

This whimsical fable imaginatively re-casts the Gospel story of God's love affair with all of creation, capturing the imagination and challenging the mind with its glimpse of God's breathtaking vision for the world.

## **The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure**

By Robert Gottfried

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# *The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure*

A FABLE



ROBERT GOTTFRIED

ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

PRAISE FOR ROBERT GOTTFRIED'S

# *The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure*

With creative ingenuity, Robert Gottfried has re-told the Gospel story. The imagination at play on these pages—expressed in words and evocative images—gives us a fresh way to understand the meaning of Christian faith. If God were inviting each of us to add our voice to the music of the universe, what song would we sing? What opposition would we meet? What companionship would we find? Let the music begin!

—Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Missioner for Creation Care  
(Episcopal Diocese of Western Mass. & Southern New England  
Conference, United Church of Christ) and co-editor, *Rooted and  
Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis*

What a lovely story! Gottfried's exuberance for life and creation jumps off of the page and I know readers will find themselves swept up in this timeless tale.

—Jill Phillips, singer-songwriter

The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure by Robert Gottfried is a rarity, a theological meditation that is in the form of an allegorical novel. Gottfried begins before the Beginning, with an eternal jazz trio. The real heart of the allegory, though, is Music itself, and as the brief novel unfolds the question rises in our hearts—what is this Music?

The answer, for me, is what I call “overflowing love.” Gottfried, who heads an environmental theology center at the University of the South, helps us understand that overflowing love, the Music of the Cosmos, is in everything—rocks, trees, you and me. The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure is a winsome, highly readable way to become a musician yourself, a way to join the “mighty chorus which the morning stars began,” and help both ourselves and the whole creation heal.

—The Rt. Rev. Dr. Marc Andrus,  
Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California

What if creation were sung into existence by an ensemble of magical creatures? In this whimsical and beautifully illustrated origins story, Robert Gottfried offers us a musical fable about how we came to be and our likely destiny. A delight to savor, this lyrical work of art is highly recommended for all readers.

—Mark Wallace, Professor of Religion, Swarthmore College

Most of us are drawn instinctively to music, but this readable book invites a different kind of response. By portraying God in the guise of a musical ensemble which invites creatures into a performance, the profound significance of salvation for all created beings starts to make sense. This is a book that will amuse, encourage and also challenge those who are curious enough to read on.

—Celia Deane-Drummond, director, Laudato Si’  
Research Institute, Campion Hall, University of Oxford

This book made me slow down and engaged me more than anything I have read in years. This “Audacious” fable made me think deeper than I have in quite some time. Sometimes we hear or read a story so many times that it becomes atonal. Let’s face it: We all tune out stories after hearing a story “too many times”. So, change the characters. Change the setting. A new Fable tweaks the old story and creates something new: Ears for listeners who had gone deaf. Slower reading. More attention to

detail. New perspectives that open eyes. A Great Awakening. A new way to imagine the Old Story. May this have the same effect on others!

—Jim Davidson, retired businessperson actively working for over 25 years on creation care ethics and climate change

“Audacious Adventure” is an imaginative illustration of the Trinity and the joyous good news of Jesus. The author’s allegory describes the triune God as a jazz trio, sharing their infinitely hospitable Music (an image for kingdom come) with all of creation. When a member of the trio becomes incarnate “stuff,” simply everyone and everything is invited to take part in the “jam.” It’s a memorable picture of the joyful invitation we’ve been given to be part of making all creation sing.

—Jenna Henderson, assistant director, A Rocha USA

This book is not to be missed! It “sings” with joy and will have your spirit singing, too! God, humans, creatures, and all creation eventually join in a great musical “jam session” that changes lives and will uplift yours through the reading of this delightful, deep, yet totally understandable tale. I highly recommend *The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure*.

—Connie Hanson, director, Christians Caring for Creation

The first disciples of Jesus spread the Gospel through storytelling: recounting how their experience of Jesus had changed their lives. Robert Gottfried’s *The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure: A Fable* is rooted squarely in this tradition. It invites us into the experience of Jesus, an experience known primarily as relationship. Gottfried’s “Fable” engages, challenges, comforts and provokes — just as the Gospel does. We come away from it hearing the music of Christ more clearly and even learning to play it more adeptly ourselves.

—Philip Johnson, deacon, Roman Catholic Diocese of Nashville

When I started reading *The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure* I could not stop. This amazing story translates the gospel into the creation inclusion nature of redemptive faith. I surely recommend the book.

—The Rev. Dr. Owen Owens, co-chair,  
National Religious Coalition on Creation Care

In the tradition of Calvin Miller's "The Singer" Robert Gottfried weaves a tale with elements of music as the central characters into a redemptive story.

—Michael Card, faith-based musician, author, and teacher

We are in desperate need of new ways of seeing the Sacred as deeply woven into, and in participatory relationship with, creation and Robert Gottfried's charming fable with original illustrations presents one such viewpoint. Here he presents the Christian themes of a Trinitarian God, incarnation, new life, and enlivened community through an all-inclusive, ecological tale using music and rhythm as allegories of divine presence and indwelling Spirit.

—Sheri D. Kling, Ph.D., theologian, educator,  
and founder of [deeperrhythm.net](http://deeperrhythm.net).

Robert Gottfried's new, classic fable brings the story of music to life. Woven together with sparse, watercolor illustrations, *The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure* sparks the imagination through these characters, drawing out the song we each hold inside of us.

—Sandra McCracken, singer and songwriter

*The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure* is a delightful, hopeful and affirming retelling of the Christian gospel story. This is a high-energy narrative about diversity, harmony, belonging, listening. Here is the score for the symphony of creation, animated by characters finding their instrument, their voice, their purpose as they participate fully in the jazz orchestra of life. Gottfried's song of ascents prompts even the tone deaf to tap their foot in syncopated rhythm, cheering for the young musicians



to set the whole world humming along. For book clubs or individuals who want to explore the ideas expressed in the book, the discussion guide promises to invoke further insights and joyous discussion. Get them both and be renewed!

—Richard Nisbett, community ecologist/anthropologist;  
moderator, Iona Community Whole Creation Network

This book evokes Rilke's "never rushing or holding back — flow free," inspiring the reader to get beyond one's sour notes in a myriad of ways. Page after page I learned how music inspires.

—Joyce Wilding, Third Order Franciscan,  
Science & Religion Consultant

They say that good things come in small packages, and Robert Gottfried's beautiful fable certainly fits the bill. In this joyful retelling of the sacred Gospel story, illustrated with the author's whimsical drawings, the Home Jazz Trio (a.k.a. the Holy Trinity) engages all who are willing to participate in glorious, ebullient, if somewhat unruly jam sessions, making Music that none had ever dreamed possible. This inspiring tale, written by a deeply spiritual environmentalist and talented musician who himself has overseen many musical jam sessions, is one that you will return to again and again. Not only will it renew and refresh you. It will bolster your faith in yourself, in humanity, and in our Creator.

—Mary Priestley, naturalist, author, and conservationist

This is like a melody you've heard before—but never in this key. A story you think you know—but not quite like this. One thing is sure, once you start you won't be able to put it down.

—Christopher Bryan, author of *Siding Star* and *Peacekeeper*.

Robert Gottfried pens a delightful retelling of the essence of the love that is at the heart of the Christian story. And, he points to a deep truth: that in the midst of a culture that tells us we are separate from the rest of the natural world that there is music, song, and dance in which all of us

can and do participate, if we but just open our hearts to the beauty and mystery all around us.

—Michael Schut, editor of *Simpler Living*, *Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective*, *Food and Faith*, and *Money and Faith*.  
Author of *Simpler Living's* community building study guide



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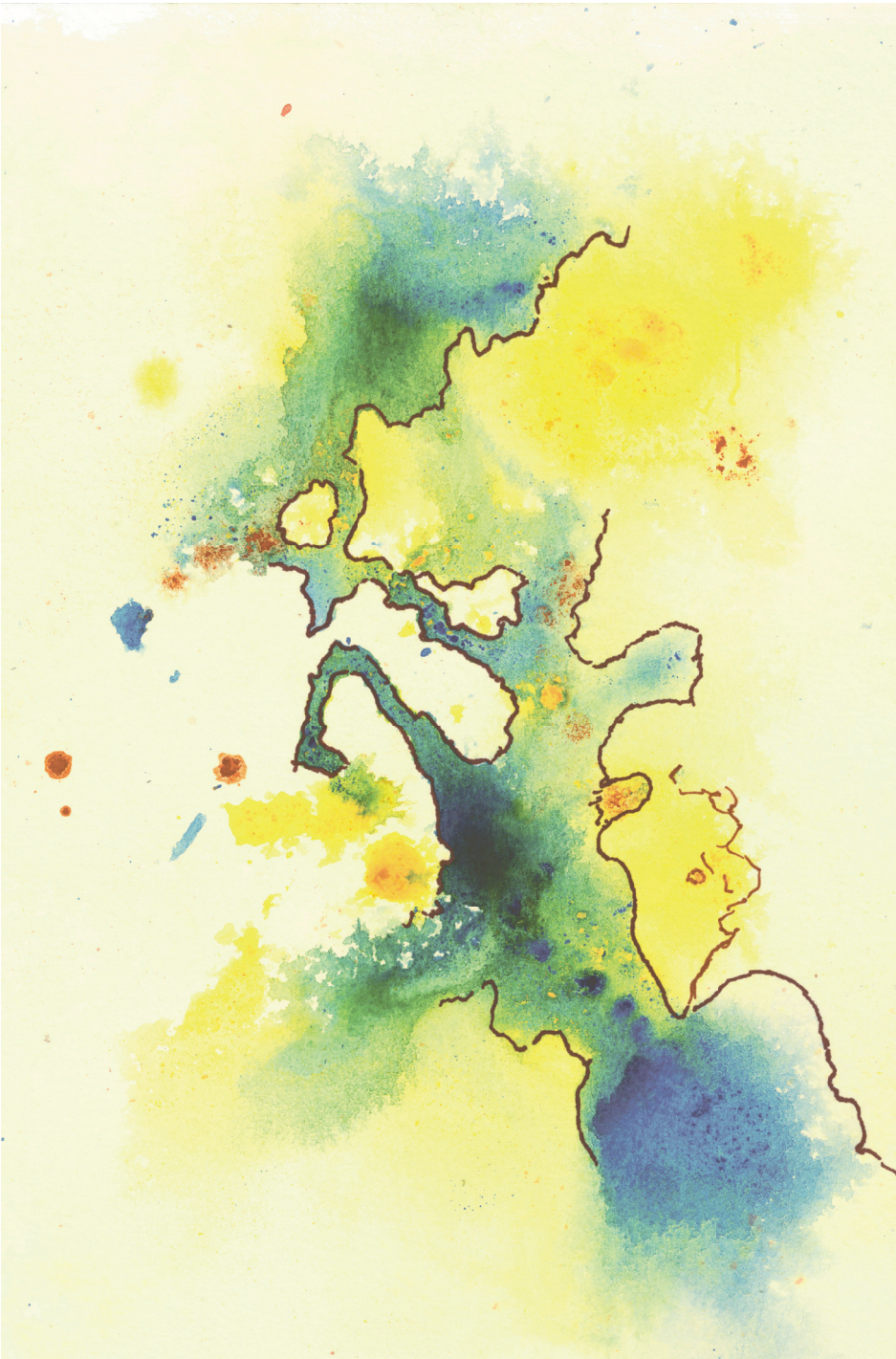
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Acknowledgements



# *The Trio*

The story begins with The Music. It can't start with "Once upon a time..." because time hadn't begun yet. The music, however, had been going on forever. And oh, what music. This music only resembled what we think of when we hear that word. It could transport listeners to places they never knew existed, to totally new planes of existence.

The Home Jazz Trio—a bassist, singer, and drummer—had been playing together forever. If there had been a hall, their music would have lit it up, dancing about like sparks off those big old crystal globes that used to hang in ballrooms. If you had been there, you just would have had to jump up and start dancing. Your body would have started to sway, your toe would have started tapping, and soon you'd have been off doing the two-step or whatever struck your fancy. Music moving through you, in you, between you and those around you. Everyone swaying to the rhythm, singing along, swept up in the tidal wave of melody. However, no one but the Trio was around.

Each member of the Trio contributed something unique and vital. If it weren't for the bass player, the one the other two affectionately called "Big Bass," there'd have been no Music, for the bassist provided the trio with its unending stream of new ideas. It's where the Music started. You could even say the bassist was creativity itself.

The singer knew Big Bass so well that he picked up the bassist's ideas with just the slightest change in the bass line and then expressed them, giving them form and substance. When the vocalist sang, you would have suddenly heard ideas that had no words but that ran far deeper than words

ever could express. It would have said what you had always known to be true. Singer made Big Bass' ideas real.

Then there was the drummer. Drummer held the trio together with undulating, pulsating rhythms that just called ideas out of Big Bass and drove Singer to give them life. Drummer never called attention to herself, delighting rather in animating her colleagues, inspiring them to listen and respond to one another, to work as a tightly knit community that always went where they hadn't gone before.

You need to keep in mind that this was Music. When you heard it, it was Alive—you didn't hear only a good bass line, melody, and rhythm all feeding off one another—you heard The Song, something far beyond the sum of its parts.

Hearing The Song you could almost see three shapes twirling, intertwining, swirling about responding to each other's movements. The members of the trio in many ways *were* the weaving in and out of the bass line, melody and rhythm, each part in a way formed by its listening and responding to the others. Leaping totally into the mix, they played with abandon, throwing inhibition out of the proverbial arena and responding with endless delight to what they heard. Call and response. Shout and "Amen!" Never thinking of themselves they lived for Music and for each other. They *were* Music, alive, passionate and unendingly moving. If we saw humans so intensely, selflessly interested in others like this, so full of life, we probably would think they were crazy. But that's what the Home Jazz Trio was like.

Music never kept to a status quo. If they had been there, hearers who liked easy listening music that stayed unobtrusively in the background would have heard insistent melodies and intrusive percussion that got into their faces and demanded that they pay attention. Those addicted to songs with driving rhythms with harsh vocals would have experienced long flowing melodic lines that called them to profound stillness. The serious intellectual sorts would have been invited to jump up and dance the "chicken strut," hopping about to joyful childlike ditties. The thing about Music is that it never left you alone—it met you where you were and challenged you to go someplace new.

But we're talking like there *were* listeners. We've gotten ahead of ourselves.

# *The Rehearsal*

Short Tail, a member of the local squirrel community, found the whole situation intriguing and frustrating at the same time. For awhile now humans had been gathering in the park and making strangely attractive noises. He really liked the sounds. The people also kept putting food on the ground for him to eat but, when he tried to get closer to do so, they made ugly noises and kicked him. Short Tail thought it pretty mean that they enticed him with food and interesting sounds and then hit him when he accepted their invitation.

And then there was One Eye. That mangy yellow-striped cat bit off part of his tail when he hadn't been careful enough. At least Short Tail made him regret it. One Eye carried around a reminder on his face that he shouldn't mess with Short Tail. Unfortunately, One Eye seemed to take it as a special challenge to get back at him whenever possible. So, not only did Short Tail have to deal with kicks from above but he also had to keep an eye out for a mangy cat that kept trying to chase him out of the park. Yet, because of those sounds and food, he kept coming back.

While Short Tail and One Eye fought around his feet, Mutuku Bates sat in rehearsal holding his clarinet and pondering the scene. His seat under the tree offered only a partial reprieve from the stifling heat. In the dry and dusty square the tree hardly offered the amenities that students at the Academy enjoyed. He bet they didn't have to contend with squirrels and cats during their rehearsals. He also suspected that gnats didn't keep diving in their eyes as they attempted to follow the notes on the page. At least the large and sprawling tree offered shade to him and most of his



fellow students. Mutuku sat munching on his sandwich when he wasn't playing because he didn't want to take the time away from rehearsal to go back to the house for lunch. After all, he might miss something. That's why during rehearsals he and the others ate the lunches they brought when they had a few measures of rest.

Neither his parents nor Mutuku, when he was older, could afford to buy a clarinet let alone pay for all the prerequisites to get into the Academy. With seven brothers and sisters his family had no money to spare. So, he knew little about scales, harmonies, counterpoint and all those little niceties the Academy stated were necessary to have under one's belt before beginning to study an instrument. His parents had lacked the resources to send him to school and Mutuku had to work ten or twelve hours a day just to make ends meet.

Life hadn't been easy. He lived at home with his parents and several siblings. Whenever he could, which wasn't often, he would flee to a little garden not far from his lodging where he could soak in the quiet. During these respites he sometimes sensed a profound silence that, without words, spoke deeply to him. Although he did not know what the silence said, he would return home focused and replenished. Unfortunately in those same moments, though, Mutuku also had to confront the dreadful reality that he desperately wanted to learn to play and that nobody would take him on, instrument or no.

That was the world Mutuku inhabited until recently. A few days ago he saw the handbill for the One and All School of Music. Mutuku had never heard of this school before and, evidently, neither had anyone else. It lacked the Academy license and its Director seemingly came out of nowhere and started offering lessons. What initially attracted Mutuku was the price. Evidently you only had to show an interest in music in order to get in. The School offered free tuition and required no prerequisites other than a desire to make music. That fit Mutuku perfectly. All he needed was a clarinet. That had presented the final obstacle.

Now here he sat in rehearsal with Contigo, the Director, patiently trying to hold the group together. This was proving no easy task, given the members of the ensemble.

It wasn't that they lacked enthusiasm. In some ways they had too much. For instance, there was Ho Chen, also known as "Salvo." Salvo played drums—or tried to. If you've ever known someone who periodically bursts out with the most curious comments when you least expect it, you have some sense of Salvo's rhythm. The most charitable members of the ensemble characterized it as "novel and inventive." Others merely grimaced at the thought.

Salvo's approach to percussion grew out of his personal sense of rhythm. He had none. His parents died when he was young and his relatives, while loving, had little time to supervise another child. As recent immigrants they all worked several jobs attempting to earn enough to keep themselves in food, shelter, and clothing. So, Salvo seldom experienced either routine or supervision. If he did, it lasted no more than a few months. As a result, Salvo developed his own personal rhythm of life that consisted largely of responding to whatever impulse struck him at the moment, as it did frequently and intensely, sending him reeling from one thing to another.

Then there was Brenda Sharp. Brenda, a budding soprano, believed that pitch was relative. She held forth that notes on a page provided general guidelines as to whereabouts on the scale one should try to sing. Holding to the probabilistic approach, she felt that if a note went up from the previous note, all you had to do was go up. How much you went up mattered little as long as you did it with great enthusiasm. The same, of course, applied to notes that went down. Brenda heartily believed that gusto trumped pitch any time. Although her colleagues in the course agreed with her in her presence, when the ensemble played and Brenda entered the fray, they hunched down behind their music stands and concentrated on their notes.

Her fellow students never tried to encourage Brenda to stick to a standard notion of pitch because no one ever tried to convince Brenda of anything. As an only child of wealthy Listeners who had tried for years to have a child, Brenda received attention and praise more than sufficient to raise an army of highly fulfilled and self-confident young adults. Because whatever she did was marvelous, she never compared herself to others or



felt the need to find out what others thought or did. This held true for everything she did, but especially when it came to her singing. So, she graciously and enthusiastically offered her voice to the world whenever given the slightest opportunity.

As a whole, however, no one failed to listen better than Gerardo. Gerardo had an unlimited faith in his own ability. Given that he knew he had a better sense than anyone else as to what the music was about and where it had to go, Gerardo played his trumpet as loudly as possible so

that everyone else could take their lead from him and follow along. When they didn't, he had the habit of stopping in mid-phrase and admonishing everyone else that, if they would just listen, the ensemble would tighten up and really start playing music.

Gerardo grew up in a household of athletes—his father had played on an all-star soccer team when he was in school and still shone on the field in the local league. His mother and two brothers excelled at baseball. She coached the local team, which consistently played in the league finals. Then there was Gerardo. Gerardo excelled at being the last person chosen to play on a neighborhood pickup game regardless of whatever they might be playing. When finally chosen, he was assigned the position that held the least probability of harming the team—often right field or 2nd reserve center field. As a result of his unfortunate lack of physical prowess, he always felt on the margin at the dinner table where conversation inevitably revolved around the world of sports, on the margin of the neighborhood gang of kids, and generally on the margin anywhere. So, when he discovered that he could play the trumpet, he decided he would never be on the margin again.

And so it went. Gerardo would boldly proceed where none had gone before, Brenda would hold forth above the boiling mass of notes with great enthusiasm, and Salvo would wander about offering a potpourri of rhythms of varying tempos and genres. Meanwhile, Mutuku and the rest of the group did their best to hit their notes with varying degrees of success.

Despite all this chaos, somehow Mutuku knew he was in the right place. He had never heard music like Contigo's. Contigo had never studied at the Academy. Nevertheless, he could pick up any instrument and master it in no time. When he sang or played, his music moved people in unusual ways. For many it drew them in, expressing a deep longing. It repelled others. It was hard to be indifferent when Contigo played.

The Director himself, however, didn't stand out. Contigo's dark curly hair with complexion to match, brown eyes, thick eyebrows and average height made him blend well into a crowd. Contigo was the poster child for Everyman. So were his clothes. His slightly worn trousers and open shirt

could have served as camouflage in a city crowd. If you didn't know he was the one playing the music or conducting the ensemble, you would pay little attention to him.

Mutuko remembered the first time he met Contigo. He was sitting on a bench across from the hardware store when this stranger started to pass by, stopped when he noticed him, and struck up a conversation. Introducing himself as Contigo, he asked him what his name was, where he was from, who his family was...all the usual starters people around here used. Then he said, "You've always wanted to play clarinet, haven't you? Have you found someone to teach you?" Mutuku had never shared this dream with anyone other than his parents and one brother. So he replied, "How did you know? I haven't told anyone about that." Contigo responded, "Well, I just kind of knew. It shows all over your face. And I guess you can't afford a teacher, right?" It went on from there.

For Mutuku, talking with Contigo even for the first time was like hanging out with his best friend, the one who knew what he was thinking or wanting without ever saying anything. Somehow Contigo knew what was going on inside, including all the things Mutuku most cherished and most regretted, even the things he hoped desperately that nobody would discover. For instance, he somehow knew that Mutuku had a bad habit of stealing small objects from stores, figuring that fingering small things wouldn't hurt anyone. He also knew he was ashamed of how he had bullied his little sister only to have her die when she was only ten. Yet Contigo seemed delighted with Mutuku who somehow felt strangely at home when he was around him. So, when Contigo invited him to join his students saying that he would find him a clarinet and give him lessons for free, and that he would learn a lot about making music if he joined the group, he did. And here he was.

For others, however, Contigo was the stuff of nightmares. Mutuku's uncle, for instance, spent his days as if behind a tall fence, only answering the door knocker and communicating sparsely when absolutely necessary. When someone like his uncle met Contigo, it was like Contigo would walk right through that fence, find his uncle madly trying to bury stolen loot, and then ask him (with a disarmingly huge smile) how he'd

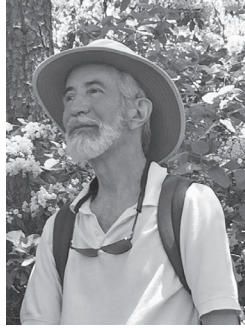
like a glass of cold water or a beer. These people typically responded by desperately trying to repair the fence and shoo Contigo out or by taking a fallen plank with the hopes of beating him with it until he left. It was hard to be complacent around the music teacher.

Contigo amazed Mutuku. Somehow he never seemed nonplussed or put out. With astonishing patience he worked with each person encouraging her and suggesting how she might improve. He complimented the group on the occasional times they sounded somewhat harmonious and always said that they were getting better and would improve as they practiced. He continually called them to something more and his students responded. Contigo welcomed everyone. He even seemed to like having the animals around. The Director constantly urged his students to stop kicking at the squirrel and cat and to welcome them into their midst. So, they tried to kick them when he wasn't looking.

Contigo never allowed anyone to criticize someone who really tried to play. He said that as long as someone truly tried with all their heart that they deserved respect. Yes, they might be able to improve. But Contigo believed that all who sought to play, whatever or whoever they were, deserved to be honored and that eventually all would learn their craft. They might not achieve technical perfection, but they would learn how to touch others' hearts.

On the other hand he had little patience with those who played or sang, even with great proficiency, but who conveyed little in the process and bragged about their prowess. Contigo always encouraged his students to dive deep inside themselves and to tap into what they heard. Practice and technique would help them learn to express the Music they found there and in the process to hear that Music more clearly. In sum, he felt that potential musicians who knew they knew little could grow and ultimately do great things. Those who knew they already knew everything would never progress because they never really knew what music was about. In an effort to wake the latter folks up, Contigo never lost an opportunity to call this to their attention. For some reason, however, the deaf never appreciated being told they didn't have any ears.





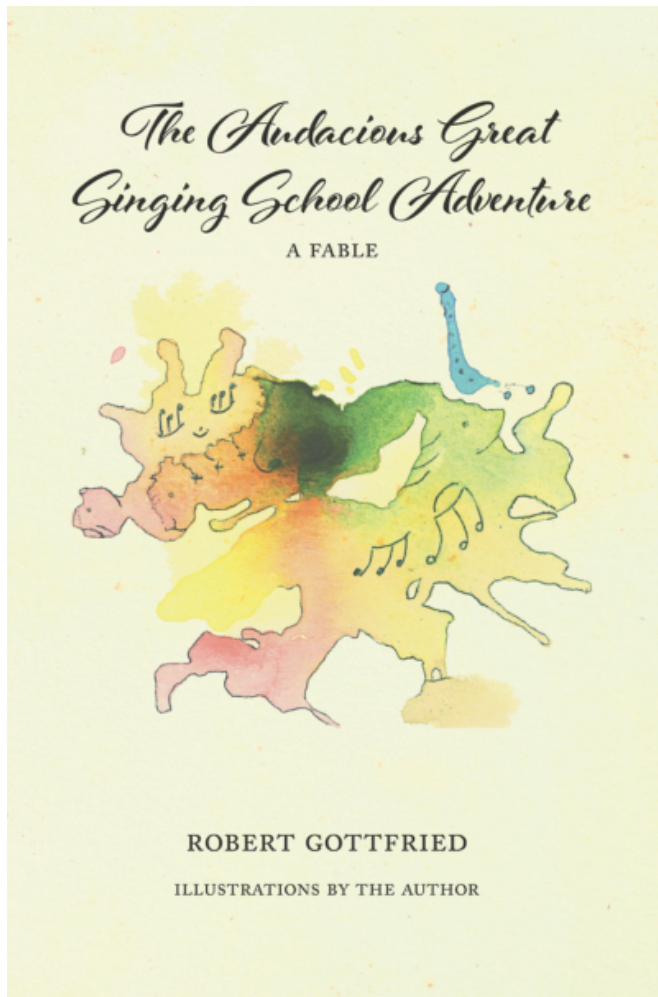
ROBERT GOTTFRIED

## *The Audacious Great Singing School Adventure*

Robert (Robin) Gottfried directs the Center for Religion and Environment of the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, where he is professor emeritus of economics. He has published and taught extensively in the areas of the environment and sustainability, including the intersection of Christianity, economics, ecology, and spirituality. Author of *Living in an Icon: A Program for Growing Closer to Creation and to God* and *Economics, Ecology and the Roots of Western Faith: Perspectives from the Garden*, he enjoys playing and singing Latin American, traditional Appalachian, and classical music with friends. Robin lives on the Cumberland Plateau where he loves to hike with his wife and work in the garden.

*All proceeds from the sale of this book benefit the Center for Religion and Environment of the University of the South.*





This whimsical fable imaginatively re-casts the Gospel story of God's love affair with all of creation, capturing the imagination and challenging the mind with its glimpse of God's breathtaking vision for the world.

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