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AN INTERVIEW WITH ORIN JOHNSON

by **Gordon Nary**



Gordon: Where did you study music, and what was your favorite course, and why was it your favorite?

Orin: I took organ and piano lessons growing up, starting in first grade, and was active in musical groups during middle school and high school. I formally studied music in as an undergraduate at Harvard University and earned a master's degree at Radford University as well. Among my coursework in music, one of my favorite classes was modal counterpoint at Harvard (followed closely by tonal counterpoint at Radford). I enjoyed the practice of learning how to write well especially for voice, and what made the choral music of the Renaissance “tick” — that is, its unique structures, expressiveness, and beauty.

Gordon: Where did you study theology, and what was your favorite course, and why was it your favorite?

Orin: I hold a master's degree in theology from Aquinas Institute of Theology. One of my favorite courses there was the Theology of Worship class, which provided a broad but incisive background in the Church's public prayer and was the beginning of my practice of thinking carefully, with distinctions, about what it would mean practically to be the best pastoral liturgist and liturgical musician I could be.

Gordon: What was your most memorable experience as a member of the Harvard Glee Club?

Orin: The Glee Club was a fabulous way to immediately be a part of a small community of friends just after arriving at a place which was very different than any prior experiences of my life's journey. Over those four years, the most memorable experience was, the summer after my freshman year, embarking on a five-week concert tour of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Friendships were strengthened, copious food and drink were shared, and we truly recognized in each other our unity and joy through the bond of music and fellowship.

Gordon: What was your first professional position as a Music and Liturgy Coordinator and what were your primary responsibilities?

Orin: Right after my time at Radford University, I took a position as Coordinator of Music and Liturgy at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville IL. I accompanied masses and services on organ and piano, directed a semi-professional choir and a team of cantors and instrumentalists, and oversaw the ongoing liturgical life of the Shrine, including some devotional practices, with a team of sacristans and volunteers.

Gordon: What are some of your favorite memories when you served as Prayer and Music Coordinator and Program Coordinator at Young Neighbors In Action?

Orin: That particular youth service camp gave me the opportunity to see many different parts of the country, and even Tijuana MX. In each place, watching the young people connect their daytime service work, though evening programming and processing, to the teachings of the Church and Christ's desire for a truly just world made any hardships of travel or sleeping on classroom floors worth it. It is unfortunate that this unique service camp recently came to an end.

More recently I have been working at the One Bread, One Cup youth summer liturgy conferences at St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana, as an instrumental music catechist. It's been a great joy to see young people realize their potential in leading musical worship through their talents, perhaps unnoticed or unutilized back home.

Gordon: As an Assistant Director of the St. Louis Chamber Chorus, what are some of your favorite presentations?

Orin: The most prominent experience in my memory is the year the Chamber Chorus director took a sabbatical and left much of the 2008-09 season to me and the other assistant director. A highlight was our Christmas concert, that year in the St. Louis Cathedral Basilica, and being able to direct pieces like “The Three Kings” by Healey Willan and “O Magnum Mysterium” by Morten Lauridsen — both fantastic pieces, sung by an amazing choir in an amazing space.

Gordon: When and why did you cofound Oddwalk Ministries

Orin: My friend Shannon Cerneka in the early 2000s had begun a solo ministry, principally with youth and youth ministers, of music and witnessing, and often I was invited along as musical support. By 2004, I was along often enough that we both agreed that it made sense for he and I to become an “us.” We met over a weekend to work out some details, including a name for our duo, and what we wanted to focus on in our ministry of music, humor, and mission. We landed on the name Oddwalk after reflecting on the Emmaus story in the Gospel of Luke. When Clopas and his friend realized they had just experienced the divine, they had only one option: to literally turn their path around 180 degrees and share the Good News. When we experience God — at prayer, Mass, rallies, concerts, anywhere — we too must continually be changed, transformed, and set upon a new path. We usually (never?) know where it will take us, who we will see when we arrive, or what we will be doing, but we must trust that God is in control of all that stuff, and simply continue on that strange journey through life we know as Christianity.

Gordon: What are your responsibilities at the Archdiocese of St. Louis?

Orin: For several years I have been one of the graphic designers of worship aids and other programs needed for episcopal liturgies at the cathedral and throughout the archdiocese. The work has honed my eye for design and fine details and has also given me glimpses into liturgies and musical pieces I might not otherwise experience.

Gordon: What do you do at Congregation Shaare Emeth?

Orin: I am a collaborative pianist (accompanist) for several Friday night and Saturday morning worship services each month there. I also help rehearse and musically lead the High Holy Day services each fall,

and occasionally help with other moments of temple life, like Purim spiels or if the Cantor pays a visit to area assisted living facilities. I have gained so much from learning this community's forms and styles of worship, and greatly appreciate the broad spectrum of music and prayer it brings into my life.

Gordon: What are your responsibilities as Music Minister and Drama Music Director at Chaminade College Preparatory?

Orin: This middle and high school has a first Friday mass each month and a few other prayer opportunities on retreats and such. I organize the music and musicians for masses and accompany from the piano as needed. The music ministers for mass have grown from a small handful of folks several years ago to often 20 or 30 voices and instruments these days. I also music direct their musicals as they come along, be they small or large, for younger or older students, or for everyone. Presently we are rehearsing "Oklahoma!" which, God willing, will be performed in the middle of February.

Gordon: As Director of Music Ministries at Sts. Joachim and Ann Catholic Church, what are some of your favorite sacred music compositions?

Orin: I am blessed that J&A" — as we call it for short — has such a broad repertoire and a congregation that loves to sing it all. So, it is difficult to pick out a favorite. Certainly, I love to hear the parish sing the Lord's Prayer, which we do sing most of the year. They first knew, before I arrived, a setting by Marie-Jo Thum, and then learned one of mine a few years ago as well. I was also pleased to write for them a few years ago a setting of Psalm 116 for Holy Thursday, which once or twice moved me almost to tears as it was being performed.

Gordon: When and why did you and Shannon Cerneka write Let Us Go Forth and share with our readers and overview of the book?

Orin: "Let Us Go Forth" is a collection of prayer services (2018, Twenty-Third Publications) which grew out of the youth retreat ministry Oddwalk does several times a year. We keep these encounters that teens have with their faith and each other highly interactive, and this book takes some of those engaging conversations and activities and places them into prayer services, surrounded by music, scripture, and other typical elements of prayer. The whole of the book also traces the civil, school, and liturgical calendars, so there are one or two opportunities for prayer each month, on various themes.

Gordon: Living Liturgy: Spirituality, Celebration, and Catechesis for Sundays and Solemnities is a very popular book series. On which editions did you serve as coauthor?

Orin: I have helped write the 2021, 2022, and 2023 editions for Liturgical Press. For each year, I provided scripturally based prayers for use by liturgical musicians, lectors, and extraordinary ministers. For the 2021 and 2022 volumes, I also wrote a page of liturgical catechesis and music suggestions, celebration by celebration.

Due out in Spring 2023, also from Liturgical Press, is my first solo work as an author, tentatively titled “Incarnate in Word and Song: Exploring Music in Liturgy and Life.” It will explore how music and liturgical music specifically — both in terms of the craft of composition and the art of performing — can inform our sharing of The Word via both liturgical preaching and personal interactions in everyday life. The project will include scripture, liturgical documents, storytelling, and many musical examples, along with preaching samples and examples of real-life moments, as well as a vision for a future of evangelization.

Gordon: How does music bring us closer to God?

Orin: The Catholic liturgy is not a liturgy which includes singing, it is from its outset a sung liturgy. That might not be the typical experience we have at mass, but it is what the Church envisions. Music is an artform which amplifies the prayers connected to it, both sonically and spiritually. In the context of liturgy, we are reminded that our breath which forms and carries our melodies — hymns, acclamations, dialogues, etc. — is a gift of God and perhaps even the presence of the Holy Spirit moving through us, uniting us with one another and with our God.

Gordon: Thank you for an exceptional and beautiful interview.