

## *Letter from our Music Director, Ben Buchanan*

It's a little bit fuzzy, but yes... I remember that very first time; that glorious first occasion when I lifted my voice and let it resound throughout the church. If memory serves, I believe it was a bit over a quarter of a century ago. Dressed all in white I offered up my first vocal solo in a worship service! My brow was wet, but not from sweat. My little baby head had just been sprinkled with water and I knew then: it was my time to SHINE! I opened up and let out howl after wail after merciless bellow as my dad (who is the Associate Pastor for Community Ministries at First Presbyterian Church of Dallas) walked me around the church, showing off his newly baptized infant son to the congregation. (You may have guessed, but I was evidently quite the bawler!)

Well, twenty-seven years later it seems that not too much has changed other than that I unfortunately no longer fit in that baptismal gown. Joking aside, my personal approach to offering up music to the Lord aspires to return to that same freedom that I had when I unabashedly shrieked and hollered in worship as an infant: bewilderedly shouting joyful *noises* up to God.

A few summers ago I had the pleasure of being hired to be the music leader for 'The Leadership Conference' held at Mo-Ranch in the hill country of West Texas. A week-long camp for leadership-minded high-schoolers who have received recommendations from their home-churches. My job was to lead a group of 5 young people in how to lead music for worship. I was privileged to witness their growth as musicians, leaders, and as a team/ensemble. Through my time working with them I learned that the two greatest things I could offer them were:

- 1) encouragement to have an open mind toward the validity and worshipful-potential of *all* varieties of music.
- 2) an example of humility as a music leader; not to aspire toward self glorification (AKA don't be a rockstar).

The first of these they found easy to internalize, having each been accustomed to their own musical preferences they found it perfectly understandable that any music made with the right intent can serve as worship. They took to heart the idea that they were here to help make a joyful noise unto the Lord and they even chose for themselves the team name "RUAW," the late Hebrew word for a joyful noise (to split the ears with sound; shout for alarm or joy; blow an alarm; make a joyful noise). My crying infant self would have fit right in!

As the weeklong conference progressed and as these high-schoolers became more and more comfortable being in front of their peers a new obstacle came to the fore. Of course! These kids wanted to show off for their friends! Their gained confidence turned against them as their performance became more self-focused rather than outwardly focused. Luckily, I had suffered from such an affliction of ego once upon a time and shared with them the following anecdote: Back in 2007 during my first semester as a college freshmen piano performance major at the University of Tulsa I found my way to being asked to help lead music for a popular contemporary worship service held on campus. I was excited by the opportunity to shine because this was the "cool" Wednesday evening worship service, some of my friends would be there, as well as many people that I wouldn't mind becoming friends with too. Okay, okay! I admit it... there were a lot of cute girls there too! The service's loud heavy music was led by a singer/electric-guitarist, a drummer, a bass player, and now it featured ME on keyboards. ME! Multi-colored lights filled the space, performative jumping was added in, one time I even played with my foot on the keys, and I had the very special job of not just tearing it up on the keyboard, but also to run the fog machine! Set-up right next to the keyboard THE FOG MACHINE. Chords, melodies, AND FOG poured out from my corner, and it's safe to say that praises weren't soaring but my ego certainly was.

I stayed with them for about a semester and then a friend invited me to an intimate low-key worship service with super-chill acoustic musical offerings. No light shows?? No fog machines?? Psssh. What was this nonsense?? Rather there was a table with a cross on it and it was set for communion. Light acoustic music set a meditative mood for worship, a *huge* contrast from the high-energy secular pop covers that I had been assisting with. Here there was far more than just musical differences, the energy of the room felt bigger even though it was a smaller crowd. Here our energies pointed outwards, multiplying as they came together; joining as one in worship. It didn't take me long to switch to helping with this service and that made a huge impact on my college experience.

When I shared that story with team RUAW they got it right away and I not only could feel their hearts change but could hear it in their music.

Celebrating the wonder of creation through song has long been a passion of mine. I grew up in the church, singing in the children's chorister choir and then in youth choir, occasionally playing drum-set, timpani, or whatever other

percussion instruments fit the music for that given Sunday. Of all my early experiences of offering music in church, the most memorable one is the prayer that I was taught as a chorister which we sang at the start of each rehearsal. It goes:

*God of all lovely sounds grant us this prayer  
in all Thy sweet harmonies of Earth and air:  
grant us Thy faithfulness that we may be  
worthy to offer music unto Thee.*

The lectionary readings for the week of September 10th, our Rededication Sunday, include one of my favorite psalms, Psalm 149 which starts out with a joyful noise: “Hallelujah!”

It continues: “Sing to the Lord a new song; sing his praise in the congregation of the faithful.” For some of us the idea of singing is frightening; to some the idea of singing exists as such a non-entity that the very notion of them being able to sing is incomprehensible and seems ridiculous.

*What was the last new song you sang? What did it feel like?*

So many people say to me “I don’t sing” but I don’t believe it one bit! Maybe you didn’t *use to* sing but you *can*, and here in Psalm 149 we receive the direction to sing a NEW song to the Lord. (Be ye not afeared, I’m not going to bring up verse 3 “Let them praise his Name in the dance”) Song is a response which brings our whole self to be engaged in worship, praise, and prayer. This and every Sunday that follows I invite each and every one of you to join in the fun! We all have the gift of music within us and I encourage you all to explore it with newfound curiosity!

*Where will you find your next new song?*

It’s a joyful NOISE we’re after: be it the cries of a newly baptized baby, the sound of a congregation singing psalms in anglican chant, or someone who is earnestly singing the hymns and is just a bit off pitch. These *are* the joyful noises. These are *our* new songs.

It is such a joy to have been welcomed into the St. John’s Western Run family. The last 3 months have been wonderful. To have been given the opportunity to go teach at the Holy Trinity Music School summer camp was incredible. I had never been to a third-world country before and working with the students at that camp, seeing how they act having grown up without so many of the luxuries that strike me as integral to life, experiencing their dedication to music even with their instrumental, pedagogical, and experiential resources that, from the point of view of my privileged musical upbringing, seem stark and limited; it was heart-opening, mind-shifting, life-changing. I found that sometimes you really just can’t know what to expect until you’re there.

Perhaps you may have a similar experience of incorporating more music into your worship life, be it by singing the hymns, if you didn’t use to, or by coming out and joining the St. John’s pick-up/festival choir. Maybe you really just can’t know what to expect until you’re in the midst of it.

I encourage you to search for a way to deepen the joyful noises you are making in your life. I hope that you might join me in giving the gift of communal singing to our fellow worshippers. Come Sunday let us lift every voice in a new song, singing praises to our Lord! And perhaps in a couple weeks when the pick-up choir rehearses for the first time under my direction, that you (YES, YOU) will grant us your presence. And that if, perhaps, you had come to scoff, that you might remain to sing.

Until our next new song,

*Peace.*

Benjamin Buchanan  
(Organist – Music Director)