

Music and worship

by [John Worst](#) in the [Nov 18, 1998](#) issue

By Paul Westermeyer, Te Deum: The Church and Music. (Fortress, 412 pp.)

I've heard lots of moaning about the state of church music over the past ten or so years. And, though I consider myself a person of catholic tastes who recognizes the value in diverse styles and forms of music, I've done my share of complaining after having heard one too many thumping drum, wailing guitar or syrupy Jesus song on a Sunday morning. Those doing the wailing, thumping and singing are mostly young people, of course, brought up on the energetic, loud and emotional music of popular culture. The moaners are usually either those trained at music schools or conservatories to play and sing the great sacred repertoire of Western Christendom or older parishioners who love the traditional songs and service music.

I have sung, written and directed both kinds of music. I've been committed to the idea that the church should use any means possible to reach the unsaved and to be seeker friendly. But for some years I have found myself torn between the noble evangelistic goals of the modern seeker service and the solid preaching and solemn, deeply moving music of the traditional worship service. Is the state of church music a manifestation of the ancient and continuing conflict between youth and age? Or is the church unwittingly accommodating itself to the forces of commerce and popular culture? Is worship style merely a matter of taste, or is the Spirit at work energizing a recumbent and complacent church?

Though Paul Westermeyer acknowledges these issues, he neither moans about the state of church music nor rejoices in its energetic diversity. Rather, he probes deeply into the social and religious history of the church and explores the interrelationship of music, theology, liturgy and spirituality. He explores the church's continuing difficulty in defining the role of church musicians and the place of music in its total ministry. (Are they song leaders? choir directors? organists? ministers to the congregation? servants of elitist interests? custodians of a treasured repertoire? Does music exist to divert? to edify? to evangelize? to entertain?)

For Westermeyer, music is not just choral or solo singing and instrumental playing, but revelation. Music makes clear the coming together of several biblical strands into one grand theme. Westermeyer thinks that "the 'lyrical quality' of the New Testament leads to a reverberant musical celebration of the whole creation around the throne of the Lamb." Music in the church does not merely assist the worshiper or calm the troubled mind; it is truth and a way to the Truth.

Westermeyer is professor of church music at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota; director of music for the seminary community; and administrator of a master of sacred music program with St. Olaf College. By titling his book *The Church and Music* (rather than *The Church and Its Music*) he hints that these two huge religious/cultural/artistic constructs have seldom, if ever, coexisted in easy harmony. His idea for the book sprang from teaching graduate and undergraduate courses for which he could find no adequate text. He calls his book a textbook, a reference, a history and an essay.

As a history, the book begins with what we are able to deduce about the music of the Old Testament worshiping communities and proceeds chronologically to the 20th-century American church, both Catholic and Protestant. As a reference, it contains a 12-page time line extending from 1750 b.c., the time of Abraham's emigration from Ur, to 1990s American church-growth and entertainment evangelism; a 30-page full bibliography; a 43-page general index; and an extensive index of biblical references. As a textbook, its chapters contain either a summary list or a concluding reflection designed to elicit discussion and commentary.

But it is as an essay on the relationship of music to worship that this book is most valuable. Westermeyer argues that congregational singing lies at the core of vibrant, meaningful worship. Congregational song is "the people's musical office." When choirs and organs dominate, members of the congregation become passive observers rather than active participants. Westermeyer demonstrates the unfortunate consequences of depriving the congregation of its song and relegating worshipers to the lowly role of pew sitters. He is particularly adept at pinpointing the good, the bad and the ugly in American church music. His explanation of recurrent themes and cultural textures shows a deep understanding of our church music as a complex of cultural, economic, theological and liturgical elements.

This insightful and lovely book does have weaknesses. Amateurs may find the cursory and terse music-theory sections hard to follow, though Westermeyer does

direct readers to sources that offer more complete explanations. Archaic or unexplained technical terms sometimes obscure the author's meaning. And Westermeyer identifies hymn tunes by their tune names rather than by the first lines of the text most commonly associated with them. The tunes are then located by number in various hymnbooks, but one must have the cited hymnbook in hand to follow the discussion. The author's description of indigenous hymnody and psalmody (i.e., Moravian, English, Lutheran) is clear, unencumbered and concise except in the discussion of Pietism, in which the complex relationships between singing and preaching, music and worship are treated in a rather convoluted fashion.

But these minor caveats should not obscure the book's value. Although it is long, it need not be read in its entirety or even in order. Key issues appear throughout, and one can gain access to any of them through the many indexes. A must-read for every serious preacher, musician or choir member, the book clarifies important concerns and opens the way for lively dialogue.