

“When in doubt, write a hymn.”

The award-winning singer-songwriter Marcus Hummon and his wife, Episcopal priest and founder of Thistle Farms, Becca Stevens, have written a wonderful book of reflections on Marcus’ cantata *The Passion*. Marcus and Becca look at the creative process of composing – especially a sacred text – and the scripture passages chosen to make up the cantata. Their reflections form a strong foundation for our own Holy Week prayer – and move us toward the joy of Easter with the final cut, “A New Song.” Commissioned by Christ Church Cathedral in Nashville, the score and a CD or mp3 recorded in Nashville are all available from Church Publishing.

Here’s a bit of what Marcus has to say about the commission and his writing process.

When I was commissioned by Christ Church Cathedral here in Nashville to write a cantata reflecting the last days of Jesus’s life, I wasn’t sure how to begin. First of all, my background is not in sacred music, but rather in popular country music. It just happens that while writing songs for the Dixie Chicks, Tim McGraw, Rascal Flatts, and others, I had started to dabble in writing music for the theater. As I wasn’t classically trained, I would need help from a friend of mine, David John Madore at the Hartt Conservatory of Music in Hartford, Connecticut, in transcribing the choral work I was arranging, and my friend Dr. Deen Entzminger and the Belmont Chamber Singers to bring the work to fruition, to full performance. I also asked Jonathan Yudkin to add his beautiful cello accompaniment. Still, I love new challenges in composition and was eager to try my hand at a very different style of vocal ensemble work. Previously, this obsession had led to writing several musicals and an opera, *Surrender Road*, which premiered with the Nashville Opera Company in 2007.

After some research I found that many composers had written cantatas around the passion of Christ; J. S. Bach wrote three! I wondered what I had to offer to this tradition. Selfishly, I wanted a reason to go back and read my Bible, as I had not done any serious study of biblical passages in a long time. Like many churchgoers, my connection to the Bible is the weekly passages from the lectionary. (Lectionaries are cycles of designated readings from Scripture, intended to cover much of the sacred story over a period of time. For Episcopalians, that sequence is three years and includes passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Psalms, and the New Testament, particularly the Gospels.)

It was my wife, Becca Stevens, the Episcopal chaplain at Vanderbilt University, who had originally suggested that I tackle the annual Palm Sunday service, where parishioners are often chosen to portray characters in the Passion narrative, and the congregation offers lines spoken by the crowd: “Crucify him! Crucify him!” I felt it would be a great joy to envelop myself in the Lord’s final journey to Jerusalem, and see if I could find a musical language for these well-known events to create a unified musical composition. It felt like a wonderful opportunity to dig deep into the texts, and to meditate more fully on my Christian life.

I grew up in the Christian faith; my mom and dad were raised Methodist in small towns in Michigan and Ohio respectively. They eventually swung between the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church, primarily based on their feelings about particular pastors. My father’s work was with the US State Department in economic development and so much of my youth was spent

living abroad in Tanzania, Nigeria, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, and Italy. Overseas, we often had limited choices as to where we could worship as a family.

In Saudi Arabia, for example, we were not officially allowed to have Christian services in the Kingdom, but in the interest of good relations with the United States in the late 1970s, the era of President Jimmy Carter and the Camp David accords, the royal family made an exception for the American business and diplomatic community. Therefore, all Christians who wanted to worship on Sundays in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, were herded into a large auditorium, regardless of whether we were Catholic, Protestant, or Greek Orthodox. Itinerant preachers of a variety of institutional and theological perspectives appeared throughout the liturgical calendar. Every week, it seemed, we listened to a new preacher. And so we all were trapped as it were; Episcopalians sitting with born-again Southern Baptists, Catholics sitting with Mennonites, Nazarenes with Methodists, etc.

There were some pretty lively dialogues in our Christian education classes, but this hardship brought about my somewhat universalist perspective. We really didn't have the opportunity to argue about the manner of baptism, or the proper method of taking communion, or the centrality of the sermon versus the Mass, and the like. The conversation and the focus varied from week to week, and in order to function as a community, it was necessary to develop an appreciation of other Christian walks.

In addition to this, my folks were adamant that I show respect for our theocratic host nation's religion of Islam. My parents, though Christian, firmly believed that God must be working in the lives of Muslims, and by extension, those of other faiths as well. My mother even chose to study Arabic during our two-year tour of duty in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

This was a formative period for me in my faith. To move through the *sucs*, or marketplaces, and about the mosques and hear the muezzin prayer call five times a day had a profound effect on me. When I subsequently left home for my sophomore year in high school, options were limited and I enrolled in Notre Dame High School in Rome, Italy. In my homesickness I turned to my faith, and started going to daily chapel, and taking communion with my Catholic classmates. This was not acceptable, and I was brought before the headmaster, where it was explained to me that only confirmed Catholics could take communion at a Catholic Mass at chapel. I said they'd have to expel me, as I fully intended to take communion. I am not sure why, but they decided to let me stay and do as I felt called to do.

Regularly I would take a bus into the city, and enjoy walking the colonnade at St. Peter's, imagining how the Eternal City may have looked to St. Peter and St. Paul, not long after Christ's death. One particularly memorable evening, as I walked about St. Peter's Square, there was an art exhibit by the great Russian painter Marc Chagall; choral music was in the air. I remember inspiration washing over me; a Protestant, in Catholic Rome, far from family in Islamic Saudi Arabia, reveling in the work of a great Jewish artist!

We are all "children of the story." I like to think of the Christian story in broad strokes. A poor Palestinian Jewish preacher emerges at a violent time in Judea, under the brutal tether of the Roman Empire. He preaches a revolutionary understanding of God's love, an understanding that

seems to transcend class, wealth, gender, nationality; certainly it transcends all hierarchy and power structures. It is a teaching largely directed at the desperately poor, and it is this teaching that ultimately threatens not just the local religious authority, but more significantly threatens the Romans occupying the Holy Land. This is what finally leads to Jesus's death. The Romans crucify Jesus: a horrific, barbaric form of execution. Still, according to Jesus's followers, three days after his death and entombment, he rises from the grave, is resurrected, and seen by his disciples, just as Jesus is said to have predicted.

Elton John was once quoted as saying, "When in doubt, write a hymn."<sup>1</sup> For a songwriter, these are words to live by. What is a hymn after all, but a musical offering directed at the object of our deepest passions? A hymn can be a lament, a cry, a shout for joy, or exultation—a hymn is a love song!

Most of my adult life has been spent writing love songs. In the world of songwriting, the vast majority of songs written in popular music are love songs in one form or another. And so, I looked at writing this "Passion" as a love song to Jesus. Jesus's story is my story. It is the tale I have been told again and again from as far back as I can remember. It is my heritage and my family heirloom. I cannot think of a nobler, more divine soul than the Jesus I have grown to love. Given the opportunity to set a chapter of his story to music, I decided to jump in!

And as for the question of whether or not I should write a new cantata, on a subject that has been so beautifully rendered by no less than J. S. Bach and so many other great composers, I am reminded of a beautiful passage from the first chapter of Ecclesiastes:

All streams run to the sea,  
but the sea is not full;  
to the place where the streams flow,  
there they continue to flow.

I am simply offering another small stream to the Sea, knowing that the Sea is never full!

Marcus

1. Elizabeth J. Rosenthal, *His Song: The Musical Journey of Elton John* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2001), 133.