Praying in Music

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I first sang sacred music in a country church in Greenburr, PA. Hymns were the only music there. Each hymn ended with an “Amen” that followed upon the last note and word of the hymn. I thought nothing of this amen. It was “normal”, unremarkable. But the practice has become remarkable to me in my time spent in St. Matthew’s Parish Choir. Noting the absence of a hymn amen in the Episcopal Hymnal coincided with an understanding of my prayer life.

I have always struggled with praying in words. My flitting mind allows for back talk when I pray in words. It might go like this: “Our Father in heaven. [Wonder when they got rid of “art”. “Art reminds me of “ain’t”. “Our Father who ain’t in heaven” ? NO!] “Hallowed be Thy name”. [Wonder why they didn’t change “hallowed” when they changed “art”.] . . . . “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”. [GAIL, when have you ever forgiven. Do you have a clue about what that means?] Well, you get the idea.

About midway in my time in our Parish Choir I suddenly realized that we were singing prayers

--in the service music, in the anthems, and in the HYMNS without the amens. A hymn is a prayer. My childhood church singing of an ending amen meant that! Every hymn is a prayer, with or without an amen! In this musical prayer practice there is no opportunity to indulge back talk. The words flow with the notes in tempo and rhythm, with instruments and all other singers in church, with a director, sometimes accompanied, sometimes *a cappella*—all sometimes quite speedy or tricky. This praying in song is communal; individual offerings happen by accident except for the rare solo. We just roll along. We pray without self-doubt, my specialty, or any other verbal intrusions. And I believe we pray during the week when we re-sing hymns or service music or parts of anthems—whatever still resonates with us in the week between Sunday services and accompanies whatever we are doing. I do not believe this is mindless praying. For me, it lends sanctity to mundane matters. Amen.