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Abstract

"The desire of concert attendees for an authentic spiritual experience maps onto the search for other authentic experiences by consumers today."

Posting about the book *Singing the Congregation* 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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December 18, 2019

Book Review: *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community*

John MacInnis

Title: *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community*

Author: Monique Ingalls

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Church musicians are prompt to assert that the musical practices of communal Christian worship shape us: What we sing and how we sing together forms us powerfully. Given the wealth of resources available on the topics of congregational worship and the music heard in our churches today, it is easy to be overwhelmed with new trends, new technologies, and new innovations. To understand the cumulative effect, we might, with the Scottish poet Robert Burns, ask for an outside perspective: “O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us / To see oursels as ithers see us!” What if a scholar was to examine the vast field of contemporary worship music practices and describe it using the terms and theoretical models of ethnomusicology, the scholarly discipline that studies music with regard to cultural and social context?^{[1](#)}

Monique Ingalls’ *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* is an academic book, perhaps an ethnography, that shares her field research among evangelicals in North America and around the world. Thoroughly reflexive in her presentation, Ingalls is upfront about her background and investment in

evangelical Christianity and how her personal journey informs her research. To be clear, this is not a book presenting theological or biblical ideals or best practices in church music. It is a mirror held up to contemporary worship music, in all its complexity.

As the sounds of contemporary worship music are adopted increasingly by churches of every stripe, readers may recognize themselves in this mirror and gain new insights to shape intentionally the cultures of their local congregations. With no less significance, this book carefully examines how Christian formation and practice are decentering from the local church today, with music shown to be a facilitating factor in the decentering process.

Singing the Congregation is organized into five chapters, each exploring the cultural work done by contemporary worship music in the following contexts: worship concerts, conferences, an urban church, praise marches, and the protean world of audiovisual worship media. In each setting, the collective performance of contemporary worship music shapes how evangelicals understand worship generally and, indeed, brings into being new social constellations, new modes of congregating as fellow believers.

How Ingalls defines the terms of her study is helpful. Contemporary worship music (CWM) is not a monolithic category; as a descriptor it includes different repertoires and styles that are portable beyond the institutional church, commercial, largely reliant upon digital audio/visual technologies, and heard around the world. In musical terms, CWM features “rock band instrumentation, standard pop-rock song forms, harmonies built upon cyclic chord riffs, and rhythmically complex tunes often based on short melodic motives” (85).

CMW is also trans-denominational, though originating in charismatic and Pentecostal churches and referencing a prominent aim for music in these contexts: to facilitate a personal, intimate encounter with God. The history of CWM dates back to the 1960s, and it has had different names such as praise and worship music or just praise music. For historical reasons, Ingalls distinguishes CWM, music intended for congregational singing, from contemporary Christian music (CCM), music intended for devotional listening (43). Both CWM and CCM have produced two separate industries with significant overlap.

Regarding the term evangelicalism, Ingalls notes that it is a contested designation with dynamic boundaries and is defined variously, such as by a constellation of attributes and habits or prescriptively, as with the so-called Bebbington quadrilateral. For the purposes of this book, Ingalls provides a thick description of what evangelical Christianity does, not what it is supposed to be. Relatedly, she labels a congregation as a fluid, contingent social assembly that is performed into being by what we do when we gather,

particularly those things we call our worship.² Importantly, congregations rely upon aesthetic formations (such as by music) and shared imaginations that produce the community's chosen actions.

The first chapter, "Making Jesus Famous: The Quest for Authentic Worship Experience in the Concert Congregation" concerns the presence of CWM at what may be called worship concerts or worship events. These sorts of concerts feature their own liturgies, experiences, and genre rules. As marketed events, worship concerts participate in discourses of the experience economy of late capitalism, in which participants attend and become promoters of a purchased experience through testimonies of life transformation (45). That is, the desire of concert attendees for an authentic spiritual experience maps onto the search for other authentic experiences by consumers today.

In CWM, spiritual authenticity is performed with conventions drawn from pop-rock music (which, interestingly, seeks its own authenticity in live performance) and with rhetoric of avowal: "I'm not here to perform for you... There is just one star of this show: the Lord Jesus" (41). Though it is reasonable to consider the adaption of pop-rock arena concerts to CWM events not as capitulation but as reformation, Ingalls discerns that worship concerts do show evidence of being "governed by the logic of the commercial music industry" (68).

In Chapter 2, "Singing Heaven Down to Earth: The Conference Congregation as Pilgrim Gathering and Eschatological Community," Ingalls examines CWM practices at Christian conferences to show how participants are encouraged to interpret the conference congregation as prefiguring the gathering of all believers in the renewed creation, Christianity's eschatological vision. As Ingalls shows, music's role in this interpretation is crucial, with eschatological discourse such as repeated mentions of heaven in spoken comments and in song lyrics. Through music, conference assemblies are prompted to embody the evangelical imaginary of the eschaton. In this chapter, Ingalls presents her research undertaken at two prominent evangelical conferences, both attended twice, in which musical choices manifest two different but related visions of the eschatological community.

An outstanding feature of the Christian eschatological vision, as in Revelation 7:9-12, is the human diversity present there. As Ingalls shows, cultural and linguistic diversity can be explored in different ways, in church congregations and at conferences like those she observed, with positive and problematic examples of dialogic performances of the other, often in a context featuring music. Ideally, through dialogic performances, a congregation identifies with someone else and, in the process, comes to know themselves better as well. Care must be taken though: Is another culture present musically, but segregated in some way? On the other hand, is another culture's music

simply assimilated? Here is a call for worship artists willing to invest themselves in learning multiple musical languages.³

This chapter is not a critique of the Christian eschatological vision itself or the good desire to make sure other cultures are present—and at home—in our music making. Rather, Ingalls' research shared in this chapter underlines the power of music to form our imaginations. By engaging Ingalls's descriptions of what happened at these conferences, her readers can see more clearly the need for our musicians and other ministers to help us imagine and know ourselves to be members of the global Christian community and to identify with the poor, the oppressed, and marginalized groups.

Chapter 3, "Finding the Church's Voice: Contemporary Worship as Musical Positioning in a Nashville Congregation," shares Ingalls' research done at an urban church in Nashville, TN. She attended this church herself, for a time, and found it to be a compelling mixture of characteristics. The church affiliates with a mainline denomination, gestures purposefully towards the evangelical mainstream, and incorporates several aspects of the charismatic movement. Musically, this church intentionally creates opportunities to bring traditional and contemporary styles together, teaching new CWM songs along with hymns from the denominational hymnal, and creating their own settings of service music for band, choir, and organ.

In response to this homegrown emphasis for music, Ingalls noted vigorous congregational participation throughout Sunday morning services. When questioned, congregants granted that other churches in town may feature music performed at a higher standard (either judged by a classical aesthetic or by the standards of the popular music industry), but this perception of marginally lower quality did not bother Ingalls' interviewees. This church excelled at what it had set as its priority, incorporating diverse styles and songs into a seamless, inspiring whole.

Along with a robust theological foundation for their worship together, the church's mission statement makes explicit these musical priorities (125-6):

- They will not simply present a "smorgasbord" (pick what you like) or a "blended soup" (everything a blend of pop, classical, etc.).
- They will work to offer a "stew," expressing various styles that all work together within a context of good taste for Sunday worship.
- They will take a "chamber music" approach, finding the right combination of instruments to best support a given piece of music.
- They will encourage musical creation among their own congregational musicians, so that the music is uniquely theirs.

In an interview, the church's music director expressed a preference for the term "convergent" worship to "blended" and referenced the "stew" metaphor to highlight the church's desire for complementarity and juxtaposition rather than homogeneity.

Ingalls' interviews with a youth pastor at this church prompted him to explain that ours is a culture used to market-driven decision making, and that a church's role can easily be perceived as vending a spiritual product, rather than stimulating and empowering a life centered on love and service to God and others. To counter consumerist cultural expectations, this youth pastor purposefully subverts the experience of music in youth worship services, moving the band to the periphery rather than center stage and limiting its repertoire to avoid chart-topping songs. This displacing of music from center stage in the youth services is consistent with the church's decision to place all musicians (choir, band, organ, etc.) in the church's rear balcony for Sunday morning worship.

Chapter 4, "Bringing Worship to the Streets: The Praise March as Public Congregation," concerns those congregations that form in a public space, specifically a public procession or praise march. Praise marches around the world have had a renowned model in the "March for Jesus," public demonstrations in London, beginning in the 1980s. For this chapter, Ingalls' chosen case studies are two praise marches she observed in Toronto, Ontario.

Spiritual warfare is a prominent theme for praise marches as well as references to the biblical story of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho (Joshua 6). The presence of musical instruments in the Jericho story is noticeable, especially as modern praise marches normally feature loud music, either recorded or performed live, and participants marching, singing, and dancing. Here musical worship is perceived as a sort of spiritual weapon by which God's kingdom is enacted in places deemed to be a stronghold of sin.

As described by Graham Kendrick, a founder of the London March for Jesus and writer of "Shine, Jesus, Shine," marches feature worship in song with three sonic values: 1) synchronicity ("harmonizing with heaven"), sonic permeation ("drowning out" the music of evil forces), 3) uniformity (moving together "in rhythmic step") (149). Here, CWM functions as an integrating agent and a unified voice, to demonstrate solidarity among those assembled, as well as a sonic display of spiritual and political power.

Chapter 5, "Worship on Screen: Building Networked Congregations through Audio Visual Worship Media" is wide-ranging in its exploration of "networked" congregations, the interconnected modes of congregating made possible by audio/visual technology. Ingalls takes up worship videos featuring CWM with added lyrics, images, and effects, online sites for global worship brands like Hillsong and Bethel, and digital projection practices in local churches.

Ingalls' descriptions of evangelical visual piety with regard to images in worship is fascinating, especially her interviews with the creators of amateur worship videos who explain their motivations and aesthetic values. In time, these amateur videos have become a genre and are largely superseded today by professionally-made videos with lyrics added to images in three primary categories: nature, worshippers—especially with raised hands, and Jesus.

The prevailing theme for this book is reinforced here: What we sense audibly and visually is formative for our understanding of what it is to practice our faith in a congregation—even online. That is, Ingalls shows how online activity surrounding worship videos on YouTube or subscription sites like Hillsong Channel, can function as a congregation for people today.

Summing up, Ingalls' contribution in this book is a substantive theoretical examination of how congregations, aided by CWM, arise in increasingly diverse spaces. Today, we may participate virtually at many sorts of livestreamed events, and the lines between online and offline venues are blurring. Church campuses may choose to project a sermon being preached at another location and, likewise, instead of hiring local musicians, professionally-produced song leading can be projected for congregational singing. Given the present reality of megachurches and multi-site campuses offering highly produced sermons and music, the situation facing small local churches is striking.

One may profitably reference James K. A. Smith's work, at this point. As he demonstrates in his book *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, the gap between what Christians say they believe and what we actually do indicates that our hearts are taught to love by the "liturgies" of our daily lives, perhaps more than we understand. Crucially, Smith names congregational worship the place where we "renew our loves, reorient our desires, and retrain our appetites."⁴ Ideally constituted, the liturgies of our daily life should take their cue from our congregational worship. If Smith is right, there is much at stake when we congregate.

Here is a call for worship artists and ministers to lead us with care, ensuring that congregational worship forms us well and always passes its surest tests, truth and love. 2 John makes this plain: Our obedience to Jesus' command to love God and neighbor happens in community, with the ever-present possibility that we could be led astray, taught wrongly, formed in detrimental ways.

FOOTNOTES

1. One of the founders of the Society for Ethnomusicology Alan Merriam contended for the study of music *as culture*, and so, if he was right, studying contemporary worship music can tell us about the priorities, values, and commitments of evangelical congregations, here at the beginning of the 21st century.
2. Indirectly, this enlightening and well-written book makes plain a glaring misunderstanding among Christians today who conflate music with worship. Truly, worship involves all of life—not just congregational singing. We worship when the transformative, renewing power of the Gospel is at work in our families, in the workplace, in how we choose to make the reign of Jesus real every day as we live before the face of God.
3. See Chapter 10 “Becoming Multi-Musical” in C. Randall Bradley’s book *From Memory to Imagination: Reforming the Church’s Music* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 184ff.
4. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 65.