

PENTECOST PEOPLE:

Worshipping as World Christians

Music is a mysterious phenomenon unique to humanity within creation. (Other parts of creation may appear 'musical' but only to human observers.) Music exists in all cultures. It works deeply within the human spirit. Most people find it precious and essential, although they don't think about it much. Others presume it to be an optional extra. A very few aren't able to connect with music at all.

Ethnomusicology, the study of the meaning and function of music in culture, developed formally as a discipline in the twentieth century. It arose partly through Christian mission work where outsiders were investing long years and great efforts into learning other languages and cultures in order to communicate the gospel more contextually. It developed into an academic discipline through fieldwork and analysis to theorising and testing. It records the diversity and development of music in culture and in some cases within cultures which are 'dying out' or changing radically. By now ethnomusicology has been able to show that music plays a fundamental role in reinforcing social stability and coherence by expressing and cementing human beliefs, social values and relationships through its structures.

Musical analysis can show that relationship patterns and power structures appear within the actual notes and rhythms of the music of particular groups and cultures. For insiders these don't generally need to be spelt out, but they can be identified and analysed by those with the tools to do so. At first sight, music may seem to be at the vanguard of social change but in fact musical structures generally operate to reinforce cultural norms and work to keep them static. It is more likely to be associated aspects of music such as voice tone, song words, new instruments and playing styles, even clothing and movements which push at social boundaries. For example rock and roll first appeared requiring barely more than three basic chords to play, yet everything about it screamed that significant social change was in the air. Music has to be changed intentionally and rather quickly for it to be able to promote social or political change in itself. Music then can function either to obscure or reveal, to allow or to bar, to bring freedom and release or to manipulate, depending on social context and influence.

Music inhabits our feelings and has intrinsic power to create, change, heighten or develop emotional moods. It can therefore be used intentionally to manipulate or work up individual or even communal responses. Consider how music effects the emotions when a national anthem is played at a sports event, or in a political meeting, or in religious worship. It can work through association. We've all experienced how suddenly hearing a piece of music can transport us intensely to a former time, place or situation in the instant.

It is however, despite the Romantic poets' views, emphatically not a 'language.' There is no guarantee that what a composer intends to communicate through music will reach another, even from the same culture, in any specific way. It is not always possible to predict the outcome of music's power. Far from being a language, music is a non-specific and crucially a non-verbal form of communication. It works deeply in a manner beyond words.



God is portrayed in scripture not only as receiving musical worship gladly when it is heartfelt, hating it when it expresses hypocritical praise, but as singing himself with joy and delight over his beloved people. God has intentionally placed the capacity to make and experience music uniquely within humanity to help us flourish as individuals and in groups. Words can do many things, but God knows that at times only something beyond words will do.



Music therefore forms an important part of Christian expression around the world. Fortunately Christianity has retained enough cultural diversity so far for Christian music to be very diverse too, in some cases reflecting the cultures where it has taken root, in others the cultures of the gospel bearers. Singing together rather than speaking is especially appropriate for corporate worship. It allows even a large crowd to express themselves all at once as loudly as they like producing, ideally, something greater than the sum of its parts rather than the cacophony and chaos caused by everyone speaking at once. Through song, music can combine unity of meaning with a huge diversity of range, pitch, harmony and tones of voice. It can include all and any kind of musical instrument, just as in Psalm 150 where the three technical categories of musical instrument to be found in any culture; strings, wind and percussion, are all validated for worshipping God. However in worship music, music and musical instruments serve the words rather than the other way round.

The Pentecost communication miracle, which began the restoration of cultural divisions echoing down history since Babel, required those declaring the gospel to speak new languages. The insider must change for the benefit of the outsider. Christianity owns one Lord, faith, baptism and so on but is not a cultural movement based on one language or way of doing things. At its best it foreshadows the worship in heaven where, as John's vision in Revelation 7 reveals, distinction of language and therefore culture are apparently preserved.

What might this mean for musical worship here and now? What approach would be most welcoming and inclusive in an increasingly multi-cultural Britain? What best reflects and draws on the gifts of everyone who is already in the congregation? What would express a longing for those not yet part of it to feel at home? What demonstrates that we are part of a community spanning all cultures and histories? What prefigures the multi-cultural worship of heaven most authentically, and even suggests we are looking forward to getting there?

Some UK churches now have very diverse congregations, although rarely as diverse as their local communities. Despite this, experience shows that diversity in congregational makeup doesn't automatically result in diversity of practice. Frequently groups are multi-ethnic without necessarily being multi-cultural at all. The latter refers more to how things are done not who is in the room. Choices of music won't come to reflect the variety of people within a congregation automatically. There has to be intention. More importantly our assumptions about how things should be done won't change without a lot of listening, learning, purposeful encouragement, giving permission, and trying out new ways. This is especially true when it comes to the dynamics of leadership. Who decides about and leads what is done? Who has permission to be involved? What breadth of material is accepted and allowed? These are key areas to work on in bringing about more diverse and inclusive worship.

Whether we are aware of it or not, the music we use in church operates like glue, week in week out reinforcing our beliefs, values and relationship dynamics. It can be reactionary or prophetic, prolonging a limiting set of cultural parameters, or embodying the inclusion, mutuality and diversity of fellowship with God and each other initiated at Pentecost and finally to be realised in the worship of heaven.

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