

Hymn writer Marissa Hall takes on choir camp

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A few times a week, organist Marissa Hall quietly slips into the empty First Presbyterian Church of Tallahassee. She washes her hands, sanitizes the keys and lets the music flow freely. She's grateful for Michael Corzine, her first organ teacher and the church's choirmaster, for allowing her to use the space during these quarantined months.

Hall records offerings for churches in Boston; she works as the director of mu-

sic and organist at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Cambridge and the music and worship administrator for Trinity Church in Copley Square. She left the city back in March after the pandemic struck to be with her parents in Tallahassee.

Although she misses the feeling of surrender she gets from a live service, she's grateful for virtual opportunities and the ability to return to St. John's Episcopal Church where she attended services as a Florida State University student and was an intern under long-time mentor and director of music, Be-

tsy Calhoun.

Hall and Calhoun are the co-organizers for St. John's Summer Choir Camp which starts June 15 via Zoom, an online meeting platform.

"When we envisioned this camp a few years ago, we wanted to recruit more children who wanted an outlet for music," says Hall. "Our hope is this camp might start to blossom into a program that is year-round and be able to serve even more children who want the opportunity to sing."

Hall's musical inclinations on the piano were nurtured at a young age,

though she lost interest around age 10. She started at FSU as a film student, but after meeting Calhoun, she was inspired once again to return to the keys. Hall studied intensively with Corzine, and eventually graduated from the FSU College of Music where she trained under organ professor Dr. Iain Quinn.

She went on to earn her master's in sacred music from Boston University before starting her career as a music administrator and organist. The highlight of her week was working with the

See HALL, Page 2C

Hall

Continued from Page 1C

children's choir program and leading them through worship services every Sunday morning.

"It was the power of music in worship that drew me in," reflects Hall. "It has this power to change people and inspire them to live beyond their normal lives. Having that combination of beautiful music in a sacred space and a service-oriented environment is amazing."

Hall is an avid lover and writer of hymns. She looks to Church of England composers like Charles Stanford and Herbert Howells for inspiration when she writes, and often revisits recognizable tunes and anthems on the organ to set the prose.

She'll swirl around ideas and search for rhyming words to fit a specific theme or passage of scripture. Recently, she created a hymn for COVID-19 which will eventually be performed in Boston. Its final stanza beckons listeners to "be still and know we have our labors and vocations to fulfill," and that a higher love and compassion will "bind us to each other even when we must be apart."

"I love that hymns are so accessible, and it is something people can take with them," says Hall. "Because the hymns are set to music, they have this amazing foothold in our memories. It's important we take them seriously because it's the theology that people remember and

If you go

What: St. John's Summer Choir Camp

When: 10 a.m.-noon, June 15-19

Where: Zoom

Cost: \$50 per child

Contact: For more information, please call 850-222-2636 or visit <https://www.saint-john.org/outreach/music/summer-choir-camp/>.

sing to themselves when they hear an earworm on Sunday mornings."

More than the experience of live music, Hall misses the togetherness of leading her children's choirs. She is proud of the Episcopal Church's long-standing tradition of having children lead services in song. Hall says her students take this responsibility seriously and are always willing to rise to a challenge. She admires their lack of inhibitions and willingness to try anything.

Hall recalls a recent trip to England where the group had the opportunity to sing in the historic Wells Cathedral which dates back to the 12th century. Though they did not know what they would be asked to sing beforehand, Hall said one child brought his favorite sheet music with him. He was delighted to find out that was the chosen song for the day, and during the service, she looked over to see tears streaming down his face.

"It meant so much to him to hear this



Organist Marissa Hall is co-organizer for St. John's Summer Choir Camp

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hymn in this beautiful cathedral," says Hall. "Trusting children with this monumental and important task is so life giving and worth it as they become passionate about so many musical pieces. I'm always happy to answer their questions and get their opinions because they have a voice that is not only beautiful in worship but deserves to be heard in rehearsal as well."

Hall is proud to continue this mission

in the focus for St. John's Summer Choir Camp this year.

She says campers will have the opportunity not only breathe and sing together, but also open new pathways to their creative expression for two hours each day.

Thanks to the virtual setting, she is excited to have colleagues from Boston joining as faculty, including Nora Burgard as a singing instructor and Trinity's Richard Webster as a guest in composition. Local musicians Zlatina Staykova will teach music theory and FSU's Dr. Gregory Springer will provide classes in music history.

Hall hopes children in the Tallahassee area and throughout Florida will register for this unique opportunity to come together as a virtual choir. She and Calhoun have stretched their imaginations with how to use the Zoom platform and enrich the program with a variety of voices.

"It's challenging us to do our vocations in new ways," says Hall. "We still have a community who wants to sing and it's our job as leaders in music to make that happen right now. We're encouraging students to create music where they are and find ways to tap into their creative energy. I'm excited to see what might get unlocked for them when they realize they have something to say."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).