

# THE *Aquinas Way*

A photograph of a modern church interior. The space is characterized by its extensive use of light-colored wood, including the ceiling beams, support columns, and the floor. In the center, there is a wooden altar with a purple cloth draped over it. Behind the altar, a large, ornate crucifix is mounted on a light blue wall. Two tall, thin candle holders with lit candles stand on either side of the altar. Rows of light-colored, modern-style chairs are arranged on both sides of the aisle. To the left, a grand piano is partially visible. The lighting is soft and even, creating a serene atmosphere. The image is framed by dark wood panels on the left and right sides, with silver vertical bars.

THE PRAYER ISSUE



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## THE Aquinas Way

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The editorial staff of *The Aquinas Way* has made a sincere effort to ensure information contained here is accurate and correct. If your name has been misspelled or listed incorrectly, please contact Bridget Kostello at [kostello@ai.edu](mailto:kostello@ai.edu). Thank you.

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## ALUMNI PERSPECTIVES

# On Music & Art as Prayer

BY BRIDGET KOSTELLO



### Music As Prayer with Orin Johnson (MA '08)

Orin Johnson is a rock star. Instead of being one that trashes hotel rooms and destroys guitars onstage, he spreads the Word of God through the music he plays, directs, and composes. And he doesn't really have groupies, unless you count the people in the St. Margaret of Scotland parish, who

embraced him more than a year ago when he replaced a well-respected predecessor.

You see, Johnson is a liturgical rock star--far from being self-indulgent, self-aggrandizing, and eager for fame and fortune, he is thoughtful, erudite, and eloquent. With an MA in Choral Conducting, he is not only an organist and pianist, but a chorister, choral conductor and published composer.

From his early grade school days in tiny Tyler, Minnesota, when he first recognized that the music during Mass changed during different seasons, and that the music

was connected to the readings, to his time at Harvard University, where he learned the finer points of picking the music and understanding why certain songs were chosen at certain times, the pursuit of music was (almost) always the goal. It just took him a little longer to discern if sacred music was his calling, or if he wanted to pursue a career in high school or college music education.

However, it wasn't until he got to St. Louis and was working at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows that the Assistant Director recommended that it was time for him to consider furthering his theological education. A friend of his recommended Aquinas, and he graduated with a Master of Arts in Theology in 2008. Johnson says that the study of theology enriched his experience of music.

While studying music opened a different way for him to understand music, studying theology did that with the lyrics of hymns. It unlocked a universe of understanding and interpretation; in the creative process, he says it has unlocked different avenues of creativity.



It is this knowledge that makes Johnson fascinating to listen to when he discusses how music can enrich prayer life.

He says that if the poetry that is sung is paired well with music, which is its own language, spending time in communication with God happens in a way that is unlike any other type of prayer. Sometimes the music is the language that speaks more than the words.

He continues, adding that it is a different experience listening to music as opposed to being part of the creation of it. He uses the example of a pipe organ, which offers a real and tangible aspect to worship that an electronic organ doesn't and can't. The sound of the wind rushing through the pipes echoes the wind sweeping over the Red Sea or the fanning of the flames of Pentecost. The music is the sound of resonance in the air and is a language in and of itself.

Expounding, he offered that any computer can play static and the same every time, but it's people that give music soul. If humans are created in the image and likeness of God, or, as St. Paul puts it, temples of the Holy Spirit, if we are the Church building in which the Divine comes to

dwell, the creativity and expressiveness that God showed from the first moments of creation is one of the things that any artist can bring forth in that creative process. Choices that affect what the art is affects what the communication is, and that all affects how you are spending time with God in prayer.

How you spend time with God is like choosing how you spend time with a friend. You could be out playing tennis (active) or enjoy watching a movie (more passive); even watching movies on the couch at home is different than attending a showing in a theatre. All experiences are different, but it's all about spending time together, growing in relationship. Spending time with God is to grow in relationship with Him, no matter how you choose to spend the time.

Johnson, more often than not, chooses music as that time with God—music as prayer.

Johnson's book, *Incarnate in Word and Song: Exploring Music in Liturgy and Life*, was published late last year. Please see our Reading List on page 30 learn more about it.