

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **A SONG TO SING: A LIFE TO LIVE Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice Don Saliers – Emily Saliers**

#### **Reviewed by Faye Short**

Rev. Don Saliers and his daughter Emily were scheduled keynote speakers at the 2006 UMW Assembly in Anaheim, California, Saturday morning, May 6, 2006. In light of their coming I read their book, *A Song to Sing: A Life to Live*.

As one who has always loved and appreciated music, I can understand the value the Saliers place upon music in their lives—and in the lives of others. It would be a very sad world if music were removed from it. Even so, I could not embrace the veneration the Saliers attached to music.

#### **Music Vs Jesus Christ**

It was interesting that on several occasions terminology was used for music that is reserved in scripture for Jesus Christ. This misplaced legacy began in the Editor's Foreward with the statement, "How are we to live with hope in this broken world? Here is an answer. 'Hold fast to that languageless connection,' to the music that urgently whispers the truth."

Jesus declared, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) He also proclaimed that despite the fact that the world would bring tribulation, "Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

In the Preface Emily writes, "I have witnessed how music brings healing to people alienated and broken by attitudes toward sexuality, by political struggles, and by crushing abuse of power." Don reiterates this understanding when he says, "I too have seen how music can heal the brokenhearted and the alienated." (XVII)

Music *can* sooth, but can it *heal*? What of Jesus' claim to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed *me* to preach good news to the poor. He has sent *me* to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19) Can music alone accomplish the daunting assignment that Jesus' said belonged to *Him*?

On page five, at the end of Emily's story is the statement, "Music, we keep saying, is some kind of mysterious mediator between us and the God we seek."

Mediator, hmm. "For there is one God and *one mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all...." (I Timothy 2:5)

"If the words and the musical forms are adequate to the mystery of being human—to suffering and joy—then the sound itself becomes a medium of formation and transformation." (Pg. 37)

Yet, we read, "...if anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

In the section "Living In Time With Music" the Saliers make claims that music can provide insight and wisdom. "Sometimes it is only through song and music that we come to understand where we are along life's way." And, "It (music) can reveal things we could not otherwise know." (Pgs. 42 & 43)

Once again, the Word of Scripture decries these statements. "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (Colossians 2:2,3)

### **Sad Substitute**

No doubt the Saliers intend their book to be uplifting to those who read it. For me, it came across as a very sad substitute for what God offers humankind. In the chapter, "A Sound Spirituality," the Saliers speak of the body's response to the beat of music that coincides with our heartbeat, and with our breathing. "This is the root meaning of the word *inspiration*—literally the in-breathing of the spirit in the human mind and imagination.... We think this is why when we have strong experiences of singing together, we sense a deep connection between the spirit of song and spirituality." (Pgs. 24, 25)

While this is high sounding, it is also hollow. How much closer to truth are the lyrics from a song from "Revival in Belfast," called *With All Faith*:

*Press in to the heart of the Father  
Hold fast to the grace received  
Breath in the life of the Spirit  
And with all faith believe  
And with all faith believe*

*Believe on this  
The Word of Life  
Our Lord the Christ  
Has come to save us  
Receive by faith  
His blood supplied  
That the power of sin be cursed  
And the Father be glorified*

In this song you hear the substance of true Christian faith, no guessing, no sentimentality. This type of close encounter can meet the deep longings of the human heart. It is genuine spirituality. The wrap-up at the end of this chapter reiterates the lack found in the substitution of "sound" for a real encounter with the living God. "For all these reasons, both of us are convinced that music

is basic to any spiritual perception of the world.... So welcome the journey into a ‘sound’ spirituality. Perhaps through the attentiveness to the music that is too often taken for granted (both outside and inside us), we may receive something unexpected—the whole stretch of human life, heightened and deepened by the presence of ordered sound.” (Pg. 37)

### **No Matter the Source**

Perhaps because Don Saliers lives in the world of sacred music, while Emily lives in the world of secular music, the Saliers repeatedly made it seem as if the accomplishments of music through the human experience could come as readily from a secular as from a sacred source. Emily writes, “I have felt the intensity of sacred music not only in the hallowed halls of church but also in the smoky bars of Atlanta. ...One place smells of incense and candles, the other of cigarette smoke and beer. I can’t say one experience is more deeply spiritual than the other.” (Pg. 5)

One chapter in the book is devoted to “Saturday Night and Sunday Morning.” This chapter speaks of the crossover in music between the sacred and the secular. No doubt, there is some blending, just as the country music stars sing an inspirational song somewhere in their repertoire, and many spiritual hymns were set to secular tunes. But we have only to look at the powerful, theologically-grounded hymns of Charles Wesley to realize how the Holy Spirit of God can inspire the words of songs to teach the deep truths of the Word of God. No doubt the music heritage of those “singing Methodists” enabled them to maintain a purist faith that could not be easily swept away by pastors turned out from liberal seminaries.

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Colossians 3:16) Yes, there is a difference. We can sing of our human misery, and even of our joys, and relate to each other as we do so. But, we can go beyond that to sing songs that speak of our true hope and of our genuine deliverance—with gratitude in our hearts to God.

### **Music and Political Activism**

Throughout their book Don and Emily Saliers interject the role of music in political activism or social justice causes. Chapter 8, “Sing Justice, Sing Freedom,” is devoted to this topic. No doubt Christian faith engages the world and moves to alleviate human suffering. But caution must be given in this area because of our own sinful nature. We can jump on the bandwagon of many causes, but not all are appropriate for Christians—and all that we do must measure up the plumbline of God’s Word. We can decide that we hold the plumbline by our own prejudices or what we have been told by those with a political agenda. We can even choose our causes because they support our unredeemed lifestyles.

The Saliers write, “It is too easy to hear only what sustains the old pieties and behaviors. Our experience both inside and outside the churches urges us to look for songs that call us to new action, new attitudes, and an active solidarity with the suffering of this world.” (Pg. 148) But wait, if we discard the “old pieties” what becomes our “new piety”? Is it our social activism? Is that our salvation? This whole statement sounds too much like Liberation Theology where the poor and suffering are saved by their suffering and we are saved by “standing in solidarity” with

them. Not so. We do not have to discard the piety that comes from a life redeemed by Jesus Christ and lived in faithfulness to the standards of God's Word for one that is based solely on a false proclamation of peace and justice for all. Personal and social holiness is not an either/or proposition, but a both/and understanding. Talk the talk, walk the walk, live the life are all integral parts of our faithfulness to God.

### **Some Good Stuff**

*A Song to Sing, A Life to Live* has some really good stuff that pops out now and then.

Augustine of Hippo is cited: "When I love you, what do I love? He asks God. "Not the body's beauty, nor time's rhythm, nor light's brightness...nor song's sweet melodies, nor the fragrance of flowers, lotions and spices, nor manna and honey, nor the feel of flesh embracing flesh—none of these are what I love when I love my God." (Pgs. 31, 32) This is a beautiful and powerful realization. C.S. Lewis came to know God because he concluded that there had to be something greater than the beauty he saw and beyond the joys he experienced. It was this realization, and coming to know the God of Scripture and the Christ of God, that turned this agnostic into a Christian apologist.

The Saliers spoke of the fact that Augustine was never fully comfortable with the delight he found in music. The Saliers write, "On occasion he grew fearful that his sensual engagement with melodies would distract him from the "pure" hearing of sacred Scripture." With this I concur and say, good for Augustine. He knew how to guard his heart for that which is best.

The Saliers conclude, "The Christian tradition inherited Augustine's ambivalence about sound and music, especially when music is joined to the texts of prayer." With this I disagree. The Christian Church is anything but ambivalent about sound and music. Christian music is and has always been a medium that engages the whole person, at the deepest level. Augustine was right though, music must not displace the Word in importance and in substance it must instead be fully supported by the Word—as in the hymns of Charles Wesley.

In the Section entitled "Music Calls to the Restless Heart," I found myself writing "yes" in the column several times. Here are my "yes" quotes:

Again reflecting on the thought of Augustine, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee," the Saliers write, "Human beings are restless for many things—for love, security, a good harvest, a reason for being, home—and music has found countless ways to express this restlessness. But note that Augustine adds one more dimension to his understanding of human restlessness. That ending phrase, "in Thee," suggests that no limited thing can ever completely satisfy our restlessness...it draws us toward God." (Pgs. 171, 172) "Yes!"

Referencing when the two of them listened together to Bach's Mass in B Minor or to bagpipers playing "Amazing Grace" at a friend's funeral, the Saliers say, "In musical moments like these, we understand that even while we are searching for God, God is also searching for us." (Pg. 175) "Yes!"

