

## **Choosing Music for Worship - Martin Adams**

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### **1) Historical & scriptural overview**

a) The justification for the use of music in worship is evident throughout the Old Testament, e.g. in Exodus 15:1; Deuteronomy 31:30; II Chronicles 29:5; many of the Psalms. It is evident that singing was a feature of Christian worship and fellowship in New Testament times, e.g. in Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25; Ephesians 5:19; Revelation 14:3.

b) Music has been a feature of Christian worship ever since, but with great differences between various traditions: e.g. Orthodox (only vocal music, sung by choir or congregation or both); Presbyterian & other reformed (congregational singing, and in many groupings only Psalms are permitted, without instruments; though nowadays practices vary); Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican (any one, or a combination of, congregational, choral, vocal, instrumental).

c) For each of these traditions and practices, sophisticated repertoires have developed, designed precisely to suit the function of music specific to their liturgies.

d) Church music has always tended to reflect both the traditions of its context (Anglican, Methodist or whatever) and repertoires of those traditions (hymns, psalm tunes, anthems, motets, service settings etc.). With few exceptions, styles of church music have not stood still, and have been adept at incorporating aspects of contemporary musical styles. In this respect Anglican worship is amongst the most eclectic of all Christian traditions.

e) The questions that arise, especially from that eclecticism is: What may we, or should we, choose; and how can we be sure that our choices are appropriate to the functions and styles of the liturgy for which we are preparing?

f) Church history shows that a legalistic view of what is permissible tends not to be edifying. It is significant that one of the few places in which the New Testament mentions music is primarily about edification. “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.” (1 Corinthians 14:26 *ESV*)

g) In its wisdom, the Church of Jesus Christ has shown, worldwide and in every culture, great caution about the power of music. Historically, it has understood that the sensual power of music needs to be controlled if music is to fulfil functions proper to Christian worship. One of the most remarkable aspects of modern worship culture is that this caution — this historical understanding that aesthetic and sensual reaction are not synonymous with spiritual experience, seems to have been forgotten.

## **2) The Functions and Suitability of Music in Christian Worship**

**N.B.** Worship and praise are not the same thing; though a number of musicians who work in contemporary Christian music speak, write and perform as if they are synonymous.

**a)** Function means “natural to the desired purpose”. (*OED*)

**b)** The primary purpose is to glorify God for who He is and what He has done. The secondary purpose is to minister to ourselves and one another in worship as a central component of the Christian life: as the Apostle Paul says of our general conduct – that we are to “be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.” (Ephesians 5:18–19 *ESV*) Clearly, there are metaphorical aspects to what the apostle is saying; but surely, he is also saying something profound about the role of music in the Christian life and in particular in worship.

**c)** In general, there are two main kinds of music – music for contemplation (e.g. a worship group singing before a service, or when we listen to a choir singing part of the liturgy, as is common in Anglican worship – definitively so for Anglican cathedral worship); and music for participation (e.g. a large proportion of contemporary “worship songs”, traditional hymns and metrical psalms). This workshop is concerned primarily with participation; but issues raised by music for contemplation are relevant to how we choose music wisely.

**e)** Referring back to the primary function (see **2b** above), the following statement by Dietrich Bonhoeffer is among the best definitions of the function of congregational singing:

See below: *Singing the New Song*.

**f)** History and current practice show that congregational singing is strongest when the music is simplest. We will probably have noticed that congregational singing tends to be strongest (i.e.

naturally together, with space for the congregation to breathe, and with an effortless enunciation of the words) when the music follows principles expressed by traditional hymnody — be it plainsong, metrical psalm-tunes, or Methodist and Anglican hymnody. The melody will be regular in rhythm and mostly one note per syllable. It will be sparing in the amount of textual repetition required.

**g)** During congregational singing musicians need to know their place, which is to support the singing. Displays of instrumental virtuosity, be it during the singing or during the interludes between verses, are usually inappropriate because they draw attention to the musician(s), and thereby distract the congregation from that which matters — the truths proclaimed by the words.

**h)** Beauty is something to be desired in worship. An extraordinary expression of the classic, Christian perspective on the theology of beauty is John Milton's poem *At a Solemn Musick* (published 1645) — the beauty of hearing words and music working together is a pledge of the forthcoming beauties and harmony of Heaven, and a reminder of the prelapsarian harmony of God's creation.

However, we should note that Milton was listening to music for contemplation, sung by a choir. And this gives us an insight into the function of music for contemplation, where aesthetic experience is an analogy and mirror of spiritual experience and truth. It is significant that in almost all Christian traditions, the performers of such music are separated from the congregation, and positioned so as to discourage the congregation from thinking of them as performers, in the sense that they would be if they were in a concert hall. (In some places, e.g. Westminster Cathedral, the choir is not only separate — it is completely invisible to the congregation.) All this should make us think about how contemporary music groups function in church.

**i)** Do your utmost to distinguish between music as aesthetic experience and music's role in spiritual experience. The tendency to confuse the two is essentially a legacy of 19th-century romanticism, in which truth was subordinated to subjective experience, and art assumed the status of religion (Romanticism's concept of the suffering artist-genius is obviously appropriated from the sufferings of our Lord). The most striking symptom of this confusion is the modern church's failure to maintain its historical caution about the power of music.

### **3) Choosing music suitable to the function(s) of various liturgies**

**a)** Choosing a song or hymn should be undertaken with the health of the congregation in mind. As Bonhoeffer implies in *Singing the New Song*, this has to be done on a case-by-case basis. If your congregation does not like worship songs such as *Shine, Jesus, Shine*, and does not like being led by a worship group rather than by an organ (or equivalent), we should never force such things on them. As he says, "Any doctrinaire attitude . . . comes of evil."

But a bit of gentle nudging might well prove beneficial to the health of a reluctant congregation. In such a case, introduce them to contemporary music by choosing songs that are musically impeccable for following the principles outlined in **2f** above; and make sure that the words

are theologically impeccable. (Traditional-minded congregations can be quite theologically aware.) Examples are: *Before the Throne of God Above*, words by Charitie Bancroft (1841–1923), music by Vikki Cook; and *In Christ Alone*, words and music by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend.

[At this point a recording was played of Lou Fellingham singing *Before the Throne of God Above*. It was agreed by all that her singing was beautiful, and that this song was eminently suitable for congregational singing because it follows the principles outlined at **2f** above. But everyone also agreed that, in a congregational context, the instrumentalist(s) should ditch the instrumental preludes and postludes. Even in the recording, it was evident that many members of the congregation (or was it an audience?) did not know when to come in.]

However, in all such cases we need to be aware of the dangers of getting to know such music only via recordings, of passively attempting to recreate a recording in a congregational context. For example, the kinds of dreamy, rambling musical preludes that often feature on such recordings are **not suitable** for congregations— folks don't know when to start! Likewise, any playing between verses should be brief and structurally pointed towards the beginning of the next verse.

In short — *ensure that you are not attempting to reproduce, in the congregation, your own experience of a song*. As Bonhoeffer says so beautifully, it is not your song — it belongs to the whole body.

**b)** As good Anglicans, we should aim to choose songs that support the lectionary readings and our acknowledgement of the church year. Traditional hymnals do this as a matter of course; modern printed collections of worship songs tend not to. So in this respect your choices of music call for fine discrimination.

**c)** In choosing songs, especially if we are attempting to nudge a congregation in the direction of contemporary songs and hymns, we need to distinguish between cultural relevance and cultural accommodation. Cultural relevance is important, because it implies that we are translating the Gospel, that we are attempting to speak to the present generation; the Gospel of Jesus Christ has always been relevant. However, what easily happens is that we promote cultural relevance's deceptive opposite, cultural accommodation; and in so doing we don't translate the Gospel, we transform it. Shallow theology or an absence of theology, an emphasis on music as self-expression, words that string together Christian platitudes — all these and many other things are symptomatic of the church's accommodation to the characteristics of a consumerist age, in which entertainment is prioritised over content, in which God and the worship of God are made into commodities, in which the age's devilish depersonalisation is addressed not by reaching out with the truths of the Gospel but by using music to anaesthetise those in need via an ostensibly holy entertainment. As followers of Jesus Christ, we can do better.

By far the best exploration of this subject that I have come across is by the American theologian, teacher and musician Marva J. Dawn. Numerous interviews with her are readily available on YouTube, and she has written a number of books relevant to today's subject, all very readable. Recurrent themes are: that worship is primarily not for ourselves, but for and to God; that nowhere do the Bible or the writings of great theologians say that the church's worship should be designed to attract unbelievers (or, as one member of the workshop suggested, folks who just don't go to church); that worship involves giving all of ourselves to God, who responds to that worship by giving

back to us out of His grace; that the church's so-called worship-wars are a result primarily of poor theological grounding. There's a lot more.

Her most obviously relevant book, which argues that good worship is essential to the life of the church because it is character-forming, both of individuals and the body as a whole, is *Reaching Our Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for this Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmann's, 1995). Cheap in price and rich in content.

#### **4) Resources (mainly online) for texts and music**

Resources of this kind, both for traditional hymnody and for contemporary and new hymns and songs, are so numerous that it is difficult to single any out. However, the following are among the richest in the range of what they offer, and in their non-prescriptive spirit:

[www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/modern-worship-music](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/modern-worship-music)

A site run by the United Methodist Church (a North American and international branch of Methodism) packed with materials for use in worship, with articles, interviews, links to music resources.

[www.worshiptogether.com](http://www.worshiptogether.com)

A commercial site rich in its range of resources. It includes: a lot of free stuff, including music and words; interviews with musicians that, for good or for ill, can be informative and revealing both about the music, the folks themselves and how some Christian musicians think; links to all kinds of other resources.

[www.chpublishing.co.uk/category/christian-books/worship-resources-1524](http://www.chpublishing.co.uk/category/christian-books/worship-resources-1524)

An Anglican site that has a wide range of books on various relevant subjects. If you type "music" into the site's search box, you will find a lot of materials that might be helpful in some of the areas that we have discussed today.

[www.churchleaders.com](http://www.churchleaders.com)

A site directed mainly towards non-denominational, North-American evangelical or pentecostal churches — the very sector that tends to suffer most from the problems discussed here. But

everything in it is free, and it has loads of articles that raise many of the issues we have discussed, though not at the theological depth the subjects deserve. It's all very results-oriented. Try the articles called "12 Things to Avoid for Better Congregational Singing" and "Are We Bringing God to Worship?" (one of the deeper articles). I don't agree with everything in either article, by any means! But some things support points I've made. In the Church of Jesus Christ there's room for us all.

[www.oremus.org](http://www.oremus.org)

One of the oldest online resources. It has a strongly Anglican bent, and has something to offer all wings of Anglicanism. It includes materials for worship of all kinds, and includes modern songs as well as traditional. Good stuff!

[www.nethymnal.org](http://www.nethymnal.org)

Another long-standing resource, with the words for over 10,000 hymns from all traditions, along with historical notes about the hymns. (It used to be called cyberhymnal.) The notes and the versions of hymns used are not always as authoritative as they might be; but it remains invaluable.

[www.songandpraise.org](http://www.songandpraise.org)

A smaller resource than the previous two; but helpful for Anglican worship because of its suggestions about hymns for different parts of the church year and for specific services such as confirmation, baptism etc..

## **5) Questions and suggested answers that we may ponder**

**a)** Are we seeking to promote a truly spiritual experience in worship — one that points the congregation towards Jesus, towards contemplating and understanding the great truths that God has laid out in the Gospel? Or are we seeking to have the congregation swept along by the power of music?

**b)** Is the hymn or song we are considering theologically sound in that it proclaims the truths of the Gospel? Or is it merely a collation of pleasant Christian platitudes? Or is it dominated by excessive repetition of just a few words? It does not have to be great poetry; but it should speak Truth.

c) Is the music we are considering suitable for congregational singing? A great deal of modern worship music is not suitable, even though it is often sung by congregations. One of the main issues in its unsuitability is its musical style, which is likely to be that of the singer-songwriter — too rhythmically complicated for a large group to be able to sing without struggling, or for the congregation to know well unless they listen a lot to the CD. Such music tends to encourage a passive view of worship: all those who know the CD can sing along with gusto. But this consumer approach tends not to encourage thought. It is important to remember that **feeling is not the same as believing**.

d) Does the impact of the song derive primarily from the aesthetic power of music? If it does, one should think carefully about whether to use it.

e) Does our use of contemporary worship music bless the whole body?

f) Is our desire to use contemporary music, or to shape worship in a particular direction, driven primarily by a desire to attract unbelievers or — much worse, to attract believers from other churches? If it is then the Bible and the historical wisdom of the church are against us.

### **Singing the New Song**

from

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

translated by John W. Doberstein, London: SCM Press, 1954 (Kindle Edition)

[In this section Bonhoeffer is speaking primarily of unison, unaccompanied singing. He speaks against the tendency of musicians (and let us remember that he was a fine musician as well as a great theologian) to elaborate instrumental parts against the plain functions of congregational singing. Although he was speaking to people who had access to just a handful of printed hymnbooks, mostly quite traditional, his points apply equally well to all congregational singing.]

. . . Our new song is an earthly song, a song of pilgrims and wayfarers upon whom the Word of God has dawned to light their way. Our earthly song is bound to God's revealing Word in Jesus Christ. . . .

"Speak to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19). Our song on earth is speech. It is the sung *Word*. Why do Christians sing when they are together? The reason is

quite simply, because in singing together it is possible for them to speak and pray the same Word at the same time; in other words, because here they can unite in the Word. All devotion, all attention should be concentrated upon the Word in the hymn. The fact that we do not speak it but sing it only expresses the fact that our spoken words are inadequate to express what we want to say, that the burden of our song goes far beyond all human words. Yet we do not hum a melody; we sing words of praise to God, words of thanksgiving, confession and prayer. Thus the music is completely the servant of the Word. It elucidates the Word in its mystery. . .

. . . Starting here [with hymns of the Reformation and of the ancient church], one's judgement as to which hymns of our hymnbook lend themselves to such rendition and those which do not will be formed quite of itself. Any doctrinaire attitude, which we meet with so often in this area, comes of evil. The decision in this issue can only be made on the merits of each case, and here too we must not be iconoclastic. . . .

It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song. Thus all singing together that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a member of the great Christian Church on earth, and help us willingly and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the Church.