

# **The Christian Assembly**

## *Concepts, Trends, and Leadership with Purpose*

- I. General and Conceptual**
- II. Music**
- III. The Spoken Word**

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## Section Two: Music

### Why Do We Sing?

“Without music,” Darryl Tippens writes, “we are left with talk.” He continues,

The trouble with talk is that it tends to position the speaker in a place of power. It puts one in charge, which can border on a dangerous conceit when it comes to reporting on the Almighty. A different, humbler posture of spirit emerges in worship and song. When we are singing, there is a sense that we are not in charge. The leading comes from the music—or it should.<sup>1</sup>

For multiple reasons (including the above), in many ways, and with diverse results, Christians sing in the assembly. We sing to worship, we sing to teach, we sing because we like the music, we sing to be involved, we sing to be inspired, we sing because we think we’re supposed to, and we sing because we want another satisfying experience. In the following passage, Cliff Ganus III elucidates the common desire for this agreeable, gratifying encounter.

During the last thirty years we have revisited the Calvinist’s search for a meaningful “worship experience” in our music, not so much to assure ourselves of our election as to authenticate our ritual with the stamp of emotional satisfaction. In more recent years we have used music deliberately as a tool to attract outsiders to our meetings. And, for many of us, our church songs now provide a bonding experience; they’re our musical identification, our folksongs, our anthems of community.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of our individual perspectives on singing, we can know, without a doubt, that music has always been important in the life of God’s people. Consider

- ◆ the triumphant songs of Miriam and Deborah
- ◆ the exalted Psalms of David and others
- ◆ the appointment of chief musicians for temple worship
- ◆ the hymn sung by Jesus and the eleven
- ◆ the instructive and thankful singing enjoined by Paul
- ◆ the awestruck, worshipful music, as seen in *Revelation*, that comes from the lips of all God’s subjects

In this section, I will discuss some mundane and comparatively unimportant matters alongside highly significant aspects of music in worship. May we all put things in proper perspective, toward the betterment of singing in the assembly.

### Intentional, Not Merely Utilitarian

Sometimes, worship songs—no matter whether they’re of the older or newer variety—are used carelessly. In my opinion, it can be rather irreverent when worship content is injected into the flow without intentionality. Songs maybe used, for example,

- ◆ to get people to come in to the sanctuary
- ◆ to get people quiet

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<sup>1</sup> Darryl Tippens, *Pilgrim Heart: The Way of Jesus in Everyday Life* (quoted by *New Wineskins* online).

<sup>2</sup> Cliff Ganus III, “*A cappella* Congregational Singing in the First and Twenty-First Centuries: Reexamining the Tradition,” 6. Typescript.

- ◆ to add “buffer” time between events or to avoid seemingly awkward silences
- ◆ to attempt to set any desired mood through the music, regardless of text
- ◆ to close things we haven’t really thought about how to close
- ◆ to set up the sermon

As I am primarily an instrumental musician, it might seem odd to some readers that I’m so interested in text. Truth be told, in “serious music” situations, I’m sometimes annoyed by text. But in the worship of the Almighty, for me, text is secondary (right after “heart”), and music is tertiary. In worship, it’s the words and thoughts that count more than the sounds.

Leaders, please don’t allow “Jesus, Let Us Come To Know You” be mere filler, and don’t allow “How Great Is Our God” or “Holy, Holy, Holy” to have the express (or tacit) purpose of getting the congregation quieted down.

May we all strive to be completely intentional in worship planning and in worship leading.

## **Song Selection and Congregational Engagement**

One Sunday’s assembly experience at our church didn’t turn out to be quite what it was in my dreamings and plannings, but I still think it was good. My wife told me she was moved to tears as we worshipped in the singing of the chorus of “On Zion’s Glorious Summit” and then as we progressed into “In Christ Alone,” which expresses with great conviction the redemptive reason that we will one day be on Zion’s glorious summit, in the throne room of God almighty.

But not all was a mountaintop experience that day. One issue was my miscalculation regarding the familiarity of one song. Basically, I thought it would be familiar, but it wasn’t. Not even the Appalachian-folk, easily-pick-up-able nature of this song, “Come Ye Sinners” could save it. It pretty much flopped, even though there were four stanzas in which to pick it up. The phrase “I will arise and go to Jesus” in the 4th felt more like “My head is still fuzzy on this song and am not sure where I’m going musically,” so there probably wasn’t much attention on spiritually “going to” Jesus. Given our model of congregational involvement and not performance by a more-or-less trained worship team, lesser familiarity with songs can’t be the rule, if the whole group is to be engaged.

Aside: there are ways to enhance familiarity, to calculate, and to be strategic with the introduction of new songs. But as with any human element, it’s not an exact science, and I made judgment errors in planning for this particular Sunday assembly.

After the assembly was over, I noticed that there was only one comment of affirmation offered to me, the primary leader for the day. I took this first as a less-than-enthusiastic overall response, but on later reflection, I wonder if it merely meant that more people were engaged in the content and less aware of who was leading them. If so, great!

I would suggest two realities when considering impact and congregational engagement:

1. The more attention on God, on building each other up, and on other aspects of content, the better.
2. The less attention on individual leaders, the better.

## **On New Songs**

May, or must, a church use new songs—songs written by and for the current generation?

New songs may in truth speak of God’s work today, but I sometimes feel the need to probe what it is, really, that a contemporary songwriter is speaking of. These really aren’t the days of Elijah or Ezekiel, for instance, and though those expressions are taken somewhat as poetic extrapolations, a lot of us sing that song without believing that those particular kinds of work of God are going on presently. Further: personal, adoring worship songs may well be authentic, but they also may be mere cookie-cutter facsimiles of the last song that appealed to the masses, was recorded, and sold thousands of copies.

Imagery and cultural “with-it-ness” are important, and should be considered. Church of Christ repertoire, for instance, should certainly be expanded beyond the imagery of the 1800s and early-1900s examples that fill 90% of our assemblies’ song lists. For me, expanding means inclusive growth on both chronological ends: “Shepherd of Tender Youth” (Clement of Alexandria, from ca. 3rd century A.D.) has value, and so does Martin Luther, and so does Fanny Crosby, and so does Twila Paris, and so does Matt Redman. (I’m not so sure about Stamps-Baxter and the Gaithers, but that’s just my opinion. If I’m thorough, I would probably have to admit that there is as much worthy content in a few Gaither or Stamps songs than in some other songs whose musical styles don’t offend my aesthetic sensibilities.) Although I write, arrange, and lead new songs, I propose that newness is not as significant as content.

The language of lighthouses and reapers and lifelines and such is definitely not my heart language. And the language of the King James era, or even of the early 1900s, is not mine, either. The question of imagery, though, begs the question of the use of scripture, or scriptural language, in songs. Not all scriptural language uses imagery with which our society is familiar. Should we ignore such passages and their concepts in writing our music today? It has been well suggested that Christians’ theology is more evident in the music of the church than in the sermons. Balance and scriptural moorings are of high significance in both!

How important is it for each generation to have its own songs? It strikes me that importance to a generation is different from importance for a generation. It’s probably more important to this generation than to most older ones. Something about this one—and here, I speak not necessarily of a single, identified generation of 20-years-or-so, such as “GenX,” but of a great bunch of us breathing in this eon—seems to demand more attention than others. We’re a self-centered lot.

But back to the question ... how important is it for all generations to have their own songs? I’d probably give it a 9 on a 14-point scale. It’s good to validate worthy creations in our time by using them, side-by-side, with more time-tested material. People can survive spiritually without fresh musical voices, but perhaps not all will thrive. I would suggest that it is just as important to connect with other generations’ songs, creating a deeper, broader repertory. For one generation to isolate itself, as though only its creations are significant, would seem self-centered.

The ubiquity of contemporary music merits some attention. Though some do this, I can’t examine the large numbers of contemporary songs and songwriters and immediately attribute the numbers to a move of God among us. Computer software and the omnipresence of guitars (along with people who can strum 4 or 5 chords and read “tab”) are two other tributaries that have led to the river of new songs in the last couple of decades. But not all these songs are outpourings of God. Some are just outpourings of the computer processor. Aside: I fear the overuse of the word “anointed” to describe worship leaders and songwriters these days. I think “anointed” can be nothing more than a euphemism for “cool” or “has charisma” or “last year, some company recorded a CD with his music on it.”

If we give a song credence solely because of how new it is, or how cool it seems, we are shallow. Equally troublesome to me is appealing to familiarity as the primary criterion for whether a song should be sung in church. If we are constantly constrained by fear of the new or less known, we are impoverished. How many times over the years have I wondered whether this or that song would “work” on a Sunday morning, because we haven’t sung it before, or at least not for a year or more ... and who is going to get upset if we use this or that new song? This is the concern of those of us who value congregational music and don’t typically have select groups that perform songs for everyone else. (Readers who have choirs and/or worship bands won’t share the concern, to the same degree.) It’s been impressed upon me that new songs should be introduced at times other than Sunday mornings. I’ve swallowed this, but I’m not sure why. Why isn’t Sunday morning the perfect time to sing a new song to the Lord?

I do think using new songs is important. It’s not the only thing, but it’s important.

## The 70s, 80s, and 90s

I once had the opportunity to lead a song or two at a city-wide unity meeting. The musical repertoire was to have been drawn from songs written since 1970 (from the host church's hymnal).

I found the list of songs that fit this bill to be woeful, I'm sorry to report. The 70s and 80s were particularly dry decades in terms of congregational music, I think.

There were probably 90 songs on the list, and I was hard-pressed to come up with 5 or 6 that I would really want to lead. The good ones seem to be 1) over-sung, 2) out of the musical range of most congregations, 3) unattractively abridged so they will be more singable, or 4) trite.

I'm torn in situations like this: part of me wants to champion and teach older songs (true hymns) like "Shepherd of Tender Youth" and "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee"; another part wants to differentiate didactically between the good contemporary songs and the drivel; another part wouldn't mind seeing the charade of Church-of-Christ "worship" in flames ... in the hope that decades of deteriorating standards might be refined by fire.

## Follow-Up: Unity Singing Event

This assessment of the recent area-wide unity event, referred to above, was written largely the morning after. I rated my experience in seven categories, on a 14-pt scale, in honor of my father's quirky practice.

1. **Biracial unity feeling: 11** (I rated this based on the overall sense I got in the room, which was filled with perhaps 400 believers. However, my personal feeling was more like a 5. The room was not particularly well integrated by skin color, which is understandable and not necessarily a bad thing.)

2. **Worship quality: 3.5** (I know, I know ... but I do feel well qualified, not presuming to judge individuals' hearts, to assess *corporate* worship quality.)

3. **Repertoire: 4** (one of the best songs led, incidentally, was by no means written in the last 40 years ... rather, the particular *arrangement* was the thing that was that young)

4. **Musicality: 2**

5. **Sonic damage to eardrums: 9** (I was actually close to stopping my ears—too many people singing brassily in unison can actually hurt ... definitely would have had to take my baby boy's developing ears out, if he'd been there.)

6. **Organization: 6** (I suspect it wouldn't have been feasible to get past 8 on this particular occasion!)

7. **Attendance: 13** (It's always encouraging, in a solidarity sort of way, to have several congregations represented, with a few people's having traveled a good distance.)

## Harmony and "Dumbing Down" Musically

Besides regularly leading musically these days, and in small group meetings, I am a constant observer (as well as a participant!), and I would like to note that in *a cappella* churches in which "contemporary" music is the rule, it seems that once again, after an interval of four or five decades, *we need a concerted effort to teach harmony*.

If we do not figure out how to re-institute the teaching of music as part of the church's curriculum somehow, the ability to sing *a cappella* music will eventually fade away *al niente* (to nothing).

The level of musical literacy is clearly decreasing.<sup>3</sup> Not that music is the end-all; it is only one means of worshipping. But in a fellowship that emphasizes singing so much, you'd think we'd pay more attention to passing on the legacy.

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<sup>3</sup> Those who regularly experience singing in larger churches may have difficulty relating to my dire tone here. Things don't sound as empty and harmonically thin when there are more voices making up the 10-30% that can still sing harmony. But if your church has fewer than, say, 300 members, and has an average age of less than 50, there's a great likelihood that only 30 or 40 people exhibit any appreciable degree of music literacy and ability to harmonize. I have no trouble asserting these realities: 1) 10% is not a great

In a few years, churches that offer neither printed nor projected music will find themselves devoid of harmony in the pews. They will either need to make harmony available—teaching its mechanics, and offering opportunities for learning it—or choose to concede fully to the prevalent culture and styles by using instruments.

Aside: certainly widely distributed *a cappella* arrangements may not be worthy of consideration as the benchmark. Arrangers in prominent positions typically have great hearts and loads of vibrant creativity, but they do not always know how to arrange four-voice harmony very well.<sup>4</sup> You may have in your midst someone who can arrange better for your church. The music might need simplification or simply improvement.

Melody-only music will not hold people’s interest very long, no matter how “hip” the songs are. Yes, I am prophesying: Unless something changes in our fellowship, it will take less time for the legacy of good *a cappella* singing to drift into oblivion than it takes for the saints who are 60 or older to die off.

Without letting the *music* take precedence over the *worship* (that should, after all, spring primarily from the hearts of spiritually minded individuals, regardless of the specific assembly activities), *a cappella* churches should either devise a new program for teaching saints how to sing harmony, or perhaps just give up now on *a cappella* singing.<sup>5</sup>

## Not Providing Music for the Musically Literate

According to documentation on the website of Lincoln Christian College & Seminary, Alexander Campbell didn’t like printed music.

It is noteworthy that during his lifetime, Campbell refused to allow musical notation to appear in his hymnbook, notation not appearing in it until the 1871 edition. He was a man of strongly-held opinions about church music. He felt that notation appearing on the same page with lyrics would detract from worship.

Some today feel that even displaying musical notation on a screen, let alone using a printed hymnal, is “elitist,” pandering only to the musically knowledgeable.

I disagree.

There are still quite a few of us (maybe 50%, though I admit the number is declining) who are aided greatly by musical notation in worship. At least for a few more years—until *a cappella* churches evolve/split again into a) the more instrumentally friendly and b) the less so—give me music notation, or don’t ask me to sing or lead.

We must provide for the future. Even when the song is known by the majority of the congregation (remember that the majority is not everyone!), why not provide music notation in some format? If for no other reason, do it because children who may be learning to read music can learn parts and thereby preserve the experience of harmony in a *cappella* music.

I think the message is clear in the following nearly anguished thoughts that I received via e-mail:

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enough quorum to make the music work very well, and 2) the musical literacy trend is downward.

<sup>4</sup> In my (admittedly arrogantly maintained) gradebook, the arrangers for songs in *Songs of Faith and Praise* get an 84% for musical editing, and the arrangers for *Great Songs of the Church* get a 95%. I’m less familiar with *Praise for the Lord*, but I’ll bet it would make the honor roll, a good deal above books distributed by Howard Publishing. Music published by the Hallal group is below D-level, and Zoe Group arrangers get an 88%. Among other endeavors, these last two are unwittingly creating new standards, or non-standards, in voice leading practice. I’m convinced that apathy is a factor in both cases. Part of the issue is the avoidance of the difficulties involved in adapting songs rooted in non-conforming, popular music styles to conventional, four-part harmony. In other words, there’s sometimes just no viable way to convert a song from its original instrumentation to an *a cappella* setting, and attempts to do so sometimes leads to flouting of certain musical conventions.

<sup>5</sup> I love my heritage, and it is not my intention here to denigrate the practice of singing *a cappella*. I am merely attempting to prophesy without divine inspiration, i.e., to predict the unfortunate doom of good *a cappella* music in churches . . . unless action is taken soon.

Last Sunday night \_\_\_\_\_ (leader) did it again: led probably seven or so songs and offered NO music access. The *really* maddening thing about it was that several were *in the book!* Furthermore, there were numbers up on the pretty PowerPoint word displays that didn't correspond to what was in the book! If that wasn't a triple whammy!

It's not a generational problem either. While I didn't know some of the songs, some younger worshippers may not have known "Count Your Blessings."

Anyway, I think it is discriminatory (that would be "anti-unity," in Biblical terms) to project words only (except on occasion). It is a snub to people who don't know the song and an even greater snub if some of those people *can* read music. Having both words *and* music available will never discriminate against the ones who do not read music; yet NOT having music does cut out the ones who COULD use it (and I strongly believe more people read music, to some degree, than is claimed).

Besides the personal snub I feel, I tend to feel angry that leaders are dealing a slashing blow to the singing as a whole . . . while seeming to be happy with a retrogression in this department.

We are not illiterate! We don't learn other things by having information passed down from the fathers, as in the olden cultures. We read the news, we read about technology, we read inspiration, we read for pleasure . . . we are nearly all readers! Why must our worship assemblies assume ignorance on the part of average Joe & Jill? It gives the "leader" an undue hold over us while robbing the whole assembly of greater participation.

I would add this: there are churches that might have had a difficult time getting a projection system going and/or do not yet have the funds to purchase Paperless Hymnal or some similar product that allows them to display music on the screen. There may be some house churches who do not have resources to buy hymnals or song books of any kind. A lyrics-only sheet for each song may be all that is available, for a while. The real problem is with churches that have five staff ministers, technology budgets of thousands of dollars per year, all the financial resources they need . . . and yet manifest apathy toward the musically literate.

If you have the resources, please do not make the mistake of neglecting to provide either printed or projection-displayed music. It will make a *huge* difference for the small segment of your church that are musicians, and it will be beneficial, though perhaps unnoticed, for a substantial number of the others.

## The Eyes as Communicators

I once read this: *Avoid extended periods of leading with your eyes closed.* To be frank, I am not sure whether the advice is a valid advice nugget or just a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Since reading it, I have been hyper-aware of this issue, and perhaps it is just because I had been preconditioned to notice it.

One issue here is personal worshipping on the part of the leader. For our purposes, let us leave out the possibility of insincere performism. I would rather assume sincere, personal investment and involvement on the part of the leader. Most of the time, when I am being led by someone with his eyes closed, I try to assume that he is personally involved and charged—perhaps contemplating the holiness of God, seeing in his mind's eyes the infinite majesty of heaven's throne room, or at least endeavoring to focus more within his own human spirit.

But the eyes are communicators, and while I believe in the notion of *lead worshipper* over *song leader* or even *worship leader*—meaning the leader is responsible, foremost, for his own heart's consummate involvement in worship—it is important to communicate with those being led. So

I recommend that leaders not make a habit of becoming involved in their own spirits to the neglect of the sheep in the pen.<sup>6</sup> For one thing, it is difficult to effect even simple leadership—in such aspects as tempo and dynamics—when your eyes are closed. If those in the pews are accustomed to leaders constantly in their own worship worlds, i.e., not connected through the eyes to the rest of the congregation, it is nigh unto impossible for people in the pews to be roused when musical leadership is called for.

Closed eyes can be authentically expressive. Closed eyes can be indicative of the truly engaged heart of a lead worshipper (or any worshipper, for that matter!), and I greatly appreciate seeing a worship leader “obviously worshipping,” as a friend put it. But if you are leading from a position at the front of a group of worshipping saints, I recommend avoiding lengthy periods of eyes-closed, internal focus.

## Hand and Arm Gestures

I know how to “lead singing” in what is now seen by some churches as an old style. And I am not generally an advocate of mere maintenance when we are speaking of style and form, but I do believe that in *a cappella* churches, apt use of the song director’s hand can help to lead the worshippers in the pews.

It does take some training and experience, and there are some who are better at “beating time” than others. Now that I have used the term “beating time,” I would like to suggest that effective use of the hand(s) in worship leadership involves more than beat patterns. However, the beat patterns themselves are standardized in Western culture, and should be learned by all song/worship leaders—if for no other reason, for the segment of the congregation that will have been trained musically through our public and private education systems.

One common error is the reversal of the standard pattern for 3/4 time. We wouldn’t say “black” when we mean “white” or “go” when we mean “stop”; neither should we change the commonly understood declarations for various time signatures. Beat patterns are a part of the language of music, and the “term” for the next-to-last beat of a measure is *out*, not in. (I say “out” instead of “right” to account for left-handed leaders.) So, in 3/4, song leaders should gesture down for the downbeat, out for the 2nd beat, and up for the upbeat. In 4/4, the pattern is down, in, out, up.

Another common error is beating each of the eighth notes in what should be relatively fast 3/8 or 6/8 time, or all the quarter notes in fast 3/4 time. Very rarely should this be done; and when it is done, the result can be an exceptionally funereal offering in song. “Prince of Peace, Control My Will” may effectively be beat in three, but “Into My Heart” and “Take Time To Be Holy” are probably better felt without so many beats shown by the leader. In the former case, every 3/4 measure could receive *one* slow beat, and in the latter, every 6/8 measure could include *two* beats (each comprising three eighth notes).

Beyond these types of “brass tacks”—and these fundamentals should not be passed over apathetically but should be learned and practiced by every leader—gesture may help to communicate a range of emotions and expressions. For instance, the four-beat pattern used with “Christ, We Do All Adore Thee” should be stylistically different from the one used with “Christ the Lord Is Ris’n Today.” With the former song, the basic gestures should be smooth and connected, while with the latter, the rebound from each beat should be more pronounced. Each song has its own type of energy, and the two should feel and look different from each other. Similarly, “Jesus is Coming Soon” should look different from “Jesus, Let Us Come To Know You,” which should in turn look different from “Jesus, You’re My Firm Foundation.”

At times, dynamics (louds and softs, and everything between) may be indicated by the song leader’s right hand. The left hand may also be pressed into service periodically to indicate such musical effects that enhance the overall expression. Even if you do not feel comfortable using the

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<sup>6</sup> This “conflict of interest” that sometimes arises (between the leader’s own spiritual needs and those of the group he is leading) makes one case for not using the same leader all the time. Leaders need regular opportunities to worship without the pressing concerns of leading others.

standard beat patterns, I encourage you to use your hand at least at the beginnings of phrases and stanzas, particularly when leading slower and/or more rhythmically complex contemporary songs. It might feel awkward at first, but you will grow more comfortable with it, and in a very short time, the whole church will be able to express things more dynamically and more “together.”

Aside: Physical gestures may include the signaling of stanza numbers, when stanzas are omitted. Because so many seem to miss these signals, I recommend both announcing the numbers (e.g., “We’ll omit the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza” or “We’ll be singing stanzas three and four only”) as well as holding up the appropriate number of fingers well before attentive singers would begin singing the wrong stanza.

A final word on the topic of leading with the hand and arm—perhaps especially for those who lead primarily contemporary songs: please consider not discarding every aspect of the older ways and means of leading. We still need rhythmic togetherness,<sup>7</sup> and hand gestures help to achieve it. As a person in the pew, I want to sing with you as you lead, but I have little chance of doing so a) if you are not using gestures to indicate the beat of the music, and b) if you are constantly skipping beats. I will describe a few matters of rhythm in more detail below.

## Pitch 1: Half-steps

Since you weren’t there, you won’t believe this. I only know you weren’t there since those who *were* there never heard my last name, and I’m not identifying the church, so if they ever come into contact with this material, they’ll never know .

We visited another *a cappella* church one Sunday. Since there was little hope of worshipping collectively—the room that would have held 300 was occupied by about 35, spread out as far as they could have been spread out—I allowed myself to descend into an exercise or three of the mind. Maybe these observations will help Christians somewhere else. . . .

In the spirit of late-night talk-n-comedy shows, I’ll give you the answer first, and then the question:

A: 44

Q: What is the total number of half-steps that the songs were sung below standard pitch?

I kid you not. 44! And there were only five songs! Two songs were essentially an octave flat, and another was a minor-seventh flat. The saving grace that really pulled up the average was the “invitation song,” which, by the way, contained repeated references to nighttime although we were singing it about 11:35 a.m. The invitation song was only a major-third flat.

Musically mostly-literate readers may quickly be caused to think, “Ha. OK, I get it—it was bad. But for those songs that were sung an octave flat—couldn’t you just have sung an octave above, making it come out about right?” But no, if you do that, you stick out like a sore thumb. If 23 of the 35 people are singing the melody an octave low, and 1 is singing alto an octave low, and another is trying to sing bass an octave low, while 10 people aren’t singing at all, two visitors trying to sing soprano and tenor in the right octave gives the impression of guests that are taking over the church. It just isn’t a good idea.

Churches with instruments often have other problems, such as 1) instruments that are so loud that people don’t sing much, and 2) solo-type vocalists and arrangements that aren’t in touch with good vocal ranges for 2-, 3-, or 4-part harmony. But smaller, rural *a cappella* churches often ignore pitch standards, frequently singing significantly below pitch, and it causes the life-pulse in the room to flatline.

Oh, and about the textual content on Sunday: although none of the songs was particularly trite, the content was rather light. A couple of stereotypical references were made, in prayers and

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<sup>7</sup> You may wish to refer to other sections titled “Rhythm and the Agitated Style (Arrhythmia),” “Contemporary Music 1 (Contemporary Worship Music in *A cappella* Churches),” and “Contemporary Music 2 (Syncopated and Delayed Rhythms).”

announcements, to “singing songs of praise to His name” or being “gathered here to worship the Lord,” yet there was not a single song of worship or praise among the five songs sung.

## Pitch 2: Pitch Matters

Here I will have to work at modifying opinions developed over decades. First off, I was taught, and still believe, to an extent, the following two general truths about the pitch level (highness or lowness) of songs:

**Pitching songs too low tends to contribute to a lifeless, dull overall “feel” in the sound.** For the most part, trained musicians carefully considered the selection of the notated key. Some later editions of songs have been written in keys changed by a whole step or even a step and a half; most of the motion has been downward. In other words, if a hymnal printed in 1906 had the song in G, you are not likely to find a newer hymnal with the same song in A. More likely, it will be down in F, and lower pitch can contribute to a dull congregational sonority.

**Pitching songs too high tends to discourage less confident singers.** We have all experienced discomfort when a song is pitched too high. There may even be laughter among the less mature saints when people’s voices crack or sound funny. The worst thing about it, though, is the decreased collective volume that results when people drop out because they fear they will sound funny when they sing high notes.

Here is a very good suggestion I had not previously thought to put in writing until a friend reminded me: especially on Sunday mornings, it is generally good to begin with songs that have less extreme ranges and perhaps less demanding (though not meaningless!) texts. Everyone needs a “warmup” time before stretching the vocal range upward.

Especially in the *a cappella* world, *pitch matters*. I’m not saying it has to be perfect, but if the song is pitched a fourth too high, people either shy away from singing altogether, or they laugh themselves through the song—risking irreverence, if the song is addressed adoringly to God.

On the other hand, if the song is pitched 2 steps low,

the basses may not be heard, and they won’t have the guts to take it up an octave  
the tenors may get confused and drop out or sing an oddly morphed sort-of alto line  
the altos may sing too high, doubling the tenor at the octave, or may make up some part that  
further confuses the hopelessly befuddled men-types captioned above  
worse yet, the whole song may lack appropriate energy and brilliance

If as a leader you can’t naturally pitch a song pretty close to its written pitch (provided the notation has been somewhat knowledgeably offered), you should learn how to use a pitch standard, such as a tuning fork or pitch pipe. It’s for the good of the assembly.

You may wish to skip the next section, which will deal somewhat academically with music history as it relates to pitch standards.

## Pitch 3: The History of Pitch

In centuries past, composers associated keys with certain moods or dispositions. Db, for instance, though only a half-step away from D, would never have been used for triumphant or even militaristic musical content; the key of D was reserved for that type of music. There is a reason that “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind” is in Db, while “Joy to the World” is in D. The key of Eb had heroic connotations, and F was often associated with nature.

Mitigating the above considerations is the realization that until at least the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there really was no global pitch standard. The organ in Bach’s church in Weimar or Leipzig might have

been tuned to A=415 MHz (vibrations per second), while Mozart's standard, 50 years later, might have been closer to A=435. Our standard "A" today vibrates 440 times per second. The difference, in some cases, is greater than a half-step. In other words, their "A" sounded roughly like our "Ab" sounds today.

The lack of a pitch standard in the past causes me to question seriously the previously supposed matching of certain keys with certain songs. There would not seem to be an inherent quality of the key of D that makes it feel a certain way for singers; Händel's key of D in the "Hallelujah!" Chorus would not have been as high as our key of D today, so it would have felt different, back in 1751, when heard by someone extremely sensitive to actual pitch/frequency.

We might also consider the changing concepts around temperament. "Temperament" refers to the mathematical/acoustical division of the octave, and the theory and practice in this area have not been constant through the centuries. Before Bach's time (the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century), it was not even possible to play a keyboard instrument in all keys, because the system of tuning was different. Harpsichords were tuned, for instance, so that the key of C, G, and D were even more *in tune*, but the keys of B and F#, for example, were so out of tune that they virtually unusable. Today, our pianos are tuned in such a way as to split the difference, sort of, making all intervals except octaves equally and marginally "out of tune."

Over the decades and centuries, the human ear has learned to hear instruments that are *out of tune* as if they were *in tune*. It makes music easier to perform, in some ways, and it also means, for me, that there is less reason to associate only one key with a song. Long & short: there really isn't a lot of difference between D and Eb and E. Those keys are all very close to one another, and only those worshippers with a sense of absolute pitch, and a few other individuals, maybe, will likely be able to tell the difference.

All of the above was for the purists, one of which I used to be, and for anyone academically interested in some shallow pitch and temperament theory. The main issue in pitching songs in an *a cappella* church is being sensitive to getting it too low for the range of the melody (and, resultantly, too low for the basses and altos!) or too high for anyone to sing.

It is still better to sing "Holy, Holy, Holy" in Eb than in Bb or C, though. Some extremes are just too extreme to work very well. Be sensitive. On the other hand, don't feel called upon to restart a song in a better key . . . unless it is making your teenagers snicker because the pitch is too high or making your whole congregation yawn because it's too low. Then, by all means, restart it sooner rather than later, for the sake of the experience.

## Common Rhythmic, Melodic, and Harmonic Mistakes

If you have ever sung much from a hymnal, and if you can read music, you have noted a common error or two. Congregations do not always sing things as they are written! Consider the following songs traditionally sung with some kind of mistakes:

There Was One Who Was Willing (Nailed to the Cross)—mistakes related to dotted rhythms  
Savior, Breathe an Evening Blessing—rhythmic error in next-to-last measure

The Old Rugged Cross—rhythmic mistakes

How Great Thou Art—ditto

There Was One Who Was Willing—again, ditto

When Peace Like a River—pitch mistake in the alto part

Abide With Me—ditto

Jesus Is Coming Soon—throughout this song, the compound rhythms (division in three eighth notes) are almost always replaced by simple rhythms (division in two eighth notes, combined with some syncopation) . . . which is actually quite a bit more hip than the way it was originally written!

Amazing Grace—which version of the harmony—the dominant or the tonic six-three chord on the word "me"?

The Lord's My Shepherd—rhythmic error in the bass part after the brief soprano-alto duet section (typically follows the tenor part's rhythm)

To Be Like Thee—melodic mistake at the beginning and near the end of the chorus

(now for a few more recently composed songs ...)

Light the Fire—mistake in the lyrics (should be “You breathe new life right through me,” not “Your Spirit moves right through me,” according to the original recording, supplied to me by the composer)

The Greatest Commands (Love One Another)—the second note in the alto melody is almost always sung incorrectly

Jesus, Let Us Come To Know You—thanks to a mass-marketed hymnal, this song had its time signature changed from 4/4 to 3/4, which changed the character of the music

Lamb of God—often sung partly in 4/4 instead of in 3/4, as originally written (with the first note in several measures sung as though it were half note tied to an eighth, instead of a dotted quarter note)

Listen To Our Hearts—the responsive alto and tenor parts in the chorus (second page) are written in a rhythm that is virtually un-singable and very unnatural; I'm confident that whoever wrote this out to begin with didn't sing it in his head as it ended up on paper!

I have not even mentioned those countless musical oddities that seem to occur in only one congregation.<sup>8</sup> Strange things happen when music is passed down orally. In some cases, though, even when the music is printed, the issue may be with the music and not with the people. Some songs were written more artfully than practically, and I welcome some change in the latter direction. But what should leaders do about such minor issues?

It probably depends on your particular situation. Some churches have more of a legacy of musical accuracy than others. If my group is accustomed to monthly “singing nights” in which new songs are regularly learned in a relaxed atmosphere, I might make a note to bring a musical “corrective” to the next singing night. If, however, no one has spoken to any musical issues in forty years, I should proceed with care and love, assuming that few people will understand or be concerned with incorrect notes or rhythms. If your church has had an overbearing leader who is always “getting on your case” about not singing loudly enough or singing this or that incorrectly, the best course of action might be silence, at least for a while.

Above all, do not let musical things obscure the greater good of the gathered people and their focus on things of the Lord.

## Rhythm and the Agitated Style: Arrhythmia

Rhythmic togetherness is really the only positive attribute of congregational singing that we have hope of continuing to attain, given the general decline in musical literacy, the lessened ability to harmonize, and the decreased focus on singing. Togetherness can be accomplished without any technical training per se.

I would like to discuss a rhythmic pitfall in some of today's churches—something I will label the “agitated style” of musical worship leading. Typically, this problem shows up most dramatically in *a cappella* churches that have suffered in the past from funereal tempos that pervaded all songs and styles. You know the church, don't you? “O Happy Day” and “Christ the Lord Is Ris'n Today” were sung at the same tempo as “Abide with Me” and “When My Love To Christ Grows Weak”—all at about 60 beats per minute.

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<sup>8</sup> Case in point: I'm proofreading this during a Sunday visit at another church, whose leader made up a full measure of the chorus of the song “In Christ Alone.” Lyrics were projected without music, and most people seemed to be singing it his way, so he would appear to have inflicted a mistake on an unsuspecting public. Also see the prior section on “Not Providing Music for the Musically Literate.”

Some churches seem to live in comatose states for years, and then some fresh blood comes in to try to save the day. Now, with the new guy, many songs are not only too fast, but beats are skipped at the end of each phrase in a sort of perpetual effort to breathe some life into things. I have experienced shortness and shallowness of breath because of this syndrome; when it is in operation, there can be little feeling of congregational unity. What results is often an annoying lack of rhythm—all in the name of enthusiastic excitement that is well intentioned but *agitated* . . . and out of balance with other values, such as aesthetics, musical excellence, and simple, congregational togetherness.

This “agitated style” is also experienced in churches that had *not* for many years been singing things too slowly. In fact, contemporary songs are susceptible to this syndrome just as frequently as older songs.<sup>9</sup> It’s ironic: If this generation’s music is anything, it’s *rhythmic*, but when contemporary songs are imported into an *a cappella* setting, the rhythmic pulse is often brushed aside for the sake of a perceived energizing of the whole experience. But when no one can sense the beat, it all feels like a disordered mass of sound instead of a song.

An aside: vocal/choral musicians are frequently more rhythmically challenged than their instrumentally trained counterparts, but I don’t find this syndrome particularly germane here. It’s not that vocal/choral people are having trouble reading the music. In most cases, it’s not a question of music literacy. It’s just that those who are leading are not relaxing enough to let the steady pulse of the music govern them.

But the simple truth is that most of the less musically trained population feels the beat *naturally*, so why not get on board the rhythmic train without trying to push through beats in the name of energizing folks?

Here’s an example of a song led in the agitated style. As you read the words below, try to read or sing them to yourself in rhythm, as you are noting the parenthetical representations of elapsed time on the right:

My Jesus, my Savior, Lord, there is none like You.  
All of my days, I want to praise the wonders of Your mighty love.  
(2, 3 / beats 4 and 1 skipped)  
My Comfort, my Shelter, Tower of refuge and strength;  
Let ev’ry breath, all that I am,  
Never cease to worship You  
(2, 3 / half of beat 4 skipped, leaving no room to breathe, let alone  
to feel the resolution from the suspension in the alto part)

(Chorus)

(then at the end of the chorus . . .)

Nothing compares to the promise I have in You.  
(should be 8 beats on “You”; 4 full beats would be fine in an *a cappella* setting,  
but most churches end up holding “You” for only 2 or 3 beats and jumping back  
into the repeat of the verse)

Once in a great while, it may be beneficial to jump over a beat or two in an effort to energize the worshippers—two, maybe three times a year—but this practice is distracting to many, so its use should be sparing. Never skip beats while singing in a meditative mood (as in “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” or “Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross”) and/or in a slow tempo; your feeling of

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<sup>9</sup> Please refer also to the section above titled “Hand and Arm Gestures,” and to later sections on “Contemporary Music” that deal with rhythmic aspects and “togetherness.”

worry over lifeless singing is better addressed by means that will actually aid the worshippers instead of merely establishing that you are vocally in charge.

When songs are not kept within the boundaries of steady rhythmic pulse, the result is similar to the feeling of listening to a stammerer speak. We feel discomfort and perhaps sympathy instead of security. We long for the experience to be over rather than feeling a sense of stability as we receive the message.

Leaders, make a study of the difference between energy and rhythmic agitation, and resolve to *help* worshippers instead of hindering them by lurching here and there, skipping beats and half-beats, and galloping pell-mell from phrase to phrase, from stanza to chorus, and from chorus back to the next stanza/verse.

Granted, most non-musicians who are accustomed to this type of arrhythmia will become desensitized, after a while, to the resultant confused effect. On the other hand, if the congregation is unexpectedly treated to the other world—a singing experience governed by a regular pulse—they might not know what hit them, but they will, without a doubt, leave with the distinct impression that the singing was better, and more *together* that day.

An *a cappella* congregation needs every advantage these days, and one of those advantages is pulse-sensitive leaders. Leaders should understand and realize the distinction between *energized and exuberant*, on one hand, and *agitated and irregular*, on the other. As a person in the pew (or cushy chair, as the case may be), I do need to be spiritually charged, but I don't need to be gasping for breath and having my intoned words lopped off at the end of each phrase.

### **Tempos: Comatose Music**

In listening to a recording of hymns by my extended family, I was struck by two things. First—the quality of these songs is very high. We're talking about 14 songs that would be called "hymns" by most (and maybe half of them are hymns ... a much higher percentage than that found in most assemblies). I miss this kind of quality. Expressions such as these jump off the audio track:

Jesus, Thy name I love—All other names above

God of grace and God of glory

in silence comes all loveliness ... in silence I'd find God

Lord, God of ev'rything that breathes, Your name is to be praised

morning known among the blest—morning of hope and joy and love

Silently now I wait for You ... open my eyes; illumine

... shall rise the glorious thought: I am with You

alone with You in breathless adoration

with You there is no darkness, Lord

grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour

when day's shadows lengthen, Jesus, be near

Don't those do something for your soul? I wish we could sing those kinds of thoughts these days. I miss them. (In the above expressions, the Deity pronouns have been changed to keep minds from closing based on archaisms.)

The second thing that struck me was slow *tempos*. A common pitfall in some *a cappella* music is gravitating to the **SCD** (Slowest Common Denominator). (Many of the songs on that family recording were sung too slowly, too.) While there is often one leader in every church who feels it incumbent on himself to be a cheerleader and sing everything fast, most leaders end up letting large groups of people drag them down. By the end of the song, "morning of hope and joy and love" sounds like "dark night of dismal degradation and death" . . . and "grant us courage" comes out, "may I somehow just get by, because I have no energy left."

In some churches, the leader is only a figurehead; the actual leader is the alto in the third row who sings more loudly, and perhaps more accurately, than the figurehead. But what happens when the alto *likes* slow tempos so she can show off her vibrato more on the long notes?

It is not always an individual that causes the tempo to slow to a snail's pace. Sometimes, the auditorium/sanctuary will naturally divide itself into segments, with the back half dragging the tempo through jello, through mud, and finally through quicksand that ultimately snuffs out any hint of life, or at least assures a coma that will last through the hour.

Leaders, please *lead!* You may find that it generally takes no more than one or two assertions of tempo authority per assembly half-hour. The congregation will quickly be roused and will attentively come along with you at more appropriate tempos.

A good friend reminded me of our common experience in a camp setting of 140+ comparatively mature teenagers. The singing there—original in a cramped, decrepit but affectionately regarded building, then later in a large, resonant hall—was often fairly slow. And many of the teens liked it that way! There was something about the *esprit de corps*, I think: if everyone is feeling things together and singing with heart, allowing the thoughts and musical tones to resonate 30% longer can be very satisfying.

But back on the home front, where not everything is inspired in our local-church pews . . . it's really not impolite for leaders to push churches to sing at good tempos. Sure, it may be a little uncomfortable for a time or two, when the leader asserts a better tempo. But things will be better, ultimately. Don't feel bad about keeping things moving along, especially when enhanced worship results!

## Tempo, Key, and Style Variation

Ever feel bored in a time of congregational music (I say "music" because I'm speaking specifically of music—this is not as broad a topic as the assembly, and not as narrow as congregational worship) and not know why?

Back in my days of being drawn to, and pushing more of, contemporary music, I visited churches of various stripes. One was the Vineyard Church that met just over the PA line from Newark, DE. I particularly remembering someone's barking like a dog during "spontaneous worship," but that's a story for another time. I noticed an unfamiliar mesmerizing effect in the music there; this effect had to do with the key of the songs. More frequently, the "boring" quotient is reached mostly in the number, or execution, of slower songs.

Whatever the penchant of the leader or the church, we should take care not to do too much that is so alike that it lulls the worshippers to sleep. What if there were . . .

3 slow, meditative songs in a row — maybe "Abide With Me," "Fairest Lord Jesus," and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"

3 faster songs — "Above All Else," "Firm Foundation," and maybe "When We All Get to Heaven" (maybe this isn't so bad — at least, in my experience, we tend to err more on the slower side of things)

3 songs conceived as medium-tempo that are led too slowly (this is worse than either of the above in terms of the sedative quality) — “O Happy Day,” “Christ the Lord Is Ris’n Today,” and “He Is Exalted” come to mind

3 marches in 6/8 time — “I Was Sinking Deep in Sin,” “Anywhere with Jesus,” and “I Serve a Risen Savior” (These exact three were led within one of each other at a recent church experience. If we want the sense of Sousa in church, maybe there’s a reason for this, but I certainly wouldn’t add “Blessed Assurance” or “A Wonderful Savior” right after this.)

3 songs in the same key — at this Vineyard church I mentioned above, I think every song one night was in the key of D, except for maybe one or two that were in G, and those used a lot of D chords. It was mesmerizing, sort of like minimalist pot-smoking music, and I imagine a lot of those gathered thought being spellbound was cool, though they didn’t know why. But it was also a bit boring for the soul.

Any one of these sets of 3 could create a listlessness, an opportunity to go into spiritual neutral, a general feeling of “blah,” as it were. It’s like having spaghetti, macaroni, and penne all in the same meal! Or blackberries, black raspberries, and huckleberries. Or a Sunday sundae made with vanilla, vanilla bean, and French vanilla ice cream. (Maybe the berries and ice cream examples aren’t really so bad.)

My mother taught me that having different colors and textures in a single meal tends to make it more nourishing, as well as more pleasing to the eye. And variety in the choice of a palette of songs does make a difference in the experience of the gathered Christians. The potential for spiritual nourishment is much more significant than the eye-pleasing factor, but variety is generally a good thing, and if there is to be less variety, let there be a spiritual purpose for the sameness.

## Contemporary Music 1: Contemporary Worship Music in A Cappella Churches

Part of the problem in the “rhythm of the saints”<sup>10</sup> is the *longer* melody notes that are, in the original versions, supported by non-vocal musical material—i.e., strums of a guitar and rhythmic patterns played on the drum set. In a non-instrumental setting, it feels like forever to hold a whole note tied to a half note in the next measure! But in the original, because of the underlying musical activity, the time that elapses during six beats does not feel like an eternity. Face it: It is just plain difficult to use some contemporary music in a *cappella* settings.

Add to this difficulty the apparent shyness of some modern worship leaders about using their hands to help keep the beat and keep the congregation together—I know, it seems old-school to “beat time.” But the problem is made worse when beats are skipped and no one can predict when the leader is going to sing the next note because he is not rhythmically governed, and there are no visual cues, either.

Maybe we shouldn’t throw out the baby with the bath water. Yes, there are some unhelpful aspects of how we used to do song leading. But leading rhythmically with the hand may be a method worth saving—especially if it helps keep people together.<sup>11</sup>

Some judgment should be applied when selecting contemporary songs for use in a *cappella* churches. In succeeding musings, I will try to provide a couple of examples of modern songs that work, and some that do not work, in a *cappella* settings—and why.

## Contemporary Music 2: Syncopated and Delayed Rhythms

What makes a good “crossover” song? Which modern songs work well in both instrumentally accompanied and a *cappella* settings?

First, I would like to look at syncopations,<sup>12</sup> which were only rarely used in church singing until the last few decades. Even some “camp songs” of my youth—including such songs as “Jesus Is

<sup>10</sup> This phrase is used with a nod to Paul Simon, who recorded an album by the same title.

<sup>11</sup> Please see above in the “Hand and Arm Gestures” section.

<sup>12</sup> “Syncopation” is a term used to describe musical accents that occur off the beat, or steady pulse, of the music. Some jazz styles

Lord,” “Have You Seen Jesus My Lord?” and “May I Call You Father?” used no syncopations whatsoever. On the other hand, “Blue Skies and Rainbows,” for which I have gained a modicum of appreciation in more recent years, has plenty of syncopations, but they are rarely sung well. *But I always liked that song, you say? Well, sure—it’s musically engaging and says something worthwhile about the Creator. But if you’ve never heard a really tight musical ensemble sing or play syncopated music, you have little idea of what’s missing in terms of rhythmic spark.*

Songs conceived with any considerable degree of rhythmic complexity should not be sung by the typical church . . . not without some teaching, at least. Put bluntly and frankly, *a cappella* churches just can not sing successive syncopations. One syncopation every few lines . . . maybe. But more than one in a measure, and we die! The feeling is lost, and those that loved the song when they heard it on the radio are either disappointed with the effort or deaf to rhythm.

I might have lost some of you here. Not that you don’t understand, but you might prefer that I not get all “musician-y” on you. Please stay with me. I’m trying to use what I’ve learned and experienced in music in the past 25 years or so to recommend a course of action for the church heritage I love.

Here is an example of a great song that works fairly well in an *a cappella* setting:

Weshall as-sem-ble on the moun - tain. Weshall as-sem-ble at the\_\_\_ throne.

This song works, despite the syncopations. (I have notated it above the way it is commonly sung, which reflects neither Twila Paris’s original nor the way it is notated in popular arrangements.)

The song “Listen To Our Hearts” presents multiple issues (see above under Common Rhythmic, Melodic, and Harmonic Mistakes). While it is certainly a worthy, unique song, lyrically speaking, the long notes that occur at regular intervals during the verse (on the words “ex-plain” and “des-cribe,” for instance) invite infractions of the “agitated style” genus. In other words, it is difficult not to rush through those measures, if you are singing the melody while the altos and tenors are supposed to be supplying the rhythmic interest through syncopations:

How do you ex- plain? How do you des- cribe a love that goes from east to west . . .

In addition, please notice the following passage at the end of the song:

words we know\_ to tell You what\_ an awe - some God You are. But words are not e -

tend to involve syncopation. Very little traditional church music is syncopated.

“Words we know” goes fine, because the syncopation is interrupted by the strong-beat rhythm of the word “tell.” But it is then inescapable that the subsequent rhythms on “tell you what an awesome God You are” will be rushed through, since seven successive syllables are syncopated.

Is it important that congregational singing be as rhythmically tight as a top-flight jazz combo or a professional vocal quartet? Of course not. “Listen To Our Hearts” may certainly be sung by most churches with some musical—and a *lot* of spiritual—success. When leaders pay attention to these syncopation issues, though, it may help to solidify the feeling of rhythmic togetherness, as well as aiding in the choice of songs.

Below is an excerpt from a song no *a cappella* church should ever use—“I Will Sing of Your Love Forever.”

The image shows a musical score for the song "I Will Sing of Your Love Forever" in 4/4 time. It consists of four staves of music. The lyrics are: "O - ver the moun - tains and the sea - Your riv - er runs with love for me. - And I will o - pen up my heart and let the Heal - er set me free. - I'm hap - py to be in the truth, and I will dail - y lift my hands -". The chords are: Gm7 (Em7), Bb (G), Csus (Asus), F (D), and Gm7 (Em7).

Singing these syncopated rhythms accurately is essential to the nature of this song, and since (sorry to be so dogmatically insistent on this, but please do notice that I say “since” and not “if”) we cannot sing them *well* without instruments, we simply should not sing them in *a cappella* churches. This song, and others, *sung poorly*, i.e., without an underlying sense of rhythmic pulse over which the syncopated melody can float, just sounds stupid.<sup>13</sup>

The main difference between the two—that causes the former selection to be workable in *a cappella* churches and the latter not to be—is the *extent* of syncopations. In “We Shall Assemble,” there are one or two syncopations (syllables sung off the beat) per two-measure section, while in “I Could Sing of Your Love Forever,” there is not a single syllable sung *on* the beat in the entire reproduced passage. It is simply not possible to sing this song without the support of underlying rhythmic activity provided by bass guitar, drums, and/or other instruments. Not even clapping will take care of the problem.

You may be asking what the big deal is. So what if we don’t sing the rhythms right? The thoughts contained in the song lyrics are great, so surely we can gain something, whether the rhythm has the right “feel” or not. I’ll grant you that there can be some benefit for someone in virtually any assembly activity, but when there are so many good alternatives when choosing congregational

<sup>13</sup> More than once, I have been understandably censured for my word choice here. I know it sounds childish, but consultations with other people and with the thesaurus provide no better options. It’s not that the lyrical concepts are boring, vapid, tedious, pointless, or humdrum; or that the musical effect of singing such songs with persistent syncopation is ridiculous, absurd, horrifically daft, ludicrous, or preposterous. I’ll just stay with the crassly offensive word *stupid* to describe the result when *a cappella* churches sing songs whose melodies depend on underlying rhythmic activity in order to make any sense—when no such underlying rhythmic “feel” exists.

music, it's incumbent on us to choose songs that can retain their essential nature when sung *a cappella*. Some songs fail miserably without the under-girding of instrumental parts, and they're better heard on the radio than sung in the assembly.

### Contemporary Music 3: Slow Harmonic Rhythm/Long Notes in Melody

We have taken a brief look at songs that require rhythmic awareness. There is at least one other category of songs that deserves similarly discriminating consideration by leaders in a *cappella* churches: songs with slow harmonic rhythm. This type of song does not change chords very often—maybe once every two, or even every four, measures. Here is an example of a song in this category that *a cappella* churches might do well to avoid.

**9** Word of God Speak

Words and Music  
BART MILLARD and PETER KIPLING

Why avoid songs of this type? Because they are, relatively speaking, boring without the supporting rhythmic patterns or guitar strumming/picking patterns that undergirded the original renditions. Notice the chord symbols above the musical staff—all the chords are some type of “C” major chord. The variations are possible only by the best singers, with rehearsal, or when instruments accompany. Less discriminating worshippers may hear songs in this category and think “that would be easy to sing in my church,” and some of them *are* easy, in one way of thinking. Yet they are not generally the best choices.

Twila Paris’s “The Joy of the Lord” may strike one as simple and effervescent, and its melody and text are worthwhile. Its harmonies, however, make it a bit difficult to carry off in an *a cappella* setting, not unlike Bart Millard’s “I Can Only Imagine.”

This beautiful expression of eternal worship lends itself to uninteresting harmonizing by those unfamiliar with the original. Some churches ignore the chord change on the word “walk,” since the melody can also be accompanied by the same E<sup>2</sup> chord through the entire eight measures (and the phrase to follow). The extension of tonic harmony through eight or even sixteen measures does not do this song justice. Yet “The Joy of the Lord” and “I Can Only Imagine” may well be

deemed worthy of a *cappella* use because of their surpassing textual contributions and strong emotional undertones.

It is worthy of mention here that many of yesteryear’s gospel songs so popular in some sectors also tend to change chords less frequently than songs written in a more hymnic style. Songs such as “I Was Sinking Deep in Sin,” “When the Trumpet of the Lord Shall Sound,” and “A Wonderful Savior Is Jesus My Lord” have relatively slow harmonic rhythms, yet they have been sung with good congregational response for decades. One of the distinctions between songs that don’t work and songs that do is, simply, legacy. Combine the years of usage with the previously higher level of musical literacy of the congregation’s altos, tenors, and basses, and you achieve at least a modicum of success. Also, when the melody is more active and “tuneful,” the fact that the underlying harmony continues unchanged for a full measure or more is not as significant as when the melody hovers within a small pitch range and is not well conceived for a *cappella* use.

Another, similar category is songs whose melodies have long notes that depend, again, on underlying bass, harmonic, or rhythmic patterns for their sense of forward motion. The extraordinarily inspiring prayer-song “Draw Me Close” serves as a wonderful example of this type:

The image shows two systems of musical notation for the song "Draw Me Close". Each system consists of a vocal line in treble clef and a bass line in bass clef. The first system has the lyrics "Draw me close to You. Nev-er let me go. I" with chord symbols G, C/G, D/G, G, and D2/G above the staff. The second system has the lyrics "lay it all down a-gain to hear You say that I'm your friend." with chord symbols C2/E, Em2, Em2/D, Cmaj7, and C6 above the staff.

In this song, each four-measure sub-phrase begins with a measure of rest. The chord changes are subtle, using very little root movement, and the rhythmic activity essentially carries the song, although the melody is also fairly well conceived.<sup>14</sup> Without voices that can solidly realize the chord changes—independent of the melody—this song, unfortunately, falls flat on its face.

In some cases, the newer songs in these categories can be arranged effectively for a *cappella* churches, but they depend on strong singers among the altos, tenors, and basses ... and on the leader’s having a solid sense of rhythm.

#### Contemporary Music 4: Arrangements that Assume a Bass Guitar

Sometimes arrangers of contemporary songs seem to assume that there will always be a bass guitar present. They may simply not be able to fathom that there are purely a *cappella* churches that will sing the music; they perhaps have not conceived of the possibility that they should account for the entire, essential harmonic structure in the voice parts. Contemporary arrangers tend to think much more vertically (bass on the bottom, chord in the middle, and melody on top), and if the bass guitar handles the bass part and the guitar and/or keyboard handles the chord, there’s no reason to give much thought to any vocal writing besides the melody.

The image shows a snippet of musical notation for the phrase "He is ex-alt-ed, the King is ex-alt-ed on high". The vocal line is in treble clef and the bass line is in bass clef. The bass line features a complex, rhythmic accompaniment consisting of many sixteenth notes.

<sup>14</sup> You may note the blank bass clef here serves to impress the point further: if no Congregational musicians can’t sing rhythmically challenging accompaniments of this type.

In the above example, in the second measure, the bass part is not truly the bass part, if you will. An octave higher, the alto line approximates the implied bass on the F-natural in the first half of the measure, but no voice part sings the implied “D” on the syllables “alt-ed on,” and the lack of the dominant “D” renders this section of an otherwise acceptable arrangement rather directionless. In the version below, the implied harmony is accounted for. (Note that the key is one step lower, and the notation, in doubled rhythmic values, in the example below. The Eb and C in the bass in the example below would have been an F-natural and a D in the example above.)

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is the vocal line in treble clef, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment in bass clef. The key signature has one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 6/4. The lyrics are: "He is ex - alt - ed, the King is ex - alt - ed on high!". The piano accompaniment features chords Gm, Bb/F, Eb, and C11. The final measure has a first ending bracket over an F chord.

I think it is interesting that the arranger of the first example is from an *a cappella* church, while the arranger of the second is not. This may seem to be a minor issue, but if we want good *a cappella* music in our churches, we should not assume that all arrangers know how to produce effective music for singing without instrumental accompaniment.

Another intermittent issue that stems, at least in part, from the vertical or chordish orientation of most contemporary music is inappropriate voice leading. “Smooth” writing may come across as somewhat boring sometimes (think of the seemingly droning monotones of some alto and tenor parts), but the lack of attention to linear skips can make part-singing downright impossible. Imagine this: you’re a tenor, and the song is in the key of D. You sing a fourth-line F#, and are then asked to jump up, without intervening notes, to a high F-natural. The chord progression from D major to F major will likely create to some parallel motion, which is ill-advised except in contemporary music, but proper linear writing does not skip a major seventh. There are better ways to handle such musical moments!

## Contemporary Music 5: Tessitura

I have for years been an advocate of *high-quality* contemporary songs. With that said, I’ll also confess something of a “mutt” identity: I am a cross between a very late Boomer, a GenXer, and a Postmodernism sympathizer. You’d think I would be open to most musical styles (I suppose this is true) and would be able to affirm the worth of contemporary and popular singers alongside the seasoned art-singers of the past (not so much). I think there are very few modern-era singers who have anything to offer us aesthetically.

I think the Beatles’ music is grossly overrated, and, though it is certainly not weak, I dislike Barbara Streisand’s voice. (Now I’ve probably lost half my audience!) And among modern worship leaders in large, famous, instrumental churches, there are equally few truly *good* voices. While Linda Ronstadt in her day and Mariah Carey in hers merited praise, very few are trained to sing without amplification these days, so today’s voices are typically weak and undeveloped, compared to voices of past eras.

Don’t think I am about to build myself up. My voice itself is mediocre; I certainly can not compete with the singers referred to above, and probably not with most of you who are reading this, either!

My suggestion here is that we be aware of *tessitura* when transcribing contemporary songs into *a cappella* settings. *Tessitura* simply refers to the *pitch range* of a melody (or other part), and

how long it stays in the same range. High tessitura for church songs, for example, might have the sopranos staying in the D-to-F range through eight straight measures of music. It's not that the sopranos can't hit the notes, but it is both a musical and a vocal strain to *stay* in that high range.

Sometimes pop voices have to sing very low, or sometimes they scream too high, but that does not mean we have to do the same if we use their music in our churches. Often, male pop singers sing in high tenor ranges for a while, and we don't even notice it, because it's natural for them. If their songs are imported into *a cappella* settings and the key is not lowered, we get that soprano tessitura problem. Female pop singers are most often altos (or might even be tenors, if they have a history of abusing their vocal folds). And their melodies can be too low for churches, unless the key is raised.

For example, a Twila Paris song—which, incidentally, can be expected, by virtue of its authorship, to express well the genuine worship of God—might originally have been sung with a range of low “A” (low in the alto range) to “A” above middle “C.” For congregational use, that range will not work if there is to be four-part harmony. Sopranos will sing the song better if it is raised by a third or a fourth, and the other voice parts will not be stretched too far one way or the other, either.

Just some things to think about for arrangers of *a cappella* music, and for leaders who are trying to figure out why the congregation sounds either strained (high tessitura) or lifeless (low) on some songs.

### **Pop Music Trends 1: Repeating the Last Chorus, and the Last Half Again**

There are several trends in contemporary church music that I am choosing to label “pop music” trends because of their clear association with popular music on the radio.

For starters: it has become common practice to repeat choruses at least once after the final stanza/verse. It is almost as though the song feels incomplete without this repeating. An example:

Glory and honor and dominion  
Unto the Lamb, unto the King  
Oh, hallelujah, hallelujah!  
We sing the song of the redeemed.

(repeat chorus:)  
Glory and honor and dominion  
Unto the Lamb, unto the King  
Oh, hallelujah, hallelujah!  
We sing the song of the redeemed.

(repeat last half of chorus again:)  
Oh, hallelujah, hallelujah!  
We sing the song of the redeemed.

(maybe even repeat the last line two more times:)  
We sing the song of the redeemed.  
Yes, we sing the song of the redeemed.

Or another example:

Shout to the Lord, all the earth, let us sing  
Power and majesty, praise to the King.  
Mountains bow down, and the seas will roar  
At the sound of Your name.

I sing for joy at the work of Your hands,  
Forever I'll love You, forever I'll stand.  
Nothing compares to the promise I have in You.

(repeat chorus, then perhaps repeat from this point:)  
I sing for joy at the work of Your hands,  
Forever I'll love You, forever I'll stand.  
Nothing compares to the promise I have in You.

(then a few more repeats)  
Nothing compares to the promise I have in You.  
No, nothing compares to the promise I have in You.  
(slower now)  
No, nothing compares to the promise I have in You.  
(and, if you dare ...)  
... in You.  
... in You.

I do not consider this type of repeating to be inherently good or bad, but as with other worship activities, it is good to be purposeful. Don't just fall into habits. Habits can lull the worshippers into a soporific stupor. Popular songs on the radio often use repeats along these lines, and the ubiquitous fade-out may also contribute to our "need" for repeating choruses ad nauseam.

One Sunday, it may be just the thing to repeat that last line eight times, but the next Sunday, once or twice is just fine. Be sensitive to the possibility that such repeating may be helpful at times, but also may dissolve a peace that had been created in the people's spirits.

## Pop Music Trends 2: Powerpoint Lyric Layout

Increasingly, churches—even those that do not sing many contemporary songs—are using PowerPoint or some other computer presentation program for projection of music on a screen or wall. Like many other practices and trends, this one is inherently neutral.

Benefits include getting people's heads up so there is more sound and "life" in the room, better flow from activity to activity, the opportunity to employ a greater variety of worship material (e.g., devotional readings and pictorial images as aids to worship), and greater efficiency in terms of paper, cost, and transition time.

Potentially detrimental is the greater drain of planners' and leaders' energy, greater initial cost, and distraction, at least for a while, by technological features over spiritual content.

The issue of "not providing music for the musically literate" is dealt with above in a section by that title. My point in this brief essay is not primarily to advocate or "nay say" against PowerPoint, but rather to encourage attention to lyric layout when lyrics-only must be the mode.

When possible, do think about the way lines end and begin on the slides. For example,

Shout to the Lord, all  
The earth, let us sing power and  
Majesty, praise to the  
King

It might look aesthetically pleasing on the screen. It does have a nice shape to it there. But it doesn't make sense. This is one better way to lay out the words:

Shout to the Lord, all the earth,  
Let us sing

Power and majesty,  
Praise to the King

Consider both the musical phrasing and the sense of flow of the language used. A specific suggestion I would make is to keep all the words of each prepositional phrase together, e.g., “to the Lord” and “to the King.” Other phrases such as “all the earth”—which happen to be well set musically, in this case, as a thought-unit—are better kept together on the same line.

Give attention, also, to the slide-change points. You wouldn’t want to flash to the next slide between “Power and majesty, praise” and “to the King.” Sometimes it makes sense to cram more words onto one slide in order to keep thoughts together. The change point may also be used to helpful dramatic effect: the lyrics “mountains bow down” might be laid out on a fresh slide that has either a mountain scene in the background or maybe a faint “watermark” image of a worshipper bowing down.

This probably goes without saying, but do give attention to the point size of your PowerPoint lyrics. The words must often be bigger than you think, if you want to avoid distracting people whose eyes must strain to see the words. In most rooms, displaying the lyrics at anything less than 20-point is ill-advised. Check for yourself, from the back of the room. And listen to comments from your back-row people.

One other word—and this one is more for the people in the background doing the technical work than for the visible leaders: when changing slides during a song, make sure you change early enough. It is common among the less musically literate to assume that the change should occur precisely at the moment the first note of the next slide is to be sung. In actuality, that is much too late. Change to the next slide well in advance, so that those who are reading (and we all read *ahead*, subconsciously) have time to see what’s on the next slide before the moment the words and notes are sung.

A good way to ensure good timing is to entrust the PowerPoint computer to someone who will actually be singing and worshipping, real-time!

### **Pop Music Trends 3: The Introduction of Praise Teams**

Congregational singing, of course, is a mainstay for many *a cappella* churches. In various places, solo singing has also played a role, though that practice later fell out of favor. Just like trends in necktie width and skirt length, there are trends in acceptability of assembly practices. By and large, it is the currently middle-aged group that seems most dead-set against solos and special numbers by select groups; octogenarians who grew up hearing solo singing church might well remember that experience fondly. It is a-scriptural (not anti-scriptural) at worst; there does appear to be at least one Pauline commendation of the practice of solo singing.

The “praise team” phenomenon—an innovation of the last couple of decades—merits some discussion here. By “praise team,” I mean a group of four to eight or nine (sometimes more) singers who play a special leading role in the corporate worship. These committed Christians often get together during the week, or, because it is convenient, at 7:30 Sunday morning, to practice the songs to be used in the assembly. They cover all the voice parts and use microphones in order to be heard. Most often, there is one designated leader of the praise team; he may be particularly skilled and may be a paid staff minister. Sometimes, the praise team members also serve by making connecting comments, by reading scripture devotionally, or by wording prayers.

When first introduced, praise teams will likely be distracting for a portion of the congregation. The distraction will probably fade as time passes, if the group is led with spiritual sensitivity and devotion, and if the technical issues are well attended to.

As with other methodologies, the use of praise teams should be honestly assessed in terms of effectiveness. I doubt that there is a universal answer. In some congregations, praise teams will enliven and enhance worship indefinitely; in others, the positive effect will probably be temporary; in still others, there may be more negative or neutral results than positive effects.

## Pop Music Trends 4: Praise Teams in Stealth Mode

I wish I could take credit for the use of the phrase “stealth mode” in this context. I can’t remember where I first heard it, but it still makes me laugh.

Have you been in a church with a “stealth” praise team? You know—where you can’t see them, and they sort of sonically sneak up on you to take your heart captive? They are not in front of the church because having them there might offend a person or three. But they are seated together, somewhere near the front . . . or, with even more calculated effect, they are seated randomly throughout the room. They have microphones, and they’re not afraid to use them. They sincerely believe they are having impact on the congregation’s worship.

Not.

In my opinion, the stealth-mode praise team adds up to *effort expended with very little effect*. OK . . . if the sound engineering is uncommonly good, there may be a surface-level impact on the sound of the singing, since all the voice parts are covered. But it is not all about sound.

At least half the reason for having a praise team is *visual*. We sometimes need people to inspire us, and seeing someone worshipping—whether a single leader or a group of sincere worshippers—can aid my worship. Let me emphasize that. Praise team members *have* aided my worship. Many times. (Granted: seeing someone attempt to lead whose heart I do *not* trust, or whose eccentric habits or odd appearance is too visible, can also be detrimental to my worship. I also acknowledge that many are—at least for a while—distracted by new visual stimuli, such as multiple leaders, to the point that their worship is hindered.)

On occasion, there may be very good reasons to have singers heard and not seen. But in general, if you use a praise team, don’t make the mistake of compromising its beneficial effect by hiding those worship leaders from view.

And please don’t make the common mistake of thinking that somehow, having each voice part picked up by a microphone and amplified will have any long-term beneficial effect on your church’s part-singing. There are basically two courses these things take:

Afraid of offending, someone turns the volume down so low that no one can hear (this happened to me recently—honestly had no idea there was a praise team until someone mentioned it after the assembly was over).

Afraid of losing congregational musical ability, someone turns the volume up so that everyone can hear the amplified voices; fewer and fewer people actually sing, in favor of listening; over time, the sad trend toward musical illiteracy continues.

The stealth-mode praise team is really just a band-aid.

## Pop Music Trends 5: Praise Teams—Volume/Mix/Balance

Praise teams almost always use both males and females. After all, one of the main ideas is to cover all the voice parts. One standard practice in a *cappella* churches is to have five, or nine, singers—with equal numbers of singers on each of the four voice parts, but with the male leader reinforcing the otherwise-female-dominated melody/soprano line. Originally, I found this sound—with the one line doubled an octave lower—unpleasant,<sup>15</sup> but it grew on me. I do not think it is necessary to have a male leader on the melody, but it may be advantageous, at least in the early months of a church’s experience of praise teams, because the people have for so long been used to hearing a man as the solo song leader.

Do consider the “mix” of sound. You might invite multiple sets of ears to become involved in early experimentation, toward the goal of achieving a pleasing blend to amplify. Perhaps the

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<sup>15</sup> Also unpleasant, *all* the time, is the sonic effect of hearing the male tenor line sung an octave higher by a well-meaning woman. Four-part music doesn’t work well with the tenor displaced by an octave. Politely ask the woman tenor in your church (not the one with the low voice singing tenor in the correct range, but the one singing higher than the sopranos sometimes) to refrain.

leader, if there is one, should have his volume set at 6, while the rest are set at 5. Or if you have very little bass in your church's pews, maybe set the bass praise teamers at 7 (if they are singing the right notes!). Just give the volume and mix some thought . . . and some ears.

The use of microphones should also be standardized in terms of angle and distance from the mouth. I strongly suggest that all singers be encouraged not to cover their mouths and faces with microphones. The mic should be held at approximately a 45-degree angle, with the cord/low end positioned in front of and just below the chin, angling up toward the face, so as not to cover the expressive mouth.

Toward the end of this series, I will offer a few tidbits on the use of the graphic equalizer on the sound mixing board.

## Topics and Lyrical Content 1: General, Depth

These days, in many congregations' repertoires, one can often find a good deal of attention given to the lyrical content in worship songs. Good!

There is definitely a positive trend here. The embarrassment of some Stamps-Baxter material and some of the revivalist songs of the late 1800s and early 1900s is giving way to more awareness of God and Bible-based lyrics. Yet there is always room for improvement and variety. We may find that we actually have too many intimate expressions equivalent to "I Love You, Lord" (an expression which was virtually unheard of in the mainstream church three decades ago). Now, perhaps we need more songs that anticipate the Lord's return in glory, or songs that address a particular aspect of His character in worshipful adoration.

I don't think we've had very many creation-oriented praise songs written recently. A wonderful song by Chris Rice comes to mind—I think it was just called "Hallelujahs." It describes nature scenes and concludes each thought with "and my soul wells up with hallelujahs." Moving. But it is not really congregationally singable in a *cappella* churches. "How Great Thou Art" and "This Is My Father's World" and "For the Beauty of the Earth" and "All Things Praise Thee" all fit the bill and continue to be sung by many churches periodically, but we need some new nature-related praise songs.

Speaking in terms of songs that have been written in the last, say, 10 or 15 years, we might need fewer songs that use cliché expressions—"lift our voice(s)," "lift up the name of Jesus," and "here in Your presence," for example, and anything that rhymes with the phrase "set me free" (a pet peeve of mine, though I confess I have used that rhyme in my own writing a time or two). It's almost infantile sometimes: Lord of eternity ... set me **free**. Crucified on Calvary ... to set me **free**. Sacrificially ... and now I'm **free**. All praises **be** ... you've made me **free**. You get the picture.

Then again, there are phrases that *do* bear repeating over and over again, such as "holy, holy, holy!" and "we bow down to worship You."

Something that strikes me as fairly unique today is expressing to God that we believe in Him. An Amy Grant song voiced this confession 10-12 years ago, and you may remember the gospel-song chorus "But we believe Thy footsteps trod its streets and plains, Thou Son of God..." To say to God, "We believe in You ... we accept that You created the world ... we worship You" is a vital thing, and perhaps especially in this age.

I feel very strong about quality in worship lyrics. For 15 years or more I have been a proponent of newer songs, but I have tried to be careful about injecting a repertoire with a syringe full of all-new songs gathered simply because of their newness. Yes, I agree: God wants new songs!<sup>16</sup> Newness is good. But not all songs that are written are worthwhile just because they are new. We must insist on consistent quality in our worship music.

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<sup>16</sup> Curiously, "The New Song," which at one time seemed to be a favorite of a large number of people from my heritage, is essentially a sentimental expression *about* singing new songs of praise to God. It is not itself a song of praise.

But association with a performing artist, a movement, or a denomination does not guarantee quality. I get particularly tired of 70s and 80s Vineyard songs. After one or two, they all sound the same. It would help if they weren't all in the guitar-friendly keys of D and G.

We also need to give thought the *uniqueness* of the concepts in the given song. We need more worshipful communion songs, for instance, but the thoughts need to add something to what we already have. A song's presence in a published collection guarantees neither its quality nor its uniqueness.

About ten years ago, I surveyed five or six *a cappella* hymnals and tabulated the topical themes of songs (e.g., *Songs of Faith and Praise* had 9.4% of its songs addressed worshipfully to the Father, while *Songs of the Church* only had 2.6% in the same category). Thinking about such things as the lyrical content of songs helps us to be more deliberate in planning and in leading worship in song. Discrimination is called for when selecting songs for the assembly.

In the course of emphasizing the textual aspect of what we sing, Cliff Ganus III recently wrote,

Sometimes I wonder what would happen if we put our church songs to the "recitation test," simply speaking the words without pitches. Would we find them sensible and authentic and without meaningless repetition? I suspect that in many cases we would find a significant break with the early church practice in that regard.<sup>17</sup>

An interesting notion!

A letter writer in *Worship Leader* magazine once suggested that songwriters "need to think more like poets, paying close attention to the art of crafting poignant lyrics, instead of simply spilling words from our journals" onto music paper. I agree.

## Topics and Lyrical Content 2: Others' Observations

I would like to share further thoughts from a few well-known leaders on the need for topical expansion in worship songs. These thoughts are taken from *Worship Leader* magazine, March-April 2006:

Graham Kendrick, a widely known writer of worship songs, suggests, "We are not short of songs about Christ's crucifixion, but there is not so much available concerned with His existence with the Father and the Holy Spirit before the world was created or after His ascension. . . ."

Gordon Borrer, author of *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*, says, "We've done pretty well with 'holiness' and 'faithfulness' but not much with 'justice' and 'sovereignty' and His redemptive agenda."

Eddie Gibbs, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, notes that our culture is one in which the artist gets more attention than the orator, and suggests that we move toward the latter—writing and using more ballads that tell biblical stories.

Marva Dawn, author and musician, draws on the high-church calendar and articulates the need for more songs around the concepts of advent (John the Baptist, preparing for the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming), lent (taking seriously Jesus' suffering, as in "Good Friday" songs), and lament.

Sally Morgenthaler, author and church consultant, finds that churches need more music that "doesn't gloss over the doubts, the cynicism of our own humanity. Songs that refuse to minimize pain, but rather, lend voice to it."

Those reflections are from people outside *a cappella* churches. The thoughts have a great deal of merit; I will add some of my own musings in the next section.

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<sup>17</sup> Clifton L. Ganus III, "A *cappella* Congregational Singing in the First and Twenty-First Centuries: Reexamining the Tradition." Typescript.

### Topics and Lyrical Content 3: Reflections and Dreams

Have you ever sung a song that expressed fear in the presence of the Almighty? Or one that was written from the perspective of the cherubim or of the four living creatures around the throne (Rev. 4)? Songs about events in Jesus' life would seem to provide wonderful springboards to worship and praise. We have a few that appeal to the record of His calming the storm on Galilee and beseeching Him to calm our internal storms today, but it would be nice to have a song about power in even the hem of His garment, or about His indignation at the treatment of God's temple, or about the healing of blind people (what a lyrical possibility that brings ... spiritual sight as well as physical sight!), or about the beatitudes. We could go on. . . .

And go on we will! Outside of the worship and praise arena . . . I have heard a song or two that are centered on the banquet or feast that He has invited us all to, but what about a song of solidarity, of togetherness as believers? I suppose there are enough songs of gathering and departing, but then again, maybe those areas are precisely where we need some renewal. Maybe you would try your hand at writing a song that acknowledges the stresses of getting kids ready for "church," piling in the car, driving through traffic lights, and then entering the glow of the assembly of Christians? The underlying impetus behind the "Songs of Ascent" in the Psalms may be more applicable in our day than we think!

I have a sense that very few of our songs really deal—at least in any thorough manner—with sin and how we deal with it in life. (My perception of this scarcity might indicate only my personal disinclination to delve into self-examination when in a large group.) There are phrases here and there in our repertoire that throw a bone at the notion of sin-confession and weakness—"purer in heart help me to be," "my spirit is hungry, but my flesh is so weak," "change my heart, O God," and "forgive our foolish ways"—but nothing comes to mind that really probes the darkness and pervasiveness and significance of sin.

Songs to the Holy Spirit<sup>18</sup> are found in small number, and with good reason: there is really no New Covenant precedent for addressing anything to the Holy Spirit. Personally, I am often bored by those three-stanza songs that seem to have three stanzas only because one is addressed to the Father, one to Jesus, and, oh, yeah, we need one to the Holy Spirit, too. But on the other hand, we could use more songs about the Spirit's work in the lives and hearts of those who are in Christ.

Speaking of last stanzas, there are lots of older songs that fall into a pattern of a requisite last stanza that deals with heaven and/or the second coming. This is not always a bad thing to think and sing about, mind you, but it can be monotonous if you have two or three of those songs in a sequence, and they all follow the same pattern.

"Heaven songs" is a category that needs more depth; in the contemporary-style vein, it probably just needs more songs, period. I wonder if today's evangelical songwriters are a bit too caught up in the political and material struggles of this world to think about our true, ultimate home. And why don't we sing more of our security and comfort in God (like "Safe in the Arms of Jesus" and "Blessed Assurance")?

There may be enough songs about grace and mercy; on the other hand, a lot of the modern expressions are cliché, and those topics are theologically fundamental, so let's stimulate the writing of more! It will not be "vain repetition," and we can not exhaust the grace of the Lord lyrically.

There are comparatively few songs being written about communion today, it seems. The ones we have are, by and large, very good in terms of lyrical content, but we could use more. Songs about mission and ministry seem to be confined to a century or so of authorship (from the middle 1800s to the middle 1900s). Songs of meditation and introspection aren't always that popular, but maybe they should be. And how about a really good, new song on obedience to God?

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<sup>18</sup> In one way of thinking, the Spirit may be described as the Essence of God. The scriptures do not present a precisely trinitarian view of Deity so much as a multifaceted one in which God seeks relationship with His creation and takes on different "faces," different roles in order to communicate with humankind.

Songs of spiritual battle. Hmm. “Encamped Along the Hills of Light” and “The Battle Belongs to the Lord” come to mind. Maybe more is needed there. And as I survey a couple of topical indices, I note that most of the songs on Christian living, in general, were written 50, 100, or more years ago. That obsolescence is even more marked in the category of “invitation” or “altar call” songs. In my teen years, I developed a strong aversion to invitation songs (and to the whole practice of the post-sermon invitation, actually . . . I’ll write a little more on that later). But as I mature, I think we probably need more of those—as long as we use them well. Perhaps it is this category more than others that deserves more contemporary lyrics. When we are attempting to reach hearts by calling them to greater heights in discipleship, we can’t expect much effect if a past generation’s heart language is being used.

Have you ever sung a song taken directly from Old Testament prophecy? One that credits God’s work in history, such as at the Red Sea, in Eden, at Mount Carmel, at Jericho, etc.? I get excited thinking about the possibilities and wish I had enough time and skill to write all these songs.

This particular section has probably served more to inspire me than to reflect for the benefit of others. I do hope, though, that readers will be encouraged to consider, more frequently and deeply, the lyrical content of songs.

## Topics and Lyrical Content 4: Song Pairings

When planning corporate worship, I can rarely resist stringing together songs that relate in one way or another. Sometimes it’s a relationship that wouldn’t be apparent to most worshippers in “real time”—say, two songs of worship that focus on God the Father, or perhaps songs of intent to stay faithful, both in the key of F. Often, even more specific connections come out, and I’d like to share three pairs of songs from *Great Songs of the Church* (No. 2 or Revised—either book) that a church or small group might use in combination:

To Canaan’s Land  
There Is a Habitation (O Zion, Zion)

The first one never has been a favorite of mine. Its worth is nearly negated by many in my extended family, and Kenneth Davis, Jr., my Harding choral director, famously said, about its second stanza, “I don’t know nuthin’ ’bout no rose.” I laughed with him about that then and am still reluctant to sing words that suggest an unfounded concept about heaven such as “a rose is blooming there for me.” The final stanza is my favorite in this song: “I’m on my way to that fair land where the soul (of man) never dies . . .”

Christians who earnestly believe they’re on the way to heaven can duly enjoy that feeling, and singing a couple of verses of this song isn’t all that bad. Yesterday, I linked it with the words of the second song: “There is a habitation built by the living God . . . a city with foundations . . . nor wars nor desolations shall ever move a stone . . . within its pearly portals angelic armies sing, with glorified immortals, the praises of its King. O Zion, Zion, I long thy gates to see . . . when shall I dwell in thee?” Some of those expressions are at least mildly maudlin, but they poetically express truth and can be especially effective when combined with a shallower song such as “To Canaan’s Land.”

In this case, we sang the first stanza and a chorus of “To Canaan’s Land,” then three stanzas of the second song, then back to the final stanza of the first. Key must be considered when doing this sort of thing. One’s written in F, and the other, in Eb, and they both start and end on the lower “do” or keynote. This makes for a relatively easy transitions. I chose the middle-ground key of E, and didn’t need to change.

When planning corporate worship, I can rarely resist stringing together songs that relate in one way or another. Starting yesterday, I’m sharing three pairs of songs from *Great Songs of the Church* (No. 2 or Revised—either book) that a church or small group might use in combination.

It's almost humorous, in my tiny little world that eschewed all sentimental heaven songs that use the word "yonder" and "by" and "by" and such, that yesterday's and today's song pairs have a lot to do with heaven. Maybe it's my perpetual longing for something more that leads to this kind of content-building.

Children of the Heav'nly King  
"Holy" from "On Zion's Glorious Summit"

This pairing is a deeper, more profound set of songs than the last. "Children of the Heav'nly King" is rarely sung anymore, and that's a real shame. At one point I would have counted it among my top ten, but people don't tend to catch on to songs that don't have choruses/refrains. Anyway, here are some of the best lines from it.

*Children of the heavenly King,  
As ye journey, sweetly sing;  
Sing your Savior's worthy praise,  
Glorious in His works and ways  
Lift your eyes, ye sons of light,  
Zion's city is in sight:  
There our endless home shall be,  
There our Lord we soon shall see.*

I particularly loved the pairing that has the next-to-last stanza coming just before the eminently worshipful *sanctus* to "On Zion's Glorious Summit Stood a Num'rous Host Redeemed by Blood":

*Holy, holy holy Lord.  
God of Hosts, on high adored.  
Who like me Thy praise should sing,  
O Almighty King?  
Holy, holy holy Lord.  
God of Hosts, on high adored.  
Holy . . . holy . . . holy.*

Isn't that inspiring? Speaking of the moment on our journey when we realize that we will soon see the Lord, and moving seamlessly into worship of the purest variety, worship that seems to catch a vision of that same Lord?

Again, consider the key of each song when attempting to move seamlessly from one to another. This is just as important a consideration in non-instrument church as in those that have piano or other instruments to bridge things tonally. In this case, the first song is in G, and the second, in Ab. It can be effective to sing a half-step higher as you move to a different song, but in this case, it isn't necessary. One could keep them both in G (no lower), or both in Ab (a little high in terms of tessitura in the first song, but doable), or modulate—whatever your preference. Be aware of the tonal connection as you lead, while you also show what's more important—the conceptual connection. Move from "there our Lord we soon shall see" to "holy, holy" *with intention*.

When planning corporate worship, I can rarely resist stringing together songs that relate in one way or another. Starting two days ago, I'm sharing three pairs of songs from *Great Songs of the Church* (No. 2 or Revised—either book) that a church or small group might use in combination:

Master, the Tempest Is Raging  
Prince of Peace, Control My Will

The first song is one of my wife's favorites. Its words carry one from instruction and awareness of the time Jesus calmed the storm on Lake Galilee ("Master, the tempest is raging! The billows are tossing high!) to prayer in personal times of storm ("The depths of my sad heart are troubled. Oh, waken and save, I pray!) to calm thankfulness for His watchcare ("Master, the terror is over; the elements sweetly rest). The chorus is as compelling lyrically as it is musically:

*The winds and the waves shall obey Thy will,  
Peace, be still!  
Whether the wrath of the storm tossed sea,  
Or demons or men, or whatever it be  
No waters can swallow the ship where lies  
The Master of ocean, and earth, and skies!  
They all shall sweetly obey Thy will.  
Peace, be still! Peace, be still!  
They all shall sweetly obey Thy will.  
Peace, peace, be still!*

The song's dynamic indications (rare in congregational church music) augment the drama and the heart's worship of this Master of All. And now, the pairing: it seems entirely fulfilling to proceed from this rather historical, faith-filled, dynamic song to a softer, more intimate prayer—something along the lines of "Prince of Peace, Control My Will."

*Prince of Peace, control my will;  
Bid the struggling heart be still;  
Bid my fears and doubtings cease,  
Hush my spirit into peace.*

*Thou hast bought me with Thy blood,  
Opened wide the gate to God;  
Peace I ask, but peace must be,  
Lord, in being one with Thee.*

*May Thy will, not mine, be done;  
May Thy will and mine be one;  
Chase these doubtings from my heart,  
Now Thy perfect peace impart.*

*Savior, at Thy feet I fall,  
Thou my life, my God, my all;  
Let Thy happy servant be  
One forevermore with Thee!*

Thinking about songs in relation to the prior song or next song is worthwhile. Important, conceptual connections can be highlighted, and spiritual thinking and worship may be enhanced.

## **Those Who Don't Sing**

I must confess that often, when my eyes have come to rest on people who are not singing during the assembly, I have become discouraged. Coming from a singing family, I simply can not relate to not singing. (I usually even sing when my throat is sore. It is hard *not* to sing.)

But I have begun—way too late, but at least I have begun—to consider *why* those people are not singing. Anytime we can move toward understanding why our Christian siblings are the way they are, why they feel the way they feel, and why they do the things they do, camaraderie in the Body is enhanced.

Mature Christians proclaim their genuine allegiance to and adoration of the Lord, in part, with their song! Less mature Christians may betray an incompleteness by lack of enthusiasm for singing and even by a reluctance to participate fully in this unique worship expression—the only one, really, whereby each person has consistent opportunity to participate in audible union with other worshippers.

There are certainly times when thoughtful Christians will refrain from singing. Besides upper respiratory issues, there may be spiritual and emotional reasons that cause someone to pause to listen . . . to be ministered *to* . . . for a while. I think this periodically silent mode of participation is a manifestation of a patently human condition—times of spiritual need or exceptional distress do occur. In addition, strong memories of times of joy or grief may temporarily limit the ability to sing. (Ever get that frustratingly beautiful, cathartic, choked-up feeling?)

Not that I have done so very often, but I would encourage us all to seek one-on-one dialogue with non-singers. Ask questions of them. Try to empathize with them, coming to understand what is—or *is not*—in their hearts.

## Darryl Tippens on Singing

Because I believe his thoughts are eminently valuable and well expressed, I will conclude this section on music in the assembly with excerpts from the writings of Darryl Tippens.<sup>19</sup>

People are influenced by music because it has the power to transport them into God's presence. It can awaken them to dimensions beyond their ordinary experience and kindle in them a love for God's majesty, power, and splendor. Though this can also happen in prayer, Scripture reading, or a sermon, for most people it happens in music. It leads us into sacred space, sacred time.

Music has this power to hold us, open us up, and bathe us. It happens to us. And when it is taken seriously—when it involves a whole-body immersion—it brings us to God. For those suspicious of emotion, music's power to take us where the intellect cannot go is alarming, but Scriptural example should allay our fears. The very fact that the Bible contains hundreds of song texts, many highly emotional in nature, tells us something important. Consider Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46-55). It expresses more than doctrinal truths (though it does that). The song overflows in ecstasy as the Virgin realizes she is to bear the Christ child. If we do not feel Mary's transport, if we do not sense the sheer surprise and wonder pulsating in her words of praise, then we are deaf to the glorious music in the text.

Surely, if all the Psalms (not just a few favorites) were restored to the worship of the church, we would be a more authentic and faithful community.

Singing succeeds because—like other spiritual practices—it requires the full involvement of the whole person. There is no other act of worship that is so visceral. This is especially so of congregational singing, for every voice is fully required.

In a time when people have a diminished capacity to absorb long sermons, hymns stand ready to offer important inspirational and didactic service to the church, as they have done for millennia. It's worth noting that the first piece of written

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<sup>19</sup> Darryl Tippens, *Pilgrim Heart: The Way of Jesus in Everyday Life* (quoted by *New Wineskins* online). These excerpts are from chapter 12, "Singing: The Way to Heaven's Door."

English (of which we have a record) is a hymn.

Given the power of song to shape belief and move people to action, we should pay close attention to content. That which we sing, we tend to believe. This can be a very good thing. In a theologically shallow environment, singing may redeem an otherwise impoverished [assembly].

Paul understood the capacity of hymns to impart core spiritual truths. When he wished to encourage Christians to live sacrificial lives, he didn't limit his discourse to reasoned argument. Instead, he appealed to people's memory of worship, citing a familiar hymn, the great "Carmen Christi" or Song of Christ (Philippians 2:5-11). On other occasions the great missionary-evangelist quoted poetry or hymns to illustrate his message and move his readers or listeners to act (Ephesians 5:14; 1 Timothy 3:16; Acts 17:28).

Singing is vitally important to spirituality because it builds community. . . . The fact is that when a congregation sings "Be Still My Soul," "Listen to Our Hearts," or "When Peace Like a River," it is mysteriously consoled and nourished in the same way spirituals comforted oppressed African-Americans in the days of slavery.

Should we try to raise the general quality of music in worship? Yes, certainly. Excellence in music, as in all things, is a desirable goal. If music is as remotely important in spiritual formation as I am claiming, then training excellent music leaders makes sense. Perhaps the day is not far off when congregations will devote as much attention to worship music as they do to the preaching or youth programs. How much better would our worship be if we asked a few basic questions like these:

1. Are the people taught? (Are the music texts theologically true? Is the language comprehensible and meaningful?)
2. Are the people inspired? (Does the music engage the emotions?)
3. Do the people receive balance? (Is dignity balanced by exuberance? Is joy coupled with reverence?)
4. Are the people joined in a sense of community? (Does the music encourage participation by the full assembly?)
5. Is there a sense of awe? (Would a visitor exclaim, based upon the conduct of the service, "God is really among you"? 1 Corinthians 14:25)