

Singing the Climate Crisis

Singing the Climate Crisis—In Activism

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The activities of protestors ask us to think about the way we encounter or fail to encounter broader publics through our music, and the way we use our voices on behalf of those who need them.

For many of us, our awareness of the global climate crisis is intimately bound up with images of activism and protest. Since at least the arrival of Extinction Rebellion, School Strike for Climate, and a broad diversity of other protest groups from around 2018 onwards, issues of climate change have been closely bound up with images of placards, arrests, and groups of people on the streets. As with many protest movements, the climate movement is often accompanied by music. Extinction Rebellion in particular are known for their use of samba bands. Alongside these, they've established a ukulele army and set up choirs, whilst chants and songs form a regular part of their different protest actions.¹ Whilst there are a range of opinions regarding the effectiveness of particular tactics adopted by climate protestors—a diversity of opinion that is likely to extend into their musical activities—as with other musical responses to the climate crisis, the music of the climate movement provides us with a challenge. In stepping out into the public realm, climate protestors sing not just for their own communities but for a wider public. At the same time, they strategise as to how they might be able to use this voice to call out for justice and to fight for the importance of particular issues and concerns. The activities of protestors ask us to think about the way we encounter or fail to encounter broader publics through our music, and the way we use our voices on behalf of those who need them.

This use of music is far from foreign to the Christian tradition. The psalms constantly cry out for God's righteous actions, a call which the prophets often seek to amplify in attending to the cry of the poor, and they often refer to a desire not just to speak out amongst the assembly, but for this voice to extend beyond to be heard among the nations. The scriptures of the Old Testament are full of the expectation both that singing has some kind of public dimension and that it can be an important means of crying out for justice. So what can this look like when it comes to the climate crisis?

From Theory into Practice

One way to imagine what it might look like is to examine what Christian activists are already doing. Christian Climate Action (CCA) in the UK are a group that seek to build bridges between their faith and the cause of climate protest. They believe that Christian faith summons them to stand up in public in the face of the environmental crisis, acting as a public witness in faithful response to the call of God. Whilst they are by no means a group made up of musicians, music often plays an important role in their response

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1. Donna Weston, Leah Coutts, and Marcus Petz, "Music and the Twenty-First Century Eco-warrior," *SN Social Sciences* 1, no. 9 (2021): 245, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00253-z>.

to this calling. Christian climate protestors are incredibly creative people, and they use music and song for a range of different goals. It can be used to manage potentially difficult emotions over the course of a protest, or to infuse it with a sense of prayer and spirituality. It can offer a gentle invitation to others to join in, or it can be defiant and disruptive. It can strategically play with people's expectations and seek to catch them by surprise, or it can act as a prophetic symbol that hopes to resonate with individuals beyond the bounds of established Christian communities.

CCA's creative projects take a range of different paths. These have included the production of a songbook to accompany large-scale protest actions,² performances of re-written climate carols,³ music to accompany public rituals of remembrance,⁴ and music to accompany a pilgrimage to COP 26.⁵ Whilst oppositional chants of protest are often the first sonic symbol we think of when imagining the sonic world of activism, most of these different musical gestures are not intended to be exclusive or isolating; rather, they draw on the traditions of Christian faith in order to produce a space of meaning and encounter. Often, this musical activity takes place alongside the actions and presence of other individuals and groups, spilling over boundaries as Christian protestors stand in solidarity with those of other faiths and no faith, asking them to share some of a common vision with each other.

“Amazing grace” at an AGM

Whilst many climate protestors find it somewhat intimidating to write completely new material, the practice of re-texting existing tunes and songs is a fairly common practice, taking roots in a wider culture of grassroots creativity. It's a practice that both has a relatively low barrier for entry, and hooks into an existing sense of familiarity. It enables other people to join in whilst playing with existing musical meanings so as to resonate more deeply with those who know the repertoire.

At a protest in 2022, a group of climate protestors stood in the middle of the Annual General Meeting of oil company Shell and sang a re-written version of “Amazing grace.” In standing up to sing they aimed to create disruption and to prevent the meeting going ahead smoothly. As such, there was a certain confrontative edge to their singing. As Christians, however, they also aimed to accomplish more than this through their

singing. In singing a song of worship they intended to engage in a spiritual act, praying for God's grace in the situation around them and for the action of Holy Spirit. They aimed to offer an invitation, believing that God's grace is open for everyone, not simply condemning the oil board members sitting in front of them but inviting them into a new future and a better way of living. The lyrics of the second verse demonstrate the mixture of solidarity and confrontation that the protestors aimed to mix together:

I pray God's Grace on all those here,
That you will be His heirs,
And He will bless you as you rid,
Yourselves of all Shell's shares.⁶

In choosing to draw upon “Amazing grace,” the protestors were aware of the social significance of the hymn and the way it is bound up with issues of colonialism which they see reflected in the exploitation of oil companies. At the same time, they sought to build upon the hymn's popularity as something which has a meaning and significance beyond the walls of the church. They sought to work with the established power and meaning of the hymn in both Christian and secular contexts in order to create something that has a new meaning and significance in a different situation. There is a level of humour to their reworking as they play with the situation and the text, and it is precisely through that sense of playfulness between different realms of meaning and intention that the performance is able to take on a burden of serious meaning without necessarily coming across as overly confrontational in doing so.

Effects and Possibilities

It is easy to see that the singing of a hymn in this manner will have different effects on different people. The diversity of encounters that public performance of music enables means that the effects of actions and protests are never completely predictable, and can have a range of different consequences. Some of these will be positive, drawing people to engage with a cause, helping increase its visibility, and strengthening a sense of solidarity and energy within a movement. None of this is guaranteed, though, and however good the intentions, it can equally be the case that public music will put some people off, that music can distract from other forms of activity and

2. Christian Climate Action, “Songbook” (2020), <https://christianclimateaction.org/other-resources/songbook>.

3. Christian Climate Action, “Climate Emergency Christmas Carol Book” (2019), <https://christianclimateaction.org/2019/11/25/climate-emergency-christmas-carol-book>.

4. Christian Climate Action, “Extinction Rebellion Was Live: Memorial for Life, Supporting the Church Synod to Save Our Children” (2020), <https://www.facebook.com/christianclimateaction/posts/1460995284057516>.

5. Coat of Hopes, “Song of the Coat of Hopes,” <https://www.coatofhopes.uk/song>.

6. Christian Climate Action, “CCA Protest at Shell AGM” (2022), <https://christianclimateaction.org/2022/05/29/cca-protest-at-shell-agm>.

engagement, and that it can foster an emotional experience which fails to carry with it any deeper or longer-lasting change.⁷ These kinds of dangers are present almost anywhere that we use or encounter music, but they are amplified when it comes to high-stakes public performances that both centre around important issues and are heard by a broader audience than more enclosed spaces typically enable.

Risk by itself shouldn't always prevent us from action, however. Risk is often inherent in any undertaking that might lead to a potential reward. Rather, it should lead us to think carefully as to what and how we engage in these kinds of spaces. We can lean more in the direction of conciliation and invitation, or we can take care at whom our performances are directed; we can lean into humour or a sense of spirituality, or we can carefully focus and craft our message to make sure any potential for misunderstanding is minimised. Outside of established ritual spaces, the potential for different forms of creativity is enormous, and we can learn from the attempts of others as we find our own strategies for interacting with different groups and situations, and for developing music that is appropriate to those interactions.

Christian groups that use music at protests do so as part of their broader attempts to integrate faith and activism. This is an important project, as faith serves as

a catalyst to strive for a better world and a better society, and to call those in power to account for their actions. If our faith issues a challenge and invitation to the broader society around us, then we should be ready to consider how that voice is expressed in our music, and how others might hear that and be able to resonate. What kind of presence does our music and song have outside of our own communities? How can it invite others into caring for the world around us? How can we stand up against ecological destruction and injustice? How can music integrate with, inspire, and lend meaning to a range of other non-musical projects and actions? These groups challenge us to cross boundaries into the public realm and to seek out places of encounter. If our faith is not just for ourselves, and indeed offers hope for the whole of creation, then perhaps our music sometimes needs to cross those boundaries, particularly when the world around us is in danger.



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7. Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2011).



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