

Selecting and Singing Hymns: A Progressive Approach

A choir master's view on how hymns should be chosen

Introduction

On a particularly snowy Saturday in mid-March (the second iteration of the 'Beast from the East') I co-lead a PCN workshop on 'Singing Hymns Again for the First Time'. The purpose was to present a range of hymns/songs/chants (for brevity: 'hymns') that might work for progressive folk.

To introduce the workshop, I offered my take on the purpose of church music and how hymn-singing fits into it. I didn't have time to say much, so I was pleased when Adrian Alker asked me to turn those thoughts into an article. This is the result.

What is the point of church music?

An obvious answer is that church music facilitates worship. But what is worship and how, consequently, is music meant to facilitate it?

'Worship' is often understood to refer to the ritual activity that takes place in church, usually on a Sunday. Sometimes it is understood to refer merely to the singing bit of that ritual. However, both interpretations are arguably too narrow. Scripture - particularly the writings of St Paul in the New Testament - suggests an understanding of 'worship' as something that encompasses one's whole life, not just that bit of it that happens in church on a pew.

This is perhaps clearest in Paul's often-quoted opening to Romans 12:

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." (Romans 12:1; NIV)

By 'bodies' is meant ourselves as a totality - all our thoughts, actions, habits, relationships, etc. - not just skin and bones. Ensuring that these are 'holy and pleasing to God' is, according to Paul, acceptable worship. Worship is much more than the fraction of our lives that is confined to ritual or other church-based activities.

Paul goes on to explain in practical terms what counts as acceptable worship:

- 1) Using your gifts for the good of the whole community;
- 2) Ministering effectively to one another in love and forgiveness;
- 3) Living in a right relationship with governing authorities; and
- 4) Fostering understanding and unity particularly amongst those with differing opinions within the body of Christ. (Romans 12-15)

We are used to thinking of church music as something that facilitates church services and other, similar events when we gather as Christians. However, if a purpose of church music is to facilitate worship in the full, Pauline sense of 'worship', it is meant to facilitate much more than what happens in church on a Sunday. In relation to 1)-4) above, church music should:

- 1*) Find ways of engaging *everyone* within the worshipping community, regardless of how musically talented or skilled they are, or what musical genre they naturally relate to. This

means engaging individuals both as listeners and participants, and enabling the range of musical gifts in the community to flourish.

- 2*) Contribute to pastoral work by, for example, offering a role and purpose to a newcomer who is trying to find their feet by encouraging them into the choir or worship band.
- 3*) Offer a way of reflecting on issues that ought to concern governing authorities. In a democracy, part of being in a right relationship with governing authorities is to engage with them. Church music can facilitate this by, for instance, expressing the hope of freedom from oppression (e.g. *Heaven Shall Not Wait* by John Bell).
- 4*) Foster unity, within and beyond the particular worshipping community. This means using (e.g.) culturally-distinctive music to celebrate the diversity within the community; and celebrating the diversity across Christian communities, such as by contributing to ecumenical services.

Church music as an agent of transformation

Another helpful way to explore the point of church music is to reflect on Paul's statement that the church is the body of Christ. Taking this equivalence as given, we can say that *church* music is, in some sense, *body-of-Christ* music. I find this to be an incredibly useful way of thinking about church music. For instance, it brings home how, just as Christ's body was both in the world (people could touch, embrace and harm him) and yet transcendent of it (in that his body, in some sense, lives on); so church music is both this-worldly (it is a series of physical actions that create vibrations in the air) and yet enables its listeners to glimpse something beyond the everyday.

It also brings home how church music is an agent of transformation. To understand this, it is necessary to recall that by the 'body of Christ', Paul meant that *the people who make up the church* are Christ's body. The church, for Paul, wasn't an institution or a set of buildings, but a group of people, formed into communities spanning a wide geographical area, who were continuing Christ's work. This involved ongoing transformation, both at the personal and community level. Paul argued that this transformation is brought about most effectively by the way people act towards each other: in short, they should act in love, modelled on the teachings and example of Christ. As Paul put it succinctly, "love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8: 1 (NIV)).

Understood this way, 'church' music is not so much music that is associated with a particular institution or actions that take place in a particular sort of building, it is music that is *of* the people that make up the church. It is one of the activities people do to transform themselves, and those around them, into the body of Christ.

Building the body of Christ: selecting and singing hymns

How does the process of selecting and singing hymns help to transform individuals and communities into the body of Christ? We have already seen how, for Paul, this transformation is underpinned by individuals' acting in a loving, Christ-like way towards one another, and part of that involves worship that respects 1)-4) above. Consequently, a good start would be to draw-out the implications of those principles for selecting and singing hymns:

- 1**) Everyone should have the opportunity to sing, regardless of their musical skills and experience, including, if possible, in harmony.¹ This means selecting hymns that are accessible

¹ A number of authors suggest that singing in harmony enables a richer sense of communion

to all by, for instance, introducing unfamiliar hymns sparingly and teaching them before the service.

- 2**) Avoid lyrics that reinforce stereotypes and prejudice. It is not a loving way to minister to blind people in the congregation to consistently choose hymns that treat blindness as a metaphor for stubbornness, for instance.² Similarly with patriarchal and other forms of exclusive language.
- 3**) Hymn choices should be responsive to significant issues facing society, encouraging the community to reflect on (for example) modern forms of slavery, or how we treat the Earth and its resources. Seek out lyrics that are not overly preachy – as Brian Wren puts it, that “brings [one’s] understanding of the Bible into conversation with [one’s] knowledge, experience, and understanding of today’s world”.³
- 4**) Select distinctive hymns that celebrate the diversity in the worshipping community in all its forms. For example, when I was Director of Music of St John’s, Waterloo, we sang a psalm in Krio to celebrate Sierra Leone National Day, and it flew. Also, select hymns that are sufficiently non-distinctive to enable the diversity within the community to find themselves within the lyrics and music. Short and simple chants, such as those from the Taize and Iona communities, lend themselves to this.

Conclusion

Church music is about far more than just making a beautiful sound. It is about building the body of Christ by engaging and ministering to everyone, in all their diversity, as listeners and participants. It is about transforming individuals and communities to become more Christ-like in the way they act towards others. Church music is just one catalyst in this process, but an important one; one that can contribute significantly or, in some cases, reverse it altogether. It is key, therefore, that we think creatively, carefully and sensitively when approaching the selection and singing of hymns.

than singing together in unison (e.g. Guthrie, op. cit., p. 399; Stacy Horn, *Imperfect Harmony* (North Carolina: Algonquin, 2013), p. 172).

² See, for example, *Amazing Grace*: “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see”.

³ Brian Wren, *Praying Twice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), p. 179.