

The Hymn Remix Project: a Musical Response to the Modern Church

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The selection of worship music in a church service can be a delicate issue, with some who prefer contemporary worship music, some who enjoy traditional hymns, and others who embrace both modern and conservative styles. Some important questions that come to mind include: What does the style of worship music say about a church's expression of faith? What are some historical worship practices that have influenced the church? How can the church stay relevant in the lives of young people, while still maintaining its historic and faith traditions? What are Gen-X and Gen-Y's saying about faith, religion and the church? How are churches responding to address these important issues, specifically in aspects of its musical worship service? How can a diverse church congregation, consisting of younger and older members, seek common ground through its worship music? These are questions that will be explored in further detail.

As a church musician and a co-founding member of the worship band, the *Hymn Remix Project*, these issues are highly relevant to the work that I do. The objective of this paper is to explore of the role of musical worship in the Christian church, and how worship music is changing—at least in some churches—to connect with a modern generation in a musical language that makes sense to them.

Music and Spirituality

Music often plays an integral role in the worship service. Gabriel Marcel, an early twentieth-century French existential philosopher, and playwright, wrote in his treatise *Music and Philosophy*:

No doubt that the spiritual function of music consists essentially in restoring man to himself. But to inquire into...one's very self...and, as it were, to expand himself is in truth to restore him to God. (Marcel trans. 2005, 114)

Marcel was no stranger to music, which he describes as providing a powerful and transcendental experience. He writes, "it is music and music alone that has caused me to discover the saving light. It is music that has opened the road to Truth for me, towards which I have not ceased striving" (Marcel trans. 2005, 53): in essence, Marcel credits music as the key to connecting with God. The notion that music can enlighten and facilitate divine insight into one's human experiences renders it a powerful agent for religious conviction and devotion.

Many prominent musicians and composers were highly religious, including Johann Sebastian Bach. Toward the top of many of his manuscripts,

Bach wrote "S.D.G.," meaning Soli Deo Gloria: "Solely to the glory of God." Often at the beginning of a work he wrote the letters "J.J.," which stood for Jesu Juban, "Help me Jesus." Also, he offered many of his cantatas "I.N.J.," In Nomine Jesu, "In the name of Jesus." (Barber 2006, 6)

These small addenda indicate that for Bach, faith fueled his tremendous musical output of over two hundred sacred cantatas. Works such as the *St. Matthew Passion*, *St. John Passion*, *Easter Oratorio*, and the *Christmas Oratorio* suggest Bach was a deeply religious man. These examples illustrate that music is often a medium for connecting to God, as well as expressing one's religious devotion.

Christian Hymnody: A Brief History

Church music dates back to Gregorian chant in the Middle Ages. Over time, it evolved to the liturgical mass, which required many skilled musicians in a choir. Contrasting the liturgical choral traditions of the high church, the hymn is a simple song form intended for congregational singing. Thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas defined the Christian hymn as the following: "A hymn is the praise of God with song; a song is the exultation of the mind dwelling on eternal things, bursting forth in the voice" (Aquinas trans. 2007). British scholar and theologian Ian Bradley writes, "it is from the Reformation that the tradition of congregational hymn-singing comes" (Bradley 1989, 5). Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote thirty-seven hymns for congregational use, which, "[i]nstead of being in Latin for chanting by choirs...were in the language of the people" (Bradley 1989, 3). Bradley is referring to the German vernacular. Luther "stressed the simple marriage of text and tune so that all people, especially the uneducated laity, could participate" (Barber 2006, 3).

The Christian hymn is an important song form to the church, as its simplicity makes them assessable for those who aren't skilled in music. Furthermore, the early hymns were direct quotations from the psalms, while the later ones were written as lyrical poetry that expressed important tenets of the faith, with a depth not often seen in popular worship music today. As such, it is essential to name a few important hymn writers and their contributions to the genre.

Often deemed the "father of English Hymnody" (Allen 1966, 49), Isaac Watts (1674–1748) has over seven hundred hymns attributed to his name. Through the music of hymns, Watts sought to "place the New Testament, as well as the Old, in the mouths of the people" (Routley 1958, 143). His hymnbook, *Hymn and Spiritual Songs* (published in 1707), include the opening lines of this famous hymn: "When I survey the wondrous cross / On which the Prince of glory died, / My richest gain I count but loss, / And pour contempt on all my pride" (Watts). A close contemporary and friend of Watts was hymn writer Philip Doddridge (1702–51), who wrote over four hundred hymns (Allen 1966, 53). John Newton (1725–1807), a British sailor, wrote the famous hymn, "Amazing Grace" (1779), after crying out to God for mercy amidst a violent storm that led to a dramatic spiritual conversion.

One cannot discuss hymnody without the Wesley brothers. The prolific hymn writer Charles Wesley (1707–88) has over six thousand hymns credited to him (Allen 1966, 56) that make up the foundation of the *Methodist Hymn Book*. His brother, John Wesley (1703–91), also wrote hymns but is known mostly for his translation work. Some of Charles's most memorable works include "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" and "Hark the Herald Angel Sing," both commonly heard at Christmastime.

While Watts and Doddridge form the first chapter of English hymn-singing, it was the Wesley ministers who are credited for fueling the Evangelical Revival that brought the gospel message to the people outside of traditional church settings. This included “the worship of God outdoors, especially at five in the morning (which hour was a favourite for John Wesley for field-preaching)” (Routley 1958, 144). Furthermore, it was these revival meetings, filled with public singing sessions, “that made hymns into the kind of sacred folk-song that they have become” (Routley 1958, 145).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, gospel-style hymns became popular, with hymn writers such as Fanny Crosby, Philip Paul Bliss, and Lina Sandell, to name a few. Canadian theologian A.B. Simpson is the author of over thirty hymns known for their endearing lyrics that express important tenets of the faith; however, many are largely avoided and deemed “unsingable” (Rivard) due to their poor melodic composition.

Church in the 21st Century

As hymnody in churches evolved, so did the church congregation. It is no secret that church attendance is declining in Canada today. According to Statistics Canada, more than half of Canadians age 15-29 either have no religion or have never attended a worship service; furthermore, only 22 per cent say religion is important to them, down from 34 per cent in 2002 (Valpy 2010). Could the style of music in a worship service have an impact on the youth in church? There is no simple answer.

Emerging churches are modernizing themselves to relate to their young people, including the increased use of multi-media technology to reach a tech-savvy generation (Cross 2006). In his research, James Penner, an author and sociologist based in Lethbridge, Alberta, found that for every three young people who attended church as a child in the 1980s and 90s, only one regularly attends now (Stunt 2012). Penner states that, “One reason for the drop in church attendance...is that Canadian society has become more individualistic, while young people are more focused than ever on attaining the credentials, internships and education required for good jobs.” Furthermore, he suggests that, “the church will need to change to keep young adults interested.” With the influences and pressures of modern society, it is apparent that many young people are seeking something different when it comes to matters of faith, including, perhaps, a more modern approach to worship.

A Musical Response: the Birth of the *Hymn Remix Project*

In 2012, a group of Christian musicians came together to form the worship band, the *Hymn Remix Project*, which set out to accomplish precisely what its title suggests — it was a musical endeavor to *remix* the hymns. They released an album of traditional hymns, retaining most of the original lyrics and memorable melodies, in the musical style of present-day popular music. The music was arranged for vocalists with mainly electric guitars, bass, drums and keyboard, contrasting the traditional setting of hymns, which traditionally employed an organ as the musical accompaniment.

It is interesting to highlight some of the *Hymn Remix Project*'s arrangements to see how we've attempted to “modernize” the hymns. The original version of the hymn,

“May the Mind of Christ, my Saviour,” written by Anglican priest A. Cyril Barham-Gould (1891–1953), contains six verses that would traditionally be sung back-to-back. Structurally, many popular songs today contain two or three verses, with a chorus and perhaps a bridge or musical interlude to present some musical variety. To break up the monotony of the hymn’s many verses, the *Hymn Remix Project* created an arrangement where every two verses were interspersed with an original chorus that we had written, inspired by text from Scripture that was related to the hymn’s content.

Likewise, the *Hymn Remix Project*, also wrote original choruses to other hymns, including, “Love Divine, All Love’s Excelling,” a hymn by Charles Wesley; “In the Cross of Christ I Glory,” by John Bowring (1925); and “I Sing the Mighty Power of God,” a hymn by Isaac Watts. The *Hymn Remix Project* created a jazzy arrangement that used piano, drums, and bass recorded live with a rich, alto voice to Frederick Lehman’s hymn, “The Love of God” (1917). “Blessed Assurance,” by the blind hymn writer Fanny Crosby, was arranged with 3-part harmony and acoustic guitar, which created an intimate and meditative feel to the music. By contrast, the hymn “Higher Ground” became a power anthem, embellished heavily with electric guitars, bass, and drums. Likewise, A. B. Simpson’s “Yesterday, Today, Forever” was arranged with a similar electric rock-band feel. These are all musical styles that many youth in contemporary society connect to and recognize. Thus, the remixed hymns find a unique place in modern worship with diverse congregations, as the music appeals to the younger church crowd, while the older church members connect with the traditional hymns from their upbringing.

Concluding Thoughts

There appears no simple resolution to reversing the trend of declining church attendance in many places of worship today, as more and more youth disassociate with organized religion. Can modernizing church music bring back a disinterested younger generation? It is a complex issue, but churches that acknowledge the changing musical tastes of society and make attempts to accommodate them are surely taking a step in the right direction.

It is ironic that Christian hymnody, which historically facilitated glorious congregational group-singing, no longer fulfills that purpose in many churches. Young people aren’t necessarily familiar with the poetic diction of hymns nor identify with the tradition. In many churches today, modern Christian contemporary music is often used in worship for wide appeal, while many in the older generation lament the loss or lack of hymns in the worship service as hymns represent an important part of their faith experiences. Initiatives such as the *Hymn Remix Project* merge modern-style music with a rich, historical hymnody tradition: in doing so, it provides engaging and exciting opportunities for the young and old to unite in worship.

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