

Prelude, Offertory, Postlude

(Some thoughts of mine, as a former Choir Director and Sub-Organist, before entering full-time ministry)

The Prelude and Postlude have a larger function, each one performing vital tasks at the beginning and end of each service. Like musical bookends, they bracket everything that happens in between, and are theologically related to the central meaning of worship. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the Prelude and Postlude are worth a library. The Prelude, for example, might be understood to be, as someone once put it, “the music accompanying the entrance of the people of God.” We come into worship and the Prelude establishes a mood, an attitude, a context, a feeling that suits the occasion. We are ushered in with sounds that speak more than words ever can, and help us approach our encounter with our Living Lord with open hearts and receptive thoughts. The Prelude, in fact, is to be meditation music while we are actively doing all those things we do as we enter the worship space. It is “both-and”—both music to listen to reverently, and music to accompany our actions.

A prelude that functions merely as background music will have little bearing on the worship service, quietly asking to be ignored amidst the hubbub before the start of worship. On the other end of the spectrum, a showy solo will only distract the congregation from the rest of the service. Instead, I would submit to you that there is only one valid purpose of the prelude: to prepare the church for worship.

Someone has said, "Prelude music, reverently played, is nourishment for the spirit. It invites inspiration. That is a time to, as the poet said, 'Go to your bosom . . . and ask your heart what it doth know.' Do not ever disturb prelude music for others, for reverence is essential to revelation. 'Be still,' He said, 'and know that I am God.'"

This statement echoes my own feelings on prelude music.

We should be able to sit quietly during prelude music and meditate on the beauty of the restored gospel, prepare our hearts and minds for the service of Worship, and ponder the majesty of our Heavenly Father and the splendor of the Savior's Atonement. Where better to consider such sacred and weighty matters? These manifestations of our worship will naturally be accompanied by an attitude of reverence.

Unfortunately, some clergy (and many “worship leaders”) are fond of the “trashy intrusions” (usually beginning with “Good morning, church!”) before the service, which usually leave me wanting to reach for a Xanax or Tums, and leaves most of the congregation groaning, as they announce this and that, or we celebrate this and that, with thunderous applause, for fifteen minutes or so.

Those attending the service should be seated at least five minutes before the meeting begins so they can be spiritually prepared for a worshipful experience. During that quiet interval, prelude music is subdued. This is not a time for conversation or transmission of messages but a period of prayerful meditation as pastor, choir, and members prepare spiritually for the service. This isn't a time of nondescript elevator music, but it's a work

of preparing, meditating on what's going to happen. It's not an opportunity to talk to those around you; we'll have plenty of time to do that after the service. This is the time to prepare yourself to meet with the living God who made heaven and earth—this thrice-holy God who has revealed himself in his Word.

The Postlude has a similar function, except that it is not establishing but extending a mood, and perhaps shifting it somewhat. Now the music at the end of the service pulls together feelings and attitudes already expressed in word and song. Whereas the Prelude was to accompany the entrance of God's people, the Postlude lifts us on our feet to march forward into the world as Christ's disciples. (Although I must admit, one Methodist Church organist told me that for postludes, I should push the "sforzando" piston on the organ, and play something by J.S. Bach!)

Prelude and Postlude are important, more so than most of us recognize sometimes. Musicians who understand the theological role of music in Lord's Day worship will provide Preludes and Postludes that appropriately assemble the community at the beginning and propel us on our way at the end. Whether we are conscious of their impact or not, the effect on all who come to worship is great.

How do folks at your church perceive the Prelude and Postlude? Are they conscious of their effect on the whole service? On the worshippers? The prelude, in particular, should relate theologically to the theme of the day, if at all possible. Or, a composition on one of the hymn tunes sung could be played. The music should always give the best of the player and challenge the listener in the most positive way to consider its meaning for what is about to happen in the continuation of worship.

When standing behind a pulpit, there is nothing more rewarding than hearing an offertory or postlude that ties the service together perfectly. I remember one service in which I was exhorting on reliance on God and the organist played "Cast Thy Burden Upon the Lord" (Psalm 51) by Mendelssohn. It fit so well with the text and added such depth to the service. On another occasion, he played an arrangement of "Great is Thy Faithfulness," and I was moved to tears.

The congregation has to be involved in the listening of the music, meaning there must be silence to be able to hear what is being performed. This seems to be difficult to accomplish in most congregations, and I think this practice of listening to the prelude has to be taught by the clergy. A spoken call to worship by the minister preceding the prelude seems to be more successful to remind the congregation that the start of the music is the start of worship. The postlude should be a sending out that embraces and confirms the spirit of the worship event. I would hope the music performed would cause worshippers to want to sit and hear it played to conclusion while those who are anxious to depart would do so quietly.

A PRELUDE should be a bridge from our context to our communal worship; a POSTLUDE should be the same bridge, walked in the opposite direction. The bridge

must be firmly anchored on the side of holy worship but, to be firm, equally well anchored on the side of our earthly context.

I believe communal worship must be a whole; it must have *unity*.

I believe communal worship should reflect our *context*.

I believe communal worship should move us to *obedience*.

Some people believe the ideal worship service would carry worshippers away to soaring, mystical heights. That would be interesting, but I don't think it would be Christian. Although, I know what is meant when a member of a congregation would tell me at the close of a service, "I feel like I have really been in church today." For that individual, the whole worship experience has come together as a whole and touched them spiritually; in a way that is hard to explain, but I recognize what they mean.

And of course, the Offertory is that liturgical element which calls the congregation to compassion as well as obedience. It is, in the Baptist tradition, when we are to give a tenth (tithe) of our income and an offering (that which we give over and above the tithe) to the Lord's work. It is the Cooperative Program that makes possible our monies going to serve Him, not only in the church, but beyond the church, literally, "into all the world." Prelude and Postlude music is something musicians do as a personal offering of worship, and if people are in the pews to listen, all the much better. I enjoy the Preludes and Postludes chosen by the organist where we are members. The organist plans his music not only to coincide with the liturgical calendar of the year, but that which edifies, and brings hope, comfort, and inspiration to those of us in the pew. Organists know that they cannot force people to come early or stay after the service to hear his musical offering, as it were. But in so many other churches, it is unfortunate that a concert/entertainment quality has crept into worship.

Music in a church should acknowledge that there's always only one audience: God. He is the audience. If someone walks out during the postlude, the message is that the organist is still offering his best music to God, even if I'm not there personally. Prelude music can communicate that a service of Worship has been going on, and continues as we become present in the building. It's a marker of the sacred space. What would happen if we acknowledged God's presence even while practicing? And realize that He doesn't demand perfection, but instead is there to help us strive towards it? I have thought about that, while pastor of a church, and called upon to sub for the organist on vacation.

My advice to the beginning organist is: practice your best and play your best: it is for our Heavenly Father's worship and His people's edification (whether they know it or not.)

We speak to God *before* the service.

God speaks to us *during* the service.

We talk to each other *after* the service, and go forth in service for Him.