

With heart and voice: It's not about the song

by [Lisa Lynne Mathis](#) in the [December 25, 2007](#) issue

Never mind all the times I'd heard the hymn sung by a congregation, or by a children's choir, or as a solo during communion—this time it was as if I was hearing “They'll Know We Are Christians” for the first time. The singer stood absolutely still, her eyes closed, her head tilted back. With open-hearted simplicity she crafted each phrase as if she were proclaiming an essential, God-given message. She did not perform the song but gave it as an offering, a gift, as if the song were an extension of her innermost thoughts. I noticed several worshipers nodding their heads yes with their eyes closed. Some worshipers were bent over in prayer, and a few were rocking to the music. There was no sound other than the singer's voice, yet on a sticky summer night an eclectic, diverse bunch of people were one in the Spirit.

Whether the woman had sung the song in a Baptist church in rural Arkansas, an Episcopal church in Boston, a Presbyterian church in Ohio, or an evangelical megachurch in Southern California, the impact would have been the same. When a selection of vocal music comes from a place of spiritual maturity, when it has a lyrical integrity and flows naturally within the liturgy of the worship, the music becomes a vehicle for the Holy Spirit. At that point all denominational and stylistic differences are transcended. Generations come together. Culture clashes are quieted, distrust and resentment dissipate as God uses music to bridge cultural divides.

Music is the glue of a service. From prelude to postlude, usually eight to ten different pieces of music are woven throughout the service liturgy. Music serves multiple purposes in worship; it says what words alone cannot. Music is prayer, praise, lament. Music brings scripture alive, encourages meditation, substantiates the heart of a sermon, brings us into focus and invokes the presence of the Holy Spirit. No wonder contention, disagreement and polarization surround the subject of music in worship.

We music directors stumble time and time again over the age-old conflicts because we are defined musically by our own upbringing, confined by the tastes of the senior minister of our church, and often restricted by the narrow parameters set by elders and lay leaders. We are still stuck in our trenches in the worship-music battle: Old Guard “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” vs. New Guard “Never Lose the Wonder”; Old Guard “How Great Thou Art” vs. New Guard “Here I Am to Worship”; Old Guard “Wade in the Water” vs. New Guard “Total Praise.” We fixate on a particular genre of music and then clamp down, becoming entrenched in the music culture that best fits our personal preferences and musical tastes.

This warfare has led to organs no longer being placed in new churches—and fewer people knowing how to play the organ. The classically trained music directors who were raised on the Widor Toccata, who long for singers capable of handling Palestrina and Byrd and the opportunity to perform a Bach choral work, are understandably irate and panicked. They feel as if they are outnumbered by proponents of saccharine, theologically reductionist pop praise songs performed on synthesizer keyboards or by rock bands performing concert-style.

That perspective, of course, is matched by the disgust of churchgoers who are desperate for spiritual connection but haven’t been raised on traditional sacred music. These people are weary of the same old hymns being plunked out on an out-of-tune piano and droned through by the person sitting behind them. They ache for someplace where they can belong and where God can be relevant to their life.

The struggle is no longer between historic stone chapels in town squares and the megachurches next to shopping malls. The changing tide of music in worship is touching almost every church in the nation.

Both camps stand on solid ground. Some contemporary Christian music is emotionally manipulative, poorly crafted and lyrically simplistic; and some contemporary music is thoughtful, provocative and easier to sing than older hymns. Some traditional music is powerful and timeless; and some of it is tired and clichéd and sung because it’s always been sung. What I’ve learned, after years of leading and singing worship music in many worship contexts, is that it’s not about the song itself nearly as much as we think it is. It’s about whether the song invites the Spirit into the sanctuary.

I was raised singing traditional classical music in a large urban Methodist church. I developed a more personal relationship with God through Jesus while singing clappy praise songs in an L.A. Baptist church. I sang classical music at a historic Presbyterian church, then moved to New York and fell in love with gospel music. To further complicate the situation, I am currently a music director of a contemporary worship service, a member of an inner-city gospel praise team and a recording artist.

What I've learned from working in all these different contexts is that it's not the music style or genre that determines a song's effectiveness but its delivery, lyrical content and liturgical placement. The style of the song is irrelevant.

How a song is offered minimizes and often dissolves the issue of genre. When the singer sings with authenticity, vulnerability and deep faith, everyone in the sanctuary recognizes it. Often an insecure and ego-hungry soprano, insisting on her moment in the sun, screeches out a favorite aria, her eyes scanning the congregation as she looks for affirmation. Often a praise team is crowded with frustrated leads from high school musicals past who belt out their favorite praise song without regard for congregational participation, let alone accurate harmony. And too often, college kids who volunteer to play in the praise band are psyched to crank up the distortion on their guitars and release their teenage angst into the sanctuary.

In these situations, music performed in worship becomes all about the self; "my moment" in the service, "my ministry." Singers in particular often perform music in church for all the wrong reasons. We singers are profoundly transparent when we stand before God and before a congregation. We too easily forget that it is a privilege and profound responsibility to be a vehicle through which God can minister. No one will believe a word of what we are singing if our motives are self-serving.

I am not talking about ability or talent. I have heard Metropolitan Opera soloists knock the living daylights out of "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," with every note in flawless tune, yet not be singing from that vulnerable faith place. I have heard famous gospel singers scream out "Go Tell It on the Mountain" until I want to run from the sanctuary and not tell a single soul that Jesus Christ is born.

Many times it's the slightly underpitch singer with an untrained ear who can bring a song into worship that surprises the whole church family. When a woman who has

suffered, who has been on the prayer list a lot, who is walking each day in faith just to survive, stands before a congregation and sings “Jesus Loves Me,” it is immediately clear that this song is coming from a place that is raw and real and that she is a vessel through which God is bringing a blessing. So she misses the high note—big deal. Members of the congregation hum that song all week long and remember her standing there, remember the way it felt to experience the power of her music and the presence of God in the moment.

Another crucial component of worshipful music is what the music says lyrically. A modern setting of an ancient hymn can be healing because worshipers raised on the traditional hymns feel valued, while younger generations hear the timeless melodies and the poetic language and feel that the song is meant for them too. The rock group Jars of Clay has a fantastic rendition of “It Is Well with My Soul” (and an album of hymns called *Redemption*), and Tim Hughes, a powerful force in contemporary Christian music, brought “When I Survey” into amphitheaters around the world with his version, “The Wonderful Cross.” In both cases, the lyric of the hymn is clear and delivered with raw intensity, and the timeless melody of the hymn is set to a fresh arrangement—uncomfortable for a Bach lover but accessible to a 19-year-old who’d rather be anywhere other than in church with Mom.

Praise songs struggle to maintain lyrical integrity, and frequently they fail miserably. “Shine, Jesus, Shine” is on my list of cringe-worthy praise songs. While I appreciate the understanding of Jesus as the light of the world, shining his light onto the darkness in our hearts and in our world, the cumbersome, self-centered lyric doesn’t align with the choppy, unsettling chord structure; the resulting awkwardness never ceases to frustrate me.

The placement of vocal music in the order of worship is important too. Traditional liturgies allow for very specific, deliberate placements of music. But more and more, particularly in evangelical churches, one finds a cluster of songs all lumped together toward the beginning and another cluster at the end. There’s nearly always music during the offering too—music that’s only 50 percent experienced because of all the activity of plates being passed and ushers moving through the aisles. By the time the congregant begins to focus on the song it’s nearly done, the climactic moment having been diminished by the sound of a person nearby tearing a check out of a checkbook. I resist the notion of music being filler during an action of worship, yet I also see the value of maintaining a flow to the service. Music during communion, on the other hand, is usually powerful, meditative and centering for me spiritually.

One of the most essential song placements is for the music that sets the stage for the theological premise of the message, which includes the selected scripture. Whether it's congregational or a solo, that song can make all the difference in meaningful worship; it can bring the congregation into a place of concentration and set the minister up beautifully for the sermon. It can also be a total diversion from the intent of the message. The music in that moment can break the spirit, the flow, the mystery in the worship. Careful planning, good communication between ministers and musicians, prayer together and rehearsal of the flow of the worship are key.

I am humbled by what I learn in each worship service I participate in, whether in rural Maryland or inner-city Philadelphia. Recently I sang in a cathedral in New York. Two thousand people were probably expecting Mendelssohn, but I chose a piece by Christian singer/ songwriter Nichole Nordeman called "Every Season." It's a beautiful song, poetic but very modern musically. I took a chance. I'm sure a few folks didn't care much for it. But it was absolutely still in the sanctuary when I finished, and I'm hoping that I got out of God's way and let the beauty of the text be a sung prayer.

Every church has something unique and important to offer and is a part of the body, as we read in the 1 Corinthians 12 passages about spiritual gifts and the parts of the body working together, each with its own unique gifting. Are we brave enough to make ourselves available to be surprised and moved by a song that's "not our style"? Can we allow ourselves to be taken out of our comfort zones and brought into the presence of the Holy Spirit.