



In this series, we give you a bit more in-depth look at the artists who are part of what makes WLP worship resources and music for prayer so wonderful. We go “Beyond the Bio” that you might find on our website or in a CD booklet to explore the stories and ministry of these artists. In this issue, we talk to composers Orin Johnson and Tony Ward. These interviews took place in November of 2018.

Straight with Crooked Lines: The Road of the Church Musician

AIM: How did you get started in church music?

OJ: My older sister and I had organ lessons when we were pretty young; I started in first grade. Our parents never really told us why. Neither of them were musicians, though they appreciated music. We had two different organs in the house: a small spinet at first, but then a bigger theater organ with percussion and other gizmos. The guy who gave us the demo played the “Pink Panther” theme and I thought, “I need to know how to do that.”

AIM: How did the Pink Panther end up in church?

OJ: In our very small Minnesota town, everyone knew everything about everybody, so they knew I was taking organ lessons. In fifth grade, somebody thought I was good enough to help out at our small Catholic church. I started out playing Stations of the Cross—the same hymn stanza fifteen times. I was mentored by a couple of the adult volunteers at church, and eventually they got me playing parts of the Mass.

AIM: So you became one of the volunteer organists?

OJ: Growing up in the 1980s, my parish and the one seven miles down the road were already sharing a priest. We had the Saturday night Mass every other month. That became “my” Mass for several years, along with occasional holy days.

AIM: Did you attend Catholic school?

OJ: No, I went to public elementary and high school. I took private piano and organ lessons from the school music teacher. In high school I also played trombone. Again, in our small school one band served for everything. I also sang in choir and in smaller ensembles, and got lassoed in for accompanying at school concerts, for solo competitions, and so on.

AIM: When did you begin writing music?

OJ: My older sister was in college, I was in eighth grade, I think, and she had a music theory assignment. I sat down and tried to do the assignment. The first time I actually tried to write something for church was in college. Of course I’d improvise at Mass, but hadn’t written things down.

AIM: Were you a music major?

OJ: I went to Harvard, where they’re called “concentrations” and not “majors.” I had a joint concentration in folklore/mythology and music.

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AIM: An interesting combination!

OJ: Folklore/mythology was my declared “major” after freshmen year. Part of that field required classes like foreign language, anthropology, and even music. At the end of my junior year I figured out that just a few more music classes would qualify me for a true double major.

AIM: And after Harvard?

OJ: As senior year was ending I tried to figure out my future—possibly teaching music at a private high school; but I was also interested in pursuing choral music. Radford University in Virginia suddenly had a graduate assistantship in their master’s choral directing program. I applied and got it.

AIM: You were doing church music all this time?

OJ: Yes. I’d been at the Catholic Student Center at Harvard. In Virginia I had an organist/accompanist job at the Christianburg Church of the Brethren. The service started with some hymn singing, then scripture, then the pastor’s sermon, altar call, another hymn, and then we repeated it the next week.

AIM: Were you still composing?

OJ: I did some composing for coursework. In the sacred realm it was more arranging. For an anniversary of the Harvard Catholic Student Center I arranged “Beautiful Savior,” another time “Amazing Grace,” and so on. The first composing of original material happened at Radford. That’s when I attempted to write my first Mass setting, though it was only as a diversion from my coursework.

AIM: After you received your master’s degree?

OJ: I started seriously applying to private high schools and for Catholic parish jobs.

I ended up at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville (Illinois).

AIM: Your first full-time position?

OJ: Yes, but I think my experience was different than most since it was a shrine, not a parish. It didn’t have the rhythms of the parish. There were no weddings, few funerals, and no community from which to draw a choir. We tried to be good neighbors with the parishes around us, and would stipend people to come in when we needed instrumentalists or a choir. I played for Mass, of course, but also novenas and more devotional services. Some things were definitely odd, like negotiating Advent when there were full Christmas lights all around the shrine.

AIM: Was it a good experience?

OJ: Yes, but I didn’t know anything else. My parish experience was my tiny parish in Minnesota, and campus ministry. I had no frame of reference to compare it to what a regular parish position might have been like.

AIM: Did you write music for the shrine?

OJ: I did start writing pieces that could be used for the novena. Its motto was “Share the healing and the hope.” I wrote some involved choral pieces, since I had pro folks who could sight-read most anything. I was there for fourteen years, but then in 2012 went to Saints Joachim and Ann parish in the St. Louis area. That’s where I am to this day. I sit on the liturgy committee. I also do school liturgies and some occasional prayer services, and Sunday Masses and other typical things.

AIM: But you also do musical things outside your parish.

OJ: I’m involved with the Saint Louis Chamber Chorus. I originally sang with them, and later became one of two assis-

tant directors. I also am active with Youth Sing Praise and Oddwalk Ministries.

AIM: Oddwalk Ministries?

OJ: I do this with my friend Shannon Cerneka. His mom worked at the shrine. In 1999 the National Catholic Youth Conference had a “write a theme song” competition and I was the keyboardist for Shannon’s recorded entry. We continued to build a ministry with music, storytelling, and so on. In 2004 we made it official, since I’d been helping him out so frequently. The name of “Oddwalk” came out of our take on the journey to Emmaus—it was a walk that got turned around 180 degrees. That “strange journey” became “oddwalk” (<http://oddwalkministries.com>). It seemed to fit us well.

AIM: What’s on your drawing board right now?

OJ: My parish has gone through the process of preparing to complete its interior, and what excites me most is doing the music area anew, including a pipe organ! It’s a refurbishing of the pipe organ from the Springfield (Illinois) cathedral.

AIM: What’s on the compositional drawing board?

OJ: I continue to work on various things. Maybe a revision of a Mass setting I did for the 2010 translation, a setting for my own parish. The Youth Sing Praise summer camp will be premiering a new musical by me and my friend Brad Behrmann a few years down the road. Of course, other little projects always crop up.

AIM: Sounds like you will find ways to stay busy!

OJ: There is never a shortage of things to do—they’re all good things, thanks be to God.