

“Sing It, Preacher!”

Thoughts about Contemporary Worship Music

Brian Wren¹
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

This article is based on three convictions. Though I focus on the third conviction, the others are foundational to it:

Preaching should be part of an integrated worship experience which engages the mind and appeals to all the senses.

Congregational singing (and not merely listening to songs) is an indispensable part of Christian worship, not least in Reformed traditions.

“Mainline” churches (not least those in Reformed traditions) need to give critically sympathetic attention to popular musics (I use the plural deliberately).

Tex Sample describes a midwestern shopping mall thronged with adults, who shopped, and teenagers, who had little money to spend and came along to hang out with friends. The teens hung out in such numbers that shoppers were discouraged from shopping. The merchants pondered what to do. They didn’t want to tell the teens to leave, and risk alienating future customers. Their solution was to play “easy listening” music over the loudspeakers in the mall. In no time the teens quietly disappeared: the music was too foreign to them.²

Some churches unconsciously adopt similar strategies. Our music of choice is foreign to many potential worshippers, including many youth. Let me offer some thoughts about this, for consideration.

Music with a Beat

Two years ago, my marriage-partner pastor had a leave of absence from parish work. We took the opportunity of visiting churches in driving distance advertising “contemporary worship.” For us, “driving distance” then meant Northern New England, where Presbyterians are thin on the ground. We found United Methodist churches whose hymn-and-organ service was supplemented by worship in more informal spaces, using folk and folk rock styles. We visited Episcopal churches using soft rock congregational song in their normal word and table liturgy. We were made welcome to a charismatic, highly participatory service where two hundred people of all ages clapped and sang for twenty minutes to soft rock music, then worshipped for another two hours with song, prayer, and communion.

In addition, we took in a concert by a Contemporary Christian praise band, with high amplification, flashing lights, and driving rhythm. Teens danced in the aisle and up front, while adults stood, swayed, and hand-clapped to the beat. What made the experience attractive to so many was partly the caring, conservative message; partly the band-singers’ glamour and the excitement of being in a crowd; and in particular the compelling rhythms of the music, whose lyrics and melodies surged and ebbed like the tide, yet left few ripples on the sands of memory. What we remembered was the beat.

“The beat” was what the worship services, too, had in common, despite differences in theology and musical dialect. Though “contemporary worship music” has many variants³, almost all of it “is written with a backbeat and inner pop rhythmic structures in mind. This is true for music of any tempo, as even the slowest pieces have a percussive element.”⁴

Prickles on the Pathway

In mainstream Protestant churches, contemporary worship music is sometimes uncritically embraced, more often bitterly contested. Mention it, and a peaceful picnic bristles with partisans; trenches are dug, and battle engaged.

A perennial problem (or maybe, in gardening terms, a hardy annual) is that relationships between clergy and musicians are not always marked by understanding and respect. Some pastors are skilled in music: more professional musicians become clergy than vice versa. Others regard themselves as unmusical, and relate uneasily to music colleagues. Few clergy, and few seminarians, have wandered through a conservatory of music, and listened to the cacophony of sound from practice rooms and cubicles: a soprano here, a pianist there; here a trombonist, there a cellist; threads of music, soaring high, then breaking off in mid-flight, as a phrase is repeated, repeated, and repeated; repeated until it comes right. Without such knowledge, it is hard to appreciate the rigor of professional music training, and of the musicians’ working life:

Through years of training they accrue
the skills of mind and hand,
which hours of practice must renew,
enliven, and expand.

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Even when clergy-musician relationships are healthy, there are differences of view. One survey asked whether a committee of staff and lay leaders should exercise direction of the church’s music program. Of the clergy sampled, 56 percent agreed (8 percent strongly). By contrast, 61 percent of the musicians disagreed (50 percent strongly). Asked whether the music director should choose the hymns, there was a similar difference of opinion: 58 percent of the musicians said yes; 75 percent of the clergy said no. Another question was, “what is the most meaningful musical activity in worship?” “Anthems,” said 41 percent of the musicians (but only 7 percent of the clergy). “Hymns,” said 79 percent of the clergy (but only 38 percent of the musicians).⁵

Musical Taste

Another problem is that — like all music — contemporary worship music arouses strong emotional responses. Musical taste, once formed, is long-lasting. “Most people acquire their musical taste during adolescent among friends of the same age, and they carry early preferences right through to the grave. This powerful force overrides considerations of individual neurology and personality.”⁶ If we have internalized one kind of taste in music, it is hard to respond sympathetically to music that is radically different. In today’s western culture, longer life-spans increase the number of different

generations. Our society probably has seven or eight strata of generational memory banks, and a sharper divide between old and young.

A further complication is that some people are, by training or natural endowment, more sonically sensitive than others. The average listener is attuned to melody.⁷ But for most people, melody cannot be stretched much longer than the average three-minute length of a popular song. With training, musicians acquire the ability to break the melody into a sequence of fragments held together by abstract relations. In neurological terms, their left-hemisphere becomes dominant, whereas the right hemisphere remains dominant in untrained listeners.

As with melody, so with harmony. Perceptiveness for complex harmony is the rarest of listening skills, with wide disparities between professional musicians and others. Many people are essentially deaf to complex harmony, and hear only a spattering of tones.⁸

Similarly, complex musical phrasing is observable only by a mind steeped in its techniques and conventions. For someone who can follow complex soundscapes of infinite variation and surprise, popular music is tedious.

Popular Skills

Partly because of such differences in perception, professional church music training is not geared to the acquisition of popular music skills and performance practices, and often inculcates the conviction that they are unmusical.

The rhythms of modern popular music, and the role of improvisation, are also unfamiliar territory to many church musicians. "A good renewal repertoire might contain everything from hard rock to bossa nova, from swing to jazz waltz, and even Latin and reggae beats. Increasingly, there is experimentation with the latest dance, rave and rap rhythms."⁹ Improvisation is required, not only between songs, but within them. Songbooks provide written arrangements, but they are not intended to be followed slavishly. Improvisation means taking a new approach, which cannot be learned from the notes on the page.

Not surprisingly, contemporary worship seems more threat than promise to many church music professionals. "Today, numbers of musicians are finding their life's work dismissed out-of-hand by their congregations. They experience it as not only a portent of economic hardship but also a threat to their very existence because their system of meaning is lost."¹⁰ It is important for pastors and others to understand this insecurity, and respond sympathetically.

Unworthy?

A related problem is that institutions training church musicians classify popular music as unworthy of church worship, with techniques to be avoided, not acquired.

Though western culture has long lived in a creative tension between "art music" and popular music, the present gulf between them is recent. At the Reformation, Martin Luther's commitment to popular church music went hand in hand with a desire for more challenging forms. Though he did not borrow tunes from the local tavern, as many erroneously suppose,¹¹ Luther composed hymn tunes for congregational use and encouraged the composition and use of complex polyphonic music, by great composers with trained choirs.

For the singing of metrical psalms in Geneva, Louis Bourgeois adapted some tunes

from French and German secular songs, and some from Gregorian chant. He composed others in similar style. His metrical Psalm tunes were radically different from traditional liturgical music. Because of their dance rhythms, Queen Elizabeth I of England referred to them derisively as “Geneva Jigs” and Shakespeare satirized the Genevan practice of “singing songs to hornpipes.”¹²

In later times, Handel frequently used the same music for his religious and “profane” texts; Mozart composed operas (*Singspiele*) for both the nobility and the common people (the *Magic Flute* was composed for a popular audience); Brahms wrote beer-drinking songs as well as sophisticated symphonic works; and Verdi constructed his *Requiem* from the same music materials as his operas.¹³

From the middle of the nineteenth century, however, western art music began to grow away from the average ear. Popular music took its own direction. Its creative movements came not from conservatories but from the streets, in ragtime, Dixieland, and other early forms of jazz.¹⁴

Class factors were at work here. Paleface urban middle class people, aspiring socially upward, perceived working class and African-American music as beneath them. Church music institutions, being themselves paleface, urban, and middle class, followed suit. From the late nineteenth-century to the mid-twentieth century, urban Protestant church life reflected middle class musical and literary standards.

Popular music styles, both secular and sacred (the gospel song, for example), were rejected as bad music. Church musicians were schooled to disdain African-American styles of music and their by-products, such as jazz, blues, and gospel. Schools and colleges of sacred music entrenched such viewpoints, “by deeming particular sounds and performance styles aesthetically unworthy as a sacrificial offering to God.” Their students “received the commission to go into the world of church music and displace bad music with offerings of good music.”¹⁵

In mainstream Protestant churches, these developments created a contradiction that still bedevils us. Theologically, we preach acceptance and inclusiveness. Musically, we proclaim rejection and exclusion, on the culturally conditioned belief that “good taste is more pleasing to God than bad taste.”¹⁶

It is time to dissolve the contradiction, and give a critical (repeat critical) welcome to contemporary worship music. In the unlikely event of my being invited to give a graduation speech at a school of Sacred Music, my message will be summarized thus: “For Christ’s sake (I speak seriously), send your students on placements where they can learn the skills of popular music performance practice, so that they can move confidently from organ console to electronic keyboard, from guitar to Gregorian chant, and from Purcell to Praise Band.”

Bending the Gifted Ear

I have already noted that by training, natural endowment, or both, a minority of people can appreciate complex harmony, extended melody, and soundscapes of phrasing and timbre. When people thus gifted regard popular music as tedious or unsatisfying, it is not primarily — I suggest — because they have weighed evidence and reached a reasoned conclusion. It is because they unavoidably hear it that way. Reasoning and weighing evidence are involved, but beneath them lie an immediate, compelling, “self-evident” perception, to which it seems incontestably obvious, say, that Beethoven is immeasurably more enriching than the Beach Boys. “It must be so!

How can anyone not hear it?" is the puzzled response.

Such puzzlement can prompt either a journey into enlightenment, or a leap into premature conclusions: that those who don't hear it are not trying hard enough, perhaps, or that they perversely refuse to try. Thus does pride lurk in the shadow of giftedness.

Let me offer a parallel, by way of illustration. I am unable to detect the difference between certain shades of red and green, and some other tints that keener eyes easily distinguish. Though more gifted color-perceivers sometimes act as if "color-blindness" means that I view the world in monochrome, they are wrong. Like them, I find New England Fall colors visually breathtaking. They do (presumably!) see more subtleties than I do. Yet this in no way means that I am morally inferior, or that my color-gifted friends have the right to pity my "infirmary," tell me what to see and what not to see, or look down on my less nuanced appreciation.

As with color, so with music. If we are blessed with the capacity to be moved and enlightened by harmony, melody, and phrasing inaudible to the average ear, this should be, simply, an occasion for joy, thanksgiving, and humility. It is illogical, and unethical, to assume that it confers moral superiority over the average ear, or what the average ear enjoys hearing.

Electronic Culture

In Calvin's Geneva, speech and music were the primary modes of communication. For a full congregation in a stone or brick building, without curtains and carpets, the sound of unaccompanied congregational psalm singing could be electrifying (try it!!). For people who grew up hearing the Mass in Latin, listening to a gospel story read aloud in one's own language was surely refreshing. For congregations long denied the Bible, the experience of hearing Calvin's urgent, reasoned, expository preaching on themes that preacher and congregation took very seriously indeed, probably ranged from acceptable to inspirational.

We are far removed from that blessed time. To keep imitating the worship media of the sixteenth century in the name of "Reformed tradition" is to be fear-ful, not faithful, and dooms us to cultural isolation.

It is widely agreed that "western" cultures (and perhaps others) are in the midst of a revolution in communication, comparable to the introduction of printing prior to the Reformation. Generations born since the Second World War have developed a new relation to sound. Rock'n roll and its successors captivate ears and bodies. Amplification in performance makes the beat more insistent, and if you dislike it, more intrusive. Studio technologies allow increasingly sophisticated intervention between first take and finished product. Audio devices become ever more easily transportable.¹⁷ Music with a beat, of one kind or another, has become the "heart music" of post-world-war-two generations, a familiar and indelible part of their culture.

Our culture is highly visual. Fewer young adults read books, but more young adults visit art museums and galleries. Among eighteen to twenty-four year olds, 29 percent reported visits to art museums or galleries in 1992 compared to 23 percent in 1982. This increase is all the more interesting since formal arts education in school markedly declined during the same period.¹⁸

In electronic culture, TVs, VCRs and their updated analogs are ubiquitous, and we watch them. When we do, our eye-brain system absorbs visual images a billion times

faster than print.¹⁹ We become accustomed to fast moving, nonlinear images, and acquire shorter attention spans.

For many, sound and vision are becoming increasingly integrated.²⁰ When a ten year old girl gets off a New York subway train and asks her friend, “Have you seen the latest Michael Jackson song?”²¹ she testifies to that integration: she has seen the video and heard the song as one integrated experience. “Music in electronic spectacles now uses not only polyrhythmic beat, but light in similar multirhythmic and layering ways. Pulsing illumination employed in this layering fashion sweeps an audience.” Though sound “enters” our bodies physically in a way that visual images cannot, “the percussive character of light now accompanying sound takes on a role and importance it has not had before,” so much so that “light has come to take on something like the character of sound.”²²

The power of visual images, sound as beat, and their integration create a cultural chasm between those grew up with it, like it, and live in it, and those who did not grow up with it, feel estranged from it, and dislike it. Discussing “soul music,” meaning whatever music appeals deeply to a particular generation or subculture, Tex Sample shows how one’s soul music is both chosen and formative. “Soul music is as deep as muscle and bone, as intimate as feeling, and as close cognitively as the way we know the world around us. The word soul, then, is a good one because music of this kind is profoundly bound up with one’s very being.”²³ For some people, hymns are soul music: learned in childhood stored deeply in memory, so that hearing them evokes memory, words, and music. Dance routines learned as a teenager become, as it were, encoded in our mind-body system. Familiar dance music gets us moving without thinking. Unfamiliar rhythms leave us stranded, and we move awkwardly, or clap on the wrong beat. The metaphor of “mental wiring” helps us understand what is going on. Tex Sample puts it thus:

“Our senses, our feelings, our bodies, and our ways of engaging life are culturally and historically structured. . . . I really am “wired differently” from my children and grandchildren. What speaks to me does not speak to them. What moves me, entertains me, touches me is not what does so to them. People of my age will not engage younger generations until we recognize this otherness and concede that along with images, sound and especially sound as beat are crucial to that recognition.”²⁴

Why Bother?

Why bother with sound as beat, visualization, and their integration? If our cultural formation is from an earlier time, why not stay within its boundaries? Those who share our preference will worship with us (perhaps). Those who don’t can go elsewhere.

Yet few of us stand apart from the culture we live in. We could try to live like the Amish, but mostly we don’t. Gladly or grudgingly, we migrate from fountain pen to typewriter, to word processor, to computer, to email, to website. In church, we may balk at rear-projection screens, yet love banners and drama, and feel short-changed if the pastor reverts to yesteryear’s longwinded wordy worship.

Perhaps, then, we should use contemporary worship music to attract the attention of people steeped in popular musical idioms, and make them feel at home. In the movie, *Sister Act*, people cross the street and enter the church because they hear

unexpected, lively, rhythmic singing from the convent choir within.

Suppose that people come, drawn by the promise of music that makes them feel at home. What do we do then? Roll up the screen, cover the drumset, unlock the organ, and pass out hymnals? Presumably not. To use contemporary worship music, of whatever kind, entails an ongoing process, and the possibility that “their” taste, and culture, will interact with and influence ours.

“Inculturation”

This suggests that the integration of visual images and music with a beat is a cultural form, in which we need to work, and with which we wish to converse, in open yet critical dialogue. A helpful word for such a process is “inculturation,” meaning “the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture or cultures” or “the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures.”²⁵

From this perspective, one purpose in using contemporary worship music is to invite people into the drama of Christian worship, and win a hearing for a Christian message, by using culturally familiar forms: visual, dramatic, and musical. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians encapsulates the problems and possibilities of this approach:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law (Gentiles) I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. . . I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:20-23)

Does Paul mean that he pretended to be what he was not, and wore any disguise, tried any trick, and used any form of persuasion that would persuade his hearers he was one of them? Though the phrase, “all things to all people” has come to have that meaning, it is unlikely that this is what Paul meant by it. Paul did not need to pretend to be Jewish: he was a Jew, never ceased to be one, and was repeatedly vocal about his Jewish origins and identity. But he didn’t require male Gentile Christians to be circumcised,²⁶ and kept table fellowship with them: scandalous to many other Jews, no doubt, but not an abrogation of Jewishness. If we give Paul a sympathetic reading, his remarks suggest he was able to be alongside others in ways they found hospitable and respectful, because he knew who he was — or rather “whose” he was — and acted from the security of that grace-founded Christian identity.

Knowing Whose We Are

The example suggests that those who offer contemporary worship need to know who, and whose, they are. Many exponents of contemporary worship know whose they are with strident conviction, and use music to wrap a package of comforting certainties, authoritatively presented, and by many gratefully accepted.²⁷ Not surprisingly, “moderate” churches shy away from such music, and equate “contemporary” with “conservative” or “fundamentalist.”

It need not be so. I believe that if “mainstream” churches embrace contemporary

worship, songs will emerge to express a more open, and more open-minded theology. In my tradition, faith is centered on the person of Jesus Christ, not a package of doctrinal certainties, and “evangelism” springs from an experience of God that we believe is worth sharing. To be an evangelist, it is not necessary to believe that other faiths are godless, unbelievers go to hell, or that the world will end tomorrow. Because Jesus reveals God to us, because his story is life-changing, because the Spirit of Christ can give hope and liberation, and because a Christian worldview makes sense of the cosmos, history, and our lives, we have a treasure to be shared.

Inculturation is the process of sharing that treasure. It means offering a Christian message, centered on the person of Jesus Christ, in the idioms of today’s cultures and subcultures, using their familiar musical forms.

The interplay between the faith of a “liturgical missionary” and the idioms of contemporary music is best understood as a dialogue. However, the “missionary’s” faith is already culturally shaped: by middle class values, for example. If mainstream middle class churches offer forms of contemporary worship, they may find their own cultural values challenged and modified. Conversely, they may hope to challenge electronic culture from within. For, “if it is correctly carried out, evangelization should help people, not to despise their own culture, but to reappraise it in the light of Gospel values.”²⁸

To put the matter theologically, the Spirit of Christ is no stranger to today’s emerging electronic culture and its “music with a beat.” Because Christ is risen and alive in the world, it follows that:

Wherever we may venture
to witness, heal and care,
the Spirit of our Savior
has long been lodging there.

Hopefully, then, as (we) “missionaries become culturally educated, and strive to present the person of Christ and his teaching in terms of the new culture, (we) should begin to perceive new insights into (our) Christian faith.” The clumsy translations and fumbling of our first attempts at contemporary worship will be replaced by new connections and new ideas:²⁹

Then let us give with gladness,
not claiming to deserve
the wisdom, strength and kindness
of those we kneel to serve.

Brian Wren, “To Christ our hearts now given,” Copyright ” 1995 Hope Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

Notes

¹This article is drawn mainly from Brian Wren’s book, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

²Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 35.

³Richard Webb finds seven major categories: Country, Jazz and Blues, Rock'n Roll, Contemporary Liturgical, Praise and Worship, and Alternative ("Contemporary," in Robert Buckley Farlee, ed., *Leading the Church's Song* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998], 82-95).

⁴Dori Erwin Collins and Scott C. Weidler, *Sound Decisions: Evaluating Contemporary Music for Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 5.

⁵Linda J. Clark, *Music in Churches: Nourishing Your Congregation's Musical Life* (Bethesda, Md.: The Alban Institute, 1994), 56-57.

⁶Robert Jourdain, *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination* (New York: Avon Books, 1997), 263.

⁷For this, and what follows, see Jourdain, 265, 259 and 84.

⁸*Ibid.*, 257 and 112.

⁹John Leach, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs: The Use of Traditional and Modern in Worship*, Worship Series No. 132 (Cambridge, England: Grove Books, 1995), 9.

¹⁰Clark, *Music in Churches*, 76.

¹¹David Music, "Getting Luther out of the Barroom," *New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, s.v. "Bar form," and Westermeyer, *Te Deum*, 148. "Bar form" does not mean "bar" as in "tavern," but a lyric/music structure, common in German songs of the time, whereby two identical phrases are followed by a third, contrasting phrase. In German, this AAB sequence is called Barform, and the Meistersinger, from whom the term is borrowed, called a complete song of this type a Bar.

¹²Robert H. Mitchell, *I Don't Like That Music* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Hope Publishing Company, 1993), 26.

¹³*Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁴See Webb, "Contemporary," 83.

¹⁵Carlton R. Young, *My Great Redeemer's Praise: An Introduction to Christian Hymns* (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, 1995), 2, 5, 6.

¹⁶Young, 2, 5, 6.

¹⁷Jourdain, 47.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹⁹Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship*, 30.

²⁰Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship*. Sample wishes to understand our culture from within. From that understanding, he finds elements in electronic culture able to critique it, and himself offers a powerful critique of the economic order that sustains it. He argues against tendencies to idealize print culture and demonize electronic, on the grounds that the demonic is not limited to one cultural formation.

²¹*Ibid.*, 47.

²²*Ibid.*, 64.

²³*Ibid.*, 66.

²⁴Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship*, 42, emphasis mine. Sample wishes to understand our culture from within. From that understanding, he finds elements in electronic culture able to critique it, and himself offers a powerful critique of the economic order that sustains it. He argues against tendencies to idealize print culture and demonize electronic, on the grounds that the demonic is not limited to one cultural formation.

²⁵Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 11.

²⁶His reported decision to have Timothy circumcised was an exception, out of consideration for local Jewish scruples (Acts 16:1-3).

²⁷In times of rapid change, and cultural or social uncertainty, "fundamentalism appeals to original sources and originating experiences in an oversimplified and literal way. It commands allegiance by its deceptive simplicity. As a result, it encourages religious and cultural incapsulation and often a fanatical opposition towards other religious and cultural systems." Shorter, 41.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 27.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 63.