

interview with a church musician advocate

Dr. William A. Raabe

Interviewed by Allison Schweitzer, August 2018

Bill and Nancy Raabe have been longtime advocates of new Lutheran church music, through commissioning works for use in worship and through the ALCM's Raabe Prize for Excellence in Sacred Composition.

In Tempo: *How did you begin your commissioning of church music works?*

Bill Raabe: Nancy had been a music critic for the *The Boston Globe*, the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, and *The Birmingham News*. As a music writer, she got a letter each year from the Pulitzer Prize for Music asking whether she had any nominations. For two years in a row she nominated pieces by ALCM composers. They didn't get very far, because religious pieces were not desired. We wondered what we could do about it.

We began commissioning music in the early 1990s. We had attended ALCM meetings and gotten to know most of the composers, at least by reputation if not personally. As ALCM members, we got to rub elbows with more and more musicians, and they would answer our calls and letters. Once the ball started rolling, we were commissioning two or three pieces a year; after a couple years maybe more than that. Now, about 25 years later, we're at close to 80 commissioned works. It's been a fruitful thing.

IT: *How do you decide which works will be commissioned?*

BR: Sometimes it's just, "Oh, I wish I had a piece by composer X." Or, "I think we're really missing a good concertato on hymn X." Or, "There are not enough good choral pieces for Epiphany." The results come from Nancy and me brainstorming—there's a hole in the literature that maybe we can help fill.

As we started doing this, in the early '90s, concertatos and organ suites were hot. Now, concertatos are not, and SATB is less attractive to publishers than two- or three-voice pieces. We try to anticipate what the publisher wants, so we'll speak with them and find out what they're looking for.

One publisher said, "Here's what we really want: a collection of pieces for an organist to play at a funeral. Maybe 10 pieces. Enough to fill time at the service." It was an open-ended thing. We contacted Bob Hobby, asked him what he'd think about doing this, and he said, "Of course." There have now been three series of books put out, varying in hymnody and levels of difficulty, entitled *For All the Saints*. That was a great idea which was actually the publisher's, originally.

We are looking for music that will benefit the church at large: the biggest to the smallest,



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the colleges and universities, churches with all sizes of choirs. Maybe that's asking too much. While not everything that has come through has been what we had in mind, far more often than not someone produces something that is just fabulous.

When I was board chair for the Lutheran high schools in Milwaukee in the late '90s, I had them commission a "school hymn" for use at graduations and similar reasons. The result was "How Good It Is to Praise the Lord," with music by Carl Schalk and text by Gracia Grindal. The board also commissioned settings of the hymn for different groups (e.g., band,



These examples are pieces commissioned by the Raabes that have been published.

organ) and for different uses (e.g., fanfare celebration) from Kenneth Kosche, John Behnke, and Jonathan Kohrs. Advising the board was Paul Grime, now dean of chapel at Fort Wayne seminary. Last I heard, the schools were still using the hymn.

IT: *Do you keep up with any of the composers? What have they gone on to do?*

BR: When we started, composers we knew and had met at ALCM meetings were already established and big names. We were adding to their portfolios, asking them to do something on this or that. For some we were passing along a text we had commissioned and were looking for a tune and arrangement on said text.

As we went on further, into the mid to late '90s, we started to encourage younger composers or maybe someone who was the organist at the eucharist at an ALCM meeting. We'd say, "Why don't you write this one up?" or "Is there something we can help you with?" That's when we started working with new composers. The analogy I like to make is that these were like the research grants that I had worked with in my academic career: we were paying them

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to have the time to compose or to hire a scribe to put music into Finale, however they would want to use the money—which resembled, in my mind, a grant to free up their efforts to do something specific.

We decided we didn't know all the young people out there and as a result put together the Raabe Prize—an award for composition that would include people we hadn't asked for commissioned pieces. The prize thus was an outgrowth of the commissioning project. We crafted the prize with excellent input from David Cherwien, Mark Bangert, and Tom Leeseburg-Lange.

We gave an endowment to ALCM, as a gift for the Raabe Prize, and we doubled the endowment as part of the ALCM 30th anniversary celebration. We do not influence how the prizes are awarded.

IT: *Have you seen any of the younger composers you supported go on to prosper?*

BR: Some of them, yes. I'm not going to claim any credit for that, but yes: we got to some of them early in their careers, and some of them greatly stepped up their pace.

IT: *The next Raabe Prize will be awarded next summer, correct?*

BR: Yes, it's usually the year of the ALCM biennial conference. Then if ALCM can, it's featured in one of the services.

IT: *What are your hopes for Raabe Prize winners to come?*

BR: I will say this: sometimes the piece that the prize goes to is exactly what we thought we were endowing, sometimes it's not, and sometimes it's exactly the opposite. But we are hands-off, and we want the prize to be used by ALCM to encourage composers to write pieces that can be used in Sunday worship.

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IT: *What is your own background in the Lutheran church?*

BR: I attended Mt. Calvary Lutheran School in Milwaukee and Milwaukee Lutheran High School. Music was taken very seriously. We had big choirs, did all the concertatos, had Paul Manz visit—we were very tuned in to what became the new traditional orthodoxy of hymn settings, chorale preludes, and so on. I sang in choirs at church and school and sang as an adult with the Lutheran A Capella Choir, Mastersingers of Milwaukee, and the Symphony Chorus in Milwaukee (this is while I was a professor at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee). Lutheran choral music was a big part of my life. When I met Nancy, she came in as the real musician. We were kind of tough to stop at that point.

IT: *How did you two meet?*

BR: We were set up on a blind date, not long after she had moved to Milwaukee in about 1988 to take a job with the Milwaukee *Sentinel*. One of the people from the Mastersingers set us up. In 1989 we were married.

IT: *Your commissionings started in the early '90s, so you've been supporting new church music essentially since the two of you have been together?*

BR: Pretty much! A little anecdote: for our wedding, we together wrote a couple instrumental pieces to go along with the hymns that were played (Nancy had been getting into composition even before we were married). We wrote a descant for our processional, which was based on the hymn tune TRURO. Nancy wrote an obligato English horn verse for “The King of Love My Shepherd Is,” which was the main hymn for our ceremony. She’s the composer, but I kicked in a few thoughts—being the longtime Lutheran.

One of our first commissions, which is still one of our favorites, was by Don Busarow: “Jesus Has Come and Brings Pleasure,”

a great text and tune deserving of broad exposure. He featured the French horn (Nancy’s main instrument) and a baritone solo (my voice range). We looked at it as kind of being written for us.

For more information on the Raabe Prize for Excellence in Sacred Music Composition, visit <https://alcm.org/news-events/raabe-prize>.

Lectures in Church Music to feature Raabe commissions

Concordia University Chicago (River Forest, IL) will include a Sunday evening festival concert and hymn sing on the first day of the Vi Messerli Memorial Lectures in Church Music (October 21-23). All pieces featured in the hymn festival are from the catalog of music commissioned by the Raabes.

Visit www.cuchicago.edu/academics/colleges/college-of-arts/music/lectures for more information.

Additional Resources:

For a full listing of pieces that have originated through the Raabe’s generous support, visit <https://tinyurl.com/raabecommissions>.

For Nancy’s remarks about the Raabes’ commissioning project at the Good Shepherd Institute, visit <https://tinyurl.com/nancyfortwayne>.