

CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP MUSIC DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

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I inhabit what can sometimes feel like a strange place in the world of church music. I grew up as a classical musician and itinerant parish organist but, on coming up to Oxford in 2002, found myself heavily involved in the world of 'Contemporary Worship Music'. This rather misleading but almost ubiquitous label is commonly used to refer to any church music set-up that employs pop or rock music in worship. I now spend much of my time as a church musician moving between different contexts, feeling welcomed and at home in all of them and, simultaneously, an outsider who is always putting part of his musical life to one side.

Getting to know the nuances of worship music took time as I slowly figured out the ways in which different things worked and the rationales behind different practices and decisions. Sometimes the music would resonate strongly, drawing me into a way of worship that I found had power to carry me along in engagement with God. Sometimes I felt deeply ambivalent about a set-up that used a music so different from the kinds of music I valued and studied elsewhere. My first experience of buying a CD that included electric guitars felt slightly disconcerting and unnatural.

Over time I discovered that this kind of tension wasn't unique to me, that worshippers from a range of musical backgrounds related to music in Sunday services in a wide variety of ways, and that for some this caused tensions between different aspects of their experience while for others, navigating differing musical worlds was seemingly effortless. Intrigued by this, and wanting to help worshippers and the church navigate some of these tensions, last year I began some doctoral research on these experiences, believing it important for different people and different churches to discuss meaningfully what they do and experience, so that they can be formed together into the body of Christ.

To understand some of these experiences, we must consider the role of music in the contemporary worship movement, where music is often thought to serve two principal purposes:

- ▶ **It provides an opportunity to reach out to the surrounding culture** and draw people into faith and worship through engagement with styles and forms that they are familiar with. Music becomes a tool of outreach that can be used to convey the gospel and to build bridges into the world.
- ▶ It finds its primary significance in **providing a space in which worshippers can directly engage with God** and offer their hearts to him in loving devotion. It becomes something that allows people to express themselves and their worship to God in ways that connect with forms of musical engagement familiar from their daily lives.

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These priorities together have shaped much worship music culture in terms of the music that is written and how this music is understood and thought about by those that use it. As in more traditional musical settings, these priorities can have positive and negative consequences, opening up important avenues of musical and devotional thought and engagement whilst neglecting others. The conflict that often accompanies the introduction of contemporary worship music can counter fruitful discussion of these



Bible ref: Jeremiah 10:10
Nahum 1:3

Am | Am | F | Dm

He who appoints

C F C G
He who appoints the sun to shine by day,
C F C G
He who decrees the moon to shine by night,
Am F G
He who has stirred the sea and calms the storm
m F G Am | Am |
He who is called I Am calls me by name

F G/B F Am G
He is the Lord, He is Lord, He is Lord, He's Lord of all.

F G
His glory, to the Lord Almighty,
F
His glory, to the great
F G/B
His glory, to the Lord Almighty,
F G Am | Am |

His power, the nations tremble to fall
His name, the stars are bright as the dawn
His love, the nations tremble to fall
He is God, I am righteous the world

Am | Am | F | Dm | Am | Dm



implications: the need to defend deeply held positions leaves many avenues of meaning and experience unexplored. One example is the way in which an early need to defend rock music against accusations that it was inherently debased and bad led to assertions that music is a fundamentally neutral phenomenon, something that simply serves the message of the words or the internal act of worship. This defence is important – rock music has the ability to foster positive attitudes and behaviours just as much as it can serve problematic purposes and agendas – but it has also closed off important discussion and dialogue about musical value and meaning. Examining people’s experiences reveals an array of perspectives that can help to reopen some of this discussion.

In a world full of God-given creativity, possibility and diversity church music can often feel polarized.

I have interviewed around 40 people from a variety of musical backgrounds about their musical lives and their experiences of contemporary worship. I wanted to find out how they relate the music they use in church to the musical backgrounds they possess from elsewhere and how they deal with what might, at first glance, seem an unnatural musical environment. From this we can consider how others might get to grips with different musical traditions and how churches can respond pastorally and musically in more nuanced ways. My research has led me to explore three main categories of musical experience that impact how people move between different musical worlds and how one particular sort of music might become meaningful (or problematic) for people from a range of backgrounds:

► **Musical meaning and experience can be flexible.** The focus of worship music can become very different depending on the other kinds of music that people listen to and enjoy. For someone into musical theatre, worship music can be valued as an emotional sing-along. For someone with a background in orchestral music, it can be the coming together as a group to make a musical and spiritual impact which characterizes their thinking about and valuing of the music.

► **People can find ways of separating out different parts of their musical lives.** Different kinds of music are able to become significant to them in different ways. Sometimes these are complementary – an expression of loud and confident communal faith in church can be accompanied by a musical life centering around the struggles and doubts which enable that faith to be taken on. Sometimes musical division can reinforce a separation between church life and daily life; the ways of being and relating that music enables in church can contrast with how a worshipper grapples (musically) with life outside that context.

► **Ways of thinking about, experiencing and evaluating one kind of music can become a problem when transferred into worship.** Someone used to looking to music for a sense of the sublime can find the strumming of a guitar meaningless and banal; someone used to free improvisation and spontaneous expression can find fixed forms of music constraining and lifeless. Sometimes these judgments can be set aside if it is recognized that worship music achieves some other purpose. Sometimes suppression of judgment turns into pent-up frustration that the music isn’t doing what it needs to, not out of self-centredness and a desire to be pandered to, but out of a recognition that there is a particular kind of good that church music simply isn’t addressing.

It can seem a rather strange situation that in a world full of God-given creativity, possibility and diversity, church music can feel polarized between just two, very separate, traditions. If we look at the range of musical lives that members of congregations possess, and the range of meanings and significance that music within church takes on for them, we might open up a conversation that offers new productive and creative opportunities. It is often assumed that in the realm of church music people either want to have their own ‘personal preferences’ catered to, or that they will have the maturity to hold these at bay. In my experience, worshippers’ real desire is to engage in meaningful music-making that does justice to their experiences of what music can be and do, whether or not that means using styles that they are familiar with. This is something that the church can listen to, engage in and teach.