

Chords and discords: Choral music of our time

by [Paul Westermeyer](#) in the [December 23, 2015](#) issue



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In 1898 Charles Ives set Psalm 67 to music. The piece begins with an eight-part bitonal chord, the men singing in four parts in G minor and the women in four parts in C major. In *The World of Twentieth Century Music*, David Ewen describes what this portended: “Before Stravinsky, Ives worked with polyrhythms; before Bartók . . . discords; before Stravinsky and Milhaud . . . polytonality; before Schoenberg . . . atonality; before Alois Hába . . . quarter tones; before Henry Cowell . . . tone clusters; and long before Boulez, he introduced music of chance.”

Some listeners haven’t wanted to hear Ives’s work or that of any 20th-century composer, preferring the music of previous centuries. Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* even provoked a riot in Paris in 1913. The path of 20th-century music was perhaps inevitable, however, given the wars, mass killings, power struggles, and brutality of the times. Dissonance and jagged rhythms were natural outcomes of the cracking of foundations and strident battles of a world in destructive conflict. Composers reflected a culture that could not nestle in false cushions of a past nostalgia without denying its own existence.

Arnold Schoenberg went into seven years of silence (1915 to 1923) to figure out how to proceed and emerged with 12-tone method, which made all pitches equal. Olivier Messiaen wrote *Quartet for the End of Time* while a German prisoner of war between 1940 and 1942, utilizing the musicians in the prison camp: a violinist, clarinetist, cellist, and himself as pianist. And from 1959 to 1961 Krzysztof Penderecki lamented war’s destruction in his *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, with its searing agony

of 52 strings that do not play lyrical lines.

The church's recognition of the reality of radical evil in the overall sweep of cross and resurrection opened music to these 20th-century soundscapes and what they could express. So, not surprisingly, Schoenberg juxtaposed the song of the angels at Christmas with rape, pillage, and slaughter in *Friede auf Erden* [Peace on Earth]. Though it ends with a D major chord, getting there is not a harmonious journey. In his *War Requiem*, Benjamin Britten protested war, using a tonal frame with a recurring troublesome tritone, and juxtaposing the text of the requiem mass with poems of Wilfred Owen in which Abraham defies the angel.

Stravinsky wrote a mass and the *Symphony of Psalms* in a neoclassical style, and *Threni* (lamentations of the prophet Jeremiah) in 12-tone technique that sounds different from Schoenberg. Penderecki's *St. Luke Passion* reflects the horrors of the 20th century using 12-tone technique. Messiaen used tone clusters, birdsong, and scales beyond the major and minor ones to write large works conceived in what might be called a Roman Catholic mystic frame of reference.

With the exception of Stravinsky's *Mass*, which was intended for liturgical use, these works were not written for nor suited to worship in a church. They are too long and presume an audience rather than a body of worshipers.

Some church choirs have gradually incorporated 20th-century musical syntax into their worship services. Sometimes this happened as new sounds seeped into their repertoires. Pieces conceived for the requirements and dimensions of worship came from well-known composers: Ives's setting of Psalm 67, Messiaen's *O sacrum convivium!*, Poulenc's Christmas motets, and Stravinsky's *Mass* and *Pater Noster*.

They also came from less well-known composers like Richard Felciano, whose *Pentecost Sunday: Double Alleluia* is written for unison male choir, organ, and electronic tape. Its muffled cupped-hands-over-the-mouth sounds of texts for Pentecost are calibrated with a stopwatch to synchronize them with the white noise of the electronic tape. Though its foreign style challenges amateur church choirs, I've directed it twice with church choirs and found congregations appreciative. David Ashley White composed "Spirit, Moving over Chaos" around a modal melody that the choir sings with a text by Patricia B. Clark. It is scored for an oboe or other instrument in that range, a synthesizer or organ or piano, bells or other percussion, and harp, in a 20th-century improvisatory style that is accessible for amateur choirs.

Although not all of the pieces they sing can be used in a worship service, choirs singing at the highest levels of performance can inspire and teach us. On its 2015 winter tour the St. Olaf Choir sang such new works as Anthony Bernarducci's *Veni Creator Spiritus*, Rosephanye Powell's setting of Micah 6:6-8, one of Eric Whitacre's *Five Hebrew Love Songs*, Daniel Elder's "Lullaby," Kim André Arnesen's "Flight Song," Sarah Hopkins's *Past Life Melodies* with its Australian Aboriginal influences and textless harmonic overtone singing, and Stephen Paulus's "Pilgrims' Hymn."

For a concert by the National Lutheran Choir, David Cherwien programmed 20th-century music that included American spirituals; the South African "Bawo Thixo Somandla," by Sidumo Nyameleze; James Green's setting of the Cherokee hymn "Guide Me As I Walk Along"; Latvian pieces, one based on Rainis's poem "Sun, Thunder, Daugava," set by Martins Brauns, and "A Prayer to the Sun to Set Early," by Alberts Jerums; *Hope and Quietly Wait* on texts from Lamentations and Romans, by Paul John Rudoj and Thad Fiscella; and "Ukuthula" by André van der Merwe.

The music of these two concerts illustrates our current choral musical environment and gives us a sense of the breadth of current music. One could add the romantic sounds of John Rutter, the wide pallet of Morten Lauridsen and the chant and "mystic minimalism" of Arvo Pärt and his kindred spirit, John Tavener.

Although atonality was a critically important component of many 20th-century compositional schemes, it was not the only one. Tonality may have seemed to go into hiding or disrepute (at least in some circles) for a period, but it never departed and soon rebounded, spiced now with dissonance that extended beyond 18th- and 19th-century common practice and with an expanded harmonic pallet. Bitonality and polytonality—two or more keys at once, as in Ives's setting of Psalm 67—have not left the party either.

Sonic choral possibilities are now extremely diverse. Stravinsky supposedly said that he wanted to write "very cold music . . . that will appeal directly to the spirit." Perhaps he had this in mind when he composed his *Mass*, which fits the neoclassical category that characterized composers like Hugo Distler, Paul Hindemith, and Ernst Pepping. Their music still lives next to the warmer sounds of more recent composers like Whitacre, Lauridsen, and Paulus. Tone clusters, birdsong, and Messiaen's scales beyond major and minor have not left the scene, nor have aleatory (chance) and improvisational techniques, nor have the minimalism of Pärt and the mysticism of Tavener.

We have a warmer vista in mind than composers did a century ago, when the battle was an icy one launched against heavy Romanticism. We 21st-century musicians have the luxury of looking back at other musical battles and their aftermath. This should give us the perspective we need as we piece together diverse musical syntaxes. We live at a point when we must piece things together.

The music programmed for the two concerts described above gives us snapshots of this diversity. In the St. Olaf concert there were open sounds reminiscent of Stravinsky's "cold appeal to the Spirit," warmer sounds of Paulus and Whitacre, Australian Aboriginal stimuli, harmonic overtone singing, and "fierce compassion" set with musical warmth and nothing fierce about it. In the National Lutheran Choir concert there were open sounds in the setting of the Cherokee hymn, wide spacing in the piece by Jerums, and octaves alone in the piece by Brauns. In both concerts rhythmic activity—sometimes percussive—and harmonic complexity were part of tonal pieces; diverse cultures were represented.

The multicultural network informs our music from sources all over the world. It has opened up a sonic expanse that invites a fecund interplay in which composers can do what they've always done—hear juxtapositions of sounds from various sources and create what they would never have created in isolated ethnic envelopes.

At first glance, the concert texts are as diverse as the musical syntax, ranging from biblical to liturgical to various hymns and poetic works in many languages and styles. But when one looks a bit closer, what stands out is the theme of justice. The song of Christianity from the psalms through the canticles and especially Mary's Magnificat has always included a concern for justice. In their current emphasis on justice, expressed in musical garb, church musicians can draw on the whole available range of musical syntax, making new juxtapositions that suggest new possibilities.

In his recent encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis includes music in the theological dialogue. The encyclical gets its title from his namesake's "Canticle of the Sun," a song that has been exegeted in many choral settings, including 20th-century ones. Francis points to the relationships of all things and includes numerous allusions to music as he addresses justice for the planet. Then, just before his final comments and prayers, he says, "Let us sing as we go." Choral singing of our time has a contribution to make as we continue the journey.