

# Music and Worship



by Allister Lane (April 2011)

## There is an 'i' in 'iPod'

Music is a powerful influence in our culture. And since the development of the Sony Walkman™ music has become increasingly an expression of who we are. The music we listen to is linked to our sense of identity.

The car has been described as a powerful symbol of the individualism prevalent in our living.<sup>1</sup> The experience of autonomy we have in the car can be recognised as a dynamic in contrast to shared communal experiences.

Typically, when in our car:

- we drive in the direction we want
- we drive the route we want to take
- we go the speed we're comfortable with, and
- we have the radio tuned to the station we want.

The link between music and our identity is not limited to an individual experience however. Many of us prioritise attending a public concert to share the experience of music. In addition, music may shape a shared identity; we are who we are, at least to some extent, because of the music we experience in common. This paper seeks to explore how music contributes to our shared identity, and to encourage discussion about how we understand music to serve our corporate worship.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

It is my intention to challenge rigidity we have around our personal taste in music; the styles of music each of us finds aesthetically pleasing. It's not that there is anything wrong with this. Listening to our favourite music on an iPod brings us great pleasure and happiness. But our personal taste cannot be the test we apply when assessing validity of music in corporate worship.

I contend that we should expect there to be a difference between the music we experience in our corporate worship and the music tuned in our car radio as we drive home from that worship!

## What is the purpose of music?

To assess the purpose of music in our worship we need to be reminded of why we worship. What is it we are doing? How do we know if we are worshipping well? We need to look not primarily at the *form* but at the *function* of worship. More about the function of worship in a moment.

What about the role of music in our worship? What is the relationship music has to worship?

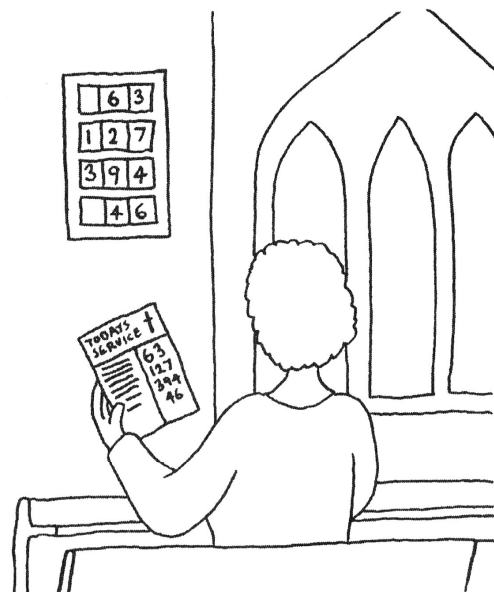
When Martin Luther celebrated music as 'second only to the Word of God' he was both acknowledging its importance and putting it in its place.<sup>2</sup>

Music is not important in and of itself; it is not chosen for its own value or interest. Music is servant to God's Word, assisting it to come to life amongst us and enabling our response. Therefore the purpose of music is to support our worship.<sup>3</sup> As a servant of our worship, it is the *function* of music rather than a given *form* that should guide our assessment of musical styles.

Marva Dawn offers a sound analysis of the function of Reformed worship in her book *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*.<sup>4</sup> She identifies compelling theological rationale for meaningful worship and describes how we can pursue authentic worship in our response to God's Word. Her analysis will assist us to explore the place of music in our worship.

## Our Reason For Being

Of primary importance for Marva Dawn in keeping our worship authentic is in the recognition that God is at the centre. Friendship, instruction and other aspects of gathered worship are important, but we lose our reason for being if we do not constantly remember that God has called us to be his people and that our ability to respond to that call in worship and in life is totally the gift of God's grace.<sup>5</sup>



SHE COULD HARDLY BELIEVE SHE HAD WON ON HER FIRST VISIT TO CHURCH

Cartoon: Dave Walker

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Galbraith (Ed.) 'Music for Worship' from *Worship in the Wide Red Land* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1985), p43.

<sup>3</sup> This point has been explicitly endorsed by the St John's Session (July 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p76.

## Worship Is Useless

We may feel at times that a service of worship is a waste of time; we might get frustrated by services that are poorly planned and led, but that is a matter of *forms*. The *function* of all worship could rightly be said as having no use other than worship itself. It is not a means to accomplish anything else; it is our expression to God with whom we have relationship. Like good love-making, we do not participate in authentic worship to get something done – other than the activity to which we dedicate ourselves. In this sense worship is useless, ...but it is never a waste of time, as it does have profound *purpose*. To worship God is to respond the best we can in acknowledgment of the shared relationship that God has committed Himself to.

The word 'Worship' comes from Old English roots *weorth* (honour/worthiness) and *scipe* (to create). Whilst we cannot 'create' God's honour because it is inherently God's, we can pursue ways to honour God that reflect and echo God's worthiness, all the while recognising that our attempts are inadequate, that we will never fulfil the appropriate tribute due the Trinity until we join the saints and angels in perfectly glorifying God in eternity.

It is difficult keeping God as the subject of worship in our present narcissistic culture. Surrounded by multiple distractions, the greatest distraction to authentic worship is ourselves. David Wells warns that if we allow our subjective opinion to guide us, then:

Theology becomes therapy...The biblical interest in righteousness is replaced by a search for happiness, holiness by wholeness, truth by feeling, ethics for feeling good about one's self. The world shrinks to the range of personal circumstances; the community of faith shrinks to a circle of personal friends.<sup>6</sup>

To expand more on what it means to recognise God is at the centre Marva Dawn provides this definition of worship from William Temple:

...the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of our consciences by His holiness; the nourishment of our minds with His truth; the purifying of our imaginations by His beauty; the opening of our hearts to His love; the surrender of our wills to his purpose – and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable.<sup>7</sup>

The point of worship is to recognise that God alone matters. Focused on that purpose, differences of forms of worship on their own would become secondary, and any tendency for specific forms to distract us from authentic worship would be curbed.

And so, Marva Dawn identifies that a music style is suitable if it can effectively assist us in directing our attention away from other distractions and into the presence of God.<sup>8</sup> This is a recognition of the *function* rather than attributing authenticity to any particular *form*.

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<sup>6</sup> David F, Wells, *No Place For Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Weerdmans, 1993), pp. 182-3.

<sup>7</sup> Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, p80.

<sup>8</sup> Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, p77.

## Music and Reformed Worship

Before going any further in exploring by what criteria we evaluate if music is 'authentic' for worship, it is necessary to summarise how music has been understood in the history of our church tradition.

Music was an element of Jewish worship, which continued into the early Christian church, including chanting the Bible readings and soloists singing psalms with congregational responses. With the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity in the Fourth Century, corporate worship changed from secretive and simple to large public gatherings in purpose-built buildings with elaborate liturgical forms.<sup>9</sup> Hymn singing became widespread, introducing the poetic texts into worship.



Another early form of music in worship was plainsong, or the 'Gregorian chant'. Pope Gregory I (590-604) was acknowledged as the first person to order such music in the church. The Gregorian chant was for suitably trained choirs and is known for its very monophonic sound. Believing that complexity ruined the music, Gregory I kept things very simple with the chant.<sup>10</sup>

Pope Gregory (the Great) writing a chant prompted by the Holy Spirit, shown in the form of a dove dictating the sacred song in his ear.

Mosaic floor of Worcester College's chapel c.1791.

Singing by the people became an important aspect of the Protestant Reformation, although initially little consensus existed among the Reformers.

**Martin Luther** was a composer of hymns and whilst most were based on the words of scripture Luther was not averse to paraphrasing scripture. Luther was a talented musician and an emotional character. This combination enabled him to identify music that people could and would sing. In his own words:

If any man despises music, as all fanatics do, for him I have no liking; for music is a gift and grace of God, not an invention of men. Thus it drives out the devil and makes people cheerful, then one forgets all wrath, impurity, sycophancy, and other vices.<sup>11</sup>

But not all the influential Reformers saw music this way.

**Ulrich Zwingli** has a radical reputation in relation to music and worship. Although an extremely competent musician he agonised that music was too powerful. Zwingli worried that music would dominate worship and usurp the primacy of scripture. He therefore insisted on the total absence of music in worship.

<sup>9</sup> Richard H. Hoppin *Medieval Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp30-32.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp42-44.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Howard L. Rice and James C. Huffstutler *Reformed Worship* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), p100.

**John Calvin** was in favour of congregational singing, and because he was a theologian more than a musician, Calvin justified singing by closely following the words of scripture, particularly the Psalms, which he described as the Bible's own hymnbook, inspired by God. In the *Institutes* Calvin is brief but clear:

It is certain that the use of singing in churches...is not only very ancient, but was also used by the Apostles, as we may gather from the words of Paul, "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also," (1 Cor. 14:15). In like manner he says to the Colossians, "Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord," (Col. 3:16) ... and certainly if singing is tempered to a gravity befitting the presence of God and angels, it both gives dignity and grace to sacred actions, and has a very powerful tendency to stir up the mind to true zeal and enthusiasm in prayer. We must, however, carefully beware, lest our ears be more intent on the music than our minds on the spiritual meaning of the words.<sup>12</sup>

If we remain fixated on our tradition alone we will fail the very vision the Reformers had. Yet, our Reformed tradition has nourished the faith of millions before us and has shown its ability to help worship God truthfully and faithfully:

The power of any tradition is its ability to, if it is deep enough, to save us from cultural captivity; tradition can enable a group of people to withstand fads, yet have the power to adapt to changing times and circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

## **The function of worship is to help us focus on God**

The Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard compares worship to theatre. Whilst many worship services allow people to be an audience viewing the ministers and musicians as performers, genuine worship is enabled when everyone recognises God is the audience. Ministers and musicians are stage hands or prompters or stage managers, but all of us are performers and our activity is directed to God.<sup>14</sup> We need not fret at the 'task' of worship when we recognise that our activity is only possible because God has acted first, and that the Holy Spirit inspires our actions.

As already noted, an important principle of our Reformed tradition is for us not to stay fixated on any given form in our expression of the faith we share. And so it is good to utilise fresh words and music to praise God. However, care must be given that new compositions do not subtly dumb down our perception, knowledge and adoration of God. A principal cause of such dumbing down is the confusion of praise with 'happiness'. It is a mistake to equate praise of God with simply singing upbeat music. Some 'praise music' may actually describe the feelings of the believer rather than focus on the character of God. Taken to an extreme, a focus on good feelings distorts the truth of the Gospel into a 'health, wealth and victory' therapy.

Marva Dawn identifies that an emphasis on what we 'get out' of a worship service – above all that we feel good about ourselves – displaces the theocentric praise of God with anthropocentric utilitarianism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Trans. Henry Beveridge.

<http://www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/books/institutes/>

<sup>13</sup> Rice and Huffstutler, *Reformed Worship*, p2.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, p82.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p88.

Since worship of God is an end in itself, making worship 'useful' destroys it, because this introduces an ulterior motive for worship. And ulterior motives mean manipulation, taking charge of the relationship, thereby turning the relation between Creator and creature upside down. Instead of trying to force happiness or making the music 'enjoyable', we best renew our worship by gaining a fresh apprehension of God. If we lacked new visions, we let modern idolatries reduce God into such an anaemic irrelevance that we must entertain people instead of introducing them to God.

## False battle lines

With God as the focus of our worship, any emphasis on the differences of so-called 'traditional' and 'contemporary' music styles misses the real issue. Both can easily become idolatrous. Marva Dawn notes that many defenders of traditional music styles proudly insist that the historic liturgy of the Church is the only way to do it right, while their counterparts advocating contemporary music styles often try to control God and convert people by their own efforts. Neither pride nor presumption can inhabit worship; both prevent God from being the focus of our worship. Enthusiasts for contemporary music styles in worship are right in seeking to reach out to people in the culture around us and in reforming elements of our tradition that have grown stale. Those who value the Church's worship heritage are right to question the faithfulness and integrity of many contemporary music styles in worship and to seek a noticeable difference in what we do in our worship that underscores the Church's countercultural emphasis. Only in a dialectical tension of tradition and reformation can we ask better questions to insure that worship is consistent with the nature of God as revealed in scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup>

If we use 'taste' as the means of assessing the style of music we use in worship, then power wins. What will help us is recognising that the style of music in our worship is not the primary issue. Instead of getting caught up in the traditional-contemporary debate, we must always ask whether any given style is meaningfully conveying the presence, the self-giving of God.

We may even want to challenge the warring categories of 'traditional' and 'contemporary' as being unhelpfully constraining, pejorative, or snobbish and look to discover terminology that expresses a rich variety of possible musical genres, e.g. folk, classic, current, a cappella, soft rock, African, gospel, etc.

The following list Marva Dawn has developed for assessing of what we do in worship<sup>17</sup> is also useful for assessing the use of music in our worship.

Meaningful worship must:

- centre on God
- glorify Christ
- involve people
- express praise
- communicate the truth of the Bible
- encourage faith
- promise redemption
- reflect the incarnation
- build up the Church
- instil vision
- make an offering
- nurture communion
- evoke an "Amen"

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<sup>16</sup> Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, p93.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p170.

I would want to add that the music we use, in order to be meaningful, must echo the particular focus of our worship at different times in a service, as we follow the Reformed pattern of worship. For example, **adoration** as we approach God in corporate worship; **seeking guidance of the Holy Spirit** as we listen to the reading of scripture; **affirmation of faith** after the sermon; **thanksgiving** after celebrating the sacraments of Baptism and Communion.<sup>18</sup>

Another reminder for ourselves is to be wary of self-deception that any given music style should be used to *attract* people to our services of worship. Popularity cannot become the predominant criteria over faithfulness. When Jesus told the truth, some of his disciples left him.<sup>19</sup> Is the point of worship to make people comfortable, or to teach them about God? Marva Dawn uses the analogy of lollies – which are very popular with children, but we wouldn't feed them only lollies if we want them to grow strong and healthy.<sup>20</sup>

## A word about the Choir

The Choir offers a special ministry within our corporate worship that complements the music we use as a congregation. Like the music of the congregation, we must understand the Choir's *function* and not assess their contribution simply on *form*.

William Willimon observes that the function of the Choir is to aid the congregation's music rather than perform for the congregation; to help make the *congregation* the choir.<sup>21</sup> It does seem to be advantageous to give everyone the opportunity to participate in all aspects of worship, but at times we recognise that we all benefit from gifted leadership in our corporate worship. Just as we look to ministers of Word and Sacrament to undertake certain responsibilities to ensure our worship is faithful to the apostolic witness and meaningful for our particular context, so we can appreciate the ministry offered by the Choir is using their gifts to encourage the growth of our faith. If the chief function of the choir is conceived to be a sharing in the ministry of the Word – singing to the congregation – James F. White suggests this authenticates a location facing the congregation.<sup>22</sup> Choir Anthems and other defined contributions complement our worship as forms of music that are particularly beautiful, often requiring particular skill and practice.

That said, subtle cultural influences require us to guard against looking to those up the front expecting a concert. Those who lead music from the front are to help the congregation worship, and they must take great care to prevent the congregation from becoming passive.

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<sup>18</sup> Colossians 3:16

<sup>19</sup> John 6:66

<sup>20</sup> Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, p167.

<sup>21</sup> William H. Willimon, *Preaching and Leading Worship*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p20.

<sup>22</sup> James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p112-113.

## **Holding onto one without letting go of the other**

We should enjoy our own personal taste in music, but if we restrict the music we use in our worship to only that then we make ourselves and others poorer for it. Exploring styles of music other than what our personal taste draws us to will inevitably be uncomfortable – but it is precisely in this risky space where there is creativity and growth. This is our space of discovery where we are able to come to greater understanding. Neither ‘traditional’ nor ‘contemporary’ is always better, but familiarity with music that has sustained other Christians in our tradition across time and in different cultures, as well as willingness to move with the creativity of God’s Spirit will benefit authenticity in worship.

There is a danger in evaluating our worship by ‘what I get out of it’, as when we do this the focus of our worship is no longer God. We must guard ourselves, and each other, from the risk of attributing authentic worship to our favourite style. Allowing worship to be a unique space where God can confront us, change us, and transform us will only happen when we can get past ourselves to discover and express our love for God.

