



Shoehorn or Two-edged Sword?

What is church music supposed to do these days? What role should it play in Christian worship? More and more, the response to those questions emphasizes our need to be open and inviting, to set aside old patterns and traditions. Worship and music should be user-friendly, we are told, even entertaining.

Why? As I hear folks talk, they suggest two reasons. The first is the radical change in the dominant American culture symbolized by the coming of age of the baby-boomers; so now, if the church is to be viable, it must address itself to a population that was not raised on the catechism and Bible stories, lacks a built-in sense of Christian morality, shies away from commitment, looks for quality entertainment, and has little or no denominational loyalty.

That would surely be challenge enough, but the second reason for a new look at worship is equally radical: the dominant American culture finds itself more and more enmeshed in a multicultural society; so now, if the church is to be viable, it must address itself to a population made up of ethnic groups and political caucuses and subcultures the people who built our churches could never even have envisioned, groups whose music and passions and way of looking at the world are profoundly different from the western heritage of our ecclesiastical ancestors.

Music must reach out to these people, we hear. And the way to do that is to keep it simple and popular, to keep the demands few and the denominator low. The trouble with all this is that it's getting harder and harder now to tell the church's approach to the consumer from that of the shopping mall or the political party, harder and harder to distinguish the worship service from the talk show. We are, in fact, not far from the kind of planned manipulation of emotions prominent in the revivalist movements earlier in this century. Is that the way it has to be? Is that what is called for to meet the needs of this new culture?

Maybe—but, as a reader of psalms, I keep worrying we may be getting it wrong. Consider, for example, Psalm 149. How inviting is it? It seems to begin innocently enough:

Sing to the Lord a new song...
Let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.
Let them praise his name with dancing.

Dancing? That's already too much for some people, of course; they're already out the door! But others of us have gotten used to sacred dance; often, we've been introduced to it by our own children, and for the most part we have come to accept its place in worship. But, the trouble is, the psalm goes on to tell us what this particular dance in the temple of Jerusalem looked like:

Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,
to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples.

This is hardly the dancing of sweet young girls in diaphanous gowns; it is a drum-driven war dance—soldiers in loincloths swinging their battle-axes in wild gyrations while the air is shattered by their shrieking sounds of hal-la-la-la-la-la-la (which, according to some linguists, is the original sound of “hallelujah,” the source of the Hebrew word, *hallel*, to praise). It is apparently a scene of ritualized combat, a tribal dance in which Israel celebrated and anticipated the victory of God over the wicked. Would this work in our local congregations? Is this bizarre cultic drama, invoking God’s wrath, an inviting form of worship for modern people? Is it user-friendly? Can music be a two-edged sword for us, or is it only a shoehorn, slipping us into the church as gently as possible?

In a recent legal case, Haitian Americans sought the right to sacrifice live animals in their religious ceremonies. However shocking and alien that might sound, their worship, with its blood and rhythmic dance, might have more in common—at least at one level—with the temple worship described in the Bible than what happens in most churches today. The fact is, worship in the temple of Jerusalem was not meant primarily to be inviting; it was meant to usher people into the presence of God, an experience that was frightening and awesome, and other, an experience that required sacrifice and blood and fire and death. When the people of the Bible found themselves getting close to God, they tended to get mighty uneasy. Have we forgotten something in our attempt to make everything saccharine and upbeat and harmless and entertaining? Instead of changing worship and music to make everybody quickly and equally at home, maybe we ought to be finding ways to make everybody (of whatever culture) strangely and equally uneasy, equally clear that whatever is going on here is profoundly counter-cultural—for all of us, of whatever color, whatever gender, whatever age, whatever political persuasion, whatever ethnic group. God is undoubtedly an equal-opportunity savior, but God is also an equal-opportunity challenger of the status quo—perhaps especially for those of us who are most established, who think of ourselves as most at home. God is God, and we are not; and worship should make that clear.

Maybe the medieval churches got something right with their vast and dark interiors, their stained-glass windows and clouds of incense, the distance of their altars and the otherness of their chants and rituals. At least folks understood they weren’t in Kansas anymore.

How can music and worship come to terms—twentieth-century terms—with the claims of the majesty of God and the radicality of the gospel? That seems to me to be the task of our worship planners and musicians. How can music help us know that Easter has happened, and that it wasn’t primarily about spring or the New Age or fertility or spirituality or the triumph of the human spirit or religion-in-general, but that it was about God, and about life and death.

To do that, worship and music need to do more than soothe us; along with the word, they need to kill us, so they can raise us to something new, something fundamentally changed. The thought of such a thing is frightening. God may turn out to be more cross-cultural than we bargained for. And the music that introduces and celebrates such a God will be more than easy listening. Maybe a band of

sword-swinging dancers is just what we need. If they can scare the apathetic pants off us, then, by God, trot them out. Give us uncomfortable worship, music that challenges, music that lets us taste the mystery, worship that brings us so close to God we'll never be the same. We need an Energizer bunny in the middle of the liturgy. Just when we think we've got it all figured out, just when we're dozing off, the script should change; we need to be surprised. Church music should do nothing less than challenge us with that kind of surprise.

When people are asked to write about church music, they do not remain neutral! As a result, it hardly seemed possible to decide which of the essays in this issue should be labeled "Perspectives" and which would be "Articles." So, we didn't try. What we have are several examples of "engaged" scholarship, which is probably fitting for our interest in "Theology for Christian Ministry."

Using H. Richard Niebuhr's categories for the relation between Christ and culture, *Paul Westermeyer* analyzes the present state of church music, urging the various traditions not to discard their heritage but to honor it for the sake of the church and the world.

Gracia Grindal argues that a musical *Kulturkampf* has set the tastes of ecclesiastical worship planners against those of ordinary worshipers—with disastrous results. She calls for a new indigenization of worship in America.

If congregational singing is desired, it must be taught, promoted, and nurtured, argues *John Carl Ylvisaker*, and that will require song leaders and a variety of singable tunes. Ylvisaker's essay offers examples and practical suggestions.

Marc Kolden also includes practical pastoral advice for worship planners. His biblical rationale for Christian singing betrays the homiletical passion of the sermon behind this essay.

Craig R. Koester walks us through the book of Revelation, asking us to pause here and there to hear the voices of its hymns and to consider their message. Such an exercise could be very helpful in the education of a worshipping community.

Anton Armstrong is a successor of F. Melius Christiansen at St. Olaf College. Armstrong introduces the Christiansen tradition in choral music—a tradition which has had overwhelming impact both within and beyond Lutheran circles.

The new *United Methodist Hymnal* is opened as a resource, especially for worship planners of other traditions, by *John Yarrington*. Choosing hymns from other books broadens our possibilities and our ecumenical horizons.

The Resources section begins with more help along the same line. *Richard Webb* compiles a list of alternate worship materials, complete with annotations to enable knowledgeable choices. Then, *Catherine Groves* and *Jane E. Strohl* meet Face to Face in a discussion of the Christian response to the New Age. *Texts in Context* returns to the church music theme of this issue, as *James Limburg* encourages preaching on the appointed psalms for the autumn Pentecost season. Finally, outside the theme, *Craig L. Nesson* proposes a way of understanding the reformation's central doctrine of justification that is thoroughly historical yet takes seriously its validity in the contemporary world.