

Worship mismatch: Texts and tunes

by [Frank Burch Brown](#) in the [March 10, 2009](#) issue

Christian music these days is pushing up to and across the boundaries of what many churches and denominations used to regard as acceptable. The introduction of new styles of music in worship—often styles associated with secular popular culture—has come to symbolize the extent and character of a given church’s cultural relevance and outreach. For that very reason, it’s increasingly important for churches to become not only more inclusive and diverse, but also more discerning and discriminating in their musical offerings.

But that’s not an easy task. Seldom do those two factors—an acceptance of greater diversity and the cultivation of greater discernment—move in a precisely synchronized fashion. Instead the church goes through periods of indulgence and experimentation, or through what can seem like eons of tighter and tighter regulation and restriction of music and musicians. Not infrequently, as in 18th-century England and in North America today, most of the musical diversifiers and popularizers belong to different churches or worship at different times than do those who see themselves as especially concerned about musical appropriateness and quality. The proponents of diversity win converts by placing a premium on music that is immediately accessible and easily remembered (and relatively unvaried). The proponents of discernment win support by defending the status quo, which may have little to do with either aesthetic or theological perspicacity.

Christians need to find a more harmonious and less volatile relationship between action and reflection, musically speaking. For that to happen, we probably need to have a better understanding of worship and of what liturgical scholars such as John Witvliet and Don Saliers have termed “liturgical aesthetics.” But we also need to have a better understanding of music.

Sometimes it helps to take an extreme case. In seminary classes and church workshops over a number of years, I have been asking groups to reflect on one particular example of ostensibly religious music with a supposedly sacred text—an example so askew, so obviously off the mark, that it would seem to defy even the

most inclusive liturgical embrace. It is my own metrical psalm, a paraphrase of Psalm 23 to be sung to the tune of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” (See page 23.)

In sharing this psalm with various church groups and seminary classes, I’ve found that they typically concentrate first on the words and on what if anything is the matter with them. Words, after all, usually occupy the focal awareness of worshipers engaged in singing. One thing that people familiar with hymnody note immediately is that as a metrical psalm, the text conforms to a long tradition. The Reformed churches, and the Church of England until the 19th century, prescribed the singing of psalms rather than hymns of merely “human composure.” Because psalms straight from the Bible are unrhymed and irregular in meter, vast numbers of psalms were “metered and rhymed” in order to facilitate singing. Consider venerable paraphrases such as “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need” (Isaac Watts) and “The King of Love My Shepherd Is” (Henry Williams Baker).

Although discussants have no trouble spotting things about the new text that are worrisome, they often devise ways to justify the words as somehow fitting. Humans have a propensity for making sense of patterns that at first seem incongruous or nonsensical—as they do with Rorschach ink blots. It is perhaps to be expected, then, that even people who might otherwise be critical find themselves imagining ways in which this text can be saved. They may observe that the text does, after all, capture most of the plain sense of the original psalm; that it is singable and easily memorized; that it might be a good way to introduce children to the psalm; and so on.

When the discussion shifts to the music, people admit to a sense of amusement. But they quickly find nice things to say about the tune as well. For one thing, virtually everyone agrees that my metrical paraphrase and the newly recruited psalm tune “Rudolph” are in some sense a good match. Certainly the music matches the bright, cheerful and singsongy qualities of my verse.

But therein lies the problem. As some people are sure to point out sooner or later, the music can be heard as reinforcing the trivializing tendencies already in evidence in the verses of my “I Know the Lord’s My Shepherd.” This is prancing and dancing music, with scarcely a cloud in its melodic and harmonic sky. Just as my verbal rendition of the psalm extinguishes any sobering thoughts that might arise when walking through valleys dark as death, the music at that very point has us imagine a

pleasant valley detour that is little more than a lark.

I've been surprised and shocked to find that with every passing year a larger and larger proportion of good Christians end up wanting to embrace both the words and the music of "I Know the Lord's My Shepherd." How to account for this phenomenon? Answering that question entails some consideration of changes in ideals for worship, but it also entails acknowledgment of possible changes in ideals and ideas of music itself.

The increasing eagerness to welcome such verbal levity and musical lightness as I've arranged in my test case appears to be accompanied by an ever greater willingness to be playful and, indeed, entertaining with worship in general. It is characteristic of the trend that, as I recently observed in person, one can now witness an adult baptism in which the pastor, while standing in the baptistery prior to immersing a well-tanned man, freely jokes that he wishes he could baptize the man's golf clubs as well. This move toward casual levity is supported by an increasingly emphatic insistence throughout much of Christian culture on an irrepressible optimism—the sense that to acknowledge the deep darkness of the shadows or the possible starkness of death itself is to be fundamentally unfaithful; the sense that praise is the alpha and omega of worship, and that the only proper praise is happy praise.

Perhaps that happy optimism—a far cry from the Calvinism of an earlier era—is one reason why many Christians of various stripes are so ready to come to the defense of the music of "Rudolph." Some point out that the story of Rudolph is a tale of rejection and exaltation. Others read the story christologically—the despised and rejected reindeer becomes redeemer and spiritual leader, his light guiding his followers to heights of blessing. Whether any of that sense of the story gets into the music is not a question that troubles these particular interlocutors.

While theologians may well worry about a Christian optimism that makes light of all trials and tribulations, there are nevertheless some reasons for not wanting instantly to rule out using "I Know the Lord's My Shepherd" in Christian worship—even if we also need to be able to discern how that allegiance is questionable in some respects.

First, music increasingly has a kind of social identification, and "Rudolph" is identified strongly with children, a group that has frequently been excluded from full participation in worship. Consequently, some people involved in Christian education

have a special motivation for accepting and promoting the religious value of this music as a psalm tune. Others equally committed to education may find the music unacceptable in church, fearing that it sells children short.

Church leaders have acknowledged more and more that there are legitimate reasons for every major group to have its preferred forms of music represented in worship. Such a representation of a wide range of social identities encourages what post-Vatican II Catholics in particular call “full, conscious, and active participation.” The social identification of musical styles is thus becoming a virtually unavoidable factor in determining what is appropriate in a given musical and liturgical context. The question of musical quality cannot be divorced entirely from consideration of whose music it is to begin with, and who knows most about its possible value.

But how could music that seems trivial and lightly entertaining ever seem good for worship, whatever the music’s social affinities? In the case of “Rudolph,” the music could seem significant precisely *because* of its lightness—when heard in a certain way and with certain groups in mind. Music is not only the sounds our ears hear; it is also what we hear *in* those sounds—what our minds make of the sounds. What we hear—what the music seems to express, its mood, its qualities or beauty—is in part socially constructed. Children and their advocates may hear in this music something that others might tune out or ignore—perhaps an overtone of hopeful childhood experience that still needs protection from shadows and that is happy to be included in worship.

The implications of such issues go well beyond whether it is ever acceptable to use a relatively playful or silly metrical psalm in worship. They have to do with how music is heard and received more broadly. Many British folk tunes, such as “Forest Green,” along with ancient and venerable hymns of the church such as “Old One Hundredth,” sounded inspiring and even exemplary to Ralph Vaughan Williams when he was music editor of the *English Hymnal* in the early 20th century. Many of us would say he was right in choosing the hymns that he did. But in retrospect one might argue that he was inattentive to the worship potential of certain other kinds of music. One thinks of music from the former British colonies in particular—North American, Caribbean, African, Indian; it sounded too exuberant and rhythmic for worship when judged by the standards then associated with the Church of England.

All the factors we have been reviewing remind us that context is important to the meaning and function of many kinds of music. Although music—at least some kinds

of music—can communicate marvelously across cultures, its inner character is often revealed fully only through familiarity and adept interpretation. Music is by no means a universal language in the sense often assumed.

In the end, however, Christian practical theologians, musicians and worship leaders need to be able to question certain musical values as they emerge within local contexts and the church at large. If the goal is to become more inclusive *and* more discerning, we must learn to test the spirit at work in music itself. Although we may accept almost any musical offering under special circumstances, that only gets us so far. We must establish expectations and criteria and make the effort to explain those criteria, realizing that words alone may not convince listeners. Instead, we need to make those expectations audible to the most astute listeners through the process of comparative listening.

Take my version of Psalm 23 once more. While acknowledging that one might welcome “I Know the Lord’s My Shepherd” into worship in a limited way, the music itself somehow goes against the grain of the psalm it purports to render anew. That impression takes on new life when one tries to imagine “Rudolph” as a setting of the King James Version of the 23rd Psalm. That translation is not metrical and therefore not susceptible to being sung to regularly metered music such as “Rudolph.” Try it. Read the King James text as a voice-over, and have a small group hum the tune of “Rudolph” in the background.

The singers who are humming the tune will inevitably slow down the tempo and try to make the music more legato. But it is virtually impossible, just as it’s impossible to imagine a softer, slower, smoother rendition of “Rudolph” as either reverent or uplifting, or consistent in any other way with the core concerns of the 23rd Psalm. After all, the psalmist, even if (in some translations) he makes no explicit reference to death, contemplates walking by God’s help through the deepest of shadows.

An attempt to accompany the classic version of the psalm with the music of “Rudolph” will leave little doubt that the reindeer music stays in a much lower orbit than the poetry of Psalm 23. In fact, if one free-associates with the music as it is hummed, one readily discerns that the feelings associated with the music go much better with holiday escapades and shopping sprees than with private devotion or public prayer. Even after one gives all due credit to the social construction of musical meaning, this music is not infinitely malleable or suited to all purposes.

That comes as no great surprise. But if it is true, it gives us reason to question the premises of those whose promotion of new church music requires just two things: 1) that the music have scriptural or Christian words; and 2) that the music be immediately appealing. We can now see that both criteria are inadequate, in different ways. By failing to take into account how the artistic medium shapes the message, each criterion ignores a cardinal principle of aesthetics: in art the message can never be separated entirely from the medium that is conveying and shaping it. Thus, in the case of my “Rudolph” version of Psalm 23, the first criterion—that the music must have scriptural or Christian words—is inadequate for selecting good worship music because even though the plain sense of my metrical psalm is in some way scriptural, the verse is such doggerel that it sinks far below the aesthetic beauty of the 23rd Psalm itself. This is an aesthetic defect that is also a religious flaw, both theological and liturgical.

The second criterion is likewise inadequate because, even if “Rudolph” has an immediate musical appeal, the tone and character of the music sound relatively frivolous to most listeners and are incongruous with the tone and character of the scriptural words that the tune accompanies and should complement. Even if we concede that religion can have its moments of legitimate frivolity, the 23rd Psalm invites nothing of the sort. The “Rudolph” tune fails the poetry and purpose of the scripture, and in that way the song fails in a potentially sacred calling.

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