

## Music in Worship

### Historical Background

Music was part of Christian Worship from the earliest days. The ancient tradition of Psalm singing was borrowed from Jewish Worship and St Paul commands some of the earliest Christians to worship in song in his letter to the Ephesians:

*Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5.18-20)*

You might notice the implicit comparison – singing has the same power over us as wine, it takes us out of ourselves and frees us to worship more profoundly.

The tradition of arguing about the place and style of music in worship is equally long. In his *Confessions*, written in between 397 and 400, Augustine struggles with his approach to music, unsure whether music in Church is more of a distraction or an enhancement to worship:

*So I waver between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which, as I know from experience, can accrue from singing. Without committing myself to an irrevocable opinion, I am inclined to approve of the custom of singing in church, in order that by indulging the ears weaker spirits may be inspired with feelings of devotion. Yet when I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys, I confess that this is a grievous sin, and at those times I would prefer not to hear the singer. (Confessions 10.33)*

Long before the Reformation Pope John XXII, in his decretal *Docta Sanctorum Patrum* of 1324, complained about the state of Church Music,

*But certain practitioners of the new school...are composing new melodies of their own creation...that they prefer to the ancient traditional music... Some composers break up their melodies with hockets or rob them of their virility with discant, three-voice music, and motets, with a dangerous element produced by certain parts sung on text in the vernacular...The great number of notes in their compositions conceals from us the plainchant melody, with its simple well-regulated rises and falls...These musicians run without pausing. They intoxicate the ear without satisfying it; they dramatize the text with gestures; and, instead of promoting devotion, they prevent it by creating a sensuous and indecent atmosphere.*

This critical tradition, decrying the unintelligibility of the text when set to elaborate music, was picked up by the reformers, and, crucially for the history of the Church of England, by Thomas Cranmer. In a letter to Henry VIII, Cranmer enunciates his key musical principle:

*But in my opinion, the song that should be made thereunto [i.e. the musical setting of the BCP texts] would not be full of notes, but, as near as may be, for every syllable a note.*

This vision was realised by John Merbecke in his *Book of Common Prayer Noted* (1552), which provided a simple chant setting of the English text, where, indeed, only one note is given for every syllable.

The controversy continued, however, especially because of Elizabeth I's fondness for Choral Music, which allowed for rather more in the way of elaborate Church music in the worship of the Church of England than the austere Cranmer might have approved. Indeed, even something which today

seems to be the heart of Church of England worship – the singing of hymns – was hugely controversial when it was introduced, and the Revd Thomas Cotterill was taken to a Consistory Court in 1819 for allowing hymn singing in Church. The objection came from protestant-minded members of the Church of England, who were opposed to the use of any words other than those of Scripture in worship.

Unsurprisingly, many similar controversies rumble on today. Most Church of England folk think music of some form is an important element in worship, and acknowledge its power to lead us, as St Augustine said, beyond the force of the words themselves into a deeper devotion. Indeed, for many Evangelical Christians the very word “worship” itself simply *means* the singing of songs together (as in “now we will enter a time of worship”). However, what kind of music we should sing and how we should sing it is still a matter of often passionate debate, and lines that we have all heard spoken in a Church context – “this is more like a concert than a service”; “that music does nothing for me”; “that song is ok in a disco but not in a church”; “I like the tune but I can’t bear those words” – all resonate with debates that have been going on for almost 2,000 years.

### Questions:

- What do you think the purpose of music is in the worship of your Church community?
- Does everybody in your Church agree about music, and if not, what are the debates about?
- How can knowing something about the history of Church Music help us to think about our use of music in worship today?

### Music in Worship Today – A Practical Introduction

A successful use of music in worship starts off with a careful consideration of your context. This may seem an odd place to start – shouldn’t we start off by thinking about what pieces of music we want to use and then think about how to introduce them?

In fact, thinking about the current situation in your church first is key to making good music choices. Music is, obviously, a performing art and that means that any piece you choose is only going to be as effective as its performance. A great new song or hymn will fall flat if nobody is going to sing it well because they object to its style, or because it’s too tricky for them to pick up.

So what do you need to think about? I’ve put a few areas to explore below and I’m looking forward to discussing them with you.

### Expectations

It is always a temptation for a worship-leader, lay or ordained, to think that their role is to “teach” a congregation the right way of doing things, but we have to respect the traditions of what we have inherited, and have to be mindful of our role in allowing people to worship in ways that are powerful for them. Hymns and songs are some of the most familiar parts of worship to people, and they are understandably upset if they are changed in an insensitive way. Equally, if we only sing the same 10 hymns on a loop people will soon become bored and we are missing out on a lot of creativity. A balance is what is required.

### Questions:

- What are your congregation's musical expectations?
- Are they used to participating in all items of music, or are they used to sitting and listening?
- What kind of music is their musical "home"? Is there any appetite for variety?
- How content are you with the musical tradition of your Church?
- What part of your Church's musical tradition are you personally uncomfortable with but which you recognise is important for other people?

### Resources

When we start talking about musical resources, people often assume the key question is about the music leaders, or about the equipment we need. In fact, the most fundamental resource in most Church of England settings of all varieties is the congregation. Given the importance of participatory singing to Anglicans, what your congregation is like musically will determine the answer to my number one liturgical question: not *what should work?* or *what would I like to work?* but *what actually does work in my context?*

So, starting off by thinking about the congregation, the first issue to consider is what are they like at singing. Many factors will have an effect on this, and they include the size of your congregation, their age, their confidence, the presence of any keen singers in the congregation who can take a lead (or otherwise), the presence or absence of vocalists (choir, cantor, or worship leader), and the effectiveness of your musical leaders in encouraging good singing through their style of accompaniment, leadership and sometimes even congregational training.

### Questions:

- What is the singing like in your congregation?
- What tends to make it better or worse?
- What might you do to improve it?
- If your congregation struggle to sing, how should that affect your music choices?
- If your congregation is really good at singing, how should that affect your music choices?

Of course, the skills of your music leaders are also crucial, and what they can do effectively should play a large part in how you make decisions about music. Unfortunately, many musical decisions are made on the basis of a notion of "how things ought to be" rather than "what works effectively". Sometimes the insistence on "how things ought to be" comes from the musicians themselves, but sometimes it comes from the community and the worship leaders, and just occasionally you have the opportunity to set some of the musicians free to be more creative and effective.

### Consider the following scenarios:

- Many village Church organists are actually pianists who are willing to "step in", but some struggle with aspects of Organ playing (which is a different skill to piano playing), and/or the Organ may be in bad repair. If you have a piano, could you ask them to play a piece on that occasionally e.g. during Communion? What might the issues at play be here?
- Some Churches have a Choir but it is very small and its effectiveness is questionable, what do you do about this?

- You have a really strong singer in the congregation, in fact sometimes theirs is the only voice you can hear in the hymns. What can you do to make the most of this talent?
- You have a Church with an excellent semi-professional adult worship band and a large teenage youth group. What is more important – getting the teenagers involved in music-making or keeping the high standard of music the band performs?
- Your excellent worship band wants to sing some new music which sounds fantastic, but it is too complex and too high for members of the congregation to join in with. What do you do?

### **Making music choices**

Finally, we're at the point when we can think about what music to choose – remember, if it's going to be effective, it has to be effectively performed in your context, which is what we've been exploring up until now. So what things should determine your music choices?

### **Familiarity and the new**

What balance do you want to strike in any particular service between “old favourites” and less familiar or new material? This will depend partly on the appetite of your congregation and the skills of your musicians and also on the particular service in question – a new song is probably more likely to be well received in a meditative Lent service than in the Candlelit Christmas Carol service.

If you do want to introduce new material think about a musical strategy for doing so, could the band/choir sing it alone one week, then all join in the next week, should there be a “practice” before the service, and should you repeat it soon to make sure it gets bedded in to the repertoire?

If you have weak singing, think carefully about what new material is likely to be picked up quickly. A manageable range, predictable tunes, repeated choruses all help the piece to get going effectively.

### **Integration with the rest of the service**

This is the key to effective music choice. The music needs to work effectively with the liturgy to make a consistent whole. There are a variety of things to think about when making music choices that will help you to ensure the music fits effectively with the liturgy:

#### *The liturgical season*

This is more important in some Church traditions than others, but music that is appropriate to the season of the service (Advent, Lent, Easter, Epiphany etc.) is one of the easiest ways to sustain the liturgical integrity of the service. This can be done by choosing hymns/songs which are specially written for a particular season (think: Forty days and forty nights; We three kings; Oh what a morning gloriously bright etc.). It can also be done by thinking of hymns that have the right “mood” for the season, even though they may be of a more general character.

One particular point to note is that traditionally the word *Alleluia* is never said or sung during Lent in any liturgical context, so check carefully the text of any hymn you pick for this season!

### *The readings/theme*

For Churches which observe the liturgical year carefully attention to the readings is particularly important during “Ordinary time”/green Sundays/Sundays after Trinity, when there is less seasonal material to guide you. There is something of a balancing act here, however. It is good to pick songs and hymns that reference the Biblical texts used, or which pick up on their themes and extend them, but you need to be careful that this doesn’t lead to too much repetitiveness in the music. A mixture of more specific and more generic music is often a good way to go.

### *The style or atmosphere of the whole service*

The style or atmosphere of the whole service also needs to be taken into account. A starchy four square hymn like *All ye who seek a comfort sure* works brilliantly at Evensong, but less well as the entrance hymn to a joyful Eucharist, an item of worship led by a praise-band, or as part of a meditative service. There is often a temptation to try and “subvert” the aesthetics of a particular type of service by putting in a different style of music on the grounds of variety/inclusion. It hardly ever works effectively as it destroys the integrity of the worship. If you want to explore a different tradition of worship it needs to be done in a way that’s more thought out, where every part of the liturgy works together.

### *What help is there?*

Most hymn books and worship song collections have excellent indexes, get to know the back of your hymn book well! Some of them give suggestions for each Sunday of the year which are very helpful, at least as a starting point. For those of you who subscribe to *Church Music Quarterly* (or whose Church does), the RSCM magazine, there is an excellent supplement that comes out in every edition called “Sunday by Sunday” which gives a huge range of appropriate music (hymns, worship songs, anthems, Taize chants, even organ voluntaries) which is more than you will ever need. But nothing beats getting to know the repertoire yourself and spending some time thinking about it.

### **Trajectory within the service**

When considering choosing music, you also need to think of the shape of the whole service. Every service has a trajectory. A common one is loud-soft-loud/joy-reflection-joy or however you want to put it. But sometimes you might want darkness > light, or thanksgiving > poignancy or something like that. The music needs to fit with this. A common “mistake”, for instance, is to put down a hymn like *Alleluia! Sing to Jesus* as the hymn during communion because it is listed in the section “Holy Communion” in many hymn books. This does not work very effectively for two reasons (i) a reflective atmosphere is spoilt by a loud hymn, (ii) the moving about etc. during communion means that not everyone can sing together at one time, so the force of the hymn is lost. Think carefully about the “mood” of each section of the service when making your choices. Get the hymn/song right and it will create the mood for you, get it wrong and it can destroy the moment.

### **Questions:**

- Do you agree with this approach to choosing music?
- What other things have I missed that you think about when making your choices?

**Task:**

You have been asked to pick 4 hymns or songs for a Communion Service. It is “Year A Proper 19” a “green” Sunday after Trinity, the readings are:

Genesis 50.15-21

Matthew 18.21-25

You are going to preach about the meaning of forgiveness. What do you pick? And why?

Entrance Hymn/Song:

Offertory Hymn/Song:

Hymn/Song During Communion:

Recessional Hymn/Song:

*Max Kramer October 2020*