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# Music and Persecution

James Whitehead

*Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada,  
Kitchener, Ontario*

**Texts: Psalm 96:1-6; Luke 21:7-19**

The focus of the chapel services this week is music, and the Psalm you have just heard set the tone, calling us to “sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless God’s name; tell of God’s salvation from day to day.” And this theme is further highlighted by the commemorations of St. Cecilia, portrayed as a patron of music, and the great English hymn writer Isaac Watts. I was struck as I read Psalm 96 and then turned to Luke 21:7-19 and saw, “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to the prisons and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.” Being a Mennonite, the juxtaposition of the themes of music and persecution brought to mind two scenes, ranging from old Europe to twentieth century Canada.

One of the things I have appreciated most during my two years here at the Seminary has been the opportunity to share traditions and viewpoints with people of many different denominations. Isaac Watts is a perfect example of the glories that can be found in the English music tradition and those of you who are Lutherans have a wonderful musical legacy. Each denominational tradition brings out of its faith and experience a unique and valuable perspective to its music. I would like to share with you some reflections from a Mennonite perspective on music.

The first scene reaches back to the year 1537, where 60 Anabaptists are imprisoned in the Oberhaus castle dungeons near Passau in Germany. Their crime is their refusal to adopt the

state religion. In an attempt to keep up their courage and not recant their faith, they make up hymns and sing them to each other. Now this is a strange thing, I suppose, when you stop to consider that 16 century Anabaptists do not sing during their worship services, since they are held mostly in secret, in isolated barns and in woods during the early hours of the morning, so as to attract no attention. Attention will bring the authorities. And whether the authorities are Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed, it will mean arrest, imprisonment, torture and possibly execution. Why is it that these women and men, who are unaccustomed to singing in worship, express their innermost faith in song? When all else is taken away, why is it only song that remains? Within the next five years, nearly all of them will die from torture and starvation, but they will write 51 hymns which form the nucleus of a hymnal called the *Ausbund*, first published in 1564. This Sunday, if you join the Old Order Amish of this area for worship, this is the hymnal from which they will sing.

Jump ahead to the early years of this century. The Mennonites who had emigrated from Prussia to Russia during the previous century at the invitation of Catherine the Great have seen their dreams die. With the coming of the revolution, their world has collapsed. A civil war is raging. Mennonite colonies at Molotschna and Chortitza have changed hands 23 times. Crops are destroyed; cattle and horses stolen; villages razed; hospitals, church buildings and schools abandoned; women and girls raped repeatedly by the armies and outlaw bands; the men rounded up and executed or kidnapped. Social disintegration and crop failure are compounded by typhus, starvation, and venereal disease. Some of the survivors, starving and carrying almost nothing, flee the country, trickling through Europe into North America. Each family, nearly destitute and missing several members, often the traditional bread-winner, step off a ship in this new world and without any prompt, fall on their knees and begin singing. They sing because their hearts are filled with grief and loss—and hope and expectation. The hymn is “Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices, who, from our mother’s arms, has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.”

When I plan worship at my church, I know that if I choose that hymn, perhaps a dozen people—the children and grand-

children of that first generation of refugees—will be unable to get through it without breaking down with emotion. While I do not have any Russian Mennonite ancestors, their experience becomes my experience. In that moment, as we sing, we define who we are.

Music communicates something fundamental from the human soul which even the most eloquent speech cannot. It encompasses speech, melody, breath, body movement, intellect, emotion and life. For a people hounded sometimes to the very brink of extinction, forced to emigrate frequently when we failed to fit in, and kept on the fringes of society by forces both external and internal, we have rarely had the luxury of academic theological expression. Perhaps for these reasons, we have produced few prominent theologians or systematic theologies. Practical considerations have always had to take precedence over abstract ones. It is our music, the music we have written and the music we have adopted, that holds first place in our hearts. When we sing to God, it is with a primal instinct that expresses our faith and life and experience and identity and being in one unity. One Mennonite writer has suggested that "our hypnology shapes our theology" and perhaps this explains why it recently took us ten years of work and careful consideration to produce a new hymnal. Our music may be our highest form of expression.

Our years of persecution seem largely behind us now. We live in relative comfort and security. I don't know what that will mean for our music, whether it is good or bad. But Christ's words from Luke 21 still remind us that a life of discipleship has more to do with persecution and suffering than with comfort and security, something which I suspect will remain in our consciousness for some time. But the message remains essentially the same. And that message is to declare God's glory and marvellous works among the nations and the peoples, telling of God's salvation from day to day and trusting God to give us words and a wisdom that will witness to God's love for creation, God's love for justice and God's love for peace as the divine reign moves toward fulfilment.