

**Can a Humanist find true happiness in classical choral music
that is deeply religious in nature?**

Paul Riedesel

First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

July 17, 2016

"The great works of sacred art are not exclusive."

Michael Steinberg

Good morning, and welcome again to any visitors. My name is Paul Riedesel and my qualifications to be speaking today include being a member here and a classically-trained though non-professional singer.

One of the aspirations of this Society that we repeat most weeks is to "Pursue wisdom through reason, science, art, and the stories of civilization." Music is an important art here. And, as will become clear, I have a strong personal interest in the world of classical choral music which is predominantly sacred music. Whether or not you share my particular "theology" which is that of a non-theistic humanist, and whether or not you care much for classical music, I hope to nudge your thinking about how one might navigate through a culture where contrary religious suppositions still abound with both personal integrity and respect for others. Visitors may not be that familiar with the Unitarian and/or Humanist traditions, and I don't have time to cover them today. However, what you heard in

the opening words should give you a basic idea of how this congregation thinks. So here is the issue:

1. Whereas well into the 19th century, classical choral music was largely sacred in nature
2. Whereas I get a great deal of enjoyment out of that tradition both as a performer and as an audience member
3. Whereas I am a non-theistic humanist
4. Be it resolved . . . there's the rub.

How do I resolve that conundrum? There is that consistency thing, the hobgoblin of small minds. If you stop and think about it—and we are notorious for wanting to think about things—isn't it somehow intellectually dishonest for someone with my beliefs or non-beliefs to be singing words of a Latin Mass or of the wretched sinfulness of man? There are several other Unitarian-Universalists and those from the Jewish tradition in the symphonic chorus in which I sing and I often see some of you in the audiences. Are we all hypocrites?

I'm not worried about basting in purgatory or elsewhere for such sins, but I think it is a legitimate question that deserves reflection. Let's look at a few justifications or strategies by which a non-theist can still comfortably partake of classical, sacred music. I bet that

they are relevant in other contexts as well, be it pictorial art or family reunions.

1) and quite specific to singing--Language itself has the practical effect of creating distance between those sacred texts and one's true self. A great deal of the choral literature is in Latin. Few of us have studied Latin, though we singers still figure out the meaning of those texts—in fact we need to do so. *Credo in unum deum* is a bold assertion. I believe in one God. *Miserere nobis* is a supplication. Have mercy upon us. How one approaches the music has to depend on the texts. German was the language of J. S. Bach, of whom I will speak a great deal, and I happen to understand German well. Even so, voicing those texts in a non-native language moves us a step away from them. "This is a foreign language so it's not really me." And to be honest, at a visceral level, I would be far less comfortable singing those creeds in English than in other languages, even knowing more or less what they mean.

OK, that strategy may not be 100% intellectually honest, but it is widely employed. Few classical singers that I know buy the virgin birth, original sin, a day of judgment, etc. that we commonly sing about. Holding age constant, I don't think our audiences are any

more pious than average either. So if I am a hypocrite, it is in pretty good company.

2). A cynical musicologist could also salve our consciences by pointing out that many composers of famous sacred music were themselves non-believers. Mr. Handel of "Messiah" fame, Johannes Brahms and Giuseppe Verdi whose Requiems are among my favorite works were hardly church-goers.

To this day, an aspiring classical singer who doesn't quite have the chops for the hyper-competitive world of opera has few career options that do not include being a church musician at least part time. So it has been for composers of classical vocal music. Even today, quite secular composers such as Eric Whitacre use sacred texts on occasion.

So there are two somewhat pragmatic rationalizations for a humanist being involved in choral music, the texts of which come from a faith tradition that he or she does not follow.

But shame on me if I didn't have more principled explanations for my love of this art.

3). And here, more than any other reason, is why I as a humanist continue to be part of classical, yea sacred, choral music: I stand in awe of the human genius behind it. Bach believed devoutly that he was merely an instrument of his Old Saxon Lutheran God. Many would say he has equal claim to Eric Clapton for *being* God. Seriously, those who make such lists usually rank Bach as the greatest composer ever in the classical tradition. The theory stuff is technical, but to many less-smart people like me, Bach and others had a talent for expressing deep human emotions in ways that nothing else does.

With all due respect to Bach and others who saw their musicality as a gift from their God, I appreciate what these flesh-and-blood mortals have bequeathed to the human race. The best of them expressed in music for the voice so much that is human. The greatest of them went far beyond their personal joys and feelings to speak for a larger community—a community of believers, it must be said, but their art reflects a kind of emotional empathy, a universalism we would do well to honor and emulate.

Then there is the technical mastery and creativity to be found in this music. That applies as well to instrumental music but the addition of human language multiplies that genius, in my opinion. I would now

like to play a couple brief examples. You probably won't get the words, but don't worry about that for the moment. Just open your mind and ears . . .

The first selection is a chorale from Bach's St. Matthew Passion. You may know it as "O Sacred Head Now Wounded" and it is sung after the crucifixion. Whether you believe any of the story or not, just listen for the human emotions of sympathy and sorrow, not to mention the harmonic surprises that Bach employs.

* (Play)

Now for something different from Verdi's Requiem of 1874, a bit of the Dies Irae chorus:

** (Play)

Scared yet? You're supposed to be. Who better than an opera composer to depict the terrible "day of judgment?" *Dies irae, dies illa, calamitatis et miseriae*. Day of Judgment, day of wrath, of calamity and misery. Yet the last iteration of this chorus is followed by the tenderest of movements *Libera me*, deliver me. With this Requiem, Verdi was honoring the great poet and patriot, Alessandro Manzoni. If you have sung or heard this music live, you never forget it or cease to wonder at the mortal mastery of Giuseppe Verdi.

4). There is one more principled justification for why non-believers like me willingly lend their vocal talent to this music. It can be a form of generosity. At such performances in churches, it is not unusual to see a number of clergy, nuns, and/or old and obviously faithful parishioners in the front rows. A UU friend of ours explained to me once that, as a performer, she feels she is giving something worthy and meaningful to them even though she does not literally believe those texts herself.

Not long ago, a singer in the Society's Chorus died suddenly. He was not a member here and his service was held at a large Lutheran church. When asked, quite a few of us gladly agreed to be part of a choir to sing for it. While we may have passed on reciting the Apostles Creed, we gave the anthems our all and joined in on the hymns. I for one never worried about my Oversoul or integrity being in any kind of peril for that small gesture of human touch.

The late Michael Steinberg was a music critic and was married to the former Concertmaster of the Minnesota Orchestra, Jorja Flezani. In his last book on choral masterworks he commented on the same dilemma I am trying to address here, and much more eloquently. In his own words, Steinberg was a "writer of Jewish birth who accepts himself for . . . a religion-loving atheist." In the Passion narrative as

some of you know, the disciple Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. Steinberg writes this about Bach's treatment in the St. Matthew Passion: ". . . he set those words to the most agonized bars of music he penned in his whole life. I don't believe there is a single person who has ever heard one of Bach's Passions who has not at some time committed some act of betrayal, great or small, and felt remorse for it, even lifelong remorse. This is music addressed to all of us. And have we not all known love, sacrifice, compassion, awe, transcendence, and the other facets of experience we encounter in the Passion story?"

So I have jammered on about my own angst. But is any of this relevant to those who are indifferent, at best, to "classical" music, much less to Masses and Cantatas? I think so.

Along with a free and responsible search for truth and meaning—which I am all about—we also claim to value the inherent worth and dignity of every person, as well as compassion in human relations. Indeed there is nothing in our grand plan to build humanism about building walls. We needn't accept as "truth" any of the theology but we can admire and appreciate the human artistry that has gone before us. I would be poorer for never having seen the stained glass of the Cologne cathedral, the haunting, late-Medieval sculpture of

Tilman Riemenschneider, Rembrandt's Holy Family or having sung Bach's B-Minor Mass.

It is often and easily said that music has the power to bring people together. I believe that. To be sure, no one style, including classical choral music, can unite everyone. But even if we do not much like some form of art—and I have my non-favorites—we should still try to appreciate the creativity, the craft, and the humanity that may lie behind it.

**

You will find our closing song as an insert in your order of service. One of the small number of outstanding, solidly humanist choral works in classical music was Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" to a poem by Friedrich Schiller. The German does not translate tidily so we will be singing two stanzas written independently by Alfred Lord Tennyson but I invite you to do your best with the one verse of Schiller's—*alle Menschen werden Brüder*—all of humanity becomes as one. I think we can agree on that goal.