

Some Reflections on Music & Worship

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What is the Purpose of Music in Worship ?

1. Begbie's Christian ecology of music: "on behalf of creation, humans may gather and focus on creation's worship, offering it back to God, voicing creation's praise."

Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music & Time*

2. Music has the capacity to 'reach the human heart with something of who God is in a way that verbal communication or preaching struggles to'.

Maeve Heaney, *Music in Theology*

3. Hymn singing should express, rather than decorate, the truth. In church music, God, not humanity, should be at the centre:

O sing to the Lord a new song. The emphasis is on the word new. What is this new song, if it is not a song that makes someone a new person, when a person leaves darkness and worry and fear behind and breaks forth into new hope, new faith, new confidence? The new song is the one that awakens God's presence anew in us- even if it is a very old song, of the God who, as Job says, "gives songs in the night." The song of praise in the night of our lives, of our sufferings and our fear, in the night of our death – this is the new song

...

O sing to the Lord a new song – and yet all our songs are only a reflection of the song of songs, which sings of eternity before the throne of Jesus Christ ...Why should not we, here and now, look forward to that new song that will embrace us when we finally close our eyes, the purest, sweetest, hardest, and most violent of all songs ... Lord, we hasten to join in your new song. Jesu juva – help us, Jesus. Amen.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sermon on Psalm 98:1, London, Cantate Sunday, April 29, 1934, DBW 13, 353 ff

4. Breadth of musical repertoire (across space/time) acknowledges our shared and diverse humanity. It takes the focus off we ourselves in this moment and unites us as the body of Christ. "People who are different from each other, joining together to sing, in unison, in praise of the living God" (Brett McCracken, writing about Porter's Gate Worship Project)

Potential Problems with Music in Worship

1. Escapism and Naïve Optimism

Music can offer misplaced hope that centres on human interest rather than on God and what God has done (prosperity gospel, celebrity musicians, focus on profit, for instance).

2. Domination and Exploitation

Music can serve malign purposes, enmeshing certain songs, styles, images and metaphors with nationalistic/political oppression and brutality.

Manipulative music that emphasises/directs a high state of emotion can lead to confusion about the source of P/power and stifle diversity of response.

3. Inclusion and Exclusion in Church Music

Music can exclude and foster hierarchy, where certain voices are heard and privileged over others.

Music can contradict the flow of worship and become a distraction from the rest of the service (including the sermon's message).

The use of certain styles, songs, images and metaphors can be incongruous with our cultural situatedness. Anne Morris asks, for instance, "Can we rightly sing African hymns while so many Africans live amidst poverty, hunger, disease and violence?"

"Take away from me the noise of your songs" is God's cry when praise and injustice coexist without right reference to each other (Amos 5: 23)

Five Questions to Ask of Our Music in Worship

Magnify: To what extent does the music magnify God's attributes and works, as revealed in Scripture?

Unite: To what extent does worship music both unite and celebrate Jesus Christ's diverse church body? Is the music genuinely participatory or is it a display of a select set? To what extent does our singing acknowledge or overlook our cultural situatedness?

Solidarity: To what extent does the worship music cohere with the rest of the service and with the mission of the church?

Include: To what extent does the worship music welcome and include the outsider and the stranger, including (religious) minorities, newcomers, those harmed by religious institutions, etc. Are all worshipping voices welcomed and valued? Who is not present in the playlist? Who is allowed to sing and who is not?

Countercultural: To what extent is our music flowing out of healthy reflection on and challenge of our spiritual formation as we seek to love and honour God and our neighbour?