

# A View From the Bench

By Marianne Nold

St. Tim's is blessed with a strong musical tradition because we've always had leadership that appreciated its importance. Just think of all the music our parish community has sung and enjoyed together! And in spite of the pandemic, our music ministry still finds ways to unite us, lift our spirits, and continue the tradition. This is one accompanist's reminiscence as part of the history.

In November of 1965, Father John Iacono invited St. Tim's parishioners to form a choir for Midnight Mass on Christmas, and an enthusiastic group of us turned out. At that first rehearsal, I volunteered to play for the choir and took my place on the organ bench. Little did I know how many years of music-making lay ahead for me and all the folks who have given us song and celebration at St. Tim's.

Organists were heard but not seen then, so the organ was situated in the small room beside the sanctuary, now enclosed as our tabernacle chapel. It was quite chilly in the winter, so I brought a space heater from home to warm it up. One stormy Sunday at an early Mass, I felt a fine sifting of snow filter down on the keyboard from the skylight above.

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council had recently announced significant liturgical changes, among them that the Latin Mass be in English and we all actively participate – not only by responding aloud to the prayers but by singing, too, something only choirs had done before. Our lectors announced page numbers, and an organ intro was the cue to sing at gathering, offertory, communion, and dismissal. Everyone followed the music in their People's Mass Books. The brave folks who first sang from the pews inspired others to join in.

Several years later, to encourage people to lift their heads and sing out, we abandoned the books, and a single screen was installed on the sanctuary side wall. The projector sat on a high shelf behind it and required the use of a tall step ladder to load the carousel. The system was far from fool-proof. When a slide stuck, everyone watched to see who would climb the ladder this time. I'd improvise on organ or cadence an ending and hope for the best on the next song.

Occasionally, the old sound system conspired to produce a deafening burst of static, startling everyone. The organ, too, could play a random tone on its own, and, unlike a piano note that fades away, this one persisted. It was loud and the reason rarely obvious, so I'd turn it off. Everyone kept right on singing. The noise might be gone if I turned it on again – or not. A repairman's efforts helped that organ behave until our 1997 church remodel included new one.

The Christmas choir was eager to continue, and the parish hired a director. This fledgling choir was the foundation for the music tradition we now enjoy. Directors came and went over the years, while choir members faithfully sang on. Each director offered his or own expertise and style, and the music program expanded. Volunteer teams of cantors formed, and brass and string players joined us on Christmas and Easter. The guitars we take for granted today seemed a daring experiment when

they first played for the “contemporary Mass” in the 1970s. Our handbell choir started out small and grew as the budget allowed for more bells. Along the way, several pianists and organists have played for us. Now, under Music Director Therese Jorgensen, we have many cantors, six choirs, and multiple instrumental resources, including six accompanists. And, in Therese and our Liturgy Director Bill Steffl, we’re blessed with composers in residence.

The piano is a seven-foot grand and stands on wheels. At first, we used a rubber doorstep to stabilize it on the sanctuary floor. One Sunday, the choir sang a spirited piece that grew to a huge crescendo, and at the fortissimo I suddenly realized the piano was slowly moving. No doorstep! My hands were full of notes, so I played on, leaving the bench behind. The drummer looked up just as the piano approached his head and quickly put a stop to its progress. Better brakes are now in place.

The final “Thanks be to God” is always our cue to begin the closing hymn. I did that at the piano one morning, and Father Harry Tasto unexpectedly turned and shouted over the music, “Not yet!” Startled, I stopped. When he seemed to have finished, I shouted back, “Now?” I still don’t know what possessed me. Church accompanists rarely speak from the bench.

When my husband, George, and I joined St. Tim’s, the average age of parishioners was only fourteen. As parish children grew into adulthood, weddings filled the calendar. For several years, well over a hundred took place annually. Tenor Mike Brama and I were often kept busy with five weddings a weekend. Couples occasionally invited a friend or relative to sing, and we’d rehearse before the ceremony. Many were very talented, but a few needed coaching. One gentleman both sang *and* talked his way through Mozart’s “Ave Maria.”

Weddings ranged from small, intimate gatherings around the altar to hugely orchestrated affairs. One summer afternoon before we were air-conditioned, six attendants sat facing the guests on either side of the altar, the bridesmaids in big picture hats. Midway through the Mass, one bridesmaid took hers off to use as a fan, her face glistening with perspiration. When she started to slide off her chair, her groomsmen jumped up, dashed over, swooped her up, and carried her out. Another day a slender groom turned more and more pale as he started his vows – until the celebrant gently helped him lower his head. A reluctant ringbearer or flower girl could slow a procession, and a bridesmaid’s child once escaped a pew to join the wedding party at the altar.

My wedding job wasn’t limited to the keyboard. When a half-dozen tuxedo-ed young men arrived, each holding a can of beer, I met them at the door to say that wouldn’t do. Father Pat Griffin once brought me a bowl of water and a towel, in case someone should feel faint. I had no idea how this might help! And on just one occasion, no celebrant appeared. But three priests served us then, so a call to the rectory brought one over to preside.

Minutes before an 8:00 p.m. spring wedding, a car accident took out the power pole on 89<sup>th</sup> Avenue, plunged the church into darkness, and abruptly cut off my organ prelude. Father John Fitzpatrick and I distributed small Easter Vigil candles to all the

guests, and I used vigil lights at the piano. A memorable night for all, and beautiful in its own way.

Before St. Tim's established guidelines, photographers tried for all possible angles at weddings. A curved cedar wall was installed in the sanctuary in the 1980s, and the organ sat behind it. Accompanists peered through an eye-level horizontal opening. One cameraman judged this a perfect vantage point and nudged me aside on the bench to lean over the keyboard and get his shots. Another fellow scrambled to the very top of one of the new projection tunnels for a bird's eye view.

Sundays sometimes brought surprises, too. Marty Haugen liked to tell how, just as I began the gathering song intro, he came running down the side aisle shouting, "Wait, wait! Stop!" It was late, but he felt compelled to rehearse the psalm before Mass. We did that, then sang the gathering hymn, and Father Tom Commers greeted everyone, "Some liturgies go click-click-click, and some go squish-squish-squish!"

In 1996, one of our parishioners gave St. Tim's a very generous donation to purchase the beautiful piano now in our sanctuary. I want to publicly acknowledge that anonymous donor with a heartfelt thank you. It's among the finest I've played, and I know all our accompanists appreciate this lovely instrument.

Time brings changes. When I first began playing here, funerals were very rare and usually involved a sudden or accidental death - sad days indeed. Our parish has aged over time, and funerals now occur more often. Those of us who sing and play at these liturgies hear inspiring eulogies and witness deeply felt grief, sometimes our own. We pray with you through music and are never untouched by your losses.

All along, people in the pews have made the efforts of singers and instrumentalists worthwhile. You are the constant - willing to go with the beat, to learn new music, ignore a missed note, embrace whatever the liturgy asks of you. We support your singing, but you in turn support us and make the music come alive in a prayer we all share. Covid has rudely interrupted us, but we mustn't let it stop us from making a "joyful noise unto the Lord!"

If you did the math, you know how long I was on the bench(es). From First Communion to Confirmations, from weddings to funerals, being a part of your family milestones was a privilege for me. Hearing you sing as I played was a joy and deepened my own faith, and I thank you for that. Seeing our parish children grow into cantors, choir members, instrumentalists, and other roles gives me hope for our church's future.

So again, thank you! Tradition says, "When you sing, you pray twice," so continue to raise your voices, and share your talents, too - whatever they are. Our parish community needs you.

- Marianne Nold

