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Fostering Cultural Inclusivity in our Church Music

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Fostering Cultural Inclusivity in our Church Music

Abstract

"Openness to hearing, engaging, and loving other cultures is not a musical issue; it is a heart issue."

Posting about musical variety in corporate worship from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Fostering Cultural Inclusivity in our Church Music

John MacInnis

To begin, I am glad to say that my community holds the presence of multiple cultures living together to be a mark of strength and vitality. Ideally, in such a community, every person experiences the freedom to be themselves individually and, moreover, the freedom to become something new together. In striving to outdo one another in showing honor (Romans 12:10), each culture defers to others with the greater obligation placed upon those with the most security and established power. Judging from the many churches that have adopted the **Belhar Confession**, I know I am not alone in finding these ideas to be fitting and desirable, for who does not want a glimpse of Revelation 7 here and now?

Revelation 7:9-10:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

*“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”*

It would be understandable, I think, for churches keen to experience a multiplicity of peoples and languages in their congregations to miss something noteworthy in this vision, though: such vast, inclusive diversity is not for its own sake. That is, this diversity manifests when the worship of God is the priority. In the following, I offer some historical perspective and practical ideas for how the power of music

can foster cultural inclusivity in our church communities, but not as an end. Rather, just as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) are both evidence and ideals to be worked at (against such things there is no law!), these suggestions are intended as ways to cultivate cultural inclusivity while keeping all our eyes where they belong—forever on Jesus.

Allowing for multiple modern languages in our collective worship should be accepted as perfectly reasonable today and, indeed, can be a major force for fostering cultural inclusivity in our church communities. I saw this firsthand at the recent 2018 Sing! Conference led by Keith and Kristyn Getty; the conference ended with a panel of speakers that included Spanish pastors who spoke freely in their native language and were translated simultaneously into English for the non-Spanish speakers in the hall. I found myself thanking God—not just for the impassioned insights these leaders shared (and that they were made accessible to me in English), but also for those women and men in attendance who heard *their* language and saw that it was a *welcome* element in the room. Beyond simply speaking with translation, music offers several ways to engage multiple languages in congregational worship.

A serviceable example for church musicians today, observed historically in the Middle Ages, is the Macaronic hymn. For example, in our familiar Christmas carol “Angels We Have Heard on High,” the stanzas are all traditionally sung in English while the refrain remains in Latin (*Gloria in excelsis Deo*, “Glory to God in the highest”). I propose that the long history of Macaronic songs in many Christian traditions can be drawn upon today as models. For example, one assignment I give in a course that I teach at Dordt College, “Music in Worship,” asks students to create a Macaronic worship song including a Spanish refrain. My students take several approaches because the refrains that they create can comment on or clarify the English text as well as simply restate an important theme expressed in the song.

Musical canons can be engaging and delightful for a congregation—especially for children and those who are young at heart. For example, the familiar words of the “Doxology” (“Praise God from whom all blessings flow...”) can be sung to the famous tune TALLIS CANON in unison and then as a canon, with separate entrances of the melody paced for multiple groups of singers. Once the words are stated in English, those in the congregation desiring to sing the “Doxology” in their own language can be empowered to do so as another voice in the canon.

Soloists or a church choir can be engaged to lead the congregation, with people designated to lead the singing in other languages. Singing in canon can be a pleasant way to build a singer's confidence and to address the common preference of some people today—which is to be overwhelmed by amplified sound because of felt insecurity about his or her singing voice.

Soloists or a choir can be used in other ways when seeking to foster cultural inclusivity through music. In a recent college chapel service that I observed, students from other countries were asked to sing the refrain of Chris Tomlin's "How Great is Our God" in their own heart language as the song unfolded. The song was set up in such a way that there was a freedom in the room for others to join in and sing in those other languages. If a church sometimes begins with a sung call to worship, that call can be made in another language and then in English, or vice versa.

In these and other examples, intelligibility should be a priority for everyone, so that all, insider and outsider, are built up. And there are effective ways to ensure intelligibility; for example, a word fitly spoken by the worship leader, a printed translation on the service bulletin, or one that is displayed on the projection screen.

Many churches welcome a congregation with prelude music, sometimes live and sometimes prerecorded—or a mixture of both. When live, this prelude music can be an opportunity for a keyboardist or the band to stretch their wings in a new genre or by incorporating ethnic instruments from another country (e.g., drums or wind instruments). When prerecorded, a church's worship committee or coordinator can select worshipful songs from other cultures performed professionally. Hearing ethnically infused music at one's arrival can be received as a statement: "diversity is welcome, you and your culture are welcome here." And, on the other end of the service, a sung benediction or postlude music can incorporate other ethnic music styles or words to characterize our sending forth.

Though used less frequently today, hymnbooks offer resources for churches and worship planners. Two books with which I am somewhat familiar are *Lift up Your Hearts* (the joint hymnal of the Reformed Church in American and the Christian Reformed Church) and the excellent collection of Psalm settings *Psalms for All Seasons*. For example, *Lift up Your Hearts*#965 provides the text for the "Doxology" (mentioned above) in Cherokee, Mohawk, Navajo, German, French,

Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, Korean, Japanese, and Mandarin. Many other songs are included that combine multiple languages and styles; they can be referenced easily using the “Index of Genre and Musical Styles” beginning on page 1051. This index includes settings from Asia and the Pacific Islands, the African continent, the Middle and Near East, etc. A similar index for multiethnic musical settings of the Psalms is found in *Psalms for All Seasons* on page 1107. This index also includes a section of “Settings Especially Appropriate for Children.”

Which raises an important idea: recruit your youth. I have found that young people are among the most open-hearted when engaging other cultures. Many children and teenagers study a second language as a part of their education, and they may be the most willing and least self-conscious participants when drawing upon other musical styles and languages in our corporate worship.

Lastly, I would suggest incorporating other cultural backgrounds in your worship leadership and your planning processes. Probably the readiest resources for engaging other cultures in our church worship are already sitting among us untapped.

To conclude, it must be said that all efforts to foster cultural inclusivity in congregational worship on Sunday will be without effect if the lives of our congregations do not intersect lovingly and hospitably with other cultures throughout the rest of the week. That is to say, openness to hearing, engaging, and loving other cultures is not a musical issue; it is a heart issue. Faithful, biblical preaching can effectively address cultural narrow-mindedness; but here, music may also be a key that is used by the Holy Spirit to unlock someone’s hard heart. Learning a new song together—with fresh sounds, words, and expressions as well as movements or clapping—may promote positive group process and a willingness to be vulnerable and generous with others.