



**2020–2021
Book Club
Participant
Guide**

***Book 1:
The Gift of Song
by Alice Parker***



Thank you for participating in a GIA book club. We hope you enjoy the book and the experience of discussing it with others. This downloadable guide provides questions for guided reading and space to make notes as you read. Keep it handy during your book club meeting to easily recall reactions, ideas, and questions you thought of while reading.

Happy reading!



Background Information: Author Biography

Composer, conductor and teacher Alice Parker has devoted her life to vocal music. Her more than 500 published compositions include operas and cantatas, song cycles and choral suites, anthems and children's songs. She has conducted performances and workshops over much of the United States and Canada for more than fifty years, and introduced thousands of students to communicative singing. The SINGS, which gather people together for spontaneous improvisation, are perhaps her most distinctive contribution to group music-making.

In 1985 she founded Melodious Accord, Inc., which sponsors workshops that are gathering places for individuals curious about the nature of song. Seventeen CDs of her music are available through their website. Her books include essays on Melody, Counterpoint and Church Music, as well as a hymnal celebrating poets and composers. She holds seven Honorary Doctorates and numerous awards from professional organizations. At her home in western Massachusetts, she continues to write and teach. For further information about her work, see www.melodiousaccord.org.



Background Information: The SINGS

SINGS led by Alice Parker have delighted groups all over the United States and Canada since she started leading this kind of program forty years ago. Begun as an introduction to her Writing for Voices classes, the concept grew to include church congregations and choirs, then people of all ages and backgrounds who wish to sing together. The music can be sacred or secular. It is sung with no accompaniment but what the singers can provide with their own voices and imagination.

The unique feature of these SINGS is their high musical accomplishment—the sheer beauty and communicative power of the singing. Yes, they are open to anyone, regardless of age. There is no need to read music: the teaching is done by rote. Some songs are old favorites and some totally unfamiliar. The atmosphere is one of delight in joining in music-making, and of ease in creating varied sounds.

The focus is on melody—that which can be sung by one voice, that miraculous combination of words, rhythms and pitches. Ms. Parker teaches by demonstration, ‘lining out’ the melody so that what the listener learns is a totally convincing, musically satisfying song. The group repeats each phrase, listening for ever more-subtle inflections, until the mood and sound of that melody are established. Then the group is invited to improvise a setting according to brief suggestions made by the leader: can you echo, make a round, try an ostinato, or harmonize?

The comment heard most frequently at the end of such a session is “That was such fun!” The singers have participated in a wonderfully creative game which both unites the group and releases its potential as each person joins in ‘melodious accord’.



Record General Thoughts about the Book

- What was your favorite part of the book?

- What was your least favorite part of the book?

- Did any ideas, themes, or stories stick with you?

- Did you reread any passages? If so, which ones?



- Did your opinion about the book change or your opinion about an idea change as you read?
- Do you think this is a book you will remember in a few months or years? Why or why not?
- Would you consider re-reading this book? Why or why not?
- What surprised you about the book?
- What question(s) do you have for the author?



Digging Deeper into the Text

Read page 7. What do songs or singing mean to you?

Read page 8. Are there hymns or folksongs you that take you right back to your childhood? Songs you know by heart?

What are your thoughts or feelings regarding Alice's idea on page 10:

"They were all so immersed in the page that they had forgotten how to listen. One student told me, 'I didn't realize there was anything to listen for except correctness.'" In your opinion, what else is there to listen for besides correctness?



On the copyright page there is information about the artwork used throughout the book:

Photos from Urformen der Kunst (Archetypes of Art, 1928) by Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932), master of macrophotography, magnifying specimens of flora up to 30 times. Though he was a lecturer at the School of the Royal Museum of Arts and Crafts, Blossfeldt had no formal training as a photographer, using homemade cameras and lenses to capture his subjects.

After reading about the artwork, how might it relate to the text?

Read page 16. "The truth is: Music starts as free as a birdcall. We try to notate it, to impose order on it, but it continually struggles to regain its freedom."

Do you agree with Alice's statement? Why or why not?



Read page 18. "There is no separation here between music and dance, between tone and action." Do you agree with Alice's statement? Why or why not?

Read the top of page 20. If you have ever written a piece of music, what are your feelings on what should come first – the words or the music?

Read page 21. When looking at new music (for singing), do you personally read the text first or go right for the music? As church musicians, do you think this should or could make a difference? What difference might it make to a cantor?



Read pages 25-26. Begin with "The leader..." and continue through the end of the chapter. Share a particular moment when you felt this transcendence that Alice describes while singing in a group.

After reading the description of "SINGS" in the introduction to this packet and the chapter "SINGS" beginning on page 35, how do you think we could encourage more singing from the congregation once COVID restrictions are lifted?



Read page 39. "A friend watching me work with a group of new song-leaders asked me 'Do you know what you are teaching?' Amused, I said, 'No. What is it?' And she replied, 'You're teaching them to listen.'"

If we learn to listen better as singers, what are the wider implications?

Begin reading at the bottom of page 41. "Realize again..." through the middle of 42 "...own possibilities."

What is the "power of music" to you?



In Alice's "Summing Up" chapter (p.45-48), she writes about "factors that seem to challenge the way we hear." Do you agree or disagree with her with regard to these factors?

Other notes and ideas:



In Summary

Would you recommend this book to others? Why or why not?

What are some ideas or questions arising from this book that might affect your group when you return to our regular group meetings?

Did you enjoy this book? Why or why not?



Page for notes during the book club meeting



Page for notes during the book club meeting