

Music Styles in Worship – some thoughts for discussion by John Riley

Music in church has historically shown itself capable of creating divisions of allegiance and opinion within the wider church and individual congregations; indeed perhaps just as much as the theology and style of preaching. In recent decades, this has been manifested by the replacement of more 'traditional' hymns and music by organists and choirs with a range of 'contemporary' styles led by groups of amplified instruments and singers. This is particularly so in churches of evangelical tradition within the main denominations. The new independent evangelical churches have generally adopted 'contemporary' worship as standard.

Whilst there is much to treasure and hold onto here, are evangelicals forgetting that such styles of music represent just some of the wide variety of forms of spiritual expression and aesthetics. Why must 'Evangelical' and lively forms of worship be necessarily synonymous with 'contemporary' styles, rather than encompassing 'traditional' repertoire and styles also?

Here are some thoughts on the matter, arguing that greater diversity might be considered and also be possible within the existing resources of those leading worship.

The issue of musical styles is therefore not simply a matter of old versus new; of different musical cultures, or one eventually superseding the other. Although there will always be elements of individual tastes and preferences, each musical style should be regarded as different parts of the whole. Nor is this a matter of organ and hymns versus music band and choruses; there are many styles of music not dependent on organ or amplified instrumentalists, such as Taize chants and Scottish folk style songs to mention but a very few.

In every style of music there is inevitably music of greater or lesser artistic merit and staying power in terms of both words and actual music. (For example, how many hymns of a hymnbook of say 150 years ago are known today?). However, there are some inherent characteristics of some 'contemporary' music which can make them quite difficult to sing to; notably a more amorphous and irregular phrase structure and lack of fully developed harmonies. Many are arguably of relatively little artistic merit and ambition. The perceived shape and pattern is therefore often less easy to grasp than for example the regular metre of many a hymn. As such some may work very well as performance pieces by skilled and well-rehearsed musicians. However, are they always necessarily so successful for congregations to learn and sing?

Many can find the direct and contemporary language of modern 'worship' songs more helpful and appealing than the language of traditional hymns, which can be imbued with quite archaic language, deep theology and symbolism. Equally however, the language of choruses can verge on the banal and simplistic, and even irreverent. The lyrics arguably also reflect at times the egocentric preoccupation with self-fulfillment and pleasure that are hallmarks of our consumer and individualistic contemporary culture.

A very important factor is that any corporate worship expressed through music must have some common currency. Although some choruses have already achieved 'classic' status, the hymn by its tradition, familiarity and shape is far more able overall to provide that unity of expression, and resonate with a much longer tradition and personal memories and associations.

There is a view that more traditional forms of music can be off putting to newcomers to a church, particularly those from non-church traditions. It is also sometimes argued that the church should emulate styles of the wider world to ensure popularity and relevance.

Such views contain a number of fundamental flaws. Surely, what is more likely to put people off is dead worship and spirituality. 'Contemporary' music is hardly less culturally loaded than other forms of music and its relative complexity can make it exclusive rather than inclusive and welcoming. Moreover, why should a newcomer or existing member who finds it difficult to identify with 'contemporary' styles of worship be any less catered for than someone who does?

It might also be argued that more traditional styles of music are available in Cathedrals and certain churches and sometimes to a very high standard. However, many members or potential members of churches would identify more strongly with the lively and active fellowship, younger age profile, theology and preaching style more associated with evangelical churches. Why therefore should people have to trade off one thing that they greatly value with another; for example, a strong and lively biblical ministry, with a very varied, rich and educative experience of music in worship?

Moreover, it is not enough to assume that those wishing for a different style of service can merely be catered for by an alternative service, usually early in the morning. The timing is simply not appropriate for many people and why should families requiring a crèche be denied the possibility of mixed tradition worship?

There is also the issue of continuing a heritage. Not all aspects of musical or liturgical heritage are helpful or relevant, but some are and have to be practiced to some degree for them to continue. For example, a repertoire of skills and knowledge in hymn singing can easily be lost, particularly for young people. As alluded to earlier, many 'contemporary' songs are quite ephemeral in nature; changing too frequently for people to learn the music and words to a point of familiarity and confidence. Irrespective of how expertly they are executed by a music band, there is surely much that lacks sufficient distinction of words and music to be ever completely familiar and embedded in minds and hearts. The extra power created by amplification can also disguise the fact that it can be the music band rather than the congregation that are doing most of the singing.

Many people's deepest experiences of music and learning of musical skills have been through their involvement in churches. Surely, a wider part of worship and mission is the development of human potential and creativity, and the enjoyment and skills involved in one of God's gifts to us. A breadth of musical skill is dependent on the breadth of the music in worship.

Surely, as in other areas, the church should present cultural forms that are familiar but also ones which are distinctive to itself. In daily life we are constantly surrounded by music that is often loud, energetic and beat driven. Much of this represents a 'wall' of sound with a single dynamic offering little development and modulation of expression, (or for that matter subject content!). At its least inspired such music might even be likened, rather unkindly perhaps, to the type of medical drug which operates optimally only with an even and constant dose, and whose effect only lasts for the period in which it is administered.

There is a view among some advocates of 'worship music' that whilst some of it is admittedly of an ephemeral nature, it is music to enable the mind to apprehend and focus on God; any lack of artistic merit and durability is not an issue and indeed may well be a virtue in that it is God rather than music that is to be the source of worship and focus of the heart.

Music of this kind may have a legitimate place in church worship. However, whatever its role in worship, such music is strongly linked to contemporary pop music. We also need music that is more distinctive to the church, underlining the fact that we are for a time at least separating ourselves from the world outside.

Another important issue is that of background pop 'muzak' – arguably a scourge even when placed in shops, eating places etc., and certainly not appropriate for the preparation of a church service or even during parts of the service itself. In church, surely we should have either meaningful silence or meaningful music and a culture within the congregation that respects and responds to this. 'Musak' however is not an exclusively modern phenomena and similar criticism might be levelled at some of the less distinguished organ music on equally undistinguished instruments that sometimes provide an agreeably discreet if largely unengaging 'aural wallpaper' within the service. Indeed, music of any style can be devalued by over exposure or delivered in an uncongenial context.

On a much wider level there is by general consent, some degree of ‘dumbing down’ of culture in society as a whole. Are there not elements in this process finding their way into church worship too? The rebellion against what has been seen in some quarters (and with some justification) as stuffy and irrelevant forms of worship has unwittingly brought about forms that are in their own way equally culturally weighted, exclusive and narrow.

Encountering new and different forms of worship by musicians and congregations, from whatever point of familiarity or comfort zone of the individual, is surely also part of a healthy broadening, learning and sharing process; one that enriches through opening new doors and dimensions; and one that promotes understanding of one another and the breaking down of barriers.

In summary, the repertoire of music in church of any style needs to be of a worthy standard if it is to fully engage congregations. It should also draw on the best of all traditions and any adaptations of ‘traditional’ repertoire should represent valid if alternative enhancements of the original rather than diminish it to a low common denominator. For this to happen requires an enlightened approach within clergy and those charged with leading worship, and which draws upon as large a skill and knowledge base as possible. Accountability to the feelings among any congregation is clearly very important. Equally however, congregations can respond very positively to music of any kind that is inspired and appropriately presented.

Whilst no single church can be all things to all people, may the aim be that all can find music that supports and inspires.

.....

A book that usefully examines these trends is 'Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time' (Paperback) by Marva Dawn, Lecturer at Regent College, Vancouver.

Here are some of the reviews, (mostly anonymous ones from the Amazon website) which usefully highlight some of the issues involved.

"Churches have unthinkingly adopted the standards of the secular culture by singing songs that have more to do with our feelings than God... and encouraging church atmospheres which pretend to intimacy but replicate the alienation of our age".

"...As for the idea that teens in the church will never accept older hymns, that is not true. Many teens are apparently looking for more substance in worship than their parents are. We need hymns as well as the creeds to root the contemporary church to the historic church".

*"...How can the Church reach out, without losing its powerful message? Having attended many churches, I believe the Christian message is often "dumbed down" to fill pews. Worship is about God, not us. Christ, not entertainment value, is its meaning. There are "...well meaning attempts to reach (our) dumbed down, short attention span, **commitment phobic generation** with worship styles that would be attractive to them, no matter the cost to the Gospel.*

"I attended a "contemporary" church and found little depth. Ultimately...we practice idolatry when we mimic empty secular culture, instead of transcending it".

"Contrary to popular notions, 'Contemporary' churches don't appeal to all young persons. (Dawn).. tells about a college student who left a 'contemporary' service saying his intelligence was insulted. Many tire of being entertained, especially when their lives become rough and upbeat songs don't cut it, and the power-point presentations become indistinguishable from any other self-help seminar. Worship should subvert culture..."

"Some traditionalists have let the liturgy become stale. The idolatry of "doing things as they always have been done" is no better than embracing secular society. (We should) engage Christianity's rich history, but not just follow it blindly. ...Liturgy, "the work of the people," should indeed be the people's work, not just the pastor's. The meaning of the liturgy should be taught so we can understand its fullness: confession, thanks, prayer, etc. Memorized forms, e.g. creeds and prayers, are important, because they create a solid believing community, rather than a fragmented loose association".

"I have found that most youth want something deep, but are usually forced to endure hype-heavy study materials (which to the teen are patronizing). I was a teen 4 years ago, and the belief that teens only want contemporary is a myth. Another point Dawn makes is that worship services rarely convert anyone (friends do this). Conversion services are based on a false premise. All in all, she wants us to abandon both stagnant traditionalism and the business-church, and worship God as a tight-knit community with character, grounded in our living tradition".