

# “Source and Summit” (of Frustration?)

BY KATHLEEN M. BASI

## *Planning music for school celebrations*

Once upon a time (not so long ago), a man who was interviewing for a position as a liturgy and music director at a Catholic church and school was asked, “How do you plan to get the kids to sing?”

He snorted and replied, “It doesn’t matter what we do. They’re never going to sing.”

He did not get the job. His sentiment, however, is echoed around the country. For many pastoral musicians, school liturgies are the most frustrating part of their job. But it doesn’t have to be that way. Here are some things we do at Columbia Catholic School (CCS) to get the kids to sing.

- **Follow the Lectionary.** Using the readings of the day exposes students to a wider range of scripture, and it allows them to celebrate in union with the larger Church. There are, of course, exceptions. (Who wants to explain “sodomy” to first graders?) When the very youngest of our students are in charge of the week’s Mass, we allow limited substitutions.

If the first reading is too complex for them to understand with the teacher’s help, we look for the same

passage in the *Lectionary for Masses with Children*. If the passage is not available, we look up the Gospel of the day in the *Lectionary for Masses with Children* and use whatever reading is paired with it. In either case, the Gospel remains unchanged.

- **Schedule “liturgical music practices.”** Twice a year, we set aside time to teach new music to the entire school. The children’s enthusiasm never ceases to amaze me. We usually have ten minutes left in which I let them request their favorites. Participation is never a problem on those days!

- **Teach a variety of music.** The “praise and worship” genre has a place in the liturgy. So does standard hymnody. Our repertoire includes “Tantum Ergo” and “Sometimes by Step,” “Pescador de Hombres” and “On That Holy Mountain,” “Siyahamba” and “They’ll Know We Are Christians.”

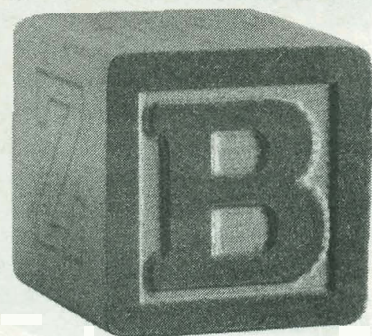
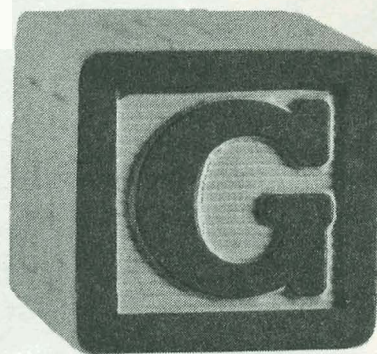
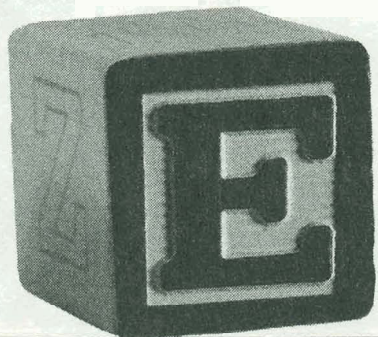
- **Overlap the school and parish repertoire.** Nearly everything we sing at CCS is used at one or more of the three parishes to which our students belong.

- **Respect the students’ preferences.** Pastoral musicians grind their teeth when they hear this, but kids are far more likely to sing music they like than music they don’t. (Aren’t we all?) All the same, it’s dangerous to assume that we know what “the kids will like.” They are more sophisticated than we give them credit for.

I am not suggesting that we feed our students a steady diet of one style simply because they like it. But when we respect their preferences, they are more open to styles outside their comfort zone.

- **Let the students participate in music choices.** The less we do for them, the more they have to think. The more they think, the better their understanding of the connection between the scriptures and the liturgy. The better their understanding, the stronger their faith. The stronger their faith, the more likely they are to remain involved into adulthood.

At CCS, I meet with the third through eighth grade classes when it is their turn to plan Mass. We study the readings of the day and identify common threads. Then we brainstorm



appropriate music. Naturally, someone always offers "On Eagle's Wings" and "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High." If I don't see a connection, I make them justify their suggestion. If they can justify it, I accept it. Once we have a list of songs, we vote.

This requires the students to put some thought into the scriptures before Mass time. It also gives them a sense of ownership, which predisposes them to better participation.

- **Let the students lead the music.** This includes leading the psalm refrain from the ambo. Because the verses are student reads them.

Letting the students lead allows me to mentor student cantors and prepare them for music ministry in the parish. As students grow in age and confidence, we try rounds, then harmony. Musically gifted students develop confidence while they learn the concept of ministry.

They also learn how to set up and take down equipment, connect microphones, and roll cords. It gives them a sense of responsibility and of being "in the know" about what goes on behind the scenes at church. It doesn't hurt that it lets them miss a few extra minutes of class, either!

**Whatever we do to enrich children's and youth liturgy will also invigorate the parish community—and in time, the whole Church.**

- **Tempo makes a difference.** How often do people, adults and students alike, complain about slow, "draggy" music? The objection is not to any particular style; rather, it is an objection to a manner of execution. Addressing this issue makes a big difference in the assembly's enthusiasm level.

- **Vary the accompaniment.** I could play "Amazing Grace" either as a straight hymn on the organ or in gospel style on the piano. But if I follow the text, I begin simply and increase the volume through verse 3. Then I go up an octave and simplify the texture for verse 4 ("Through many dangers . . .") and build to a climax on verse 5 ("When we've been there . . .").

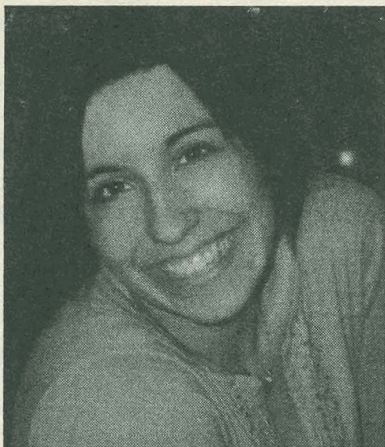
These variations draw attention to the words being sung.

At other times, accompaniment is simply unnecessary. A final refrain sung a cappella is a powerful, beautiful moment of prayer. We often fear that people can't or won't sing without instrumental backup, but in my experience, congregations react well to hearing their communal voice.

- **Teach justice: Be copyright compliant!** Copyright infringement is rampant in schools and in churches. By insisting on compliance in our programs—and explaining why we do so—we teach about justice. Students learn that what we do at church affects people elsewhere.

- **Give—and expect—the best.** Expect students to live up to the liturgy rather than "dumbing it down."

Preparing liturgy this way requires time and energy. But the celebration of the Eucharist is the "source and summit" of Christian life. Whatever we do to enrich children's and youth liturgy will also invigorate the parish community—and in time, the whole Church.



Noelle Garcia will perform at 6:30 p.m. August 6 as part of a Summer Outdoor Concert Series at St. John Vianney Parish in Wyoming, Michigan. For additional information contact Ken Sokolowski, Youth Minister, at 616-534-5449.

To hear sound clips from Noelle's CD *Meet Me Where I Am* (WLP 008194, \$17.00), visit [www.wlpmusic.com](http://www.wlpmusic.com) or Noelle's own Web site, [www.noellegarciamusic.com](http://www.noellegarciamusic.com).

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