


Editorial

Jonathan Dueck

We classmates—both Indo-diasporic Canadians and non-Indo-diasporic Canadians—sat in semicircular lines on the stage in a corner of a thoroughfare through the Fine Arts Building at the University of Alberta.

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The *tanpuras* (long slender buzzy lutes) established the drone, the *om*. Singing, we moved up and down the melodic world we were trying to inhabit—the raga, which includes all kinds of little melodies, patterns, and meanings that

exceed a Western scale. The *tabla* (beautiful tuned drums that speak in patterns like syllables) established a pulse. And then, as we moved into the composed song, a *tala* (a rhythmic cycle, repeated and beautifully elaborated) coordinated our activities so all our explorations of melody and meaning arrived on the *sam*, the initial beat of the *tala*.

We sang the composed song, a lively *bhajan* (hymn) to Krishna, together. When the song reached its peak, I—a rank beginner but a lucky student in this North Indian ensemble class—had the chance to sing *tans* (an improvised melodic melisma, a little like the scat singing in jazz). Riding on the wave of rhythm and the ever-present drone, we played together in the melodies of this sacred song.

Our teachers, Mrs. Wasanti Paranjape and Mr. Vinod Bhardwaj, both Hindus, and my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Regula Qureshi, sat and listened to us, along with fine arts and design students and professors. A little older group, the parents of Indodiasporic students (Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians) sat and listened, shaking their heads and saying *Wa* (pronounced *vah*) together as we reached the peaks of the melodies. They were not separate from the performance. After we finished the song and the little concert, these parents came to the group, embraced their children, and talked with those of us who were not their relatives too.

“Thank you for singing.”

“The bhajan was beautiful.”

“Where did you learn those gamak tans?”

What was happening as we sang together? Was it appropriation or apprenticeship? Was it a community-owned performance or a university power move? Or something in between? Was it validating or stealing meaning?

All of these are possible readings of the story. But I experienced it as a moment of warm relationship and connection, of momentarily but deeply

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ly *feeling* and *sounding* together. Singing a text about Krishna prompted me, as a Christian, to imagine Jesus's playfulness, beauty, sense of duty, comradeship. It deepened my experience of Jesus. But, more profoundly, being greeted by the parents of my Indo-diasporic classmates, who expressed such pleasure at hearing

us all sing music close to their hearts and religious experiences, gave me a sense of the abiding presence of the divine and the possibility of connecting across difference when we sing together.

I tell this story—one intentionally chosen as musically and religiously “far from home” for at least some North American Mennonite congregations—as a way into the three strands this issue of *Vision* explores: (1) congregational music and identity (including race, racialization, culture, ethnicity, history, and gender) in the diverse North American Mennonite context; (2) theological and musical leadership and power—and its problems—in church contexts; and (3) the making of *Voices Together*, a hymnbook that tries to draw together a diversity of Mennonite voices at the present moment.

In Mennonite contexts, as contributor Adam Tice has elsewhere suggested, we sing our theology.¹ And as I and others have also argued, when we sing, we embody and instantiate—we *make*, like raising a barn—our ecclesiology. This is not to say that we always do so well, nor that our ecclesiology is sound. But it is to say that in singing—and in other corporate, rhythmically organized moments of heightened speech like common prayer, responsive readings, or spoken liturgy—we experience being the church, with all its problems and possibilities together. And so *Voices Together* has had perforce to respond to the questions of identity and diversity, power and community, that comprise the denominational directions

1 Adam M. L. Tice, “Who Do You Sing That I Am? The Life of Jesus in Twentieth Century Mennonite Hymnals: A Case Study in the Use of Hymnody for Theological Research,” MA thesis, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2007.

that Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada are navigating in their respective contexts at the present moment.

The trajectory of the articles in this issue is toward becoming more aware of worship's relational qualities—to worship is to relate to the church, which is to say the people, within and beyond the building—and to expand our singing and worship in ways that invite and include the church, now, across all kinds of difference.

Melissa Florer-Bixler begins theologically with a sermon about this trajectory, thinking of worship as sacrifice, as gift economy—that is, about the quality of relationship God and we (all of us) sustain with each other. Adam Tice then frames this trajectory historically and identifies the strategy in *Voices Together*: to teach Mennonite congregations that use the hymnal how to sing together with congregations that sing in many other ways,

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connecting them in mutually recognizable ways and in the experience of singing the church into being together.


Contributors next tell stories and reflect—often from their own lives and standpoints—on how our singing and speaking together can exclude and include, disempower and empower. In doing so, they urge us to attend to each other in worship. Sarah Kathleen Johnson considers worship leading in predominantly white Mennonite congregations with “traditional” patterns of worship as gendered labour, as “women’s work,”

urging us to think more inclusively about who leads worship and what it means to do so. Sarah Nahar talks about ways music both connects and divides us in a diverse church and in Mennonite peacebuilding activity, in Black and white contexts, and across Mennonite global diversity.

Carol Penner's two poems celebrate the ways music allow us to express deep diversity in church—how music allows more than one voice to sound at once. Paul Dueck retells the story of Mennonite World Conference worship as an experience of “unity in diversity.” And Beverly Lapp tells the story of three worship spaces related to North American Mennonite history, tracing the experiences of worship and senses of tradition (of plainness, of sophistication) associated with each place and identifying

the ways that worship spaces can become sites of theological contest over how Mennonites should worship together.

Contributors also invite us to sing each other's songs, with respect and with the bravery to be taken out of our comfort zones. Sarah Augustine, drawing on her conversations with Indigenous people, people of



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color, and LGBTQIA+ people, gifts us with a reflection on texts and hymns in *Voices Together* that expand our Mennonite identity by diversifying the images and texts in our worship. Darryl Neustaedter-Barg tells some of his own story as Mennonite worship musician and pushes us—if we are interested in inclusion—to engage seriously with popular

music and the many Christians for whom it comprises “home” in church. In a similar vein, Anneli Loepp Thiessen's piece offers a practical introduction to songs in *Voices Together* “outside of our comfort zone” and the ways they might include others.

Carl Bear and Sarah Kathleen Johnson point to a number of early and medieval church songs in *Voices Together* and suggest that singing these songs connects us to our history and draws us, as Mennonites, into a historical sense of Christian unity and a critical sense of our place within (and not as an exception to) Christian tradition, with its faults and its strengths. And Katie Graber describes the consultative and collaborative way that Indigenous Mennonites and the *Voices Together* team worked to thread Indigenous singing through the new hymnal, in ways that are both meaningful to Indigenous singers and accessible to non-Indigenous singers.

To conclude the issue, I offer a sermon on identity and difference in music and suggest that the particular histories of Mennonite identities should be not abandoned but expanded—identity and ecclesiology not evaporating but becoming (now and mapped back and forward in time) more fluid and polyphonic in the ways that music allows and dramatizes.

My hope is that you find this collection of sermons, articles, poems, and stories an invitation to sing together across difference and out of our comfort zones, welcoming each other and together being the body of Christ as we do so.

About the author

Jonathan Dueck is vice president academic, academic dean, and associate professor of ethnomusicology at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He previously taught at George Washington University, Duke University, the University of Maryland, and the University of Alberta. He is a founding co-editor of *Prompt*, a journal of innovative writing-in-the-disciplines assignments and teaching reflections, coeditor of the *Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities* (2016), author of *Congregational Music, Conflict, and Community* (2017, Routledge) and *Performing Basketball* (Oxford, under contract), and has published articles in *Ethnomusicology*, the *Journal of American Folklore*, and *Popular Music and Society*.