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Title: The Music of Taizé

Author: Henry Gerike

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The Music of Taizé

And the Music of Your Congregation

Even before the introduction of *Lutheran Service Book*, many congregations enjoyed incorporating the music of Taizé (pronounced teh-ZAY) into their Sunday morning worship. This music has its roots in the French prayer community of Taizé, a village hidden in the hills of Burgundy in eastern France. This ecumenical lay community was founded in 1940 by Brother Roger, a Protestant. Originally the community assisted refugees fleeing Nazi occupation throughout the war, and by 1949, a monastic community of seven was formed. Currently the Taizé community consists of about 100 brothers, representing Protestant and Roman Catholic Christianity from 25 different nations. They work for reconciliation among Christians.

Even though it is relatively isolated, Taizé has become an oasis for thousands of young people who come to take part each summer in various retreats. While physical work and Bible study are regular components, the heart of each retreat is daily worship—morning, noon, and evening.

Because of the large numbers of people attending these retreats, the community realized that they would need to provide a musical vocabulary accessible to all, no matter their ability or language. It was decided that repetitive, easily memorized chants, that could be sung by the multinational, multilingual congregation gathered at Taizé, would best fit the bill. Various attempts were made with different musical forms and languages. Finally, Latin was chosen to be the community's language of prayer—a “dead” language revived to put everyone on (un)equal footing.

To solve the musical problem, Father Joseph Gelineau suggested that Parisian church musician Jacques Berthier (1923–1994) be commissioned to write simple musical settings for the community. Over a period of almost 20 years, a vast repertoire of original music was created by Berthier, most of which has been published in North America by GIA Publications of Chicago.

The process of composing this music began with the Taizé leaders choosing a biblical or liturgical text. The text was sent to Berthier, who then set it in a traditional harmonic idiom with enough interest to sustain prolonged singing. The music also had to support a variety of languages, each with its own unique accents, and had to have a welcoming “folk” quality about it.

Because these short, simple tunes are repeated several times, interest is maintained by adding instrumental descants or vocal counter melodies. Sometimes the congregation hums or repeats a simple text, over which another layer of text is provided by cantor or choir. The music of Taizé is as suitable for a small student group meeting in a dormitory as it is for a larger liturgical celebration in a congregation.

Traditional Taizé services follow a flexible outline that begins with the gathering music of Taizé chants. Short Bible readings (especially from the Psalms and the Gospels), more chants, silence (often prolonged from five to 10 minutes), prayers (translated into a half dozen languages), and more chants are the essential elements of these “youth” services. The emphasis is on simplicity and involvement of the congregation and instrumentalists.

Within a Lutheran context, some congregations may be able to adapt the Taizé format for an evening service, while others may only be able to utilize portions of Taizé music for their services. For instance, Evening Prayer services during Advent and Lent may be the easiest places to begin using the music of Taizé. Instead of a prelude, the choir could begin by singing “Jesus, Remember Me” (*LSB* 767), “O Lord, Hear My Prayer” (*LSB* 780), or “Adoramus Te, Domine” (*HS98* 894), with the congregation joining in. Parish instrumentalists could play the various descants. One inner-city congregation in Chicago enjoyed this method of beginning evening services, in part, because students from the parish school brought their recorders or flutes with them. As the students sat with their parents, they played the descants they had learned in school.

Other Taizé chants, such as “Alleluia” (*LSB* 951) and “Kyrie” (*LSB* 943), can be used as parts of the Divine Service. In both cases, the congregation and choir hum and sing their parts while a cantor sings the appropriate text. A smaller congregation in the St. Louis area used “Adoramus Te, Domine” (*HS98* 894) on All Saints' Day for its Commemoration of the Faithful Departed. The names of those in that parish who had died in the Lord were set to the melodic formula provided in *Hymnal Supplement 98*. Then after all the names had been read, the congregation and cantor sang the “Adoramus Te, Domine.”

During the distribution of Holy Communion is an excellent time to incorporate the music of Taizé, especially “Eat This Bread” (*LSB* 638). This easily learned chant provides people the opportunity to sing with the body of Christ as they come forward to receive the gifts of Christ's body and blood for their forgiveness.

Taizé canons, such as “Prepare the Way of the Lord” (*HS98* 807) and “Magnificat” (*HS98* 803), can find a great home in the Advent and Christmas liturgies, especially with the Sunday school children leading the congregation.

Some things to remember about using the music of Taizé:

- Taizé music is congregational in nature and not a performance/concert music for choirs. Congregations can sing in harmony, but they will need to be taught the music either before the service or by playing it through a few times. Having the choir know the music will greatly help the congregation.
- On appropriate pieces, don't skimp on the repetitions. Give the music a chance to settle in and to become part of the praying. Some of those repetitions need to go on for several minutes and not just four or five times.
- Keep the tempo consistent throughout the repetitions. Don't slow or break at the end of each repetition; reserve these for the last repetition.
- Vary each repetition's color by using a different vocal or instrumental solo to layer over the congregation's part.

- Use the various congregational vocal and instrumental resources you have. There are instrumental parts accessible to beginners as well as advanced players. To see a full selection of Taizé music, visit www.giamusic.com.
- Preparation is needed, so plan ahead! Know roughly how many times a chant will need to be repeated. Know what will be done on each repetition. Write out a plan that can be used by director, choir, and instrumentalists.

For example, “O Lord, Hear My Prayer” (LSB 780) makes for a great prelude to an Evening Prayer service. The following sequence shows how you might plot out who plays what and when, and how the music might be gradually enriched by the addition of counter-melodies and changing instrumental colors.

1. Introduction by organ or guitar.
2. Choir sings in unison.
3. Congregation joins choir; a solo instrument plays the melody.
4. Choir begins singing in harmony.
5. Instrument A plays first descant and continues its part.
6. Instrument B begins to play its part.
7. With congregation and choir continuing in parts, the organ drops out.
8. Choir, congregation, and instruments continue.
9. Organ rejoins as a signal that the chant is coming to an end.

While the initial use of Taizé music may at first seem a little awkward, it is definitely a music that is welcoming—inviting participation by young and old, by musician and non-musician alike. Within a Lutheran context, it can serve as yet another wonderful resource to enrich your parish music and worship life.

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1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295

800-248-1930 x1265 • worship@lcms.org • www.lcms.org/worship

