

Tales From the Choir Loft

May 2024

How We Got the Anthem “Seek Ye First”

The Short Answer

The short answer is that Tuki and I bought a choir set of sheet music of “Seek Ye First” for the Lancaster United Methodist Church Chancel Choir. But why did we do that? That is a story that goes back to at least 1978 and even farther back than that.

What Is “Seek Ye First”?

“Seek Ye First” is a wonderful mashup of Karen Lafferty’s contemporary christian music song “Seek Ye First” and Johann Pachelbel’s classic Canon in D, arranged by Douglas E. Wagner. Wagner mixes the two songs together so eloquently that you could not be faulted for thinking that it was written as one original song rather than the combination of two very different musical pieces.

Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF)

The First United Methodist Church (FUMC) of Arlington TX had a strong Methodist Youth Fellowship program in the ‘70s, and I was a regular participant from 1973 to 1979. We cycled through Youth Directors every year or two. At the time, I wondered why they were only there for a rather short time. Many years later, I would piece together many disparate bits of information to realize that the job of Youth Director was a spot for college graduates with intent to go to seminary to spend a year or two gaining experience in a ministerial field. I thought we were very lucky, as all of our Youth Directors were excellent at the job.

Around 1978 we had a new Youth Director named Brad Ramsey. Brad played guitar and wanted to bring more singing to the MYF. He printed up a song book with the words to many of the songs that were currently popular at the christian colleges. One of the songs that he taught us was “Seek Ye First” by Karen Lafferty. This was a new song to us, having come out of the Maranatha! fellowship in southern California in 1971. I was familiar with the music of Karen Lafferty, eventually owning both of the record albums (yes, they were vinyl records—CDs wouldn’t come along for a while) that she published.

In 1979 I would graduate High School and relocate to the “Colorado School for Wayward Boys and Girls” (as a friend of mine referred to it). Most people refer to it as the “U.S. Air Force Academy”. I stumbled into being one of the song leaders for the Chapel program, and one of the popular songs we sang was “Seek Ye First”.

GE Light Bulb Music

Apparently, most people are introduced to Pachelbel’s Canon in D at somebody’s wedding, since it became very popular for weddings in the ‘80s. So much so that there is a meme on YouTube about the piece. One popular meme plays off the cello part, which plays the ground bass, which consists of two measures of quarter notes that repeat ad infinitum. Supposedly this leads to the cellist becoming extremely bored, possibly falling asleep and collapsing to the floor.

Somehow, I missed all of that. If I had heard the Canon in D, I didn’t notice it enough to comprehend it as an important piece of music. That all changed in the late ‘80s when Pachelbel’s Canon in D was used as the background music in a TV commercial for General Electric light bulbs. I’m sure you can immediately see why this Baroque canon was the perfect vehicle to sell light bulbs. No? Yea, neither could I. Even so, from that moment on my first wife and I referred to the piece as “GE Light Bulb Music”.

My Aunt Martha, the Church Organist

For as long as I can remember, my Aunt Martha (Mom’s sister) had been a church organist. Tuki met Aunt Martha and Uncle Jim at my mother’s memorial service in December 2010. When we were planning our flying trip to AirVenture in Oshkosh WI for July 2011, Tuki wanted to visit the Miller kids that she used to watch at their new home in North Carolina. Since the trip would take us right past Knoxville TN where Aunt Martha and Uncle Jim lived, we arranged to spend a few days with them.

Some time before we arrived, I realized that even though I had been singing in church choirs since 1973, and I may have heard Aunt Martha play piano at our house, I had never heard her play the organ. That wasn’t so

unreasonable, since she didn't have an organ in her house, and my family was never visiting on a Sunday morning when she would have been playing. Being a long-time fan of organ music, I insisted that while Tuki and I were visiting that Aunt Martha take us to the church and play the organ for us. She thought it was a weird request, but she complied.

So, what do you play when someone just asks you to play something, anything? Sensing this as a good time to get some useful rehearsal in, she pulled out the anthem that her choir was singing that Sunday. This was the Douglas E. Wagner arrangement of "Seek Ye First" and "Canon in D". "Seek Ye First" had been a favorite of mine since my MYF days, and "Canon in D" was familiar as "GE Light Bulb Music". Tuki and I really liked how Wagner had weaved the two songs together. Tuki remembers that Martha, apropos of nothing, said something about "It's good for weddings". Tuki took a picture (who writes notes anymore?) of the book that Martha was playing from so that she could order a copy of it for herself after we got home.

Aunt Martha also played for us Gordon Young's "Prelude in Classic Style". I recognized it because our organists at FUMC Arlington TX had played it occasionally, and Mom had declared that it was one of her favorites. I told Aunt Martha that it was one of her sister's favorites.

Wedding Planning

When we got home from that trip, Tuki bought a piano arrangement copy of the book that Aunt Martha was playing from. When we were planning our wedding, Tuki decided that we would have the choir sing the Wagner arrangement of "Seek Ye First" for the entrance of the wedding party.

While Richard Wagner's "Bridal Chorus" (also known as "Here Comes the Bride") is commonly played for the entrance of the wedding party, Tuki felt it was overdone, and it was not one of her favorites. The "Bridal Chorus" from the opera *Lohengrin* became popular for this purpose after Victoria the Princess Royal (daughter of Queen Victoria) used it for this purpose in her wedding to Prince Frederick William of Prussia.

So, we rejected a piece by **Wagner** in favor of a piece by **Wagner**. (Note: this visual joke works better when read on the page than when spoken with proper pronunciation.)

As I remember, Ralph was quite happy to order a new piece of music and rehearse the choir for the wedding, but we would need to pay for the music purchase. That seemed quite reasonable to us, so we purchased the music. Just before the wedding, as the choir was learning Wagner's arrangement of "Seek Ye First", Tuki and I got to sing through it a few times, but not enough to get proficient.

The Wedding of Russ Erb and Satoka Hanaoka, 25 Aug 2012

At the wedding, the Lancaster United Methodist Church Chancel Choir sang "Seek Ye First", directed by Ralph Williams and accompanied by Mary Zimmerman.



Sopranos

Cyndi Christensen
Melinda Hunter
Jane Van Howling (coming out of retirement)
Helen Jones
Ginny Bretz
(Satoka Hanaoka was in the ceremony)

Altos

Angela Williams
Martha Minnicks
Susan Reyes
Vicki Fisher
Addie Stokes
Joan Evans

Tenors

David Wright
Tony Disney (on loan from the Bass section)
(Charlie Jones and Russ Erb were in the ceremony)

Basses

Steve McDougall
John Perry
Fred Bush
Chuck Luker
Claud Seal
Dick Perry

At the appropriate time, Mary played and the Choir sang “Seek Ye First”. As expected, the choir did a great job. However, the procession was going slow. Being somewhat familiar with the anthem, I realized that the choir was on the final verse and Tuki hadn’t appeared. Tuki realized the same thing and was in the foyer telling Ellen Eslick to open the door and let her in. She finally came in and made it to the front just as the choir finished.

Russ and Tuki’s Anniversary Celebrations

As a result of the wedding, Ralph decided he liked the song, and it fit the choir well. In keeping with his policy of singing familiar anthems in the summer to reduce rehearsal load, in August 2013 I suggested that the choir sing “Seek Ye First” as the anthem in honor of our first anniversary. Ralph liked the idea and we sang it in August 2013. Strangely, everyone in the choir seemed familiar with it except for me and Tuki.

We would continue to reprise Seek Ye First each August until August 2019. In 2020 something happened that threw off the choir’s usual routine.

Bonus Facts

While Aunt Martha was playing the organ for us, Tuki was doing what any card-carrying millennial would do—she was video recording it on her iPhone. Martha had been playing for some time when she finally realized that Tuki was recording our “rehearsal” session. Martha immediately said to Tuki “I better not find that on YouTube!” Interestingly, Martha did not tell Tuki to stop.

Aunt Martha would pass away eight years later in 2019. After the memorial service, one of her three sons (my cousins) would mention that her playing the organ was something that was so common to them that they had never bothered to make a recording, audio or video, of her playing. Thanks to Tuki, we were able to present them with the only known videos of their mother playing the organ. Consider what are the important things in your life that are so common you don’t think about them? Make the effort to record them. The “Tales From the Choir Loft” series is an effort to record those shared stories of our choir before they are lost.

Since the first time Tuki met my family was at my mother’s memorial service, it is obvious that she never got to meet my Mom. As her sister, Aunt Martha was the most similar person to my Mom, and clearly knew her as well or better as my Dad. Tuki bonded with Aunt Martha very quickly, and sure had a lot of fun with her. My Aunt Martha briefly was the Mom that Tuki had always wished she had.

- Russ Erb