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MUSIC IN WORSHIP SERVICE

Esther J. Kibor

Introduction

We have a saying in our language that says, “music is the heart of a language.” How true is this saying when we think of music in the worship of our God, the heavenly father who has done so much for us in Jesus Christ. Music plays a great role in the worship of a church. In music people lift up voices and hearts to God. Robert Webber rightly states, “worship is a meeting between God and His people”¹ In this meeting the presence of God is felt and a response is given in praise and thanksgiving. In the words of Terry Wardle, music “blends the sermon and prayers, making the worship a wonderful celebration of God’s self-giving in which Christians energetically declare the worthiness of God.”²

Yet strong feelings abound about hymns and music in worship. While some are positive, for example, “wasn’t the music great today? The anthem was inspiring; it’s good to attend a church where the music is high quality.” Others are negative, and unlike the positive comment, may state something like this, “I don’t understand why we can’t ever sing anything we know. The pastor always seems to select hymns nobody ever heard before. That anthem didn’t do anything for me.” The reason for such statements is threefold: people can sing; music evokes significant events in the life of an individual; music in worship develops faith, and “singing is one part of worship in which all present can participate by blending their voices toward the common goal of praising God. Carol M. Noren concurs with this threefold reason in saying that “music is the most corporate act of church service ...[that] ...unites worshippers as they interact with God in songs.”³

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¹ Robert Webber, *Worship: Old and New*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982), 11-12.

² Terry Wardle. *Exalt Him: Designing Dynamic Worship Services*, (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, 1992), 24.

³ Carol M. Noren. *What happens Sunday Morning: A Layman’s Guide to Worship*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 56-65.

Music in worship expresses itself in praise and adoration not to mention confession and thanksgiving as congregations gather to sing and focus on the nature and glory of God. There is need, then, to carefully select songs and choruses that have positive and victorious themes if music is to evoke true worship in the hearts of worshippers. What then are the basic categories of music? How significant is music in worship? What effect does good music bring to worship in our churches today? The focus of this article is to provide a solid and comprehensive survey of music as an essential element of Christian worship in the hope that churches will reconsider the type of music that is sung in their congregations.

Three Basic Categories of Music in Worship Service

James White describes vividly three basic categories of music that are likely encountered in worship. These include, **congregational music** that is chanted by everyone in worship service; **choral music** sung by some in the worship service; and **instrumental music** that may be accompanied by movement only.⁴ While these are broad categories, they can still be broken down into several forms, for example, in the congregational music are reflected the anthem, introit, ascription and hymns. For choral, there is the gradual and selected music. However, in many worship services the music is sung accompanied by instruments. In everyday life, believers listen to praise albums and other spiritual songs to minister to their spirits. These songs refresh and prepare them for worship whether in anticipation for corporate worship service or personal quiet time. Whatever category of music is used, peoples' hearts are always tuned into God making them ready to utter praises.

The Significance of Music in Worship Service

The significance of music in worship is well captured by Noren in analyzing the type of music used in worship in each of the above categories. First **congregational music** is best for it is participatory and interactive rather than passive. In worship both visitors and regular attendants are likely to join in if the hymns as well as songs and choruses are familiar, easy to sing and favourites of the congregation.⁵ It is vital that the first song or hymn a

⁴ James White. *Introduction to Christian Worship*, (Nashville: Abington Press, 1980), 100-102.

⁵ Noren, 58-59.

congregation sings should always be one that can be sung well. The first song or hymn usually has a way of attracting new comers.

Secondly, congregational singing has long been part of Christian worship. The New Testament gives several references to such singing. For example, Jesus and his disciples in the upper room after the Passover meal; Paul and Silas in the Philippians' jail; the admonition given to the Colossians (chap.3) and the singing of the multitudes in the book of revelation.

Thirdly, congregational singing too shapes and reinforces faith.⁶ In emphasizing this point, Allen and Borrer rightly point out that "music is one of the best ways to teach biblical truth [for] when the word is set to music, it penetrates the mind and heart and stays there."⁷ Even for those without faith in Christ, music can be used as an evangelistic tool to reach them especially when we consider the vitality of scripturally composed and contemporary songs.

Choral music with its roots in the Old Testament times was used when monasteries were established. This music became more complex and sophisticated with time as trained choirs came up. Like congregational songs, choirs are important in "proclaiming the word, performing music too difficult for congregation to sing, and in leading worshippers in singing hymns."⁸ In the context of the church's ministry, choirs serve crucial roles in the pastoral, educational and outreach functions. They provide fellowship and are a means of involving people in worship. And in areas of improvement, say, in weak preaching, choirs can offset such weakness in a worship service.⁹

There is need for proper location of the choir members in the worship service if a choir is to play the three liturgical functions discussed above. Proclamation is suggested when the choir is behind and a bit above the pulpit in front of the congregation. The music then will come from the position where the scripture will be preached. It also creates a sense of intimacy and mutual encouragement¹⁰.

⁶ Noren, 58.

⁷ Ronald Allen and Gordon Borrer. *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*, (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1982), 163.

⁸ Allen and Borrer, 163

⁹ Noren, 61.

¹⁰ Noren, 62.

Solidarity is suggested with the other worshippers if the choir is located at the rear balcony. Here, the choir members together with the worshippers face the liturgical centers and/or the cross (where one exists). This position facilitates mediation for there is no visual distraction. Needless to say, choir members should avoid the mentality of being engaged in a performance. Those who sit in a split chancel or elsewhere and leave their seats to stand on the chancel steps to face the congregation when singing¹¹ portray this function.

Instrumental music serves many functions. An organ or a piano can be used for the prelude and postlude of worship services to prepare people to worship and for praiseful fellowship. They can also be used for processions and recessions, and as background music during silent prayer. But background music must always be soft, and not too loud as to disrupt the praying persons' attention. Remember even the one playing the background music should also be involved in praying. Further instrumental music can be used during offertory time and other periods of meditation in the service.¹²

In Psalm 150, there is a list of instruments used in the worship of God: trumpet, lute, harp, tambourine, strings, pipe, and cymbals. Many references in the Bible call people to worship through the use of instruments. In I Chronicles 25:1, musicians used the lyres, harps, and cymbals to prophesy. A combination of strings, for example, lyre and choirs were used in processions (Ps. 81:2). Use of instruments in music was a way of communicating to large numbers without the intrusion of words. The trumpet and the horn were used separately and together for music of acclamation and praise respectively. The style as given by the psalmist is that of "let everything that has breath praise the Lord (Ps. 150:1).

From the above, we cannot overestimate the power and significance of music in worship. In so doing, we can easily prevent people from attaining a deeper understanding and richer experience of worship. As a gift from God, music has an "emotional and mental stimulation unmatched by any other means of communication. Words alone are very strong ... [but] when they are put into ... [the] 'right' music ... they can be burned into the mind and consciousness indelibly.¹³ So there is need to develop and use words (in music) to express creativity in praise and worship of our living God. This is only possible when singers and instrumentalists, as found in OT, are trained to lead worship (I Ch. 15:16-22).

¹¹ Noren, 62.

¹² Noren, 64.

¹³ Allen and Borrer, 160.

The Effect of Music in Worship Service

Music is integral in worship despite the varying scenes in the singing of any corporate worship. From observation, some congregations sing with boundless joy and glow on their faces, clearly pointing out that “I love you Lord” and “I want everyone to know it.” Others do not even open the hymnal; they just exist until something important revives them. Still others go through the motions of opening their books and their mouths in seeming dynamic participation yet with no thought of what is sung. Further some sing only if they know the song or chorus. What then is the effect of music in worship?

Singing is a dynamic living function that is caught. It is interactive and draws attention that an audience cannot just sit and listen in silence. Even those who are not skilled in music or do not know the songs or hymns or choruses are actively engaged.

As congregations lift up their voices to God in music, power and excitement is unleashed. Music opens up peoples’ hearts in response to the nature and attributes of God and this response is expressed in body movement, for example, the lifting up of hands and the springing of the feet up and down in singing. In concurring with this vitality of music as bodily expression of praise, Wardle rightly says such movement denotes “surrender, dependence and a desire to draw closer to God.¹⁴ It is a reflection of an intense feeling that music has power to encourage and uplift hearts, thus, opening them up to the spirit’s touch. To allow this to happen, we must create room, select and choose solemn reflective songs and/or hymns that call people to the cross and repentance.¹⁵ The standard of the music must “involve blending of intonation, tone colour, rhythmic integrity and a sense of music style.”¹⁶ In spite of these standards, we must exercise care in choosing music that will relate worship to life, be it contemporary or classical. Consideration should be taken because music that is conducive to worship depends on the nature and culture of the congregation. While some prefer classical, others contemporary, especially the young people. But balance must be maintained.

In the African context, the type of music sung in worship services does not necessarily matter much. With the influence of technology all types of music are sung. Whether the music is cyclic in pattern or one in which there is a mix of

¹⁴ Wardle, 36.

¹⁵ Wardle, 94.

¹⁶ Allen and Borrer, 157.

intercultural and western rhythms or where there is a variety in melody and frequent change of keys, the worship leaders must beware and determine which music to play so as to reach the diverse congregations. However, the thrust of the music itself, in my understanding, must touch the worshippers' hearts, level out differences and communicate the gospel and in the process encourage and edify congregants to maturity. The challenge is for the worship leaders and all concerned in the worship service to consecrate themselves so as to allow the worship to be awe inspiring and God honouring.

Key Factors to Congregational Singing in Worship

Several key factors serve to maintain a balance in the midst of obstacles to effective singing in congregational worship. There is need to create a comfort zone for the congregation, an atmosphere devoid of tension, where a spirit of warmth and friendliness pervades, and where people are not embarrassed to 'make a joyful noise to the Lord.' The creation of such an atmosphere and mood calls for worshippers to, first, examine their own personalities. Are they friendly, warm, accessible and confident? Second, have a proper accompaniment. For example, full sound, and right choice of instrument to accompany. Third, worship leaders must select songs, at least in the beginning, that are easy to sing and well known by the congregation. A good hymn does not need much direction. Fourth, some songs must be put in a lower key for all to sing. And as found in the African context, harmony is key. Fifth, give permission to the members not to participate by saying, 'you may not know the words yet, but feel free to join in and hum along. Listen to the words and phrases because that is part of worship too.' And last, but not the least, lighten the spirit of the congregation by creating life and humour¹⁷.

Worship leaders need to consider these key factors so as to make worship services meaningful in accordance to what God intends them to be for the glory of His name. It is very important that worship leaders explain the meaning of hymns, songs, and choruses; and ask people to ponder the words and phrases. A checklist for effectiveness would include such questions as, "Are the songs meaningful? Am I enthusiastic? Am I avoiding the routine? Am I explaining enough but not too much? And, Am I alert to the emotional energy of the congregation?"¹⁸ Remember regular evaluation of the worship service will go a long way to impact the congregation positively.

¹⁷ Jack Hayford, John Killinger and Howard Stevenson. *Mastering Worship*, (Christianity Today Inc. Portland: Multnomah Press, 1990), 53-54.

¹⁸ Hayford, Killinger and Stevenson, 57-58.

Conclusion

Music in worship is vital because it draws people to God. There should be a balance between classical and contemporary music so as to cater for all age groups. The hymns, songs and choruses must be addressed to God; there must be spontaneous praises that reflect the quality of our devotional lives. Music as Noren describes must be characterized by the filling of the Holy Spirit and be an expression of a conscious faith.¹⁹ This conscious expression of faith will avoid the singing of familiar hymns, songs and choruses thoughtlessly and leave the unknown to remain silent. Worship leaders and all those engaged in church ministry must be mindful of the music in their worship services.

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¹⁹ Noren, 58.

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