Toward multiple musical languages in worship

Darryl Neustaedter Barg

The musical journey from *The Mennonite Hymnal* (1969) to *Voices Together* (2020) represents my journey as well as that of my people. The old adage, "Tell me what the people are singing, and I'll tell you what they believe," may once have referred mostly to theology and text but no longer. Join me on my little journey, and I'll tell you why it means so much more.

I am a lifelong church musician, not an academic. It is only in more recent years that identifying questions of power and privilege as a subtext that accompanies this musical journey has become part of my reflection.[1] Why do we sing what we sing? Who gets to choose? Who influences the choosers? Who defines excellence? Who doesn't?

Church music and camp music

Apparently I didn't start my life with *The Mennonite Hymnal*, as I was born in 1968, a year before its release; however, that is the hymnal that accompanied the first part of my faith story, as did singing in the various church choirs from the beginning of my memory. Formal music lessons also contributed to a particularly "Western Art Music" track of musical expression. The first time I recall being moved by other music was as a young camper at Bible camp. I hated camp as a camper, but the music moved me. The next major transition was being allowed to listen to rock music on the radio when I was in the seventh grade. Immediately, two particular songs gripped me with their sheer power and presence. I sat by my little clock radio hoping these two songs would get played again and again.

Thus began the dual track of my musical life: Church music with its classical underpinnings, and contemporary rock and roll. Moving into later adolescence, working at camp, picking up the guitar, and beginning to lead singing there solidified the finding that my spiritual life and expression was nurtured as much or more by music at camp than at church

1 While this piece obliquely references issues of power, colonialism, and racism, it was written as a personal reflection. The *Voices Together* team has tackled these issues more directly in two online webinars. See Launch Resources at http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/resources/.

proper. Further, my abilities and progression as an accompanist of music on the guitar was influenced by what I was hearing on the radio. There was no leading from guitar at church.

It was abundantly clear in those days that my "camp music" wasn't really welcome at church. I quickly bumped against assumptions and structures that made it clear that the camp music should stay at camp. I only learned later how traditional the church of my upbringing was. We only sang "proper" hymnody. The catchy gospel songs introduced to our church in the Anhang (appendix, or directly "the section that hangs at the end") of the 1945 German Mennonite Hymnal were termed "Hups Lieder" (roughly translated "jumpy songs") by many in the congregation. In the transition to English worship and *The Mennonite Hymnal* (1969), the Gospel Songs section was decisively avoided.

Heart songs

Early in the process of creating *Voices Together* we settled on the concept of the "heart song" as a means by which to honor the songs that have a special place in people's faith journeys. "Favorite song" didn't seem to get to the depth of the matter. The Heart Song Survey was an invaluable source of data and inspiration as we slowly gathered together the music that would become *Voices Together.*

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How do songs become heart songs? We've long known that music has a special way of taking a text to a deeper place. One of our hymnal creating forebears reminded us that, while text is critical, we needed to ensure the music works, or the song will never find its place in the hearts of its singers. The musical elements of tune, harmony, and rhythm combine with text attributes to create what might be a fine song; however, once the song is adequately known, context or community and the Holy Spirit make it a heart song. A holy mystery—or is it?

I've often queried the hymnological giants in my life about what the context was in which "Praise God" (Dedication Anthem; *Voices Together*, 70; *Mennonite Hymnal*, 606) could flourish and become a heart song. There is general agreement that Mennonite Church and General Con-

ference Mennonites of the mid-twentieth century worked hard at singing together well. In the United States, the singing schools and, in Canada, the "Saengerfests" (Singing Festivals) were crucial to the musical, spiritual, and social fabric of our people. When "Praise God" was introduced in 1969, "the people were ready," George Wiebe once said to me. Apparently this is also combined with the more somber nature of the music we had been singing. This joy-filled, slightly more challenging anthem gave an opening to an experience and expression that was quite new for many. Combine that with repetition and its use at all sorts of community events when a joyful expression to God was called for, and you have what we have: a widely beloved heart song.

If even some of this is the recipe for a heart song, then what happens when young people get together and sing in joyful voice in a setting where the Holy Spirit is invited to move in what might be considered a new musical language? Simply, new heart songs that probably don't sound much like "Praise God" or anything else in *The Mennonite Hymnal*.

Music as language

The idea of music operating like language is not new, but it has become, to me, a helpful way to talk about shifting musical landscapes and the tensions that have surrounded these shifts. My sister studied in the Suzuki Method, and I remember seeing a Suzuki video from the 1950s of very young children with reel-to-reel tape recorders a third the height of their bodies, worn like backpacks as they were out in the playground playing.[2] By my sister's time, it was vinyl records on incessant repetition in our house. By all accounts, it worked in our home: my sister is a brilliant violinist and musician. I think it also worked for me, as I immersed myself in the unique rhythm guitar gifts of Pete Townshend of The Who, Alex Lifeson of RUSH, and eventually many others. *Brilliance* may not be the operable word, but I think I became formed in a musical language by a different set of skilled musicians.

2 The Suzuki Association of the Americas describes the Suzuki Method this way: "More than fifty years ago, Japanese violinist Shinichi Suzuki realized the implications of the fact that children the world over learn to speak their native language with ease. He began to apply the basic principles of language acquisition to the learning of music, and called his method the mother-tongue approach." See https://suzukiassociation.org/about/suzuki-method/.

Daniel J. Levitin's *This Is Your Brain on Music* was another formative stop in my understanding of the role of music in worship.[3] We all recognize that music is powerful and complex, but now the neuroscientists can prove it. Levitin's book is designed to be an accessible read on how our brains respond to music. My learning was that, indeed, music operates expansively in our brains, but more crucially, we can become deeply familiar with certain styles or genres of music to the exclusion of others. Musical genres are different enough that they operate as different languages. For example, we now know that the part of the brain where rhythm operates is understood to be quite primal. If you grew up with the emphasis to be on the first and third beats of the bar (as in much Western Art Music), and you hear something where that is flipped to second and fourth, where the backbeat of rock and roll lives, you may experience a visceral, negative response.

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What then, if you speak one musical language and I speak another? What are the words by which my language is described? That depends on who has the authority to do the describing. Do you say my language is harsh and ignorant and not worthy of use in worshiping God? No, you acknowledge you don't understand it. Do you belittle it among your peers and disempower its expression? No, we understand this to be racist, colonial behavior. It's not that long ago when this was precisely how the music I participated in was treated. Among other things, it was based on the assumption that this was simply a poorer version of the same language, a position that I likely accepted for a long time. Perhaps my music didn't belong in church as a poorer expression of music in general.

Further depths in this framework are available. Levitin suggests that a notable level of Dopamine (the chemical that produces pleasure when released by our system) is released when we hear something familiar but with a small element of uniqueness or surprise. In the context of language, we appreciate all the fine things a depth of native language learning gives us: nuance, sarcasm, various forms of humor based in puns or

3 Daniel J. Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: Understanding a Human Obsession* (London: Grove/Atlantic, 2008).

unique turns of phrase. Much of this is not available to those for whom this is a second or third language.

This became clearer to me as my children began listening to contemporary pop and rap circa 2005 and on. I made fun of this music and belittled it, until I started trying to appreciate it and eventually create it. All the audio production tools I was comfortable with did not give me what I needed to create a proper groove or beat. Nothing in my musical studies at my Mennonite University gave me any help either. I still can't make beats that I would play for anyone, but I have begun to appreciate some of the masters like Timbaland and Dr. Dre in musical languages that are arguably the most popular and globally widespread today.

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We can learn multiple musical languages, but it takes work. And, while we need not like all musical languages, we should approach them all with humility, curiosity, and hospitality. I hold no grudges towards those who had no idea what to do with different musical languages in the 80s. We were a much more homogeneous collection of Mennonites, many still with roots in semi-isolated rural communities. The hymnal of the day was one of the few musical resources available. I once had a gentleman tell me that he didn't much like my music and my banjo was much too loud. I've never played a banjo, but he didn't know the difference between a banjo and a guitar. This was not an insignificant oversight to a guitar player but represented a complete lack of relevant language.

There are also aspects of music making that have meaning beyond the music and text. There are non-musical signs and symbols that go with our musical languages. At one time, for the keepers of our church's musical language, it was clear that a drum set was a symbol for music that was not appropriate for worshiping God. Now it is a symbol for a different set of people, that the church might have a certain kind of musical openness. Or for a younger generation, it may even represent something old and dated.

Musical languages in *Voices Together*

I'm not nearly the only Mennonite who has journeyed in our churches with multiple musical languages. The growth of idiomatic diversity in *Voices Together* is a testament to how our communities and capacities for change have increased. We now have the choice before us of holding to our traditional Mennonite language or of embracing hospitality. We have entered a time of rapid change and diversification of musical languages. The proliferation of personal listening options via smart phone and headphones means you can learn your own musical language much of your waking day. Seeing so many young people plugged in 24/7 guarantees this. (There are hundreds of genres of Electronic Dance Music alone.)

Voices Together represents the option and opportunity of becoming communities of radical hospitality. We acknowledge that there are now multiple languages represented, and we show grace when our own is not the music being led. This is hard work. It requires us to appreciate, while not fully understanding, the capacity for a particular musical language to represent our corporate journey toward God and one another. It is likely that we will never again have the kind of shared musical language that we did when "Praise God" topped the heart song lists. It is my hope that, as a church, we will greet future musical change with curiosity, humility, and hospitality.

About the author

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