



Church Music: A Countercultural Activity

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What’s church music good for? First of all, music undeniably plays on human emotion. At one time or another, all of us have been taken by a certain twist of melody or have resonated with the harmonic movement of a specific series of chord progressions. Music has the power to move us to places words simply cannot.

These reactions, though personal, are bound to community. Music intrinsically *requires* community. Composer, performer, and listener comprise the usual trinity by which the musical elements of the printed page—melody, harmony, and rhythm—come to life. Of course there are several variations on this theme. Some forms (choral, orchestral, small-scale chamber works, or even the rendering of “Frere Jacques” as a round) require more than one performer. The number of listeners surely may vary with performers themselves sometimes filling that role. Those who improvise for sheer personal enjoyment comprise yet another variant. But composer (or arranger), performer, and listener form the usual grouping by which music is given life.

In the singing of a hymn, members of the congregation fill a dual role, that of participant (or performer) and that of listener. Here is active musical, emotional, and spiritual participation in the most complete sense. In singing a hymn, a group of possibly very diverse individuals is united into one worshiping body, the body of Christ. Luther, Hus, Comenius, Calvin, the Wesleys, and tent revivalists understood this. Music combined with texts sung by the people of God gathered in worship is powerful; it is truly one of the church’s greatest treasures. *Lex orandi—lex credendi*, yes. But the following is also true: *lex cantandi—lex credendi*. That which we sing has enormous bearing on the shape of our beliefs.

Almost two decades ago I stood with thousands of others at a papal mass in Chicago’s Grant Park. The overwhelming sense of being a part of something infinitely larger than self was crystallized in the middle of the mass with the singing of a favorite hymn. Denominational boundaries fell. Voices, high and low, young and old, some well accented, joined together as one, as church. As far as the eye

could see the mass of humanity simultaneously professed its faith, propelled by melody, rhythm, harmony, and, of course, text. Even a solitary man walking his dog on the other (virtually abandoned) side of Michigan Avenue whistled along. Something was happening here. And it was good! In the more recent past, during a summer walk in downtown Philadelphia, another church musician and I were intrigued by the sounds of “Amazing Grace” coming from a rather unlikely crowd gathered in Liberty Park. It was obvious that the “leaders” knew only the first stanza,

which they repeated over and over again. It was also obvious that the group, participating in a special moment, felt the need for some form of ritual community song. It soon became obvious, as we made our way through the singing, candle-carrying crowd of old denim and flowers, that the focus of this liturgy was a draped portrait of Jerry Garcia, now truly [but gratefully?] dead. Why “Amazing Grace” and not an anthem from the Dead Head repertoire? Necessary ritual requiring specific music of mourning. Interesting.

What’s good in church music? Simply this. We have a priceless treasure, a radiant jewel—congregational song. It is many faceted and ever expanding. Open virtually any denominational hymnal and you’ll most likely find “A Mighty Fortress” side by side with tunes from the Geneva Psalter, with music from Taizé, black spirituals, Irish folk melodies, excerpts from Southern Harmony, South African freedom songs, the hymns of Watts, texts by Brian Wren, and tunes by Marty Haugen. The cross-pollination of denominational hymnody in the past half century is phenomenal. Hymns help us understand the richness of other cultures’ encounter with and response to the gospel. Moreover, we actually participate in that richness ourselves. Poets continue to provide us with vibrant new and powerful stanzas which propel messages and images via eye and vocal chords right into the heart. Composers fashion tunes that help us remember and internalize these texts and that touch our souls.

But there is a very real danger. So little group singing is going on in America today that it has virtually become countercultural. Outside the walls of the church the only viable examples seem to be the “Birthday Song,” sung around a lighted cake, “The Star Spangled Banner,” sometimes still sung together at the beginning of sporting events, and the occasional Christmas carol nursing home outing. Since the enlightenment, emphasis on the human as first and foremost an individual has played a major role in the demise of group song. The realm of worship is no exception. Combine this individualism with recent technological advances—the availability and use of recorded music and electronic amplification (“why should several people sing when one really good singer can sing *for everyone*”)—and with the growth of what some call an entertainment mentality, and the results are passivity and vocal self-consciousness (where singing is concerned). Group musical *participation* has become archaic. Perhaps it’s time to regain a new and even greater appreciation for the song of the assembly. Let’s cultivate great congregational singing. Let’s train musicians to facilitate, not merely to lead, the song of the people. Let’s take out the gem, our family heirloom, and polish it. *Cantate Domino!*

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I struggled to recall the words to the hymn being sung around me. I hadn’t heard it since childhood, and the memory was faint. I knew it, though. Of course, I didn’t recognize the words as sung by the aboriginal Taiwanese people who surrounded me in this Presbyterian Church in Ping Tung, Taiwan. I was connecting to a memory from another church pew on the other side of the world, close to forty years ago. In that pew, I first heard this nineteenth-century hymn.

Haltingly and partially, the words came: “I surrender all.” The voices of the women and men had a gentle, beautiful vocal quality. While I couldn’t understand the words, I could sense

the sincerity in their voices. “All to Thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.” I didn’t even know this hymn was still being sung. But in Taiwan, it was well known. It was sung reverently and, by many of the parishioners, from memory.

I could barely contain my surprise the following Sunday. I was a participant in a conference on contextual liturgy and music. The World Council of Churches had gathered people from all parts of the globe to meet for two weeks at the Presbyterian Seminary in Tainan, Taiwan. All of the workshop participants attended a local Taiwanese Presbyterian parish that morning, just down the street from the seminary.

Near the end of the service, the electronic organ introduced the same melody I had heard the previous Sunday: “All to Jesus I surrender, All to Him I freely give.” How could it be that this American revival hymn was still alive, even popular in Taiwan? I mused on the strange dislocation I felt in hearing this hymn from my past in such a current and foreign culture.

Music is more than notes on a page. Music requires a local and specific presentation. In this presentation, a community is engaged with a text and tune that it makes its own. A song begins in a specific community at a certain time. The revival hymn “I Surrender All” arose in a North American religious community pitched with the individual conversion fervor of the nineteenth century.

But the ability to cross into another context, a different time or place, makes music a powerful medium. In the gentle, communal spirit of the aboriginal Taiwanese in 1997, the hymn found a new, and quite different, context. In the small mountain town of Ping Tung, aboriginal Christians have already surrendered much. They have surrendered their land, as they are continually pushed further back into the mountains by the waves of immigrants to Taiwan. Those who are Christian are further alienated in this country, with its predominant mix of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion.

The aboriginal Taiwanese Christians have already surrendered property, religious conformity, and economic security. I could hear in their voices the solidarity they knew with one another in “all to Jesus I surrender.” For the aboriginal Taiwanese, this hymn means something profoundly different than it did in its original context. Their social surrendering is not at all like the personal surrender of the North American revivalists. But the hymn continues to speak its powerful voice.

Music takes root in us when it enters deeply into the life of our assemblies. Music addresses us in community and calls us into praise of God. Music is the interaction in the assembly between a sung text and a specific communal context. When the interaction connects with the life of the community, music calls the community into its relation to the divine.

The criterion, then, for choosing music for the Christian assembly includes the music’s ability to speak to *this* people in *this* context at *this* time. Understanding this criterion requires looking deeply into the spiritual life of a community. What are its deepest pains and joys? How might God address this community at this time? With what words might people respond to God’s invitation?

The answer in each community will be different. One community may find God’s strength in hymns of healing and reconciliation. Another community may hear God’s call to justice in hymns of freedom and liberation. While these are simplifications, they point to the

essential work of knowing and responding to the assembled community.

It is contextual presentation, then, that enlivens and contemporizes music. This is the aspect of music that changes with each circumstance and community. A given hymn is never the same twice. As it is sung by different communities, a hymn participates in different events and takes on a different life.

Music speaks God's praises in a community gathered to sing. Music speaks across time, place, and people, taking on new meaning in new contexts. Can we do less than to seek the best expressions for God's praises in each context in which we worship?