

Compositional Integrity in Congregational Song

Few believers would dispute music's importance in worship services. A service where the music does not resonate with the worshipper may leave him disappointed, discouraged, or disconnected. Careful selection of congregational songs, on the other hand, can contribute to a richer worship experience.

This article will attempt to articulate principles for music leaders to consider when selecting music for worship services, ensuring that both the lyrics and musical aspects of congregation music are characterized by compositional integrity. I will first discuss the textual elements of congregational song, followed by musical aspects, and conclude with the relationship between the two. This article does not intend to be exhaustive in its scope, yet its assertions are fundamental principles in music ministry.

First, the lyrics must package truth in a precise, comprehensible manner. They must be neither theologically incorrect nor ambiguous. A lack of clarity may confuse or distract the congregation, possibly contributing to incorrect theological assumptions. Confusion also occurs when the language is too complex to assimilate quickly, as in the hymn "Arise, My Soul, Arise:"

Arise, my soul, arise; shake off thy guilty fears;
The bleeding sacrifice in my behalf appears:
Before the throne my surety stands,
Before the throne my surety stands,
My name is written on His hands.

Most Christians would need time to examine this text before singing it perceptively. Earnest singing would require prior knowledge of the hymn or a leader's brief explanation of its imagery.

Second, a clear line of reasoning needs to be discernable both throughout each stanza and within the entire song. (Whether this principle applies depends on the author's approach to given song or hymn.) Horatio Spafford ordered the stanzas of the hymn "It Is Well with My Soul" with a clear flow in which each stanza continues where the previous one ended:

- v. 1 *My response to circumstances*
God has taught him to accept all that comes his way, both good and bad.

- v. 2 *The basis for acceptance of circumstances: grace shown at the cross*
In the face of adversity, he remembers that Christ has shown regard for him by dying in his place.

- v. 3 *The cross atones for sin in full*
Christ paid for the entirety of the penalty of sin on the cross.
- v. 4 *Final hope realized*
The author yearns for Christ's return, when "faith shall be sight," and his hope for salvation will be fully realized.

Spafford penned these great words on the occasion of his four daughters' death at sea. Despite this tragedy, he fixes his hope and security on Christ's redeeming work on his behalf. His conclusion looks forward to the day when he shall fully enjoy his salvation. This hymn is but one example of how each stanza can build upon the previous one to create coherence and profundity.

Contemporary praise songs occasionally jumble unrelated thoughts together in an effort to rhyme. Consider "I Could Sing of Your Love Forever," a familiar song in which the writers conjure two underdeveloped and possibly unrelated images:

Over the mountain and the sea
Your river runs with love for me
I will open up my heart
And let the Healer set me free.

Instead of developing the "river of love" theme, the writer proceeds to "open up [his] heart and let the Healer setting [him] free." While many assign these images meaning, the song still suffers from an inherent lack of clarity. One should be aware that this tendency is present in many new praise songs.

The third major consideration is the praise song or hymn's musical interest. The harmonies should progress smoothly, showing sophistication and variety through any number of musical devices, such as the use of minor or diminished chords, secondary dominants, or variations in harmonic rhythm. In addition, the music should complement the message of the text. One would not wish to find a serious, heavy subject accompanied by a light-hearted or fast, driving rhythm. The melodic range must also be accessible for the non-musician—usually no larger than an octave. In addition, the melody needs simplicity. People become distracted when a tune has unpredictable leaps or rhythms and an unsteady tonal center. Music must not detract from the lyrics because of its complexity (or lack thereof). It should be viewed as a vehicle for expressing the lyrics in a worshipful and appropriate manner.

Generally speaking, musical and textual phrases need to correspond. Complex dovetailing is not usually appropriate for congregational song. The music should enhance the text rather than obscure it. A contemporary song, “More Than Enough,” illustrates this problem.

Text

All of You is more than enough for all of me
For every thirst and every need
You satisfy me with Your love
And all I have in You is more than enough

Musical Phrases

All of You is more than enough for
all of me / For every thirst and
every need / You satisfy me
with Your love / And all I have in You
is more than enough

One can see that the musical phrases disrupt the text’s flow. Such division diminishes the text’s impact. Whenever poetry is broken apart, comprehension becomes much more challenging. It is most unfortunate in this case, given the good quality of these lyrics.

These components of textual and musical craftsmanship can make a difference in the vitality of your congregation’s worship services. They will improve doctrinal purity, minimize implicit distractions, and foster greater participation in your congregation. Ultimately these ideas cannot guarantee experience authentic worship, but they may minimize unnecessary detractors inherent to the some music.