

An Introduction to Pastoral Care by Music

by Michael Heymel

For some centuries biblical Job, representative of all suffering human beings, was honoured as a patron saint of music and musicians in Western Europe. In my book *Trost für Hiob. Musikalische Seelsorge* (Consolation for Job. Pastoral Care by Music, Strube Verlag: Munich 1999) I remind to this nearly forgotten music tradition of the Minstrel, to derive from it criteria for the understanding and practice of music in ecclesiastical, pastoral or other social contexts of the present time. The tradition of Job is combined with an old Protestant tradition according to Martin Luther, to console suffering others or oneself by singing hymns and spiritual songs. My goal is to find out, under which conditions music can develop its potential of healing, consoling and upbuilding forces.

In my understanding pastoral care cannot be fully comprehended without musicality, because human life as well as Christian faith and theology have an essentially musical dimension. As Martin Luther wrote in October 1530 in a remarkable letter to the Roman Catholic composer Ludwig Senfl, the biblical prophets – which term includes also the psalm writers and all other biblical authors – have putted their theology in music. So the word of God has at first to be communicated in psalms and hymns, and you can experience its truth, namely the presence of God by singing. “The LORD is my song”, we read in the scriptures (Ex 15:2; Ps 118:14). In this sense I define pastoral care as a happening of sound (*Klanggeschehen*), based on the sound of the human voice. As far as I know, singing psalms and hymns is the most intensive way, to practice pastoral care and to bring people in contact with the mystery of life. You can be comforted by music, when you are singing and listening to sounds and words, which give you heavenly peace or courage and power of resistance. This was the experience of the Church Fathers in psalmody.

In der Nacht ist sein Lied bei mir. Seelsorge und Musik (In The Night His Song Is With Me. Pastoral care and Music, Spenner Verlag: Waltrop 2004) is based on my postdoctoral thesis at Rostock University and presents the results of my further research. In its first part I explain the main arguments for music as a medium for health and spiritual growth, when it is used in personal relations (or I-Thou-relations, to speak with Martin Buber). The following parts give an overview on the origins of pastoral care by music in the early church and in Judaism, different kinds of music (sacred music, which is fundamental for pastoral care, as well as music in a general sense from psalmody to negro spirituals, from classical music to popular music) in pastoral care and the ways of practising it (singing, playing, music listening) with those people, who are aged, sick, dying or mourning. In this respect pastoral care by music is closely connected with sacred music and music therapy. They are orientated to the person, who is situated like Job in an existential crisis. Pastoral care, sacred music and music therapy offer something to men, what may be a great help to them and enables the individual to overcome the difficulties in one's life. I have considerable reasons to suppose, that this is just the same what happens in a deep personal encounter with any music of artistic value.

Two years later the third volume *Wie man mit Musik für die Seele sorgt* (How to care for the Soul with Music, Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag: Ostfildern 2006) was published. In my book I start from everyday situations to demonstrate, why it is so important to care for the soul with music. Examples from the bible and the history of Christianity clarify, how pastoral care with music has been experienced in early times. What means the ability of listening for

pastoral care? I try to explain this by the special case of Ludwig van Beethoven, the great composer and pianist, who became deaf, but nevertheless continued to imagine and to compose music. Furthermore, I investigate, from which qualities depend the comforting effects of the hymns of Paul Gerhardt and the music of Johannes Brahms. Another subject is the relation of love and music. Under certain circumstances music can make alive the power of devoted love, and this potential is highly relevant for pastoral care. The last chapter deals with the question, with what kind of music we can live and die. Many sounds, which are not beneficial to our souls, penetrate into our ears. So be careful! You can chose what you really want to listen. It is crucial for the life of every individual to search for that kind of music, which opens the doors of the soul or, as the old hymn writers of the Reformation era said, which opens our heart and all our senses for the encounter with God.

Prefaces of hymn books are first-rate sources from which emerges, how hymns were used as spiritual resources and media of pastoral care by congregations and individuals. In the main part of *Das Gesangbuch als Lebensbegleiter* (The Hymn Book as a Companion for Life, Gütersloher Verlagshaus: Gütersloh 2012) I analyze about fifty prefaces of German Protestant hymn books from 16th to 18th century. These hymn books were destined for people who are accustomed to sing every day and to exercise singing. Thereby they put emphasis on the personal attitude: heart and mouth and life should correspond. So we learn by the prefaces that the right way of singing has to be understood as a divine service and "holy art".

My research on pastoral care by music meanwhile is documented in a number of articles and four books. An English version of my essay on *Music in the Work of Abraham J. Heschel* was first published in *Judaism*, vol. 49, 2000, No.4, p.399-410. Since many years the writings of Rabbi Heschel are a source of inspiration for my work.

I am interested to expand my studies on pastoral care with music into a more intercultural and interreligious level. As far as I see, the encounter of different musical cultures today is an enormous challenge for European Christians and theologians like me to learn more precisely, how a variety of music is suitable to support men in entering in the presence of God and how it makes possible a kind of mutual interaction, which has a healing and upbuilding influence on the involved individuals.



Rembrandt: David is playing the harp for King Saul (ca. 1650/55)

Biography



Michael Heymel is born in 1953 in Frankfurt am Main. He studied Theology and Philosophy in Frankfurt and Heidelberg, where he made his doctoral thesis on the Danish religious author Søren Kierkegaard in 1984. As a reverend of the Protestant Church in Hessen und Nassau (EKHN) Heymel has worked in several parishes. Besides he educated lay preachers and conducted a church choir. Then he got singing lessons for several years and made his first appearance with German pop songs of the years between 1920 and 1940. In 2003 Heymel made his postdoctoral thesis at Rostock University on pastoral care and music.

Since 2004 until 2012 he was unsalaried lecturer for Practical Theology at Heidelberg University, teaching Homiletics, especially with examples of great preachers of ecclesiastical history, as well as Liturgy and Pastoral Care with Music. In cooperation with Christian Möller he published a collection *Sternstunden der Predigt* (Calwer Verlag: Stuttgart 2010) about decisive moments in the history of sermon and an interpretation of Kierkegaard's edifying speeches (*Das Wagnis, ein Einzelner zu sein – The Risk of Being An Individual*. TVZ: Zürich 2013).

Between 2008 and 2016 he was employed at the Central Archives of the Protestant Church in Hessen und Nassau, where he was researching on the estate of Martin Niemöller, the prominent Protestant pastor, who spent the last 7 years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. Niemöller's Dahlem sermons were completely edited by Heymel in 2011. In January 2017 he published a new biography on Niemöller which was reviewed in international journals and magazines.

An international conference on Martin Niemöller and his international reception took place in April 2021 at the Evangelische Akademie Frankfurt. It was conceived by Lukas Bormann, professor for New Testament research at Philipps-Universität Marburg, together with practical theologian Michael Heymel, and was conducted in collaboration with study director Eberhard Pausch. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was held as a videoconference. A conference volume will be published in October 2023 in the series *Arbeiten zur kirchlichen Zeitgeschichte* (AKIZ.B) by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

Heymel has published several books on Kierkegaard, Jewish-Christian Dialogue, Protestant sermon on Mary, hymn writers Paul Gerhardt and Arno Pötzsch, the Post-Reformation history of Protestant hymn books and music in pastoral care. In the *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* he presented detailed biographic enquiries on the German cultural philosopher Walter Schubart and his Latvian-Jewish woman who both fled to Riga and were deported in 1941 to Kazakhstan. A detailed essay on Schubart's life and work was published in 2015.

Heymel has also written short exegetical introductions to the Revelation of John (2018) and the Gospel of John (2020). In 2021 he published some of his own sermons (*Zum Leben aufblühen*) and an introduction into the basic articles of faith (*Woran glaubst du?*).