

Music and the Worship Service - Part Two

As we saw in the last session, the music you do in your church needs to be a reflection of the gifts you have as a congregation and the culture you’re trying to reach. It is a mistake to think that, if you want to reach young people, you have to do a certain type of music or try to be something you are not. That may just be fear or covetousness or discontentment. There are many examples of churches that are doing very traditional, liturgical and classical styles of worship who are teaming with young people, depending on your context and your gifting. If you live in an urban business district, with a lot of college-educated professionals in a success-driven environment, there are going to be higher standards and expectations and people accustomed to a more sophisticated palate. And classical and traditional styles of worship may be very effective vehicles for directing worship, capturing the attention and hearts of the people.

But much depends on your giftings as a church. There should be a goal in worship of *undistracting excellence*. You want to be able to do things well, in a way that is not distracting to your people. If they are distracted by something being off, they will not be worshiping. You will do best what you have people gifted to do. For instance, contemporary styles of music, in my opinion, can be harder to do well. And some classically-trained, excellent musicians are not able to play by ear and mix with others. But they are excellent sight-readers and need fully written music. Your people will be more helped to worship with music that is done well than trying to be something you are not or do something you don’t have the gifts to do.

The following are a set of documents/guidelines we have used in our church to guide and train our musicians and leaders...

Practical Values for Edifying Music

1. **Edification** - The primary function of music in worship is to edify and help the congregation in worship, particularly by focusing thoughts on God’s Word and drawing out the heart in response to His Word. The key question then for all music is: is it edifying and helpful? “All things are lawful; not all things are helpful.” All the other values for music in worship flow out of this one. What songs to choose, both textually and musically, is an edification question. How they are arranged is an edification question. How they are to be played is an edification question. Who is best to play and lead them is an edification question. (If we can assume the theological questions of what songs to sing and spiritual qualifications of leaders and musicians, the following values applicable to worship leading flow out of this first one...)
2. **Simplicity** - Besides special music, the focus of most music in worship should be on the congregation and congregational singing. This focus is lost in many churches doing contemporary worship and the loss is tragic. I have been in several churches doing contemporary worship – the songs are good and theologically sound, the “band” sounds good, but nobody in the congregation is singing. Sometimes it’s because no one really has been taught and knows the songs. Most of the time I think it’s because the song leaders and band are clueless. They don’t even realize that no one’s singing. And people in the congregation

aren't even sure if they're supposed to sing. The band is too packaged and practiced and the instrumentation is too “thick” to hear anyway. Music in worship is not a rock concert; it's not a performance. It is to help the congregation sing. For this reason, the instrumentation needs to be simple. Intros need to be simple. Transitions need to be simple. You're not trying to sound like a cd. You're trying to lead the congregation. The focus is not on the sound of the band but on enhancing the congregation's singing. The best worship team then is the team you don't notice, that helps and gets out of the way and doesn't surprise you by inserting themselves back in.

3. **Flow** - Flow is a function of song choice, transitions and leadership. It doesn't have to follow a contemporary format of one song after another, but if you are going to break up the music in your service it still needs to be smooth. I personally don't like a lot of standing up and sitting down and breaks between music. I also shy away from having to say a whole lot in between songs or introducing songs. Sometimes it can be helpful; a lot of times it's unnecessary and not. When doing contemporary worship of several songs in succession, the issue of flow in song choice is crucial. And it's more than just playing songs in the same keys. It involves transitions, stylistic smoothness, etc. When we're picking songs, I'm looking from several different angles:

- *Thematic* – how does the content (text) of the songs flow into one another?
- *Mood* – does the mood of the songs flow together (or is it too jarring)?
- *Key transitions* – do the keys flow into one another well? (Playing two songs in the same key can have a good effect. Moving up a whole step is easily done; moving down a whole step is more difficult. Moving up a fourth in key sounds good; moving down a fourth (up a fifth) is more difficult. Moving up a tri-tone is a no-no.)
- *Content Overload* – I don't believe three songs in a row with seven verses each is a wise use of time or helpful to the congregation. If we have a content heavy song, I may want to move to a more experiential, responsive song next. Some of the shorter choruses are great for breaking up and encouraging response to the more content driven hymns.
- *Style* - Some musical styles and songs just don't transition well between one another. Others surprisingly do, even ones you wouldn't expect. For instance, I've found that some contemporary folk-rock sounding songs actually transition well to old Lutheran chorales, but not to other 19th century English hymns. (On a personal note, most hymn music written between 1880 and 1930 needs to be thrown out.) There are some tricks you can do to get over the hump – sometimes we'll go from a contemporary piece to a traditional hymn by beginning singing the hymn acapella. For whatever reason, it makes the transition easier.
- In making these observations, I need to acknowledge that when you get into any genre and style questions, you start getting into the gray area of personal aesthetic preferences which are often cultural and not always the same from person to person or culture to culture.

4. ***Giftedness*** - I am very protective of what I allow and who I allow to play in our church. I don't allow “just anyone” to play during singing or even perform special music – including preludes. Just because someone plays an instrument does not mean that they are gifted and trained and able to edify others musically. The key criterion is: are they able to perform in a way that is *edifying* to *most* people, including visitors? Sister Marge may feel edified watching her adorable grandson Jack play (“squeak”) the clarinet, but not everyone feels the same. For this reason, I am up front with people that music in worship is not just an opportunity to play and perform something; it is part of the overall focus of worship on God. God has gifted some people to be able to edify others musically and they are the ones who should be doing music in the church. Some people with some ability may do a special music every once in a while, with adequate preparation and readiness. But there are some people more gifted who are better and more often to be used.

Pastors need to be very careful, discerning and pastoral here... Have you ever seen the American idol auditions?

5. ***Leadership*** - The issue of leadership in worship music is the gift of being able to have a sense of the room and being able to “take the stage” without “dominating the stage”. It involves being able to have a congregation feel trust and confidence in following you. If the congregation is uncertain, no one is ‘worshipping’. Worship leading involves being able to teach songs to the congregation well and making them comfortable to sing them out well. It involves being able to function as a “flow-man”, keep things going, say appropriate words between songs when appropriate – knowing what to say, when to say it, and how not to say too much. It also involves being able to musically lead the worship team – have a sense of what’s going on, able to respond intuitively and lead while the music is being played, able to nuance and respond to the text of the song and the work of the Spirit in the room, and enhance it musically while it is happening. There are excellent musicians who, in my opinion, don’t have this gift. I’ve been in churches with worship leaders with doctorates in music, who play and/or sing amazingly, but don’t seem to have discernment as to what’s going on in the room around them and don’t “lead”; the music sounds good, but the congregation is left behind. In my opinion, the leader can make or break the worship team. No personality will be one size fits all. But the ability to lead others to sing well, confidently, responsively for the engagement and edification of the whole congregation is a gift.

Evaluating Music

The following are a series of questions to ask when evaluating new songs or worship orders at FRBC. Some answers to these questions will be admittedly matters of personal judgment and taste. Final decisions on song choice and order are at the pastor’s discretion. However, the worship team will collaborate with the pastor on song choice and order.

When evaluating new songs -

1. *Content* – What does the song say? Is it Biblical? Is it helpful? Is it objective, subjective, responsive? Where does it fit in the liturgy; i.e. what does the song do? What nuance does it add to our existing repertoire? Why is this song needed?
2. *Style* – What is the style of the song? Does the style fit the words? Is the style driven by the content or does the style make more impact than the lyrics? Is it a style that transitions well with most of our songs? Does it fit our congregation? Is it too dated a style? (Some English chorales or late 19th century revival music are very dated. Some other older musical styles seem to be accessible and transcend their time period.) Does the style fill a niche in our existing repertoire?
3. *Quality and Accessibility* – Is the text done well? Is it quality poetry? Is the music done well? Is it quality music? Is it too colloquial or too high-brow? Is it understandable and accessible to most of our audience? Is it easy to learn? Hard to forget? Will it be helpful in worship?

When evaluating a worship order –

1. *Content* – Is there a thematic flow to the order? What is it? Does it follow a “Praise, Confession, Assurance, Commitment cycle”, a “Exalt, Encounter, Respond” cycle, or some other order? Is the overall arrangement driven by content? Is the emotional effect warranted by the content? Is the Gospel presented adequately as the foundation to our worship? What’s the overall diet - thematic, mood? Is there content-overload? Are there elements that need to be added to round out the content? Objective Gospel-centric?
2. *Music* – Do the songs transition well musically? How are transitions going to be done? Is there an overall musical arc and flow to the order?
3. *Repertoire* – How does this order fit with recent orders? Are new songs being refreshed? Are there enough established, familiar, easy to sing songs on the order to make it accessible to our congregation...to our children...to visitors?

Guidelines for Worship Team Participation

1) Spiritual Guidelines

- Worship team participants at FRBC must be professing Christians and be actively walking in repentance and faith. Public ministry before the congregation is a position of trust and spiritual responsibility. Worship is with the whole man, and those leading and facilitating the worship of others lead best by example. We believe that the spiritual state and understanding of the singer and musician absolutely affects their ability to play, sing, lead others, and do so responsibly before God.
- Worship team participants at FRBC must (usually) be church members committed to the life of the church. Again, worship team is a position of trust (requiring the trust of the congregation) and responsibility. True worship flows out of faithfulness in relationship.
- Worship team participants must have Gospel humility - to be able to work well with others, receive criticism without being devastated, give criticism with grace.
- Worship team participants must be lead worshippers in the act of worship. Effort must be made to not get lost in the motions or in the performance, but to be able to worship with the heart even while leading others.

2) Creative Guidelines

- a. *Skilled* - Worship team participants must be capable and proficient at their instrument. They must have a good ear, be able to sing or play in tune, be able to sing or play accurately, be able to sing or play in rhythm, be able to read and/or quickly learn new music, be able to lead others confidently without distraction. They must have a gifting that can be exercised in undistracting excellence
- b. *Rehearsed* – Musicians and singers must be prepared for each Sunday’s selection of songs. Musicians must be able to play the notes accurately and confidently. The team must be together on chord changes, transitions between songs, dynamic changes, rhythms, etc. This will require rehearsal.
- c. *Nuanced* – Musicians and singers must pursue dynamic expressiveness in leading the songs. They must facilitate the congregation’s focus on and experience of the text by a nuanced playing and singing of the music. The music must be communicated authentically and expressively. i.e. Don’t play the verses the same way twice!
- d. *Sensitive* – Following from the above, musicians and singers must be able to have a “sensitivity” to one another’s playing and singing and a sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit. The playing of each should complement one another and not compete.
- e. *Flexible* – Therefore, musicians and singers need to be flexible within the service, open to changes, eager to serve.

4) Reliability Guidelines

- Worship team participants must be able to follow faithfully and in good conscience the above guidelines.

- They must be available and on time for rehearsals and for services – ready with instruments tuned, hooked-up, music set.

Planning and Rehearsal and Evaluation

1. Plan with others
2. Determine your liturgy (and teach it!)
3. Rehearse weekly
4. Keep a repertoire list, refresh list, songs to learn list
5. Keep a liturgy file, a readings file...
6. Evaluate, study, and pray
7. Pay attention to mood, tempo, intros, movement, endings, transitions...