

# BACK TO BASICS

John Harper steps back to consider why and how we are choosing and using music for worship.



Just occasionally we need to step back from the week-by-week routine, and ask very basic questions about what we are doing with music in worship, why and how we choose and use it. The music we choose and use in worship reflects collective taste within the worshipping group, and the personal preferences of the leaders. Local custom and resources also affect the choice of music. Custom, taste, preference and also need influence the points in the service where music is used.

In general, we are clear that music is a positive medium for worship; that choice of appropriate texts for hymns and songs can illuminate the theme of a service, a season or feast, or specific readings. It can transform the 'feel' of worship. We are also aware that music badly done can have a negative effect on a whole service. A well-known song set too high or too low for the average voice, or taken too slowly or too fast can be frustrating. An unfamiliar hymn melody can engender more general uncertainty and discomfort. The same music used too frequently can lead to staleness.

It is worth stepping back to think why we use music in worship, and how we might use it more discerningly and more effectively.

Most music in worship is music with a text. What do we do to a text by voicing it in song? We heighten the text, marking its specialness by melody. We formalize the text, proclaiming it in a way untypical of everyday verbal communication. To an extent we depersonalize that text – accepting stresses, rhythms and melodic inflections imposed by the music, rather than by our own preferences. We also use a sung text as a means of ordered, collective expression. (Come to think of it, many of the spoken texts we recite together regularly acquire their own 'musical' qualities as they develop collective pace, rhythms, stresses and inflections.)

Most of us can remember a melody better than its text. Or else we use the melody to remind us of the text. Such

memorability demonstrates the strength of music in its own right. There are things that music does that go beyond voicing a text in song. Music is intimately connected with our feelings and emotions. In this it is direct and personal in its effect. It is a reminder that all worship is connected in some way with feelings and emotions, and we need to be aware of this in both planning and conduct of worship.

As well as a personal dimension to music, there is also a collective dimension, not only in relation to group feeling, but to group expression: music is a ready tool to encourage participation. Participation and collective expression can contribute to greater at-oneness, 'building up our common life' through shared song. (In some worshipping traditions this extends to shared action, and even shared dance.)

Every piece of music has an identity – partly defined by its individual qualities. But it also has collective musical qualities, shared by other comparable music. It has style. It belongs to a tradition (even if it is a fairly new tradition). Style and tradition in music contribute to the overall nature and identity of worship. Indeed, since we share common texts, music may be a defining quality of the local identity of our worship. How we choose and use music contributes to the overall aesthetic of our worship.

Music well-chosen and well-used can be a key contributor to worship which is effective in building up community, enabling that community to express its collective prayer and praise, and yet allowing individuals space and inspiration for personal needs, reflection and inner strength.

The positive contribution of music has to be set against the downside. Music can be powerfully unsettling and excluding if it seems unfamiliar or inappropriate: it can stimulate strong negative feeling. Music that appears to be more concerned with itself than with either God or the worshipping community can be corrosive in worship. That does not preclude new music, or music sung or played by

specialists; but it does require us to be careful and vigilant in our choice, use and presentation of music – especially at times of change.

So far we have considered music in isolation. Now let us look at it in the practical contexts of worship.

Music is used within the overall form and structure that constitute an act of worship. It may be a strong element within that structure, marking key points in the worship, or it may be more incidental. It may serve as a pillar of the structure, or it may be a pointer to the form. Its role may vary within a single service.

Music can be used to ‘break up’ either a section or the whole of a service. Since we often stand to sing, it may be linked closely with changes of posture. It may be a helpful break from a large tranche of listening to the spoken word.

Music may complement or be related to action. It is best to avoid music chosen simply to ‘cover’ an action. Either it is there in its own right – and the action takes place simultaneously, as a subsidiary event – or it complements the action, and both action and music are heightened by one another.

Music is inseparably linked with time. All music exists within time, and is a shaping of time in sound. It heightens our awareness of sound and silence in a time-frame; it heightens our awareness of time. All worship exists within time, and is a shaping of time with prayer and praise.

The complex of factors affecting choice of music in worship begins to develop: where should music occur in the form and structure of an act of worship? how does it relate to the form and/or structure of the worship? how does it fit into and contribute to shaping of the time-frame of the worship? how is it being used by the worshipping community? how does it affect the community, collectively and individually? how should it be presented to the community?

To these general questions may be added more specifically liturgical questions: How does the music relate to the season? the readings? the liturgy (e.g. Eucharist, Baptism, Service of the Word)?

We may go further than this, and consider how different moments in worship may be best served by music. The choice and use of music at specific points can enhance the moment and its meaning.

**Gathering.** Music is frequently included at the beginning of a service – often a hangover from the old processional hymn. How can music contribute to the gathering of the community? Should the song or hymn be the very first item, or should we greet one another, and then gather in song? **Praise.** Having gathered and prepared for worship, there is an opportunity for praise – in the Eucharist, the Gloria in excelsis. How do we best express our praise for the Almighty?

**Responding.** We hear the word of God, and we want to respond. How should we use psalms or other songs to respond to the word? How do we maintain a balance of readings and song to ensure the cohesiveness of the liturgy?

**Proclaiming the Gospel.** As the Gospel is brought to be proclaimed to the people, how should they welcome and acclaim the Good News in song?

**Reflecting.** We hear readings and a sermon. That is a lot to take on board. How might we reflect on what we have heard, and how might we consolidate those thoughts by the use of music?

**Affirming.** The affirmation of faith includes creeds. These are texts defined by meaning, rather than by poetic effect. How might we affirm in song the underlying principles of our belief?

**Praying.** We make intercession for the church, the world, all in need, and those who have died. What music enables us to deepen our collective prayer?

**Offering.** We offer ourselves and our gifts to God. In this we offer back to God the fruits of his creation. How do we express the joy of our offering in song?

**Thanksgiving.** We give thanks to God for the ultimate gift of his Son for our salvation. If this is in the context of the Eucharist, how do we voice our thanksgiving in the Eucharistic prayer? In other services, how do we express our heartfelt thanks in music?

**Contemplation.** After the Communion at the Eucharist, or in a period of stillness at other services, we contemplate the mystery and wonders of God. What kinds of music can contribute to that contemplation? Or is this a time for the music of silence?

**Sending.** We are sent out to the mission of the church in the world. What kind of music enables and strengthens us for this task?

### Music and expectations

At the end of the day, we have to be practical and realistic. We may dream of all sorts of musical possibilities, but we need to address just what we can achieve. That is made harder in a world where music is so accessible and so attractively packaged by the commercial media. Our own efforts as live players and singers can so easily seem to fall short.

Rather than imitate badly, we need to think just why a particular piece of music seems so attractive, and to find a version suited to our resources, or to choose an alternative piece.

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