



Program Note

After a fruitful discussion, Trinity Wall Street ultimately declined to publish our program note for Untie That Knot. We have printed it here so that you might gain greater insight into the thinking and creative process underpinning this concert. We hope to spark good-faith discussions about the institutions and forces shaping all our lives. Enjoy this afternoon's concert, and we hope to chat with you after the show!

Christianity is, at its root, inherently queer – certainly in a political sense. Jesus was an outsider who surrounded himself with other outsiders – sex workers, tax collectors, “sinners” of all stripes – and preached communitarian mutual aid and radical forgiveness as substitutes for status-seeking and performative moral uprightness. I can imagine a new Last Supper now, Jesus’ modern disciples a mix of undocumented immigrants and trans femme camgirls and Black single mothers – all the people our society has taught us to dismiss, oppress, and worse.

I also struggle to think of an institution in Western history that has done more to alienate and traumatize queer people than Christianity. The Church’s constraints on and proscriptions against bodily autonomy for women and queer people (among many others) have been instruments of subjugation for centuries, ways of cultivating the insider/outsider mentality against which Jesus railed incessantly. These tools of control have enabled the accumulation of outrageous wealth and power, defying Jesus’ own repeated cautions against wealth-building as a worthy project. This accumulation in turn enabled greater demand for conformity and crueler punishments for those who dared to show their differences or express dissent. Fundamentalist Christianity in America has led the movements against abortion rights, against trans people’s freedom of gender expression, and against gay marriage worldwide – all of which have reintensified this year. I acknowledge and appreciate Trinity Wall Street’s numerous programs working to counteract some of these historical oppressions, including Pride 365, and for the many other parishes around the country undertaking such work. However, the centuries of harm, and the resulting mistrust of Christian institutions by many LGBTQ+ people, remain – and will take decades of difficult conversations rooted in honesty and building mutual trust to heal.

And yet... as a classical singer and lover of the arts, Christianity permeates nearly every facet of my professional life, something about which I often feel conflicted. So much of my favorite music to sing, and indeed some of the music on this program, was written centuries ago for use in worship, and I find so many of Jesus’ teachings deeply resonant in my life, and urgently needed in our society. The Church was the original funder of publicly-available art music, and the presence of powerful music and ritual in services I have sung has brought me – and many others – joy and consolation, regardless of one’s degree of belief in the Church’s doctrine. Moreover, Christianity has known for a millennium what neuroscientists have only begun to understand in the last twenty years: communal music-making has the power to bind people together on a physiological level, building emotionally-grounded communities in ways that language cannot. Tragically, the Church has too often chosen to take advantage of this phenomenon, profiting from the labor of often-queer musicians to strengthen its communities of believers... which it then turns against those same individuals to consolidate its own power.

I’ve struggled for nearly two decades to understand my place in Christian institutions, and to reconcile my participation in their aggrandizement. This concert is, in one sense, about that journey: from the realization of my own outsider status to the exploration of a more joyful, empowered connection with the metaphysical. My spirituality rejects the boundaries of Christian doctrine while aligning with many of Jesus’ messages to us: practice radical welcome, forgive instead of retaliating, question institutions’ motives aloud when they seem to stray from their values. However, it’s also an attempt to empathize with people who find themselves trapped, in one way or another, by Christianity’s constraints. In a system built over centuries to control how we are allowed to love, to minimize the agency we might exert over our own bodies, self-expression is a radical act. ChamberQUEER’s other co-founders and I have had many conversations about what it means to “queer” Christianity; the presence of figures throughout the tradition striving to be more fully themselves gives us confidence in our place in a lineage of artists seeking to hold the Church to account, to encourage it to better live out its own professed values.

–Brian Mummert