

THE Christian Century

It's not about the song

By Lisa Lynne Mathis

Never mind all the times I'd heard the hymn sung corporally as a congregation, or as a children's choir anthem, or as a solo during communion—this time it was as if I was hearing “They'll Know We Are Christians,” for the first time. The singer stood absolutely still, her eyes closed, her head tilted back. With open-hearted simplicity she crafted each phrase as if she were proclaiming an essential, God-given message. She did not perform the song, but gave it as an offering, a gift, as if the song were an extension of her innermost thoughts. I noticed several worshipers nodding their heads “yes” with their eyes closed. Some worshipers were bent over in prayer, and a few were even rocking to the music. There was no sound other than the singer's voice, yet on a sticky, summer night, an eclectic, diverse bunch of people were one in the Spirit.

Whether sung in a Baptist church in rural Arkansas, an Episcopal church in Boston, a Presbyterian church in Columbus, Ohio, or an Evangelical megachurch in Southern California, the impact of this song sung by this woman would have been the same. When a selection of vocal music comes from a place of spiritual maturity, when it has a lyrical integrity and flows naturally within the liturgy of the worship, the music becomes a vehicle for the presence of the Holy Spirit. At that point all denominational and stylistic differences are transcended. Generations come together. Culture clashes are quieted, distrust and resentment dissipate as God uses music to bridge cultural divides

Music is the glue of a service. From prelude to postlude, there are usually eight to ten different pieces of music woven throughout the service liturgy. Music serves multiple purposes in worship; it says what words alone cannot. Music is prayer, praise, lament. Music brings scripture alive, encourages meditation, substantiates the heart of a sermon, brings us into focus and invokes the presence of the Holy Spirit. No wonder contention, disagreement and polarization surround the subject of music in worship.

We music directors and ministers stumble time and time again over the age-old

conflicts because we are defined musically by our own up-bringing, confined by the tastes of the senior minister of our church, and often restricted by the narrow parameters set by elders and lay leaders. We are still stuck in our trenches in the worship-music battle: “Old Guard O Sacred Head Now Wounded” v. New Guard “Never Lose the Wonder”; Old Guard “How Great Thou Art” v. New Guard “Here I am to Worship”; Old Guard “Wade in the Water” v. New Guard “Total Praise.” We fixate on a particular genre of music and then clamp down, becoming entrenched in the music culture that best fits our personal preferences and musical tastes.

This warfare has led to organs no longer being built into new churches—and fewer people who know how to play the organ. The classically trained music directors who were raised on the Widor Toccata, who long for singers capable of handling Palestrina and Byrd and the opportunity to perform a Bach choral work are understandably irate and panicked. They feel as if they are out-numbered by saccharine, theologically reductionist pop praise songs performed on synthesizer keyboards or by rock bands performing concert-style.

That perspective, of course, is matched by the disgusted churchgoer who is desperate for spiritual connection but hasn’t been raised on traditional sacred music. This person is weary of the same old hymns being plunked out on an out-of-tune piano and droned out by the guy behind him. He aches for someplace where he can belong and where God can be relevant to his life.

The struggle is no longer between historic stone chapels in town squares and the megachurches next to shopping malls. The changing tide of music in worship is touching almost every church in the nation.

Both camps stand on solid ground. Some contemporary Christian music is emotionally manipulative, poorly crafted and lyrically simplistic; and some contemporary music is thoughtful, provocative and easier to sing than older hymns. Some traditional music is powerful and timeless; and some of it is tired and clichéd and sung because it’s always been sung. What I’ve learned, after years of leading and singing worship music in many worship contexts, is that it’s not about the song itself nearly as much as we think it is. It’s about whether the song invites the Spirit into the sanctuary.

I was raised singing traditional classical music in a large urban Methodist church. I made a more personal relationship with God through Jesus while singing clappy praise songs in an L.A. Baptist church. I sang classical music at a historic

Presbyterian church, then moved to New York, where I sing regularly at The Riverside Church, and fell in love with gospel music. To further complicate the situation, I am currently a music director of a contemporary worship service, a member of an inner-city Gospel Praise Team and a recording artist.

What I've learned from working in all these different contexts is that it's not the music style or genre that determines a song's effectiveness, but the delivery of the song, the lyrical content of the song, and the liturgical placement of the song that count most. The style of the song is irrelevant.

How a song is offered minimizes and often negates the significance of the genre of the music. When the singer sings from a place of authenticity, vulnerability and certainty of faith, everyone in the sanctuary recognizes it. Often an insecure and ego-hungry soprano, insisting on her moment-in-the-sun, screeches out a favorite aria, her eyes scanning the congregation as she looks for affirmation. Often a praise team is crowded with frustrated leads from high school musicals past who belt out their favorite praise song without regard for congregational participation, let alone accurate harmony. And too often, college kids who volunteer to play in the praise band are "psyched" to crank up the distortion on their guitars and release their teen-age angst into the sanctuary.

In these situations, music performed in worship becomes all about the self; "my moment" in the service, "my ministry." Singers in particular often sing in church for all the wrong reasons. We singers are profoundly transparent when we stand before God and before a congregation. We too easily forget that it is a privilege and profound responsibility to be a vehicle through which God can minister. No one will believe a word of what we are singing if our motives are self-serving.

I am *not* talking about ability or talent. I have heard Metropolitan Opera soloists knock the living daylights out of "His Eye is on the Sparrow," with every note in flawless tune, yet not be singing from that vulnerable faith place. I have heard famous gospel singers scream out "Go Tell it on the Mountain" until I want to run from the sanctuary and not tell a single soul that Jesus Christ is born.

Many times it's the untrained ear, slightly under-pitch singer who can bring a song into worship that surprises the whole church family. When a woman who has suffered, who has been on the prayer list a lot, who is walking each day in total faith just to survive, stands before a congregation and starts to sing "Jesus Loves Me," it is immediately clear this song is coming from a place that is raw and real and that she is a vessel through which God is bringing a blessing. So she misses the

high note, big deal. Members of the congregation hum that song all week long, remember her standing there, remember the way it felt to experience the power of her music and the presence of God in moment.

Another crucial component to worshipful music is what the music says lyrically. A modern setting of an ancient hymn can be healing because worshipers raised on the traditional hymns feel valued, while younger generations hear the timeless melodies and the poetic language and feel that the song is meant for them too. The rock group Jars of Clay has a fantastic rendition of “It is Well With My Soul” (and an album of hymns called *Redemption*) and Tim Hughes, a powerful force in contemporary Christian music, brought “When I Survey” into amphitheatres around the world with his version, “The Wonderful Cross.” In both cases, the lyric of the hymn is clear and delivered with raw intensity and the timeless melody of the hymn is set to a fresh arrangement—uncomfortable for a Bach lover but accessible to a 19-year-old who’d rather be anywhere other than in church with Mom.

Praise songs struggle to maintain lyrical integrity and they frequently fail miserably. *Shine, Jesus, Shine* is on my list of cringe-worthy praise songs. While I appreciate the understanding of Jesus as the light of the world, shining His light onto the darkness in our hearts and in our world, the cumbersome, self-centered lyric doesn’t align with the choppy, unsettling chord structure; the resulting awkwardness never ceases to frustrate me.

When it comes to images of light, I prefer Matt Redman’s reflective song “Pure Light,” which flows smoothly with soulful accompaniment:

[ital]How great the glory of Your name/How small the voice I
humbly bring/Yet with my all I raise a song when I see You/It
is the song of love's pure light/The grace reflected in these
eyes/The overflow of those who know/They have seen
You.[end ital]

The placement of vocal music in the order of worship is important too. In more traditional dynamics, there are very specific, deliberate placements for music. But more and more, particularly in evangelical churches, one finds a cluster of songs all lumped together towards the beginning and another cluster at the end. There’s nearly always music during the offering too, music that’s only 50 percent experienced because of all the activity of plates being passed, ushers moving through the aisles. By the time the congregant begins to focus on the song it’s

nearly done and the climactic moment was diminished by the sound of the person sitting next to you tearing the check out of their checkbook. I resist the notion of music being “filler” during an action of worship, yet I also see the value of maintaining a flow to the service. Music during communion, on the other hand, is usually powerful, meditative and centering for me spiritually.

One of the most essential song placements is the music that sets the stage for the theological premise of the message, which includes the selected scripture. Whether it’s congregational or a solo, that moment can make all the difference in meaningful worship; it can bring the congregation into a place of concentration and set the minister up beautifully for the sermon. It can also, sadly, be a total diversion from the intent of the message. The music in that moment can even “break” the Spirit, the flow, the mystery in the worship. Careful planning, good communication between ministers and musicians, praying together and rehearsing the flow of the worship are key.

I am humbled by what I learn in each worship service I participate in, whether in rural Maryland or inner-city Philadelphia. Recently I sang in a cathedral in New York. Two thousand people present were probably expecting Mendelssohn, but I chose a piece by Christian singer/songwriter Nichole Nordeman called “Every Season.” It’s a beautiful song, poetic but very modern musically. I took a chance. I’m sure a few folks didn’t care much for it. But it was absolutely still in the sanctuary when I finished, and I’m hoping that I got out of God’s way and let the beauty of the text be a sung prayer.

Every church has something unique and important to offer and is a part of the Body, as we read in the 1 Corinthians 12 passages about spiritual gifts and the parts of the body working together, each with their own unique gifting. Are we brave enough to make ourselves available to be surprised and moved by a song that’s “not our style”? Can we allow ourselves to be taken out of our comfort zones and brought into the presence of the Holy Spirit?

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