

(Almost) A Decade of Congregational Music Studies

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In the eight years since the “Christian Congregational Music: Local and Global Perspectives” conference first met, Congregational Music Studies has both crystallised as a new field of research, and catalysed a new generation of scholarship interested in Christian devotional music as it is practiced and experienced by groups and individuals around the world.¹ Congregational Music Studies represents a new focus within the study of music and Christianity which both builds upon earlier traditions of study and turns in new directions to see Christian musical activity in new ways. It offers an emphasis on human practices and experiences built largely upon ethnomusicological impulses which foreground an understanding of music as a human activity over and above its status as text or aesthetic object. This is complemented by an emphasis on the congregation as one of the main participants in Christian musical devotion, resisting a focus on musicians or composers as the principal focus of attention. In the following pages, I want to trace some of the research that has emerged over the last eight or nine years, to reflect upon the contributions that a new generation of scholarship has begun to make to our understanding of devotional music, and to look at the directions this field might be taking in the near future.

A Story of Growth

In the autumn of 2011, having spent some time away from academic study, I finally worked up the motivation to give it another go. Through much of my musical education in Oxford and London, I’d had an uneasy awareness that, while traditional university music courses delved periodically into areas of sacred music such as the development of western chant and the music of the Reformation, they didn’t always connect very easily with the musical arena that was becoming increasingly important to me: the everyday use of music

for congregational and individual worship. Over the course of time I had made some efforts at connecting the two, beginning some exploration of musical theology through, for example, Jeremy Begbie’s work in *Theology, Music and Time*.² This began to bring my devotional practice and my musicological study closer together, but it didn’t quite go all the way. Theological perspectives on the music of the concert hall were still at some distance from the participatory musical practices of the congregations where I served and worshipped, particularly due to the interest they often had in texts and composers over and above communities, experiences, and practices.³

What finally gave me the motivation to return once more to academic research was the realization—one which should have been, but wasn’t always, obvious—that the musical activity of congregations themselves, and all the joys and struggles that I’d experienced within it, could itself be a valid focus of academic study. As I began my doctoral research, I quickly discovered both that there were more scholars that had ventured into the realm of congregational music than I had expected, and that there were still many ways in which this really was still a novel and evolving area of study. There was, for example, no shortage of publications on different kinds of sacred musical works, and certainly there was theological literature addressed to different understandings of the nature of music in both more-secular and more-sacred performance venues. Likewise, I found a range of histories documenting the rise of particular spiritualities and their associated forms of worship as well as many popular-level texts reflecting pastorally on particular musical issues faced by congregations. There seemed, indeed, to be a great deal of literature that touched in some way on the arena in which I was interested. However, a good proportion of this literature seemed to skirt carefully around the edges of congregational musical activity rather than taking that as its main point of focus. My own interest in contemporary worship music

1. I use the terms *devotion* and *devotional* throughout this article due to their slightly broader connotations than ideas of worship.

2. Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).

3. While organisations such as the British or American Hymn Societies may well have provided support for my interests had I been aware of them, they largely failed to cross my radar as potential supporters or partners. This was partly because my primary interest was in the area of contemporary worship music rather than hymnody as such, but also because my interest in questions of experience and practice seemed to be very different from the focus on musical and literary texts which I assumed to be the primary interests of such societies.

seemed, at the time, to be particularly vulnerable to neglect, as its primary musical material was, perhaps, less compositionally or theologically remarkable than many of the works which motivated people to write articles or books on them.

Nevertheless, as I ventured further, I began to bump into people who shared a similar interest. In 2010, Carolyn Landau, a musician on my worship team in London and an early-career scholar herself, introduced me to Monique Ingalls, who had begun to pursue her own research on contemporary worship music, and to Tom Wagner who was doing some work on Hillsong. After an initial meeting over drinks, this led to the idea that we, together with Martyn Percy, the principal of a local theological college, might try putting on a small conference specifically dedicated to congregational music, with the aim of seeing whether there might be a dozen or so people out there with an interest in exploring this area further. While we were initially quite uncertain as to how many people might share what seemed quite a niche interest, the conference attracted a surprising number of people, and we are now close to celebrating the tenth anniversary of the conference, an anniversary which marks a significant journey of growth and development in the fledgling field the conference helped to inaugurate: Congregational Music Studies. So what has happened over the course of this last decade?

In 2014, I wrote an article exploring some of the different scholarly trends and contributions which led to the early development of this field,⁴ in particular, drawing attention to the increasing possibility within ethnomusicological research to apply ethnographic methods not just to distant or exotic others, but to engage in fieldwork research around musical traditions much closer to home. Alongside this, I highlighted the ways in which complementary developments in congregational studies, practical theology, and ritual and liturgical studies had served to prepare the ground for interdisciplinary study of congregational musical practices. In particular, I described how such interdisciplinary study can help to develop beyond traditional theological or musicological approaches which have often tended to marginalise the

practices of everyday musical devotion. I traced some of the different pockets of research which were beginning to emerge at that time, and attempted to draw these together so as to suggest that what had once been isolated examples of scholarly endeavour might now begin to cohere into a larger-scale phenomenon. A great deal has happened, however, even since the developments of just five years ago.

The first, and perhaps most important, development has been the creation of a community of scholars and practitioners who are aware of each other's interest in the musical activity of congregations as a focus for scholarly exploration. A number of scholars were already working on these questions before the conference began. It was only in drawing them together explicitly in this way, however, we began to create a self-conscious community, aware of potential colleagues and collaborators scattered around a variety of institutions. It was here that the idea of Congregational Music Studies as a field of study with its own identity was born, and with it the self-conscious nurturing of an area which both built upon existing studies in areas such as hymnology and music theology, but also took its own distinct and particular direction through its prioritisation of the activity and experience of congregational music as its major focus.

A second achievement has been the publication of a number of books explicitly dedicated to these themes. This has become most visible in an edited series of book publications under the umbrella of the *Congregational Music Studies* created and organized by series editors Ingalls, Martyn Percy, and Zoe Sherinian, and published by Routledge. These volumes demonstrate very nicely the range of themes which have become important within this area of study. The initial volume, *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity and Experience*, has become the most widely-referenced, both establishing congregational music as a focus of study and, following the keywords in the title, introducing some key themes relevant to such study.⁵ This volume has become a key text for scholars and students seeking to engage with Congregational Music Studies scholarship

4. Mark Porter, "The Developing Field of Christian Congregational Music Studies" *Ecclesial Practices* 1, no. 2 (2014): 149–66.

5. Monique M Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Tom Wagner, *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity, and Experience* (Farnham, UK/Burlington, VT: Routledge/Ashgate, 2013).

for the first time and has significantly helped to lend legitimacy to the congregation as a valid focal point within studies of devotional music. The volumes that have followed, covering themes such as media,⁶ localization,⁷ community, diversity and conflict,⁸ have each developed in different directions, bringing in new themes and points of focus which extend beyond the scope of the initial volume and which cross over with scholarship in a range of other areas of study. This series of publications continues to expand, alongside works published in other venues which orbit around the same constellation of interests.⁹

A third, and crucial, development has been the platform this work has offered for a new generation of researchers interested in asking their own questions of the devotional musical practices which they encounter, exploring questions of meaning, power, relationships, ethics and justice amongst different Christian communities and traditions. A recent proliferation of doctoral dissertations in this area, particularly within the United States, has been immensely encouraging to witness. These theses have focussed on topics such as the history of contemporary worship music in modern America;¹⁰ undergrounds, mainstreams and Christian popular music;¹¹ fundamentalist Christianity as musical and cultural practice;¹² ritual, power, and white masculinity;¹³

listening to American evangelical worship music;¹⁴ the relational ethics of church music;¹⁵ understanding church music through the lens of performance studies;¹⁶ a history and analysis of the genre of “global song” within US mainline Protestant churches and networks;¹⁷ spirituality within the Jesus movement;¹⁸ and how Korean Christians use congregational music to negotiate identity and build community.¹⁹ A number of these have received some acknowledgment within the pages of *The Hymn*, and I hope that readers of this publication have been as encouraged by reading about the emergence of this work as I have been.

As is clear from these dissertations, contemporary worship music and evangelical Christianity have formed a major point of focus within much of this research, and deservedly so, as these phenomena have an ever-increasing influence on contemporary Christian communities around the world. However, equally rightly, they are far from the only points of interest to scholars working in this area. At the 2019 Christian Congregational Music conference, for example, there were papers on topics such as black British gospel music, Turkish Christian hymnody, the role of the choir in rural English churches, the point of choral evensong, chanting communities in Finnish Orthodoxy, Beer and Hymns as a form of musical community, and the shaping of a

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6. Anna Nekola and Tom Wagner, *Congregational Music-making and Community in a Mediated Age* (Farnham, UK/Burlington, VT: Routledge/Ashgate, 2015).
 7. Monique Marie Ingalls, Muriel Swijghuisen Reigersberg, and Zoe C Sherinian, eds., *Making Congregational Music Local in Christian Communities Worldwide* (London/New York: Routledge, 2018).
 8. Mark Porter, *Contemporary Worship Music and Everyday Musical Lives* (Abingdon, UK/New York: Routledge, 2016). Jonathan Dueck, *Congregational Music, Conflict and Community* (Abingdon, UK/New York: Routledge, 2017).
 9. E.g., Melvin Butler, *Island Gospel: Pentecostal Music and Identity in Jamaica and the United States* (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2019). Monique Marie Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018). Tom Wagner, *Music, Branding, and Consumer Culture in Church* (Abingdon, UK/New York: Routledge, 2019). Frances Wilkins, *Singing the Gospel along Scotland's North-East Coast, 1859–2009* (Abingdon, UK/New York: Routledge, 2017).
 10. Wen Reagan, “A Beautiful Noise: A History of Contemporary Worship Music in Modern America” (PhD diss., Duke Univ., 2015).
 11. Andrew Mall, “‘The Stars Are Underground’: Undergrounds, Mainstreams, and Christian Popular Music” (PhD diss., Univ. of Chicago, 2012).
 12. Sarah Bereza, “The Right Kind of Music: Fundamentalist Christianity as Musical and Cultural Practice” (PhD diss., Duke Univ., 2017).
 13. Maren Haynes, “‘Punk Rock Calvinists who Hate the Modern Worship Movement’: Ritual, Power, and White Masculinity in Mars Hill Church’s Worship Music, 1998–2014” (PhD diss., Univ. of Washington, 2017).
 14. Josh Busman, “(Re)sounding Passion: Listening to American Evangelical Worship Music, 1997–2015” (PhD diss., Univ. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015).
 15. Nathan Myrick, “The Relational Ethics of Church Music” (PhD diss., Baylor Univ., 2018).
 16. Marcell Steuernagel, “Church Music Through the Lens of Performance: The Embodied Ritual of Sacred Play” (PhD diss., Baylor Univ., 2018).
 17. Marissa Moore, “Voicing the World: Global Song in American Christian Worship” (PhD diss., Yale Univ., 2018).
 18. Kathryn Kinney, “Upon This Rock: American Evangelical Spirituality and Jesus Music, 1969–1976” (PhD diss., Washington Univ., 2019).
 19. Bo Kyung Blenda Im, “Transpacific Modernity and the Challenge of Belonging: Negotiating Race, Music, and Faith in Seoul” (PhD diss., Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2019).

Christian music event amongst recent anti-Islamic sentiment. Likewise, while the United States has served as one the major centers for the development of this scholarship, it is by no means the only significant location for recent research; for the 2019 conference, the committee accepted and invited papers from the United Kingdom, United States, Ireland, Australia, South Africa, Spain, Brazil, Japan, Finland, Hong Kong, Romania, India, Sweden, Jamaica, and the Netherlands; from disciplines such as ethnomusicology, church music, musicology, educational psychology, sociology, hymnody, worship studies, music theory, music, theomusicology, liturgical studies, homiletics, practical theology, theology, ritual studies, sociology of religion, arts management, performance studies, religious studies, and anthropology. It is exciting as both a scholar and a practitioner to read and hear such a diverse breadth of research, and to reflect on what it means, and what implications for the study of congregational song can be drawn from these new varieties of analysis.

Overlapping Institutions

While the Christian Congregational Music conference has formed an important focal point for new research in this area, it is far from the only venue within which this study is being nurtured and within which scholars are finding partners for dialogue. Developments within ethnomusicological research have been crucial in nurturing a focus on musical practice and experience, and many scholars within the field have ethnomusicology as their natural disciplinary home. The establishment of what is now the Religion, Music, and Sound Section within the Society for Ethnomusicology by Ingalls and Andrew Mall in 2009 has significantly raised the profile of scholarship on religious music within an organization that studies this music from a global perspective, as social practice and on the basis of ethnographic fieldwork. The American Academy of Religion has also been an important institutional focal point for scholars working in this field, and the Music and Religion unit, in particular, helps to maintain an awareness that devotional musical practices are part of the way in which religion is practiced within society, and not simply a separate realm of aesthetic or artistic enjoyment. The

conferences of the British and American Hymn Societies, the Calvin Symposium on Worship, and the conferences of the Society for Christian Scholarship in Music, each also contribute their own particular focus for scholars working in this area.

The establishment of the *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* represents another parallel and overlapping endeavour within the realm of musical scholarship. Established in 2015, the then-editor of the journal,²⁰ emphasised the need for a journal able to draw in non-musical matters alongside the musical when considering religion, suggesting that that scholarship of religious music tended often to be pushed out of musicological disciplines in the early twenty-first century. Likewise, Congregational Music Studies has begun to make itself felt on a range of university and seminary course syllabi in which university educators are beginning to take this realm of scholarship seriously as a topic of interest for emerging generations of students. Learning of the presence of scholarship in this area within my undergraduate home of the Oxford University music faculty was, for me, a potent symbol of just how far the field has come. From my undergraduate days, in which I struggled to find any kind of connection between the music that nurtured my developing faith, and the historical musicology of the music syllabus, it is exciting now to see this material being taught in the music department there, and to see more and more doctoral candidates and research students investigating related topics where I never imagined such scholarship taking place.

Media and Social Media

It is not just traditional institutions, however, that have served to enable the flourishing of research on music and congregations. As an early-twenty-first-century development, with a large contingent of early-career scholars, social media and the Internet have played a key role in keeping scholars in scattered locations aware of the work that their colleagues are doing, Facebook, in particular, serves as a location for scholars to observe developments in the world around them, test out ideas, celebrate each other's work and progress, collaborate on projects, and find points of reference beyond our own departmental and institutional horizons. This

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20. Robin Leaver, "Editorial," *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* 1, no. 1 (2015). Available at <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yjmr/vol1/iss1/1/> accessed 14 April 2020.

social media presence is enhanced, to an extent, by the way in which this field of research crosses over into contemporary societal issues, debates covered by the media, and also with the lives and practices of those engaging in research. The Contemporary Praise and Worship Research Colloquium, organised by Adam Perez, is one example of the collaborations that have opened up. As well as meeting regularly in a physical venue in order to discuss emerging scholarship surrounding contemporary praise and worship music, the colloquium is also networked via online meeting software Zoom, so that researchers who are dispersed away from any central institutional structure can nevertheless maintain an ongoing dialogue in a timescale much quicker than patterns of publication and conference attendance. Sarah Bereza's *Music and the Church* podcast is another example, seeking to mediate between thought and scholarship surrounding congregational music and the practical needs and interests of musicians and pastors practicing this work on a regular basis.

Scholars associated with the field have also begun to offer a new public face for Christian music scholarship within different media forums, particularly as media outlets seek to understand the different ways in which religious practices are evolving in contemporary society and the crucial role that music often plays within the most spectacular of these. A recent issue of UK-based Anglican newspaper *The Church Times*, featured interviews with a number of scholars of congregational music in a feature seeking to understand the current situation of contemporary worship music in the UK church, and the possible future musical directions that churches might be able or need to take.²¹ Likewise, Wagner has been quoted in *The New York Times* in an article exploring

the popularity of Hillsong,²² while Wagner, Ingalls, Kinga Povedák, Gerardo Marti, and Tanya Riches have all been mentioned in articles in *Christianity Today* exploring similar phenomena.²³

Emerging Trajectories

While the idea of Congregational Music Studies represents an exploration beyond traditional paradigms of sacred music research through its foregrounding of congregations, some scholars have, in turn, found the focus on the congregation itself too restrictive, and research continues to evolve. Mirella Klomp²⁴ and Ingalls,²⁵ in particular, have suggested ways of theorising music and faith which deliberately frame the study of music and faith in other ways. Klomp has highlighted the fact that devotional musical practices often occur beyond the limits of traditional congregations, and that a focus on the congregation therefore has the potential to exclude important realms of society from research in a way that potentially reflects older patterns and assumptions better than contemporary realities. Ingalls, in turn, has suggested that we might benefit from a focus on *congregating* as an activity that can take place in a variety of settings in a variety of ways, over and above a focus on the congregation as any kind of specific bounded or established entity.

Other turns have been proposed as well. Marcel Steuernagel,²⁶ for instance, has suggested, following the rise of Congregational Music Studies, that the interdisciplinary of performance studies opens new possibilities and perspectives that scholars should pay further attention to. In my own more-recent work,²⁷ I have suggested

21. Madeleine Davies, "Global, White... Where Next for Worship Music?" *Church Times*, 7 Dec. 2018, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/7-december/features/features/where-next-for-contemporary-worship-music>.

22. Michael Paulson, "Megachurch with a Beat Lures a Young Flock," *New York Times*, 9 Sept. 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/10/us/hillsong-megachurch-with-a-beat-lures-a-young-flock.html>.

23. Clint Bryan, "Hillsong's Global Appeal, Explained by Sociologists," *Christianity Today*, 23 Jan. 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/january-web-only/hillsongs-global-appeal-explained-by-sociologists.html>. Constance Cherry, "Across the Globe, Contemporary Worship Music is Bringing Believers Together," *Christianity Today*, 15 Feb. 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/march/across-globe-contemporary-worship-music-is-bringing-believe.html>.

24. Mirella Klomp and Marcel Barnard, "Sacro-Soundscapes: Interpreting Contemporary Ritual Performances of Sacred Music through the Case of the Passion in the Netherlands," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 21, no. 2 (2017): 240-58.

25. Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*.


26. Steuernagel.

27. As-yet unpublished, but see Mark Porter, "Sounding Back and Forth: Dimensions and Directions of Resonance in Congregational Musicking," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 2 (2017): 446-69.

the potential value of comparative work that considers multiple different Christian traditions, and the potential value of tools within sound studies. Nathan Myrick is continuing important work highlighting the importance of developing ethical perspectives on the musical activity of congregations,²⁸ and Mall has highlighted the need to consider questions of capital and status in order to get a grip on patterns of power and inequality within the circulation of worship music.²⁹ No doubt there are many further new areas which deserve equal, if not greater, attention, and there are also significant gaps that remain to be filled. Frances Wilkins, for example, in her work among fishing communities along Scotland's north-east coast highlights the numerous gaps in knowledge surrounding sacred singing traditions in Scotland and across the British Isles.³⁰ Likewise, Adan Fernandez has observed, following the 2019 Cuddesdon conference, that more traditional models of worship are sometimes subject to a degree of neglect.³¹

Other suggestions abound, and there are still a great number of new perspectives to be brought in. Scholarship in this area is still somewhat geographically uneven. Many recent dissertations have been written in the United States, a situation which has been enabled and propelled, to a certain extent, by the particular nature of both American Christianity and American university structures. There are countries and regions where a different prioritization of interests means that this kind of scholarship hasn't developed quite so easily. Another, more-recent, development has been a desire to explore the potential dialogue that it might be possible to open up beyond the boundaries of Christianity with those studying the music of other faith traditions and the way that it functions within communities of faith. What paradigms are used to understand other religious musical traditions? Might they help us to see our own in new ways? Can parallel or contradictory developments be traced across the boundaries of different sacred music practices? There are a great many questions to be asked here which Congregational Music studies are only just beginning to consider.

There are still significant challenges to face as studies of Christian Congregational Music develop into the

future. While some important interest and dialogue has come from those occupying established positions within university and seminary departments, as those who complete their doctoral theses emerge from graduate study, the challenge of where to find a longer-term home for further work, whatever form that may take, is a very real one. While this is a challenge posed by the state of modern academia in general, it is a particularly stark one for individuals caught between different disciplinary traditions, and often, as well, between research and practice, an intersection which, as John Witvliet highlighted at the 2019 Christian Congregational Music conference, still needs further attention. Scholarship of music and Christianity does not stand still and, alongside a constant stream of new musical forms and practices to reflect upon, the ways in which we understand these practices, and the focus of our interest is also subject to a continual process of evolution and development. The development of new work in this area should serve as an encouragement to those with longer-standing interests that new generations of scholars have the curiosity to push the study of sacred music in new directions. At the same time, it provokes the question of how existing institutions can listen to and support this work, and of how we can enter into dialogue with one another in a way that best enables the flourishing of different institutions and interests alongside one another as we head into the future. 

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28. Nathan Myrick, "The Relational Ethics of Church Music" (PhD diss., Baylor Univ., 2018).

29. Andrew Mall, "Worship Capital: On the Political Economy of Evangelical Worship Music," *American Music* 36, no. 3 (2018): 303–326.

30. Wilkins.

31. Adan Fernandez, "Christian Congregational Music Conference 2019: 10 Takeaways for Today's Worship Experience", 5 Aug. 2019, <https://medium.com/res-facta/10-takeaways-for-todays-worship-experience-88a9576467bc>