, it's music as much as literature that reassures me of its sanity."

Bell observes that church is about the only place in our culture where people still sing together. There is at least one more place: Wrigley Field, where in the middle of

the seventh inning people sing “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” That tradition was started by the late sportscaster Harry Caray, and now the singing is led by different celebrities, some of whom can sing and some of whom cannot. Nevertheless, everybody sings and it makes for a wonderful experience.

Many of the battles over music are battles over different musical idioms. I have found that jazz is an idiom that lends itself to liturgy, and that many jazz musicians understand what liturgy is about and can make meaningful, joyful, evocative music.

I recently preached at the pastoral installation of a friend. I saw in the bulletin that the response to the benediction was going to be “Take the A Train,” a Duke Ellington classic. After he pronounced the benediction, the pastor invited everyone to be seated and then explained that when he moved to New York City to attend seminary, his mother warned him not to get on the wrong train. But he had learned that the nature of ministry is traveling to new places, meeting new people and being open to God’s surprises. With that, a trumpet player and a pianist launched into one of the most spirited versions of “Take the A Train” I’ve ever heard. The mostly older congregation loved it. Heads began to nod, feet tapped, smiles broke out. It was a new song, at least in that context, and it was great.