

Cross-bred Music: Joining Cultures to Proclaim the Gospel

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Abstract

Celebrating quality music across diverse cultures is a worthy heritage of the Lutheran Church. Combining these musics—and their people—in the context of the Christian Gospel provides new insight and relationship.

Note: This article is an adaptation of the Banquet Speech I shared at the 2023 Lectures in Church Music at Concordia University, Chicago.

The late Howard Swan, a dean of American choral conductors, once said that choral conductors are the most fortunate people in the world, as they get to work with its most wondrous gifts—people and music. When the high delight of sharing our faith in Christ through those two gifts is added, they are blessed indeed. This article relates some of my own faith experiences with music and with people from around the globe and in my local communities.

An early memory of music's impact to uplift and connect people is from grade school. I had a newspaper route, and part of the job was to try to sell subscriptions. A few of us newsboys went out with our adult manager to do some door knocking/paper peddling. It was mid-December in Northern Minnesota—cold and dark. We had a few “normal” visits at houses, even selling a couple of subscriptions, and were approaching the final stop. It was a small, run-down, dimly lit house, but we did see a Christmas tree in the window. Our boss had us knock on the door. An elderly man, alone and frail, came to the door and invited us into his warm but shabby home. He was stooped, not too clean, and hard to understand, but we went ahead with our usual pitch. He was not really paying attention to our spiel; he just seemed glad for the company. Our boss, seeing we were not going to make a sale here, started to usher us out. As we were moving to the door, I felt a little bad deserting him, so I commented to the old man that I liked his Christmas tree. His eyes brightened, and he asked if I



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knew “*O Tannenbaum*.” Having been raised as a good Lutheran, singing at home and in church, I took a stab at it, but my German was iffy. The man moved closer to me and filled in the gaps in my language. He continued with more verses as I, and, thankfully, the other boys, hummed along. (During this exchange, our boss was impatiently trying to get us out the door.) The man offered us some Oreos before we left. I remember wishing I could have stayed longer, as I sensed that we had just been given something special. The power of music—particularly when there is a deep-seated cultural connection (in this case, the German language he learned as a child) infused with our faith—was impressed on me.

Ten years later, I experienced a college semester abroad in Jerusalem. There, we immersed ourselves in the community, even singing in the YMCA Community Chorus for a Christmas concert. While the music-making was not the highest quality, the personal connections we made were rich. I had the privilege of singing a duet with the President of Bir Zeit University, a tall Palestinian Christian man with a booming baritone voice. He was a kind, gracious, thoughtful soul. The week of our concert, he missed a rehearsal because his teenage daughter was hospitalized after having been shot by Israeli soldiers. Thankfully, she recovered, and the community we shared in our Christmas concert took on even deeper significance, as our joint music-making offered comfort and peace to the people.

My next experience abroad came in May 2000, when our Concordia University, St. Paul Christus Chorus was invited to sing for the Polish government’s annual sacred music festival, *Gaude Mater*. We flew from Minneapolis to O’Hare’s international airport, planning on an overnight flight to Warsaw. On arrival in Chicago, we were informed that our flight would be delayed. We waited through further delays until the Polish airline put us up in a hotel overnight. We came back the next morning to yet more delays.

The crowd that was waiting along with us was mostly Polish nationals, eager to get home to their families for the May Day holiday. As the wait dragged on into the afternoon, the crowd became increasingly agitated, and I was becoming more and more anxious about our itinerary. Perhaps to distract myself (and occupy my students), I thought it could be helpful for us to sing for the people at the airport. I got permission from the airline check-in staff and then gathered the choir for an impromptu concert with our piles of luggage as a backdrop. Just as we began singing, the airline desk announced yet another delay. The crowd erupted, almost drowning us out. However, those close by turned to see what on earth we were doing in this chaotic situation. The piece we were singing was “*Lullajzhe, Jesu, Niyu*,” a beloved Polish Christmas carol. Gradually, the shouting mob turned to listen, leaving their anger and yelling aside to hear our song. Tears were streaming down the faces of many present as they held hands and remembered their home, family, and faith that they so longed to return to. We finished our song (and a couple more), and the people applauded, hugging and thanking us. One person said to me in broken English, “Thank you. You brought us

peace.” We eventually got to Poland and had a marvelous tour with yet more experiences of music of faith connecting people.

We were again blessed to share the gifts with others in a song trip with the Christus



Chorus to Ghana in 2008. This was a remarkable tour, full of wonderful concerts in churches, universities, and concert halls as well as service projects in villages. The event that stands out is the time when we were taught and fed by our hosts.

At St. Francis DeSales Catholic Church in Cape Coast (one of the slave castle cities on the West African coast), a young Ghanaian priest concluded our concert by teaching us a joyful Ghanaian High Life piece that they use for offerings; we sang it twice that night for two offerings. This up-tempo, pop-influenced, simple music is infused with instruments, dancing, and joy in a way that wrapped us up in their community.



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In fall 2014, my wife, Katherine, and I were invited on my sabbatical to teach in Bethlehem, Palestine, at Dar Al-Kalima University and Christmas Lutheran Church. We learned much from these settings, where people were working, doing ministry, making music, and creating art under very difficult circumstances. The Palestinian Lutherans we met combined their heritages—Arabic music and art in a church that was founded by German Lutherans in the 19th Century.

The juxtaposition of the German and Palestinian cultures is striking. The church building has stained glass windows with inscriptions such as “*Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt*” (“The Lord is my Shepherd.”) For the closing hymn one Sunday, Pastor Mitri Raheb announced, “We will now sing *Grosser Gott*.” Led by their pipe organ, the congregation sang this German chorale in Arabic from their hymnal that printed the music and words right to left.

That congregation sang with such gusto on their hymns—both old German chorales and Palestinian based melodies—that I felt drawn to bring the two styles together. They regularly sang a Palestinian melody (in a sturdy e minor key) for the Gloria in their service. Because they also embraced German hymns, the meter, character, and harmony of the piece immediately made me think of another chorale: *Erhalt uns Herr* (“Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word.”) The result was a choral arrangement that combines both songs. It starts with an Arabic-stylized oboe line that disguises the chorale tune, giving way to the droning accompaniment and percussion of Palestinian folk music, alternating and ultimately combining with the German Lutheran chorale.

Link to Recording of “Hallelujah, Mazhda Hallelujah” in English:
<https://tinyurl.com/y2tdub9d>

These global experiences highlight the ripe opportunities to collaborate with musicians from LCMS partner churches around the world. Phil Magness worked with the French-speaking churches in Africa to develop their hymnal and resources. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ghana is in the midst of their own hymnal project—a collaboration in which I participated in November 2023 in Accra. The Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa is training church musicians to recapture their heritage of singing Ethiopian music in harmony. The head of their School of Music and Media Arts, Amare Teklu, completed his Masters in Church Music at Concordia University Wisconsin, and his wife, Tsega Abebe, has completed a church music major at Concordia University, St. Paul. Through connections with them, I worked with and learned from 200 of their church musicians in Addis Ababa in November 2023. We formed a choir for a choral chapel service that opened them up to new possibilities for their worship.

In Taiwan, the LCMS is working with their church body to set up a music conservatory. Dr. Martin Dicke has been an advisor for them, and they seek to use the resources and model created by David’s Harp music ministry from St. Paul Lutheran

Church Music Conservatory in Council Bluffs, Iowa. We in the American church have tremendous opportunities to collaborate with, learn from, and be energized by the vibrance of the growing churches of the Global South. In turn, we can support their growth with our resources. These connections do not require the time and expense of in-person collaboration; with current communication resources, virtual collaborations can be quickly set up and yield a rewarding harvest.

My final story is a combination of global and local connections. In 2018, I met *29:11 International Exchange*, a Gospel music/reconciliation ministry from Cape Town, South Africa. We have enjoyed several in-person and virtual collaborations, and I now serve as their Board Chair. The group is intentional in building relationships, collaboration, and understanding—both musically and personally. Their faith in Christ is their driving force. *29:11*'s work has ranged from small-town churches (and their choirs) to schools, universities, and professional ensembles, including several collaborations with the Minnesota Orchestra.

This South African group, with singers of the African American communities of Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church, Walker|West Music Academy, and the sibling pop group NUNNABOVE led to a transformative “Cross-Breeding” collaborative concert at Concordia University, St. Paul.

Concordia St. Paul is in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, an African American community that was dismantled with the construction of I-94 in the 1960's. Concordia also lost about half of its acreage at the same time, so we had a shared history with our Rondo neighbors. Concordia and the Rondo community also directly felt the effects of George Floyd's killing, with destructive riots arising just blocks away in the aftermath. In conversation with community musical partners (which included one of my music composition major advisees, Carl Clomon, the Music Minister at Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church and on the staff at Walker|West Music Academy), we decided to hold a “Rondo Reconciliation and Renewal” concert collaboration to directly address racial injustice and division.



This was a challenging project that took careful planning and listening. Some of my students were concerned that this concert would espouse “critical race theory.” Others felt they as white, privileged people should not sing music that expressed the experience of Black people. To address these concerns, we held

talking/listening sessions, panel discussions, service projects, and a guided dialogue

supper with all participants. Our hard work in the joint rehearsals contributed to the bonds we formed.

By the time we came to the concert, we had built relationships and understanding, making it possible for us to connect authentically. This alone, though, would have only taken us so far. The key element we shared was our faith in Christ. That Rock was the common foundation that brought us together.

In the concert, each of the six collaborating groups did a short celebratory set to revel in our diverse gifts. We then had a panel discussion about the issues of racial strife that harm us all. That set up our performance of two pieces that faced this issue head on: “Say Her Name” and “The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed.” These pieces alone would have left us in despair, but we then shifted to the “still, small voice” of a solo singing “Jesus Died for All” to the melody of the Civil Rights era song, “We Shall Overcome.” This simple piece—one that could be done with even the most limited musical resources—led us all into singing this uplifting song together. We ended with the joyful, yet purposeful “The Storm is Passing Over” Gospel song.

In March 2026, many of the partners from the February 2026 “Rondo Reconciliation & Renewal” Concert recombined for another event entitled “Love Is the Excellent Way: A Concert of Healing and Hope.” Coming in the midst of the immigration enforcement surge in the Twin Cities, our planning team felt called to offer the positive message of Christ’s love for the world in a way that was not political or partisan.

With hands joined—black and white, young, and old—we sang together as a community in Christ. Humbled before the Cross, the people present were transformed to go forth in hope, love, and peace. This is the power of music (even at its simplest) shared in community when Christ is at the center. Church musicians have been given these gifts of music, people, and faith. With those gifts, infused by the Spirit, we can join in Christ’s mission to redeem the world.