

Making Melody to the Lord

A Festival of Song in Thanksgiving for God's Gift of Music

and Featuring the Works of Robert Buckley Farlee

June 1, 2025—Seventh Sunday of Easter

Narrations by Martin A. Seltz

MUSIC AND THE GATHERING

"Where you hear psalms or other spiritual songs sung, in accordance with the word of God and the true faith, you may rest assured that a holy Christian people of God are present."

—Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church*, 1539

The program on this day follows a familiar pattern of Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending. No, we are not here as *the* Sunday eucharistic assembly, gathered around the Risen Christ in word and sacrament to be sent into and for the world. But: Yes, we are assembled on an Easter Sunday for—let's call it a *minor* eucharist, the word that means "thanksgiving." We are here to give thanks *with* music for what Martin Luther once called "that divine and most excellent gift" of music. And we will do that thanksgiving by celebrating also how music supports and expresses the voice of God's people Sunday after Sunday in the *holy* eucharist.

Music is a gift God keeps on giving across the generations. Five hundred years ago, in 1525, the musical energy of the Reformation was just taking off, with the gospel-drenched song of Luther and Walter and Speratus now in the hands—with the spanking-new itty-bitty hymnals that had just been published—and now in the language and on the lips of God's people. Seventy-five years ago, in 1950, a boy was born in La-La-Land. And for the past fifty-five or so years, he has left Hollywood behind to become one of this generation's premier generators for the musical energy that conveys the holy gospel. Today it seemed good (to me, at least) to set a few of Luther's effusive words about God's gift of music in dialogue with a few of the many manifestations of that gift in the works of Robert Buckley Farlee—as we with voices and instruments celebrate all of that.

First, then: With music God gathers us. When Luther late in life wrote about the marks, the essential features of the church, he said (in short) about one of those hallmarks: Where you hear the gospel sung, you find the church. We are found and gathered by the Holy Spirit, who calls us out—that's a vocal thing and the very meaning of the word *ekklesia*, "church"—and then the same Spirit breathes us together in song. We were gathered again today at the font, singing with St. Paul and Susan Briehl and Bob that we belong to Christ, and we sang the wonders that unfold from that claiming. With music of praise our gathering continues, the praise of our holy, mighty, glorious, dying, living God.

MUSIC AND THE WORD (part one)

"Humankind alone was given the gift of . . . song to praise God with words joined to sweet melody."

—Martin Luther, *Preface to Symphoniae iucundae*, 1538

Luther praised music in general most lavishly, for example in his little Greek paeon titled Περὶ τῆς μουσικῆς ("Concerning music"), which starts, "I love music. . . ." But he usually went on to say that what's even better in God's gift of music is the marriage of music and word. In a preface to a

motet collection, Luther wrote, “Humankind alone was given the gift of words joined together with song to praise God with words joined to sweet melody.” And not just any words. God’s word—the good news—married to music is a sweet and potent combination.

Luther was extravagant, however, about where you could hear good news. Perhaps inspired by the nightingales that soared around the Wartburg castle while he was translating the New Testament, he once said, “Every little songbird has the gospel written on its throat.” Luther’s affection for gospel birdsong and the range of Luther’s voice led the composer Hans Sachs to call him the “Wittenberg Nightingale.”

We might well call Bob a Minnesota gospel bird, not a bobolink, or a loon, but a nightingale. Like the nightingale with its repertoire of more than two hundred distinct songs, he has developed a voluminous catalogue of music paired with the psalms and the gospel acclamation scripture texts for most of the lectionary days. And, beyond the Bible, there’s more good news to be sung: God’s word is voiced in anthems and motets that draw on words from the faithful of every time.

Today we sing one of those psalm settings. We hear Julian of Norwich’s remarkable good news sung. We hear Luther himself—and Bob—preaching on Jesus’ words in a gospel motet. We even hear “what our good God has for us done in sending the beloved Son” caroled on the throat of a woodwind bird, the oboe.

Music, says the Reformer, is the lead instrument that another bird, the Holy Spirit, uses to launch the word of God into human hearts. With the great flock of witnesses, we sing the gospel into each other’s ears and hearts, and into our own.

MUSIC AND THE WORD (part two)

“The fathers and prophets chose nothing to be more closely linked to God’s word than music. . . . Words and song act together on the listener’s mind and heart.”

—Martin Luther, *Preface to Symphoniae iucundae*, 1538

There’s more to say about music and the word. I’m talking especially about hymns. Luther emphasized that music was a *creature*, a creation of God, which was given to other creatures—even songbirds, since he didn’t know about whales, but especially to human creatures—to make something with that would be useful and beautiful and even gospel-effective. In other words, God the Creator makes us cocreators in the realm of music, as in other realms like procreation and language and science and other arts.

The hymn in the liturgy is a musical event that weds two artful cocreations, the poetic language and its musical partner, and then enlists the whole people of God as further cocreators in making the music to proclaim the word. Sometimes the same cocreator makes text and tune; often at least two are involved, from (at times) wildly different points of origin. (I’ve heard that hymnal committees and editors are sometimes called on to be the matchmakers.)

Today’s event is sprinkled with hymnic cocreations in which Bob has partnered. In this section we sang one of his many collaborations with Susan Palo Cherwien (living now in wonder), and we will soon sing one of his recent collaborations with Jeannette Lindholm. Bob brings to such partnerships a musical frame that helps to ensure the match’s endurance well into the future of the church’s song.

Some of you may have noticed that today’s first reading for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, year C, includes one of only five mentions of the word *hymn* in the Bible. Paul and Silas,

thrown in prison, sing hymns—to God and their fellow jailbirds. That’s the power and reach of the church’s hymns. In every season—summer heat, autumn cool, winter coming; in every place—prisons of suffering, lands of grief, boughs of joy; in every circumstance—where worship soars, when memory fails, where death awaits; we sing—and when we cannot sing, others sing for and to us—sing of God’s unfailing grace.

MUSIC AND THE MEAL

“To God I give my melody / and thanks in all eternity.”

—Martin Luther, “Frau Musica,” *A Preface for All Good Hymnals*, 1538

It is well known that Luther’s love of music was not limited to worship. Around the massive table in the LutherHaus in Wittenberg, family, colleagues, student boarders, hangers-on lingered after supper to make music. Luther wrote to an unknown composer in 1535, “We sing as well as we can here at table and afterward. If we make a few blunders, it is really not your fault but our ability.” In his Latin Mass, he wrote about the sacramental table, “I wish we had as many songs as possible to sing” during the sharing of communion.

The ministry of music is a ministry of word *and* sacrament. With music, we acclaim the new birth of every newly baptized child of God and our own risen life. At the table, musical leaders dare to accompany not only the earthly assembly but also angel choirs and the whole company of heaven in singing Holy, Holy, Holy; Hosanna all the way into the highest.

Pastor Farlee’s musical ministry for the sacraments includes a hymn with this lovely prenatal image: “The nourishment the mother takes is shared by life within. Oh, feed us, Lord, at your own feast.” And his repertoire of liturgical music includes Simeon’s song in which we join after seeing the light of Christ and tasting the food of salvation.

Ultimately, music supports the meal and extends its blessing by the way it draws the faithful into *eucharist*, into *thanksgiving* for all the gifts of God that are embodied here in the body and blood of Christ. Luther penned that thanksgiving in a poem titled “Frau Musica,” Lady Music:

Thanks be first to God, our Lord,
who created her [music] by gracious Word. . . .
For our dear Lord she sings her song
in praise of God the whole day long.
To God I give my melody
and thanks in all eternity.

MUSIC AND THE SENDING

“Nourished, go to thankful labor / bearing fruit in love for neighbor.”

—Martin Luther, from “Jesus Christ, Our Blessed Savior,” Erfurt *Enchiridion*, 1524

God’s gift of music sends us into motion. We sing as we go out. In the words of one of Luther’s hymns, “Nourished, go to thankful labor / bearing fruit in love for neighbor. / Those you serve can taste from you / what wonders God in love will do.” We are called to venture, to go out with good courage, dancing in the light of God, to proclaim God’s wonders still untold.

And every sending into the world leads us always back to gathering, not as in the circle of fifths or the circle of life, but rather into the grand revolution of the whole cosmos, leading us at last to the Spirit's gathering of us and all creatures to stand with Christ before the Ancient One, where our sole and holy vocation, whether we are musicians here or not, will be to weave a song of majesty to the holy Trinity.

Making melody to the Lord does not end with the composer's creative work, even though composers like Bob have built us extraordinary launching pads. Making melody is something all of us beloved of God get to do, love to do, with all creation, now and forever, using God's excellent-ist creature, music.

We have sung a-plenty with Cantor Farlee this afternoon, and now it is fitting that we hear from him directly. Fröhliche fünf-und-siebenzig Geburts-Jahr, Bob— joyous 75th birth-year!

Narrations for "Making Melody to the Lord: A Festival of Song" © 2025 Martin A. Seltz. The narrations are indebted to the research and insights of Mark P. Bangert's *That Divine and Most Excellent Gift: Martin Luther, Music, and the Arts* (Fortress Press, 2025, in which references for the Luther quotes may be found) and the author's foreword to *Making Melody to the Lord: A Robert Buckley Farlee Hymnary* (Augsburg Fortress, 2025).