What shall we sing?

Rebecca Slough

The compilers of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist hymn collection known as the Ausbund[1] displayed remarkable openness to borrowing from other traditions. This text-only book suggests many good tunes for the hymns, demonstrating no prejudice against musical styles as diverse as folk melodies, chorale tunes, or Latin plain chant. The book's title page describes it as a collection of hymns by right-believing Christians.

Until recently, North American Mennonites have invested little in creating our own songs for congregational singing, but we continue the Anabaptists' pattern of drawing from a variety of musical sources. And right belief remains important in evaluating what we sing. But we no longer think right belief is just a matter of the words. Many leaders also feel pressed to determine the *right music* for Mennonite worship. This preoccupation obscures important issues that lie below the surface of the debates about musical styles. This article examines a few of these issues and distills a few general principles for evaluating songs for congregational worship.

The music

Few worshipers can say why or how music helps them praise, pray, or offer themselves to God. They lack language to describe how melody, rhythm, and harmony work together to heighten the emotional expression of words. Without basic understanding of these elements, those who select music for worship will find it hard to bring the necessary wisdom and generosity to their task.

A *melody* sets tones or pitches in singable patterns or phrases. Melodies are created by the arrangement of short phrases. Some melodies, such as chants, use only two or three tones; others use many tones with breathtaking leaps. In the West, minor melodies express our yearnings, loss, and pain. Major tunes convey a sense of fulfillment, restoration, joy, and peace.

A song may combine two or more melodies, one for the verses and one for the refrain. Some contemporary[2] worship songs, such as "Open the Eyes of My Heart," use up to three short melodies that can be interchanged to extend the singing. A melody with repeating phrases, such as HYMN TO JOY, is easier to learn.

Rhythm is the driving force of melody, creating energy and heightened drama. Through rhythm, the whole body joins in the feeling of the melody. A basic beat invites people to move and make music together.

Harmony supports melody by adding layers of tones. Master harmonists know how to heighten the drama in a melody, which can shape our interpretation of the words we sing.

All songs need a melody. In most songs, the melody is the primary element. In many African and some contemporary worship songs, melody may be secondary to a driving rhythmic pulse. When sung or played by an instrument, harmony adds color and richness.

Regardless of style, an interesting, durable, accessible, versatile, and memorable melody is essential for congregational singing. Rhythm and harmony energize the expression of praise, prayer, and affirmations but should not overpower melody.

The words

Hymns and songs encapsulate basic biblical truth. To inspire trust, hope, and commitment, words must be strong, vivid, direct, and imaginative.

A song with more words is not inherently better than one with few words. The sparse words of a spiritual, chorus, scripture song, or Taizé ostinato can be supported by a durable melody. These musical genres share characteristics with songs from oral cultures around the world. Combined with a well-crafted melody, rhythmic momentum, and a simple—not simplistic—harmonic structure, the words of these songs etch themselves on the soul.

Songs using more words—typical of traditional hymnody—develop a theme. They serve as meditations that move directly into prayer, affirmations of faith, or lessons revolving around a central idea.[3] Melodies successfully used with these complex word structures are themselves more complex and benefit from well-crafted harmonies.

Words for congregational singing should have strong images, active verbs, clear intention, and a recognizable structure. They should call forth deep emotional and intellectual responses, as they resonate with scripture.

The brain

Robert Jourdain's fascinating book, *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy*,[4] draws on psychological and neurological studies to demonstrate how music is made by the brain but sounds and resounds in the body. Humans understand music because the brain is able to remember and interpret the series of tones that make up melodies. As we gain musical experience, we anticipate the shape a melody may take. In western music, we find it deeply satisfying to anticipate the melody, as it is controlled, attenuated, and satisfied through climactic tensions and resolutions. This satisfaction accounts for much of our pleasure in singing familiar tunes.

But the brain is easily bored. Although we thrive on the familiar, the brain also seeks novelty.[5] We enjoy the surprises of unexpected but artful leaps, the variations on a theme, the inversion of a sequence. Our brains perk up when something new is introduced. People with more musical experience—more capacity to anticipate a melody's structure and follow the unexpected changes—appreciate music that is more complex and surprising.

Our enjoyment of interesting, nuanced, and complex music is tied directly to our capacity to anticipate how the music is moving. We cultivate this capacity through formal and informal education and repeated exposure to a wide variety of musical examples. Classical music, jazz, blues, country, and rock styles are all acquired tastes.[6]

The above analysis holds true for western music that uses conventional scales, rhythms, and harmonies that strive for completeness. But many African, Asian, and aboriginal peoples use repetitious, circular, open patterns with no clear endings. Because the brain is always on the lookout for change, singers or instrumentalists naturally begin to improvise additional rhythms, harmonies, and counter-melodies to add layers of sound.

Repetitive melodies can lull the mind and the spirit to quietness. With less musical information, the melody and words can

penetrate the mind and the heart, opening the soul to meditation and contemplation in ways that complex melodies cannot. Repeating melodies with faster tempo open the spirit to greater physical expressiveness, deeper vibrations in the body, and possibilities for dance.

For congregational singing, more complex musical structures are not better than simpler, repetitive structures; they work differently. A melody of either type must be worth the effort to sing it. If our singing of more complex melodies lacks energy, it may be a result of the congregation's failure of desire or a product of the music leader's unwillingness to ride the climaxes and resolutions of musical thought. If our singing of repetitive melodies becomes dull, it may be a product of the congregation's failure of imagination or of the leader's inability to invent complementary improvisations.

The social environment

The music we know best, that speaks most deeply to our hearts, we learned in the company of our family and friends. We imitate what the people around us sing or play. We may come to love other types of music, but we are usually introduced to them through contact with people outside our normal social circles.

Leaders often make assumptions about what worshipers know and understand musically, and leaders committed to standard hymnody tend to evaluate the worship music independently of the people who will be singing it.

A "sound pool" holds in our minds the variety of songs and music styles we like and understand.[7] Here we know how to anticipate the musical structure and how to improvise appropriately. In my congregational song class, I ask students to identify the types of music they enjoy making or listening to. They also identify the kinds of music they exclude from their sound pools. Responses are always swift and intense. In our ensuing discussions, we discover how adamantly some of us love and others detest the same kind of music.

I then ask the students what is in the sound pools of worshipers in their congregation. They make guesses, but often they do not know what other worshipers listen to or sing. This realization is sobering. Music leaders often make assumptions about what

worshipers know and understand musically, and leaders committed to standard hymnody tend to evaluate the worship music independently of the people who will be singing it. These leaders may not know the depth of the congregation's knowledge and understanding. Leaders committed to contemporary worship music tend to assess whom the music will reach independently of the quality of music—the integrity of the melody, the uses of rhythm or harmony.

Who is singing? That's the essential question. What do they know? What can they respond to? Everyone's sound pool can be expanded through education and systematic plans for making new music accessible. But leaders must start by learning about what is in the sound pools of the majority of worshipers; with care and persistence, these pools can then be enlarged.

The style of expression

In *Discover Your Spiritual Type*, Corinne Ware describes four spiritual types found among Christians.[8] The majority of North Americans reflect two of Ware's types; we embrace either *a head spirituality* shaped by the reasoning mind or a *heart spirituality* shaped by our feelings. A person with an exclusively mindful spirituality will find it difficult to be moved by the mysterious experiences of love and grace. The person of heartfelt faith will find it difficult to focus into disciplined action the energy released by emotional expression. Christians who seek to grow in faith must cultivate both mindful and heartfelt dispositions.

Although some songs appeal to both heart and head, these dispositional differences show up sharply in preferences for congregational song. Mindful singers tend to prefer hymns, whose themes unfold over the course of several verses. Singing the words with a fitting tune allows the singer's mind to give its assent, which then shapes the heart's response. Favorite hymns rehearse the works of God, make affirmations of faith, or move the mind toward prayer. Mindful worshipers are stimulated by more complex music and thoughts, and they grow impatient with repetition.

Heartfelt singers tend to prefer simpler songs with more repetition and fewer words. These songs give voice to the passions of their hearts. Particular words, especially if they are repeated often, can eventually give rise to reflection. The songs, if they are led

well, familiar, and of sufficient musical substance, help these worshipers give themselves to the moment with abandon.

Wise music leaders recognize and value what different types of music do for worshipers' capacities to encounter the living God. Using a wide variety of musical styles honors the need for the two dispositions to temper each other. Many contemporary worship songs have a place in congregational worship for those who are seeking, for new believers, and for those whose faith is revitalized by uncomplicated—again, not simplistic—and overtly passionate songs. But worshipers of all stages of maturity must also sing songs that refine their faith through more challenging words and musical forms, the kind of song on which mindful Christians thrive.

White Mennonites in North America have tended to lean toward the mindful disposition, doubting the authenticity of music—such as gospel songs, contemporary worship songs, Taizé melodies, or repetitive African songs—that appeals to immediate and individual feeling. But rather than automatically raising our defenses, we might ask what the music and words are doing. What is freed or challenged in us as we sing? What responses to God do the new songs give us? Do they appeal primarily to our hearts and the immediate moment, or to our minds, working on us in the hours, days, and weeks to come?

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The aim of the song

If our congregations had more opportunity to sing recreationally or devotionally, our distress about music would be eased. When Sunday worship is the only time the congregation sings together, the pressure to get it right is intense.

Music leaders must understand the overall flow of the worship event and make selections based on the momentum of the service at different points. One song may accomplish a worship action effectively and fail in accomplishing another. Many contemporary worship songs bring about adoration, personal offering, and prayer. Gospel songs rely on sturdy music with a strong beat to affirm faith. Many chorales also affirm faith and offer fervent

prayers. Folk songs and English or Genevan psalm tunes proclaim scripture in poetic paraphrases. Simple songs can move the congregation's worship along effectively. "Seek ye first" gently encourages us to seek, ask, and knock in order to receive the kingdom of God.

"Holy God, we praise they name" adores God with a stately waltz and draws the congregation into the endless procession of the church's worship. "Open the eyes of my heart" prays with fervor for the certainty of faith. "God loves all his many people" proclaims and affirms the gospel with a catchy tune and infectious rhythm that invite everyone to join the gospel way of life. Each song or hymn, regardless of style, must be evaluated in terms of what (besides the obvious action of singing) it helps the congregation do. All music styles can find a home in services that have clear direction and momentum. Music leaders carry responsibility to know the gifts of melody, structure, rhythm, harmony, and words that a song offers and to use them to the fullest. Leaders must cultivate the musical skills that will enable the worshipers to sing a wide variety of songs.

What shall we sing?

It is impossible to define the right music for congregational singing in all places for all times. Music making is primarily a social activity that reflects the cultural realities of our particular congregations. I propose the following as some general principles for evaluating music for congregational singing. The right hymns and songs have:

- singable, durable, and memorable melodies;
- rhythms and harmonies that support the melody;
- strong words that resonate biblical truth and engage singers in the actions of worship;
- simple and complex musical structures that are accessible to most worshipers present and can be adapted or improvised on;
- a home in the congregation's sound pool or new qualities that will quickly be recognized as something familiar;
- mindful and heartfelt qualities; and
- purposes that express specific actions of worship and contribute fittingly to the movement and flow of the worship event.

When it comes to music, right belief is forged in particular congregations as we sing our way to faithfulness.

Notes

[1] Printed in 1564 and enlarged in 1583, the Ausbund is the oldest Protestant hymnal in continuous use; the Amish in North America continue to sing from it.

[2] The word *contemporary* in this article refers to songs for congregational singing that: (1) are in a rock music–based idiom with instrumental accompaniment (often a band), (2) use or require a group of singers for leading songs, and (3) presume a worship structure that includes at least one large block of congregational singing. Permission to copy many contemporary Protestant worship songs of this type for use in worship is covered by agreements obtained through Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI). Other new hymn texts and tunes, psalm settings, and international songs are not "contemporary" in this sense, and are not covered by CCLI licenses.

[3] See, for example, "Love divine, all loves excelling," "Amazing grace," "Joyful, joyful we adore thee."

[4] Robert Jourdain, *Music the Brain, and Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination* (New York: Avon Books, 1998).

[5] Ibid, 54.

[6] Church growth advocates who contend that using contemporary worship music will ensure congregational growth make a point with which Jourdain would agree: People whose steady musical diet is rock music will be able to understand rock-based contemporary worship music most easily, given how the brain learns to understand music. The problem lies in the exclusiveness of the claim that youth and the unchurched are only adept at understanding rock music. For example, many young people listen to hip-hop far more than to rock, yet the hip-hop style is not reflected in the contemporary worship music recorded and published for congregational singing.

[7] Lawrence A. Hoffman borrows the term *sound pool* from his colleague Don Gurney. See "On Swimming, Sound, and Canon," in *Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman and Janet R. Walton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 327.

[8] Corinne Ware, *Discover Your Spiritual Type: A Guide to Individual and Congregational Growth* ([Bethesda, MD]: Alban Institute, 1995).

About the author

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