

Pk's Perspectives ... The Rejoiceful Choir

I hate to admit it, but like most of the rest of America, I sat glued to my TV set watching the finale to the second season of “American Idol.” As the stakes got higher and higher, it finally came down to two singers — Clay Aiken and Ruben Studdard. That night was going to be when they put their best foot forward and gave it their best shot for the title. So what did they do to take things up a notch, to put their big inspirational numbers over the top? They brought out a choir, singing strong and loud and behind each soloist. And they did it again with the third season finale as well! Yes, that’s what I said...a choir. You remember those, don’t you? Those antiquated artifacts of church life from way back when. Those musical dinosaurs that most experts today tell us are just taking up space on the platform that could be better used for a good drama sketch. And yet, when the world wants to celebrate and inspire joy, they do what is only natural — they call in the choir! Just when churches are turning in their choir robes, music from Kirk Franklin, Fred Hammond, and the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir is selling in droves, and lighting up some TV screens as well. Right when worship leaders are pronouncing the death of the choir, the world is embracing its power and reveling in its spirit.

So why are churches giving up on choirs today? One reason is that we’re just lazy. Choirs require a commitment from a large number of people. It takes work to keep people coming to rehearsal and worship week after week, year after year. And once you get used to having a strong choir in the service, any worship time without one seems like it has had all the power drained out of it. And if a church is trying to soft-sell commitment, it can be a real chore to keep a choir going. It’s easier to just find five or six uber-talented people to commit to leading weekly worship.

The other main reason is the church’s love affair with worship fads. Choirs have gotten a stodgy image, and I admit that some of them deserve it. Many need to invest the time & work necessary to painstakingly transition their choir from singing dusty “anthems” to uptempo songs and inspiring ballads. But instead, churches have thrown out some of the wine with the old wineskins. What could have been re-cast with a new sense of ministry vision has been trashed. And that’s too bad, because a choir can do things that a praise team just can’t. For one thing, there are some songs that just don’t sound the same with fewer people; majestic hymns like “How Great Thou Art” or “It Is Well With My Soul” don’t have the same power with six people singing as they would with the backing of a 20 or 40 voice choir. You really are hard pressed to do service to the grandeur of God with just a small ensemble and a couple of guitars. We have greatly limited the musical voice of worship if we give the choir their walking papers.

I came across this article 18 years ago and put a hard copy in my files; it was written by Mike Speck and published in The Singing News. Twenty years ago I sensed the burgeoning tension of the contemporary worship voice trickling into the mostly traditional worship voice of established congregations, which is why I held on to the above article. Though obviously dated (some of you might need to Google “Fred Hammond”), I think the point of Mike’s article is spot on. It is a powerful worship voice when a praise team and praise choir collaborate rather than compete (think Maverick City Music). Pray for our Personnel Committee as they seek out a full-time Worship Pastor to further hone both of our church’s worship voices, renew ancillary music ministries like handbells/Children’s Choir, and weave them all together in beautiful collaboration. Grace & peace, love you. PK.