

For the glory of God: Conductor John Nelson

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [June 30, 2009](#) issue

John Nelson is a world-renowned conductor noted for his commitment to contemporary sacred music. He was born in Costa Rica to American missionary parents. He attended Wheaton College and the Juilliard School of Music. He founded and serves as the artistic director of a nonprofit organization, Soli Deo Gloria, which sponsors the creation of contemporary sacred music.

Nelson serves as a music director of the Ensemble orchestral de Paris and recently conducted Berlioz's Les Troyens at the Opera House in Stuttgart. Between performances, he prepared Beethoven's Missa Solemnis for performances in Armenia and Men delssohn's Elijah for a concert at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. He lives in France with his wife, Anita.

How do you define contemporary sacred music?

It is music written in our lifetime that addresses God's relationship to human kind or humankind's relationship to God. *Sacred* means many things to many people. But to me personally it means that which addresses and makes me conscious of my Creator.

What is the most interesting venue where you have performed contemporary sacred music?

The world premiere of Israeli-American composer Paul Schoenfield's *D'vorah* would qualify. This 45-minute retelling of the biblical story of the prophetess and judge Deborah took place in Haifa, Israel, with an Israeli orchestra, 30 blue-eyed, blond-haired members of the Oslo Gospel Choir, five African-American soloists and a gay conductor. Joy spilled into the aisles of the Haifa auditorium as people danced to a wild mixture of blues, gospel, rap and contemporary classical.

Where do you find your most receptive audiences?

It may surprise you to know that classical sacred music is appreciated far more in “secular” France than in “religious” America. The large churches in France—and in Europe in general—resound with sacred music concerts on Sunday afternoons and at other times. Whenever my Paris orchestra performs the great oratorios, masses and requiems, whether at a concert hall or a cathedral, the audiences are large and enthusiastic. In fact, our last *Soli Deo Gloria* commission, a highly adventurous and difficult oratorio by Peter Bannister, drew an avid standing-room-only crowd at the Paris church where the late composer Olivier Messiaen was organist. Rarely would that happen in America, where the culture of classical music is shallower and a more churched population stays away from concert halls.

What is the relationship between music and words in a worshipful piece of music? Is that different from the relationship in an operatic piece, for example?

Absolutely no difference. If words are involved in a piece of music, they become the inspiration for the music whether it be an opera, a pop song or a hymn. I once studied Bach’s *St. John Passion* for one week with a great Jewish musicologist who spent 30 of our 40 hours together on the text. It was shaming for me, a Christian boy brought up on the story of Jesus, who preferred to study the notes first. A lifetime performing opera and sacred choral works has taught me the absolute essentiality of being inspired by the text.

Music becomes empty without meaning behind it. Of course, there are many examples of works in which the quality of the text is inferior to the quality of the music and vice versa. The ideal is to have a proper match. What troubles me is the terrible dumbing-down of music and text found in today’s churches.

Could you say more about that?

I think this dumbing-down is a result of the American Christian community’s forgetting its high calling. We have become seduced by the television mentality of pleasing the multitudes and worrying about ratings. We want to have people in the pews and are willing to conform to this world rather than be transformed by the renewing of our minds and hearts.

I don’t mean to imply that a pipe organ and a great choir are better than a guitar and a praise leader. It goes far deeper than that. To mature both our minds and our hearts, we need more meat than milk. But in too many of our churches the world has

crept in to the extent that one cannot tell the difference between a church and a conference center, between an altar and a stage, between sacred and secular music—all in the interest of attracting rather than challenging.

Perhaps my most meaningful church experience was in Manhattan where for seven years I attended a simple Episcopal church that met in the manse of a demolished cathedral. We had an ordinary table for the altar, indigenous artwork rather than stained glass, a sometime choir made up of homeless people who were given two subway tokens as recompense, a minister of music who composed for Broadway as well as for the church and whose music making was brilliant but amazingly selfless and worship inspiring, a priest who made you think and a congregation made up of every strata of society. Christ would have been at home there. Would that there could be more settings like that.

Are you enthusiastic about new material for *Soli Deo Gloria*?

Yes. There are many who are pessimistic about the arts in general—and not without reason. With globalization and the scary economic conditions, the world is looking to the common denominator—whatever works for the most people.

But this has been the case throughout history. And in every age there have been Shakespeares, Bachs and Rem brandts. Our job is to find them, encourage them and showcase them. There are great composers with whom we are working (and we've worked with some great ones in the past): James Mac Millan, the Scot tish composer whose passionate Catholic faith infuses every note he writes; Peter Bannister, the British composer I mentioned before; and Daniel Kellogg, a young American composer who shows great promise and whose faith is also at the center of his work. These are among the many I place my hopes on.

It's too early to divulge details about it, but on the front burner is a project involving a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer who, in conjunction with one of the world's notable writers, is retelling a biblical story in a modern setting. So yes, I'm enthusiastic.

How does your faith inform your work?

How can I answer that in a few words! Down deep my faith informs everything I do. Being a performer, however, I struggle with the visible aspect of my work, and it often conflicts with my inner desire to please God rather than people. My

relationship to a magnificent and holy wife, to Christian friends and colleagues and a bedrock of faith nurtured by my parents help keep me true.

My relationship to an organized church keeps evolving. Brought up in conservative evangelicalism, I remain true to the essentials but have found God's banquet table far larger than I used to think. My constant traveling gives me the privilege and blessing of working in various traditions—Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, evangelical. And since we have just moved to the French countryside I'm looking forward to worshiping in God's nature—something new for this city boy. No doubt that will give a better perspective for all the creative work I try to do.