



ODB Artist Portrait:
The Music of Ken Turley

-an interview with ODB's Rev. Thom Muller-



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Rev. Ken Turley, now retired after 30 years as parish minister and serving as president of Convention, and his wife Laurie, live in Bridgton, ME.

While she continues her career as a public school music teacher, Ken devotes his time to composing music, producing music videos, gardening and keeping house.

Performing and rehearsing have ground to a halt with the isolation required by the virus, but the more solitary aspects of his life continue unabated.

Q: How long have you been making music, Ken? What was it that initially drew you to it? How has your work evolved over the years?

I still have memories of singing folk songs and spirituals in first grade. My favorite song was “Goober Peas.” And I still have a deep affection for spirituals, probably why, as a teenager, I was so into Motown and could not stand Bub-blegum music. In fourth grade some people came into our classroom and demonstrated string instruments and we were offered the opportunity to learn. I chose the violin and once a

week got to leave class to play in our elementary school orchestra.

I switched to cello in 7th grade and then string bass which I played all through High school. I actually got a small scholarship to play in college. But it was there that I discovered the guitar and, of course, rock'n'roll. Started my first band the next year playing bass and I've been playing ever since. Wrote my first song at age 18 and have continued to write songs to this day. Somewhere over 300 at this point. I love and have played all kinds of music over the years, going in and out of various phases, but the important genres have been classical guitar, free form jazz rock improvisation, Blues and singer-songwriters. I do have an undergraduate degree in music and my masters from SSR was focused on theology and the performing arts. The most pivotal experience was playing in two different productions of Godspell.

Growing tired of serenading people in bars who weren't listening, I realized that contemporary music could convey a sacred message and that brought me from the West Coast to Boston with the idea of becoming a church musician. Even though Godspell and Jesus Christ Superstar were all the rage and the Catholic Folk Mass was well established, no college would accept me as a church musician because I did not play keyboard. So I became a minister who played music.

Seminary and 30 years as a pastor focused my musical efforts into the church. I wrote a rock oratorio called "Revelation" and with the help of the church, performed and recorded it. Laurie and I wrote three Sunday school musicals which are available if anyone is interested. And I've set 20 or so Psalms to music.

As chair of the Committee on Worship for many years, a number of us collaborated on producing three volumes of *Songs for the Journey*, a collection of folk, spirituals and contemporary songs for worship. I was also instrumental in organizing and providing music for the annual Convention sessions for many years. In retirement I

have returned to my classical roots and have devoted myself to composing, primarily instrumental music but I continue to write songs as well.

My website, www.turleymusic.com and Youtube channel under my name have most of my compositions and a growing number of musical meditational videos which you can grab the links to and use as you will.

Q: What have been some of your major influences musically?

Out of my love of music, I got into teaching and attended countless concerts and rock festivals. In both cases I saw music bring people together and lift spirits into joy. Music in its intended sense is collaborative, cooperative and reciprocally beneficial and I found peace and purpose in that. I have been influenced in one way or another by every piece of music I've ever heard and listing that would be a never ending process. But two pieces of music that I consider milestones in my musical evolution are "The Fool" by Quicksilver Messenger Service and the String Quartet by Maurice Ravel. Beyond that, Baroque and Blues, Popular and Classical, and musicians who do it for the love without all the hype and glamour are my guiding influences to this day.

Q: What role does music play in your spirituality and ministry?

Music was essential to my work as a pastor, and today music IS my ministry. With Laurie's help music was a huge part of the life of every church community we built and led. I will confess to some frustration around the lack of understanding or appreciation of music as a ministry in and of itself within the Swedenborgian church. Swedenborg's theology, frankly, has been my saving grace. But it is extremely intellectual, and there are many, many people who would love it but who need

something with a little more feeling and accessibility to draw them into a place where they can then appreciate the theology.

For many people theology is secondary to finding a place in a loving, socially active spiritual community. Good, socially relevant, and emotionally moving music can provide an entry way into the community that just good theology often cannot. To this day, music is a way I can reach people and lift their spirits. Maybe I can influence their thinking, that is why lyrics are and always have been extremely important to me. But first I want to open their hearts and help them feel safe, joyful and connected to the people around them who are sharing in the musical experience. To this day, that is my ultimate purpose in making music.

Q: Has your Swedenborgianism influenced your music and creative process?

There is absolutely nothing about me that has not been influenced by my Swedenborgianism. I think and see everything and everyone in terms of the process of spiritual regeneration. I see correspondences in everything around me, and most especially in nature. I am able to accept and honor the diversity in life because I see it as an essential part of the beauty and richness of God's evolving creation. I try, not always successfully, to engage challenges and difficulties as an opportunity to grow in spiritual strength and integrity. And I see every moment as an opportunity and a responsibility to exercise the freedom of choice found in the equilibrium between the influences and invitations of Heaven and Hell. Music has been my life-long companion and practice and, for better or worse, more than anything else it is where I experience myself most open to and closest to God.

Q: You have recently worked on a series of musical pieces called “*The Oratorio on the Book of Revelation*”. Could you share about this project and what inspired you to undertake this composition?

The *Oratorio on the Book of Revelation* is to this day one of the best things that has ever come into being through me. I recently made a music video on one of the songs from the ending in hopes that it would remind people that however dark things may seem in any given moment, there is hope for a resurrection into the light and love of God. The Holy City is the metaphor for that community of loving and like-minded souls where each of us will feel most at home. I am hoping to do more of those and make them available in my remaining years.

I have written a number of pieces for orchestra and larger combinations of musicians, and that is really fun. Like painting with a huge canvas and an unlimited number of kinds of brushes and of colors of paint. But getting those performed is, well shall we say problematic on a number of scores. (No pun intended) And “usefulness” is an important concept for me. (Yes, another Swedenborgian influence I cannot escape.) So lately I have been concentrating on writing for classical guitar and solo voice or instrument.

I’m in the process of getting a song cycle for guitar and voice recorded. As well as the ten, well eleven as of yesterday, Sonatas for guitar and solo instruments. A number of these I have put photo-videos to and are posted on Youtube, along with some trios from a live concert recording. When I get those recorded and posted then I’ll start on the nine or so trios with guitar and two other instruments, and then there’s a number of quartets and one piece for guitar and string quartet. If I get that far I’ll start in on my chamber pieces for various combinations of instruments and the ten suites for chamber orchestra.

Our current situation has forced me, willingly, into learning the technology of sharing tracks and recording them remotely and then mixing them together with my computer software. Its been a steep learning curve, but I'm definitely making progress. At this point I'm only constrained by time and the finances to pay good musicians what they deserve for their work in learning and recording my compositions.

I will confess, what I am not good at is self-promotion and fund raising. So let me practice that a little: our CDs of original songs sung by Laurie and each of the individual songs are available at CDBaby.com or on iTunes. I have a bunch of copies of the Sunday school musicals, "Christmas 2000" which is a contemporary setting of the Christmas story with favorite carols arranged in contemporary style; "Song of Spring" which is a folk music telling of the Johnny Appleseed story; and "Sam and Dee", which is for a more mature audience and reimagining of the story of Samson and Delilah. If anyone is willing to pay postage and printing for scripts and scores, I am happy to give them away and get the CDs off my shelf! Also a number of my Psalm settings and a couple of the songs from Revelation are available in sheet music form at www.SheetMusicPlus.com . You can hear them there before you buy. Continuing in the spirit of self-promotion: if some one would like to commission me to compose something on a specific theme, I'm pretty reasonable but I don't work fast, so please plan ahead.