
Music as a Spiritual Practice

BY MARK J. SUDERMAN

Christians often disagree about what music to choose for worship and even about its function within the liturgy. Three books follow different paths to clarifying music's role in worship, particularly in congregational singing.

Most Christians would agree that music is an important aspect of their worship and is a vital complement to other spiritual practices. Yet within our congregations and between them we may disagree strongly about what music to choose for worship and even about its function within the liturgy. Three books follow different paths in clarifying music's role in worship, particularly in congregational singing.

BRINGING GOOD SINGING INTO WORSHIP

In *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991, 122 pp., \$5.95), Alice Parker warmly invites us to think with her by beginning each chapter with an imagined conversation between a representative church musician and herself. Then Parker, who is a noted composer, clinician, and scholar of congregational singing, jumps right in to talk about the crux of issues regarding singing and song leading that churches face today. Her no-nonsense approach makes easy reading for the lay person, but also pushes the trained musician to think carefully about norms typically assumed in congregational singing.

Parker emphasizes the pressing need for song in churches today, for good singing can produce good congregational life by modeling a way for members to work and live with one another. Singing is able to foster unity among members and with God. Yet she stresses that not all of our singing in worship is *good singing*. Congregations must work at singing well: their members must study it, leaders teach it, and musicians expertly lead it. She fears that very rarely today can one find a congregation with an unbroken tradition of good singing, in which the children have grown up hearing their parents, friends, and peers sing. Our culture has drifted away from

this type of music-making, she warns, moving instead toward a diet of letting others produce sounds for us, either for our entertainment or for their purposes of advertising. There is a need to bring back the congregational voice that, in Parker's words, is "the heart of all church music" (p. 7).

To recapture its voice, Parker suggests, a congregation first needs a "vision" of the sound it wants. The key to this sound starts with the mel-

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ody: hearing it, shaping it, bringing it to life with the human voice. (Parker includes a brief account of the history of melody.) A song leader initiates the song and models the melody, and the congregation responds to this. Church members do not need to be able to read every note; it is more important for them

to hear the music and re-create it in the best way possible. "Music is sound, and the better it sounds, the better it is—and the more people will be caught by it" (p. 34).

Song leaders must understand each song in its entirety—not only its music, but also its words and their meaning in context. Only then can they share a song with the entire congregation, inviting the participants to respond in the best possible way. Musical accompaniment can support singing in various ways, but Parker strongly believes that the best singing occurs when no musical instruments are used, when hymns are led by a person, not by an organ or piano or other instrument.

Parker encourages the church to continue searching for the best union of good theology with good music, for our senses and minds must work together if we're to have an opportunity to "see" God through the arts. Regarding the source of church music, she is broad and eclectic: we need music that speaks to the emotions, concerns, and needs of everyday living, whether it is drawn from the realm of folk music or is composed music.

All the key people involved in planning a worship time—the pastor, song leader, liturgist, poet, visual artist, and so on—must collaborate with and show respect for one another, and remember why and for whom they are planning this worship. "There is no reason for music unless it communicates, and it should communicate to our minds, hearts, and spirits," Parker concludes (p. 56). Music is a gift from God, and it is during worship (and other times in our lives) that we are able to offer this gift back to our Creator. With a true desire to return this musical gift to God, we should not only give of ourselves, but strive to give the *best* of ourselves.

LETTING WORSHIP GUIDE THE CHOICE OF SONG

Music in Christian Worship: At the Service of the Liturgy, edited by Charlotte Y. Kroeker (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, 217 pp., \$18.95), is an anthology designed for the people who are responsible for church music: church musicians (both academically trained musicians and lay leaders), pastors, and theologians. Its twelve essays are by prominent scholars of worship and music from various Christian denominations. This interdisciplinary book provides a broad-based discussion of the complexity of church music, a discussion that acknowledges the interaction of music with a congregation's theology, liturgy, ethnicity, locality, and degree of involvement in worship.

Kroeker, a professional pianist who directs the church music initiative at the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame, frames the first section of essays on "Theological and Philosophical Considerations" with the question, "How can understanding the intersection of worship and art affect its integral contribution to Christian worship?" Nicholas P. Wolterstorff urges that church music primarily should enhance the action of the liturgy; only when the character of the music fits the liturgical action that it serves should we give consideration to its musical style. Don E. Saliers explores how music, as well as other symbols, can shape our sensory experience in response to God and produce different levels of congregational participation in worship. Michael S. Driscoll speaks of "musical mystagogy" and how the arts, especially music, can connect us with the mystery of God.

In the second section of the book, "Historical Perspectives," Kroeker poses the question, "What does the history of music in the church have to teach us about current and future practice of music in worship?" Two very different responses follow. Fr. Jan Michael Joncas uses the writings of Pope John Paul II to address the role of music in the church and to provide helpful distinctions of a family of terms, including "sacred music," "religious music," "church music," and "worship music."¹ Bert F. Polman offers a concise history of Christian hymnody from the medieval era to the present and concludes that "one of the history lessons we might have learned is to recognize that the church, at its best, has been able to integrate the best of the new songs with the best of the historic ones" (p. 72).

Part three, "Contemporary Cultural Considerations in the Light of Biblical Mandates," considers the question, "What issues in our current environment must be addressed in order for faithful music-making to occur?" A number of authors in this book regret the lack of modern hymns or worship songs expressing sorrow and lament. Echoing this concern, Wilma Ann Bailey draws the connection between the psalms of lament in the Old Testament and the spirituals of the African American slave experience. To address the need for discernment in worship planning, John D. Witvliet of-

fers several rhetorical models to help us choose music for the liturgy. This chapter is an excellent “nuts and bolts” approach to dealing with church controversies about music. The other two essays in this section present the cases for two different approaches to musical choices—singing songs from around the globe (C. Michael Hawn) and expressing the local uniqueness of a congregation (Linda J. Clark and Joanne M. Swenson). Both essays make strong points, and these two approaches should not be viewed as mutually exclusive.

In the final section of the book entitled “Practical Considerations in the Light of Biblical Mandates,” Kroeker asks, “How do we go about choosing music faithfully for worship?” Frank Burch Brown speaks directly to the question of musical styles that is at the heart of many congregational “worship wars.” Much of Brown’s essay is a critique of and response to William Easum’s warning, in *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World*, that churches are becoming spiritual dinosaurs. Mary Oyer, a Mennonite church musician and retired professor, is interviewed by Charlotte Kroeker concerning her experience in crossing cultural lines within church music. Kroeker’s concluding essay, “Choosing Music for Worship,” sums up the numerous ideas presented in the book.

OPENING WORSHIP TO THE WORLD

J. Nathan Corbitt’s *The Sound of the Harvest: Music’s Mission in Church and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998, 352 pp., \$28.00) introduces the role of music in the history and theology of the global church. In the first part, “Music in the Kingdom,” Corbitt shows how music functions in a local congregation in worship, prophecy, proclamation, healing, education, and theology. In the second part, “Music for the Kingdom,” he offers practical guidance to church musicians, pastors, and laypersons on the topics of the voice, the song, instruments, and musicians. Throughout the book Corbitt’s writing style is accessible and inviting to those who are just beginning to think about how music functions in Christian life and worship.

Corbitt begins each chapter with an organized synopsis and two stories. The first story, “the sound of the harvest,” offers a glimpse of a church music activity, while the second story, “and the beat of the street,” juxtaposes this church activity with music outside the church walls. The concrete examples in these stories connect the topic of the chapter to actual life. Unfortunately, Corbitt’s desire to cover each topic in great depth makes it difficult, at times, to follow his main thrust. However, the stories illustrate his ideas well and provide an excellent global, multicultural look at music in the church, moving us beyond our Western thought and experiences. Each chapter ends with questions and exercises to help the reader or study group dig more deeply into the subject.

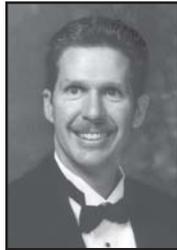
This book differs from the previous two books in Corbitt’s approach to the practical issue of choosing music for use in worship. While Parker and

the contributors in Kroeker's anthology stress the need for music education of the church body, Corbitt (while not avoiding the need for education in the music of the church) emphasizes that people must be reached in their current milieu. As he moves us toward more globally sensitive worship, he sees the need for new songs, without discarding the old. Corbitt concludes that "musicians' greatest gift to the kingdom is the critical listening skills to evaluate the present, the prudence to remember the past, and the wisdom to extend the kingdom outside one's own frame of reference" (p. 252).

Though these three books approach the choice of music in worship in very different ways, each makes a valuable contribution to the complex, important discussion about how music reflects and prods the movement of the church. Together these authors can guide us toward a more complete musical offering in our worship.

NOTE

† Father Joncas discusses the *Chirograph of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II for the Centenary of the Motu Proprio TRA LE SOLLECITUNINI on Sacred Music*, which is available online at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_20031203_musica-sacra_en.html. This document was issued in 2003 on the one-hundredth anniversary of Pope Pius X's effort to "renew sacred music in the liturgy...as a means of lifting up the spirit to God and as a precious aid for the faithful in their 'active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church.'"



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