News



Catholic composer David Haas speaks during a session of the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress on March 24, 2019. (Screenshot from YouTube/RECongress)



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Ali met Catholic composer David Haas when she was 14 years old, attending his Music Ministry Alive camp for three years starting in 2002. She recalled him being a hands-on mentor, remembering names and affirming the talents of the 150-or-so music students who attended the program each summer.

It wasn't until five years later that unwelcome sexual advances tainted the relationship, when Ali and Haas ran into each other at the Religious Education Congress in Los Angeles, Ali told NCR.

Taking her to a more secluded area with benches outside the congress, Haas surprised Ali by "aggressively" kissing her and trying to put his hands down her shirt, she said.

Ali, who was 19 at the time, pulled away and turned down his invitations to his hotel room that night. Several times throughout the years, he'd continue to seek her out when he knew they were at the same event through their professions.

Ali learned only recently that her encounter with Haas was part of a pattern of abusive and manipulative tactics that Haas allegedly deployed on dozens of young people who knew him through the Catholic music community.

NCR spoke with three women, including Ali, who each claim that Haas forced himself on them for a kiss and that they later felt cornered and sought out at conferences or events.

All three have also asked that their real names not be published for fear of retaliation. In this case, NCR learned the names of three women who described unwanted physical advances by Haas, and conducted extensive telephone interviews with each of them. NCR does not publish the names of people alleging sexual abuse without their permission.

According to a May 29 letter from Into Account, a nonprofit that works with and offers support to survivors of sexual and spiritual abuse, multiple unnamed

individuals reported "sexually predatory actions" by Haas. They requested Into Account share its assessment of their experiences with Catholic and church music organizations and publishers, a few archdioceses, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Catholic and ecumenical organizations where Haas had professional involvement.

Haas, a composer of well-known songs in Catholic liturgies, has now been dropped by prominent hymnal publisher GIA Publications, as stories like Ali's have begun to surface.

"Early this year we became aware of allegations of sexual misconduct by David Haas, and we learned the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis was considering a decision not to provide him a letter of suitability," the prominent hymnal publisher wrote in a June 13 Facebook post.

Voicing solidarity with victims, the publisher wrote: "In response, we suspended our sponsorship and publishing relationship with Mr. Haas, and have not sponsored his work since late January."

The St. Paul-Minneapolis Archdiocese released a statement saying the archdiocese has received multiple allegations of sexual misconduct against Haas, and it declined to provide a letter of recommendation that he requested in 2018.

The statement regarding Haas also noted that the archdiocese received a complaint in 1987 that Haas made "unwanted sexual advances toward a young woman."

When asked for a comment, Haas provided a press release denying the allegations and expressing solidarity with sex abuse survivors.

"David Haas denounces Into Account Inc.'s allegations as false, reckless and offensive," the press release says, adding that Into Account gained access to his personal, professional and business contacts to "electronically publish its allegations

and conclusory opinions throughout the United States and beyond," including a reporting form to solicit potential clients, the press release said.

"He is also sad and disappointed that Into Account Inc. chose to use social media — a public forum — to deprive him of a fair and legitimate venue to face his accusers, but instead launched a marketing effort with the mission to destroy his reputation and livelihood."

A key player in the movement for contemporary liturgical music after the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, Haas composed popular songs that can be found in GIA's *Gather* hymnals, including "You Are Mine," "We Are Called," "We Have Been Told" and "Blest Are They."

All who spoke with NCR emphasized that they were older than 18 at the time of their incidents.

But those who have reported inappropriate experiences with the composer, according to Into Account's letter, fear professional retaliation, "and based on what they have reported, we believe those fears to be well-founded."

Professional retaliation

In a June 21 Facebook post, Haas' ex-wife, Jeanne Cotter, said that when she was 16 years old in 1980, she attended his music ministry workshop in her hometown parish. Afterward, he invited her "out for a coke to talk about the presentation," she wrote. He later kissed her in the car of a parking lot, she said. "I felt stupid and awkward and yet really special for getting such intense attention from my mentor and inspiration," Cotter wrote.

When Haas and Cotter were engaged to be married in 1987, the St. Paul-Minneapolis Archdiocese revoked his letter of suitability following a report of sexual misconduct. That year, Cotter said, she became "generally aware" of that allegation by a young college student.

"At that time I couldn't believe the man I was in love with, the artist who was writing such meaningful and inspired music was capable of the acts to which he was being accused," she wrote. "It took another 8 years of experience and professional therapeutic help for me to actually comprehend and believe the shape and form of sexual misconduct to which I had been exposed."

Cotter wrote that his "serial sexual infidelity" throughout their seven-year marriage ultimately led to their divorce in 1995, and that his misconduct was known among friends, colleagues, therapists and sexual addiction treatment coordinators.

She also said that professional retaliation followed their divorce and annulment.

"Not only was our full calendar of concerts and workshops cancelled by him and rebooked as solo Haas events or events with another female artist, but David sent a letter to every Catholic diocese stating, among other things, that the irreconcilable differences leading to our divorce was due to my unwillingness to have children. This was a lie."

Questionable mentorship

Megan describes the Music Ministry Alive summer program in St. Paul, Minnesota, as "this world that David and others created in which they were celebrities, in which they had this power."

Megan said Music Ministry Alive had an aura of prestige, with lengthy applications, recommendations and auditions required ahead of participating in the five-day course with Haas at the helm. The teenaged participants were given leadership opportunities, private instrument and voice lessons, "the cream-of-the-crop kind of experience."

"It was everything we wanted church to be — that's important," Megan said through tears. "We wanted to just live there forever. It was instrumental in our development as young people.

"The fact that the [expletive] archdiocese knew [of his history] and still let him set up a camp for young people. ... The amount of hurt and pain that could have been prevented is almost unforgivable."

> 'The spiritual manipulation that I felt was almost a stronger force than being forcibly kissed.'
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She remembered him being "a touchy person," always hugging, making kids "feel chosen" when he'd place his hands on their shoulder as they sat with their peers.

Haas would lead a big concert at this program once each year, with the students all eager to be front row "so that maybe they could see and know you," Megan recalled, particularly the power of him looking at you while he sang the words to his popular song "You Are Mine."

Now, whenever Megan is caught off guard and hears one of his songs at a church service, "I have been wrecked, just knocked on the floor."

The "grooming" that Megan said she experienced included Haas taking her out to meals, cornering her into private and inappropriate conversations at conferences, buying her gifts, and expressing interest in her career and concern about her boyfriends.

When Megan was in her early 20s, Haas forcibly kissed her, made remarks to her that she described as lewd, and later threatened to destroy her career, she said.

"It isn't until then that you realize, 'Oh, my God, what has been happening this whole entire time?' I didn't even know. I thought he was buying me gifts and checking in on my career because he cared about me as my mentor."

The ways he inspired her to dream, the ideas he pulled out of her, the conversations they shared — "the spiritual manipulation that I felt was almost a stronger force than being forcibly kissed," she said.

Fearing professional retaliation, Megan chose not to share the specifics of her confrontation with Haas.

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Avoiding his material at church has become like a strategic game for Megan, she said with a break in her voice.

"How do I navigate that world where I want to participate in this thing that I love, as a full member of the body of Christ? I feel like I can't. He's taken so much from me. I can't sing his music, I can't see his name, I can't hear people clap along to his songs, as wonderful as they might be."

She sometimes imagines what her life would have looked like if she hadn't been accepted into Music Ministry Alive, or if she'd had a different hobby altogether, because despite her trauma, "you can't avoid your faith. You can't avoid church. You can't avoid music. You can't avoid how it seeps into your soul. You can't avoid funerals and weddings.

"It would have been easier to avoid if it wasn't so interconnected."

Put on high alert

Kate said sometimes Haas' grooming was done in plain sight, both his effusive praise and affirmation of people as well as his ability to isolate.

"You know how you find yourself backed into a corner in some situations and you're like, how did I just get here?" she said. "He's so skilled at it."

Kate still remembers the Saturday night Haas forced himself on her at the Religious Education Congress in Los Angeles around 2003. "It happened 17 years ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday," she said.

At the time, she was 33 and working as a high school choir director and in parish music ministry. That night she and Haas, whom she's only met through conferences, "were engaged in a wonderful conversation about the changes in the church and liturgy." Then he suddenly asked her to go with him to an alcove-like area of the arena. "I had no way to really escape because he was kind of blocking the exit," she recalled.

With his hands on both sides of her head, "he forced himself, with his full body weight coming down on me" as Kate struggled against his three attempts at a kiss, managing to turn it into a hug so that her face could avoid his, she said.

"I was so dumbfounded… I remember ducking under his arm so that I could just escape the situation, but still just dumbstruck."

> A co-worker said, " 'You have to be very careful because you are one step away from being a conference joke.' And that effectively silenced me."
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She immediately told her friends about the incident when she went back inside. The next day, Kate told a co-worker who is also a prominent liturgy musician about her encounter with Haas, asking for advice.

"He said, 'You have to be very careful because you are one step away from being a conference joke.' And that effectively silenced me," Kate said. (He has since profusely apologized to her for his reaction, she noted.)

When Haas emailed Kate saying he thought she misunderstood their last encounter, Kate replied that it was inappropriate and to never contact her again.

"Honest to God, I just didn't even think to report it" other than telling her friends, she said. Anytime she knew they would be at the same event, her friends would assure her they'd stay close so that she wouldn't find herself alone with Haas.

"And somehow, still, David found 45 seconds without anybody else" to intervene, she said of one occasion in 2015, when he tried to apologize for his past behavior and then tried to hug her.

Kate said she has always been naturally inclined to participate fully in anything related to Catholic liturgy: "I love it, I love ritual, I love LA Congress because it's just so vibrant and thriving and it's creative and it's wonderful.

"And what this did was put me on high alert every time I went to one of these conventions, to make sure that I had someone there who I could reach out to and walk away if I needed to."

With a lot of Catholic composers as friends, Kate said that anytime they would get together to perform and record for GIA, if Haas was there, she would have to take a step back.

"I felt like I was sidelined from things that I should never have been sidelined from because I was told to keep quiet."

Kate said Haas also later sent her a Facebook friend request even after their last tense encounter. "He just doesn't stop. ... He still thinks he has a way to get through to me."



David Haas is seen at the piano during a session of the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress on March 24, 2019. (Screenshot from YouTube/RECongress)

Losing interest in singing

Ali, who also reports being forcibly kissed at the LA Congress, notes that Haas was aware of her own traumatic backstory. As a participant at the music camp, she had shared personal experiences of previous trauma in her life.

"I do think there is a bit of preying on trauma," said Ali, an assertion that is consistent with the allegations that Into Account has received that he "focuses attention on women with past histories of abuse, then uses the vulnerabilities created by trauma to create intimacy," according to the May 29 letter.

Following Haas forcibly kissing Ali at the Religious Education Congress in 2007, when she ran into him at other national events, Ali said, he "frequently would seek me out in different communal areas, so he constantly cornered me in the lobby, he had come over by the elevator, even called my room a couple of times."

She said that when she was deliberate about only seeing him in public, Haas found ways to isolate her in conversation, at one point becoming angry when she said she was dating her now-husband, whom Haas didn't know.

Since Haas allegedly forced himself on Ali, she stopped recreational singing — the one hobby she was passionate about when she was growing up. She doesn't participate in choirs or music ministries at all since that experience. "I just kind of lost interest for it," she said.

"It hasn't kept me from my faith, but it has distanced me certainly from the music community and from a desire of wanting to participate in any way in anything that he could be affiliated with, any publishers that he's associated with, which unfortunately is quite a few."

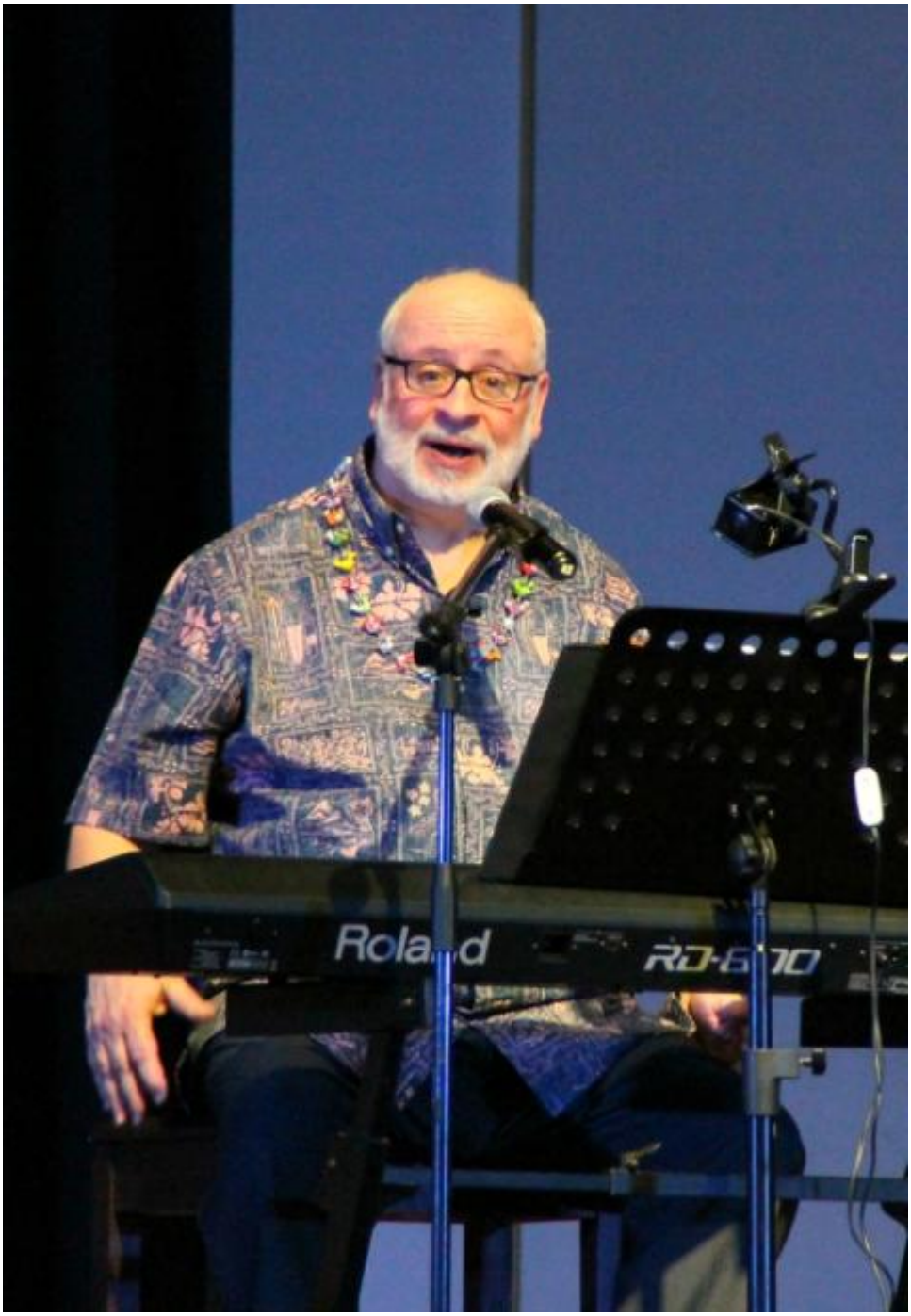
'We owe our community better'

The encounters the three women recalled to NCR are consistent with the reports that Into Account described in its letter:

> Some women have described romantic relationships with Haas that felt consensual in the beginning, but were then marked by sudden, overwhelming sexual aggression from Haas, in which any resistance was met with extreme anger. Other women have described incidents that we would interpret as outright sexual battery, involving groping, forcible kissing, and aggressive, lewd propositions. The youngest victim reported to us was nineteen years old at the time of the alleged sexual battery, while Haas was over fifty.

While no reports of incidents with minors have surfaced, Ali said that, in speaking with other victims, they shared noticing his penchant for knowing 18th birthdays.

They also noticed his tendency to isolate people when they're alone at an event or conference, "and there does usually seem to be some form of retaliation against them professionally when they object in any way to his advances or if they're icing him out," Ali said, as well as his attempts to convince the women to leave their relationships.



David Haas in concert at the Ateneo de Manila University in Quezon City, Philippines, in 2016 (Wikimedia Commons/Titopao)

But until Ali and Megan had received Into Account's letter, they didn't know they were among many who accuse him of sexual misconduct.

Ali said, "My heart kind of dropped and I realized, oh, this wasn't just a one-off incident with me when he crossed the boundary; this is a pattern of behavior."

"My understanding is that it is an open secret in the church community — I just perhaps was never privy to that," Ali said. "But multiple people have said, we always suspected, we heard rumors, he had that reputation — something of that nature."

Now that she has learned that his inappropriate behavior with young people was an "open secret," Ali said she is "extremely disappointed" in those in church leadership who, despite the Catholic Church's scandals of sex abuse, suspected misconduct yet failed to act on it, or still hired him for events, programs and retreats despite the rumors.

"It made me really question how I view them as colleagues and mentors if they have not been able to speak out and advocate for those [harmed], because that's something that we commit to as catechists," she said.

"We owe our community better. We owe victims better."

While employed as a minister, Ali said she sometimes heard Haas' name come up as a potential hire for programs, and she'd express being "vehemently opposed to having him present, citing that I felt that he had improper boundaries with young people in particular."

Ali, who is a mandated reporter and a trainer for the Virtus sex abuse prevention program, said she believes he has "all the signs of somebody who is grooming individuals, whether that be young people or vulnerable adults."

"I would not consider him to be a safe adult or mentor to be in our community. And I think that we need to take steps to make sure that he does not have access to those that he can victimize."

All three of the women NCR spoke with say they are not interested in pressing charges nor do they wish to see Haas go to jail.

Instead, Megan wants to underscore the abuse of power and spiritual manipulation at play.

In Haas, she sees "a pattern of not knowing your own strengths, not knowing your own influence. And I believe that leaders need to be very cautious about the influence that they have over other people."

She also said that the National Association of Pastoral Musicians and the LA Congress "need to wake up to the fact that this kind of behavior is happening at their events." She recommends they develop a code of ethics that panelists, speakers and participants should agree to adhere to.

Kate is eager to see Haas' contemporaries "call out your brethren," as she believes they "knew exactly who he was and what he did. They may not have known to what extent, but they chose to turn their heads the other way. That needs to change." She added that she also hopes GIA comes to terms with the fact that its inaction enabled him.

"He needs out. I hope he gets his conversion from whatever, but it has to stop. He's 60-some-odd years old and still doing this."

And, according to Megan, "there's no way to avoid him. He's at everything. He is literally everywhere."

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