

Nothing Like the Christmas Choir

There is nothing like a choir and there is nothing like Christmas to remind us of this. The season and its series of public occasions offer fresh evidence for the unsurpassed sound of that gathering of voices known as the choir.

It is the most wondrous of all musical instruments, the human voice: young or old, in unison or in harmony; accompanied or a cappella. In surroundings simple or splendid: there is nothing quite like a choir.

Forget the awards given to artists and groups by the recording industry. Ignore the congregations who replace choir lofts with performance stages. Discount the trends to disband the choir in favor of praise bands and worship teams.

The choir rules!

To be sure, these forms of contemporary music have taken hold in church life; in fact, have created a veritable revolution in Christian worship. This is not all bad: it has introduced new instruments and innovative sounds into the praise of God and it has certainly connected a whole generation with the gospel word.

And more than that: technology has provided a means for such music to escape the sanctuary and enter every other human space: home, car, office, factory, and market. In this way, contemporary Christian music is now the medium of choice for many who desire to inspire and educate believers.

Thank the other Dwight Moody for much of this.

Before he died in 1899 the famous evangelist introduced into his urban-center campaigns the solo voice of Ira Sankey.

For every sermon Moody preached, Sankey sang three songs, most of them self-accompanied on a small pump organ. It was a strategy designed to interest the people and attract a crowd. Sankey himself became a celebrity.

Not that Moody ignored the choir.

His 1877 Boston affair was typical of his revival efforts elsewhere: it featured platform seating for a 2,000-voice choir. In this, as in most other ways, Moody pioneered the practices that Billy Graham perfected a century later.

Practices such as the mass choir. Even in this era of electronic sound and celebrity music, the choir still sings.

In fact, the choir is very much alive. It is not just a relic of the temple worship so carefully described in the Hebrew Bible; it is not just an artifact of the medieval music that once dominated the Christian cathedrals of Europe.

No, the choir is at the center of sanctuary things all around the world and especially at this time of Christmas celebration.

A “Google” search brings up more than a half-million sites devoted to thousands of choirs that continue to gather, rehearse and sing.

Boy choirs are popular, as are cathedral choirs, gospel choirs and campus choirs.

Some congregations still give priority to a graded system of choirs: preschoolers, children, youth and adults. Last year a senior adult choir sang for our college students and received a standing ovation.

I was blessed to grow up in a church that believed in the choir: there I learned to read music, to sing a part, to prepare for a program, and to play a small, unpretentious role in a memorable musical occasion.

Which is what the choir is all about: allowing even people of modest talent to sing the glorious music composed by people of enormous ability.

So when I sat near the back of the sanctuary one recent Sunday I could neither recognize faces nor distinguish voices. It was not important, for it was a choir that led the worship. No celebrities here, no prima donnas, no solo artists looking for a

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contract with some record label. It was a choir: it was one, rich, glorious sound unified in praising God.

They were using the words first sung by that angel choir sent from heaven to earth: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and good will among men."

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