

# **PRINCIPLES FOR CHOOSING SONGS & HYMNS FOR WORSHIP**

*By*

*Bryan Thomas Schmidt, M.A.*

Choosing songs & hymns for worship is one of the most important tasks of any pastor or worship leader. An advantage as well as disadvantage comes from the fact that there is so much material to choose from. The difficulty is finding time to sift through it all and make choices, not to mention the process involved in determining what those choices will be. This article is an attempt to provide some guidelines to simplify this process. It is in no way complete. And it is written from a Western point of view, so please adapt things as necessary to your own cultural understandings and realities. The underlying principles should nonetheless be useful in any context.

Please note that often lists and categories are incomplete and it is expected that those attempting to use these principles in their own work will add and expand each list. That said, we will first examine characteristics of traditional hymns and worship songs as they are typically understood by the church. And then move on to some ways to properly sift through the thousands available to determine those of highest quality and most appropriate for your own church setting. We conclude with suggested exercises to assist you in beginning to list and categorize songs for use in your worship as well as evaluate them over time.

## **Hallmark Characteristics of Congregational Hymns**

The hymnody tradition of Protestant churches has a long and rich history, and each denomination has its own standards and preferences based on factors such as theological beliefs, musical styles, even themes. But there are many common characteristics which most denominations share in selecting their hymnody. United Methodist musician Dean McIntyre laid out the following in a recent article:

- texts that are rooted in Scripture
- texts that are theologically sound
- texts that use poetic and literary devices
- texts that are understandable by the people
- texts that give expression to emotions, fears, joys, sorrows, hopes, etc., of the singers
- texts that divide into stanzas and verses of repeating metrical units, often rhyming
- melodies that move mostly in steps and small leaps, with some leaps up to a 5th, but rarely more
- melodies that have linear direction and predictability, often in an arch form
- melodies encompassed mostly within an octave
- melodies in a range that is singable by most people

- melodies that are mostly diatonic, with only occasional accidentals, that grow out of and exist within the hymn's harmonic structure, but that also allow for occasional dissonance
- harmony that is tonal and that makes use mostly of the primary chords of a key (I, IV, V), with use of other chords for color, variety, and emphasis
- harmony that generally changes in a predictable rhythmic pattern
- rhythm that is regular and grouped into simple repetitive patterns
- rhythm that exhibits a recurring accent or tactus
- use of dotted rhythms, syncopation, fermatas, rubato, and tempo changes for emphasis, emotional, and expressive effect
- melodic rhythm determined by the text
- integration of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic characteristics in a way that seeks to allow for declamation, expression, and understanding of the text

There are others of course, and you may even disagree with some listed, but these are generalizations developed over hundreds of years. It is important to note that these are true characteristics of western congregational song and are not really related to performance practice. Congregations, accompanists, music leaders, choirs, and singers will all take liberties and use personal interpretive devices in the actual singing of the music, and of course there are ethnic and cultural practices that will modify or overrule some of these. But if you examine the vast majority of hymns in the vast majority of 20th-century hymnals – especially in the United States -- you will find that these characteristics apply to congregational music. These standards have been used without any major discussion or negotiations by church leaders in Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Pentecostal and other denominations.

### **Characteristics of Praise and Worship Songs**

Praise and Worship music has become a major force on music in churches and Christian entertainment. There are certain common characteristics found in this type of music, which sometimes distinguish it from traditional hymnody. Dean McIntyre lays them out as follows:

#### **Text**

- Use of short, often repetitive, phrases.
- Primary use of short, simple, monosyllabic words.
- Language that is direct, plain, uncomplicated.
- Lack of theological or doctrinal content.
- Concentration on personal experience in worship.
- Lyrics directed TO God rather than ABOUT God ... but also lyrics in short, stock phrases that describe God's attributes or one's longing for or relationship with God.
- An abundance of offering praise and giving thanks.
- An absence of opportunity for lament.
- Frequent borrowing of short phrases from Scripture.

- Use of the common, informal, vernacular language of the people.
- Use of images that evoke feelings and emotions.

### **Music**

- Melodies with limited range.
- Short melodic phrases, often repeated, sometimes slightly varied.
- Predominance of slow tempos ... but also fast, energetic tempos when called for by the text.
- Simple harmonic structure; common use of primary chords (I, IV, V) and some related minors (ii, vi).
- Regularity of rhythm with a strongly accented beat pattern.
- Since much of this music is written by solo artists or established groups, the musical style is often reflective of that soloist or group and less adaptable to congregational singing.

These characteristics, of course, can only be generalities. There will be many exceptions and songs exhibiting unique elements of style. And the PW category can be further diversified by style elements added from other categories, such as rap, hip hop, global, country, and various folk styles.

### **What To Look For In Selecting Songs and Hymns For Worship**

In selecting songs for Worship, I always begin with the two principles offered by Dr. Robert King of Fuller Theological Seminary to create a list of songs and hymns:

1. When it comes to song, God wants to be understood.
2. When it comes to song, God is receptor-oriented.

#### **1. When it comes to song, God wants to be understood.**

When planning worship, God wants to be understood, so everything included in the order of worship should assist in that. In considering music, we must choose songs which help us to understand what God is saying to us during this particular service. This ties into what I have already said about matching the theme. There is a message to the service, primarily manifest in the sermon. Songs should point us to the message and help us to reflect on and learn it, applying it to our own lives. Usually a song's lyrics will highlight one small aspect of the overall theme. This is fine. People process things mentally in smaller bites anyway. But there should be some obvious connection to the theme.

Secondly, in considering music, we must choose songs in the language in which they can best be received. When I come to Brazil or Ghana or Mexico, I work hard in advance to learn at least a few songs in Portuguese or African language or Spanish. People often tell me they like to hear me sing in English, too, and this is fine, but they don't understand the words, so I am not able to communicate when I sing in English. It is more

entertainment. Since my heart's desire and calling are to communicate, I need to sing in a language they can understand. Additionally, my effort to learn their language communicates a sense of connectedness, love, and respect that binds us more closely and leads them to want to hear more of what I say and share more of themselves.

In your own churches, most of you serve a particular people group with a common language. So, it is appropriate to sing songs in that language. And it is also appropriate to choose songs in the musical traditions of that culture. People use music in many ways throughout their daily lives so we must find ways to choose music in worship that connects to their lives. If the music in church is music they only hear in church, it is not as effective in helping them make a connection between what happens on Sunday and what happens Monday through Saturday. We do not want Sunday Christians. We want people who are Christian every day, 24 hours a day in every aspect of their lives. This is why the musical language is as much about the style of arrangement and music itself as it is about the spoken language of the lyrics. These things must be considered carefully in choosing songs for worship.

Thirdly, in considering music, we must choose songs which connect us with the larger body of Christ. Hymns are a rich tradition for the church going back many hundreds of years. People all over the world at any moment on a Sunday may be singing the same hymns we are singing in their own language. Also, many hymns were carefully crafted to teach important theological concepts. This is why so often each denomination chooses different hymns for its hymn books. Singing hymns is vital to remind us of our connection to other believers. It is also a great resource for strong teaching. But there are bad hymns as well as bad praise songs, so again, carefully thought must be given to how each hymn helps God to be understood in a particular service.

Fourthly, in considering music, we must choose only those songs which communicated clearly and fully. This will vary depending on the theme of each service. A song which is appropriate for one service, may not fit in another. This is why Christmas songs are not sung every Sunday or Easter songs. On a missions Sunday, you would likely not sing a song about the theme of repentance or the theme of baptism, unless those were somehow tied to the way the missions message was presented.

Also, it is important to choose songs which have a clear message. There are poorly written songs and hymns which just don't work. Occasionally, because they are enjoyable to sing, if paired with a song or scripture passage or hymn, they might be used responsively. But as stand alone songs, they just don't work. "Let It Rain" is an example of an English song like this. In Africa, they have many songs with repetitious lyrics of the same incomplete phrases over and over: "I Believe, I Believe, I Believe, Yes, I'm free." This is an example. Why are you free? What do you believe in? Songs which ask questions need to provide answers as well. If not, the communication is unclear and they are poorly written. Songs like this should be avoided in most orders of worship.

## **2. When it comes to song, God is receptor-oriented.**

When it comes to worship, God is receptor-oriented, so in considering music, God is not limited to one musical style and neither should we be. Variety is important. Different styles evoke different emotions. Fast paced, loud songs get our hearts pumping and fill us with enthusiasm. But quiet, slower songs can allow us to be prayerful or contemplative. There are appropriate moments for both in each worship service. And these are just two examples, there are many others.

Secondly, in considering music, God is not limited in language so we must use the best language to communicate to those receiving. This is not just about the language idiom such as Spanish or English, it is also about the complexity of the phrasing. Some songs, especially hymns are very complex. These are best used to feed the advanced believers, those who have been in the faith a long time and have spent more time in study of the Word and have more developed theological understandings. In a mixed congregation, you will have some advanced believers and some beginners. You need songs for both. By singing the advanced songs, beginning believers can come to understand them in time, but in the beginning, they will not be very well fed, so it is important to also choose simpler songs which can feed them. At the same time, advanced believers can get bored with these songs, so again, the music you choose must consider the needs of the entire congregation. Choose the language that will communicate best for everyone, and usually this is a mixture.

Thirdly, Musical style is also a language of its own, so we must do styles which appeal to everyone, using variety to meet all the people's needs. If you have a congregation of various types of people, you will not be successful in meeting their needs if you don't use a variety of styles. If all you sing is contemporary and you have an older, more traditional congregation, you will face conflict and people will feel dissatisfied. At the same time, if you have a younger, more contemporary congregation, singing only hymns would not be effective. At the same time, one should still include some of each to enable communication between these groups and a sense of connectedness. Even if you only have a young congregation which prefers contemporary music, hymns can be very valuable resources. Sometimes, using new tunes which are more contemporary, to fit the old words can be very helpful. We are singing an example of this in this workshop. But it is important to sing them because they engender a connection down through the history of the faith which is vital to the church's work and their own sense of being connected to a tradition.

Music in worship works best when it enhances worship, instead of getting in the way of it. Harold Best writes: "All true acts of worship are linked to, and supportive of, further acts of worship." Music uplifts us and unleashes in us a response within which mere words cannot. Hymns and songs can call us to worship, be prayerful, be confessional, bring a sense of forgiveness, tell stories, and send us out to share our faith. The emotion inherent in melodies and the meaning of the lyrics connect in a unique way to inspire us to all of these and more. Mislplaced songs can destroy the mood and focus and take away from true worship. Our whole sense of order, connectedness and approach to God can be thrown out of balance. Worship can be distorted, disjointed or even stop entirely. We

can lose our freedom of worship. So choosing music for the order of worship is vitally important and must be done with great care and consideration.

But once I have applied these principles to create a list of songs and hymns that I am considering for use in worship, how do I narrow them down? This is where I analyze the quality of the pieces themselves and begin to choose the best of the list. Here are some standards I use in this process:

1. First, do the words communicate the thoughts in the best way, with language that is understandable and not contrived, not overly flowery, not stretching for wit or language that will call attention to the text rather than to the thought behind it?
2. Second, is the text matched with a tune in a manner that presents both as equal partners?
3. Is there consistency of rhythm — are there uneven or unmatching numbers of syllables in the meter? Does the meter hold throughout the text? [Note: This principle is often ignored in contemporary worship songs and praise/worship choruses.]
4. Exactness of rhyme — Is the rhyme actually a rhyme and not an approximation or a similarity of vowel sounds?
5. Are textual accents not incongruous with musical accents? Are textual climaxes supported well by the music?
6. Are symbols and metaphors easily grasped rather than stretched or contrived, and does their use actually contribute to insight or understanding?
7. Is there a lack of sentimentality and emotionalism? [Note: Not entirely, but that these two qualities aren't the real reason for the text's existence.]
8. Does the hymn place words in the mind and mouth of the singers that helps them articulate thoughts and expressions that they would not have been able to articulate by themselves?
9. Sound theology, scriptural basis.
10. Lacking obscure references.
11. In a text generated from something like September 11, the space shuttle explosion, war, or the tsunami, that the main focus is not on the pain, suffering, and misery, nor on the doubt and questioning that may follow such an event, but rather on the ultimate hope, comfort, and healing that comes from God's grace.

12. That there is a logical plan or sequence to the stanzas; that they make sense individually and collectively; and that there is a unity to them.
13. That all of this is accomplished in language that is simultaneously natural, even conversational, perhaps, but also language that raises us out of our suffering, grief, and emotions. There is a fine line between language that describes events/emotions in a manner that helps the singers and language that keeps us mired in those events/emotions. [Note: The hymns of Charles Wesley provide excellent examples of this.]

Asking these questions and applying them to the selections you make will greatly improve the quality of the songs and hymns chosen for use in your worship. The congregation will also enjoy them more, connect to them more, and appreciate the musical quality more. And it will help to mature your own congregation's musical style as well.

### **Exercises:**

Here are some exercises to help you in creating a catalog of songs and hymns for use in your worship:

1. Make a list of songs currently used in your congregational worship. [Note: Don't forget to do the same as you add new songs as well.]
  - a. Break them up by songs the congregation enjoys
  - b. Songs the congregation doesn't enjoy

Then divide them by

  1. Songs the congregation knows and sings well.
  2. Songs the congregation needs to learn better
2. Take the songs after they have been divided and categorize them by types:
 

adoration, praise, prayer, confession, etc.
3. Spend regular time in prayer or meditation as you plan each worship and plan the month in advance where possible to provide for themes and flow.
4. Keep records of what works and what doesn't, making sure to get feedback from trustworthy Deacons, Elders, and church members.
5. Consider the planning and arranging process as sacred as reading the Scriptures or times of prayer.