



Philosophy of Music in Corporate Worship



TWIN CITY BIBLE
CHURCH

Philosophy of Music in Corporate Worship

Caleb Parsons

What is music?

Music is a gift of common grace which God gives to humanity. However, this gift is special because God commands his people to use music in their corporate worship of him.

What is the purpose of music in worship?

The purpose of music is to glorify God in the way he commands.

How are we commanded to use music in our worship?

We are to sing *together* to the glory of God alone in *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*. (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16) The implication of singing together as a church body is that singing is to be intentionally congregational.

What kind of music should be utilized in our worship?

Because musical style is based largely on cultural context, human tradition, and personal preference, we must focus on *the content of our music* rather than a *particular style or genre*.

What this means:

The music we sing is to be doctrinally sound, sing-able in a congregational context, timeless in its melodic and harmonic structure (that is, not leaning to a particular style or genre of music, regardless of preference or popularity), and done in a conservative manner which emphasizes *participation* and de-emphasizes *performance*.

We should seek for the content of our music to meet the criteria we are given in scripture.

Namely:

- **Psalms:** We are to sing the Psalms. In doing so, we are singing God's word back to Him in worship of Him. This is the most clearly acceptable form of music we offer to God in our corporate worship, because the content of the music is the inspired, infallible word of God.
- **Hymns:** These are non-inspired songs written to glorify God. These songs frequently highlight particular attributes of God or recognize his actions throughout redemptive history. These songs should be carefully selected to ensure theological accuracy.
- **Spiritual Songs:** These are expressions of praise and gratitude to God for that which He has accomplished in the individual lives of believers. Spiritual songs may exist in the context of hymnody, or may take the form of simple praise choruses. These must also be carefully selected to ensure theological accuracy.

How should instruments be used in corporate worship?

"Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!" (Psalm 150:3-6)

While our modern instruments are not the same as those listed in Psalm 150 in terms of appearance, structure, timbre, or temperament (equal temperament vs Pythagorean/eastern temperaments,) the principle of the text remains the same: *clearly God desires to be worshipped using a variety of instruments*. The instruments mentioned in Psalm 150 include brass instruments, string instruments, percussion instruments, and woodwind instruments. In keeping with this principle, we are to implement a variety of instruments into our music as the talents and abilities of our members allow.

All instrumentation should be subordinate to the vocal melody line in our congregational and special music. This means that instrumentation should serve to enhance and draw greater attention to textual content. Arrangements should be written in a way which complements the melodic vocal line by doubling/harmonizing the melody, providing the harmonic accompaniment implied by the melody, or otherwise enhancing focus on the text being sung.

The reason for this is that while instrumental music *can* and *does* glorify God, our focus should be to use the textual content of music to directly and explicitly praise God for who He is and that which He has done.

What is the function of Special Music?

There are three primary functions of special music in corporate worship:

1. To glorify God in the context of corporate worship.
2. To edify the body through individual believers sharing the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs placed on their hearts.
3. To introduce new songs to the congregation for the purpose and goal of singing them congregationally.

As the name implies, special music is to be special. This means that special music should be implemented into corporate worship only when it is appropriate and beneficial to do so. *For this reason, special music will no longer be on a regular rotation and individuals will be under no compulsion to share special music.*

What is the process for an individual to share special music?

Individuals who desire to share special music are encouraged to approach the music leader and request to share special music for the edification of the congregation.

Requests to share special music are to be made at least one week in advance. Specials must be rehearsed with the music director on the Wednesday (unless otherwise specified) prior to the Sunday on which the special music is to be shared. The director has the ability to delay, reschedule, or cancel any planned special music if there is reason for concern (personal concerns, concerns about musical quality, etc.)

The purpose of this process is to ensure that special music is doctrinally sound, conservative in nature, and excellent in quality.

What is the function of Offertories?

Offertories provide a time of reflection for congregants during the giving portion of the service. Unlike special music, offertories are to be on a rotation in which members are encouraged to share their musical talents by playing instruments. Ideally, musical selections used in offertory will reflect the songs used in the day's congregational singing. At minimum, selections for offertory should represent songs which are theologically accurate in their textual content.

What is the function of the music leader?

The role of the music leader is not, nor should it ever be, that of a cantor performing worship for the laity. Rather, the role of the music leader is to be that of an individual within the body leading others within the body to sing praises to God. It is the responsibility of the music leader to ensure that musical selections align primarily with the Word of God, and secondarily with the desires and direction of the pastoral leadership.

What is the function of the choir?

Similarly, the role of the choir is not, nor should it ever be, that of skilled musicians performing worship for the laity. Rather, the choir is to be a subset of the congregation functioning in three ways:

1. To glorify God in the context of corporate worship.
2. To augment congregational singing through the use of harmony, responsive singing, descants, and other methods when appropriate.
3. To introduce new songs to the congregation for the purpose and goal of singing them congregationally.

Choir members are to understand that singing praise to God congregationally is of primary importance. As a subset of the congregation, members should recognize all other functions of the choir to be of secondary importance. Choir specials and all other choral music should be considered special music and should be treated as such.

Developing a robust repertoire of congregational music

In keeping with Biblical principles, we are to *sing to the Lord a new song*. (Psalms 96, 98, 149, Isaiah 42:10)

This does not mean that we abandon older songs on the basis of "singing a new song to the Lord." In fact, our goal should be the opposite. If we are to develop a robust repertoire of congregational music, we *must* continue singing the great psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs passed down through generations of Church history.

This does mean that we are to continue adding music to our congregational repertoire. While this music does not necessarily have to be new in terms of its age, it should be *new to us as a congregation*.

How do we accomplish this?

This is to be accomplished through use of special music (choral or solo) as a method of introducing new music to our congregants. Utilizing the choir in this way is not only beneficial to the goal of developing new congregational repertoire, but is also helpful in alleviating workload and time commitment for our choir members. My goal is to develop and implement a calendar in which we work to learn 11-12 new congregational songs each year. The schedule will be broken into 4 week units which function as follows:

Week 1: Introduction via Special music

Week 2: Sing as congregational (Re-introduce if necessary)

Week 3: Sing as congregational

Week 4: Sing as congregational

By the end of this 4 week cycle, the congregation will *at least* be familiar with the song. Even if a particular congregant is unable to attend every service within a month, this ensures that those who attend any one service will *at least* hear the new songs we are trying to establish as a part of our congregational repertoire.

During this cycle, special music is still open to those who desire to share a song for the edification of the local body. This rotation also allows for us to maintain our existing repertoire of historically rich, doctrinally sound music. This also helps avoid the perception that our approach to music is changing dramatically (which *is not* and *should not* be our goal) and helps us to preserve the best of the music we already sing.

The goal of developing a repertoire is to become familiar with a set of doctrinally rich psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Familiarity enables both musicians and congregants to not only engage with music and lyrics at an academic, intellectual level, but to also use music as a means of sincere worship to our Triune God.