

Module 3 - The Singing Voice in Worship

Introduction

The issues covered in this module are:

- Why do we sing?
- Why do we sing in worship?
- Who should sing?
- The relationship between words and music
- What should we/could we sing?
- Does quality matter?

However, before we can really make sense of these questions we need to go back a stage, and ask even more fundamental questions about the nature of sound itself.

Preliminary exercise: perceptions of sound

The following exercise draws on material presented in greater detail in [Burrows: *Sound, Speech, and Music*](#), (Chapter One).

If possible, strike a large bell. If a bell is not available, it might be possible to substitute a recording, or simply try to imagine the effect of a large bell being struck.

Recording?

Listen carefully and to be prepared to describe as accurately as you can your sensations of the sound.

Ask yourself:

- Where does the sound appear to be coming from?
- Where do you hear the sound?
- Does the sound seem to be outside or inside you?

Perhaps you can put into words the idea that the sound comes from both outside and inside, so that it functions as a demonstration of [transcendence](#) and [immanence](#).

Some quotations:

Seeing is like touching, hearing like being touched: except that the touch of sound does not stop at the skin. (Burrows p.21, *Sound, Speech, and Music*)

Sight draws me out, sound finds me here. And sound goes beyond touch, which respects the perimeter of my skin, and beyond its degree of intimacy in seeming to be going on within me as much as around me. (Burrows p.16, *Sound, Speech, and Music*)

Music [or any sound to which we give attention] is a defined encounter with the surrounding environment. It leads us outside ourselves since, although we interpret what we hear within our brains, we are aware (as sentient beings) that its source is elsewhere. Music thus offers a striking example of something which is both immanent and transcendent. (Hone p.158, *Sound, Speech, and Music*)

Share your thoughts about these quotations with others working on this module by using the bulletin board and starting a 'thread'.

Why do we sing?

Some questions to start you thinking:

- Do you like to sing?
- When do you like to sing?
- What do you like to sing?
- Does singing change your mood?
- Do you like to hear other people sing?
- In what circumstances would you choose to listen to a recording of a solo singer or choir?

Reflect on the idea that using the voice is the flip-side to the ideas above about listening.

Think of the sounds made by a baby or young child. Their cries and vocalisations are a way of beginning to communicate with the world:

- to draw attention to themselves,
- to make others aware of their needs,
- to test boundaries,
- to express themselves,
- to make connections with the world and the people in it.

This pre-verbal communication probably reflects more fundamental issues and needs than some of the later 'more sophisticated' conversations which become possible once the child has begun to use language.

Singing connects with these fundamental issues, as well as with the worlds of the imagination and the spirit. This allows us to suggest some reasons why we sing.

Some reasons why we sing:

1. because singing allows us to express ourselves in a physical way;
2. to inspire and be inspired;
3. to express emotions;
4. to make connections with other people;
5. to give voice to the imaginative and spiritual parts of our nature.

singing allows us to express ourselves in a physical way

- singing comes from the core of our unarticulated ideas about who we are; asserting our right to be, to simply exist;
- when we sing, we take ownership of who we are, using the body we inhabit;
- singing is a natural act, which allows us to assert that we have a place in society and within the world.

[For more detail, see Burrows, Chapter Two: *Voice* and Chapter Four: *Words and Music*]

to inspire and be inspired

- Singing is a process: it begins with the imagination, a desire to sing, a musical thought; we breathe in, control the breath as it passes through the poised vocal mechanism and create a sound; this resonates within us, and flows from us into the air which surrounds us;
- all the different shades of meaning of the word 'inspire' draw from the sense of breathing: to animate; to stir; to stimulate; to invigorate; to influence; to breathe life into something;
- We get some sense of the inspirational effect when, for instance, *Nessun Dorma* is sung at a key football match. The effort of the singer seems to mirror the effort we hope the players will make.

to express emotions

Differences between saying and singing: Burrows (p 7) suggests that for good communication speech usually has to be:

- intelligible;
- clear;
- logical;
- plausible - it usually corresponds with the way things are or could be;

Singing, and music in general, may choose to be these things, but it is not necessarily restricted by them.

Meditation:

The man bent over his guitar,
a shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
you do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,
a tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
of things exactly as they are."

[The Blue Guitar, Wallace Stevens](#)

- Poetic language begins to transcend the patterns of normal speech, and music allows even more freedom;
- emotional occasions seem to require us to express ourselves more fully than words allow - perhaps this is a return to a more primitive / basic / fundamental emotional language: the cry of the baby; the cry of pain or pleasure;
- singing allows us to prolong and extend the sound of a word or a part of a word and to create a time frame which is independent of the sound lengths and rhythms of the words themselves.

- singing also creates an independent frame of reference for pitch, intensity and timbre - all of these seem to be intimately connected with the expression of emotion.

to join together as a community

- Music helps us all to do the same thing at the same time;
- it can act as a co-ordinating activity, in a way similar to a work song or sea shanty;
- however, when we add our voices together with others, we are still aware of what we are contributing as individuals;
- the whole effect can be much greater than the sum of the parts (think of a choral society) - this is not simply a matter greater audibility, but an increase in confidence and the overall quality of the result.

to give voice to the imaginative, spiritual and feeling parts of our nature

- It is commonly supposed that we can think only in words: the proposition 'I think, therefore I am' suggests verbal analysis. A musical sound gives us another way of expressing ourselves;
- this might be an expression of pain, pleasure or some other feeling - in which case the music is acting as a refinement of more basic sounds;
- alternatively, the singing may simply allow us to express something imagined, some musical pattern or phrase which we have thought of, or heard elsewhere;
- singing may elongate and prolong a thought - we can sustain a long note, or hum so that we resonate with our own sound.

Why do we sing in worship?

Some reasons why we sing in worship:

to worship and praise God with our body not just our mind

- We stand in the presence of God and to give voice to that:
O come, let us sing unto the Lord
Let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.

Psalm 95

- to celebrate the saving acts of God in history:
Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

Exodus 15: 21 (after the crossing of the Red Sea)

to inspire and be inspired

The idea of breath as a creative force and of the wind as an unseen sign of the presence of the Spirit runs through the scriptures. When we sing, we use that same breath to witness the presence of the Spirit in our lives.

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

Genesis 2: 7

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley: it was full of bones. . . . I prophesied as I was commanded . . . And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.

Ezekiel 37: 1, 7-10

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Psalms 150: 6

The wind blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from, or where it is going. So with everyone who is born from spirit.

John 3: 8

the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

John 4: 23-24

and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Acts 2: 4

- *to express profound emotions*

to express sorrow and anguish

Cry aloud the Lord!

O daughter of Zion!

Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night!

Lamentations 2: 18

- *to express joy in the presence of God:*

And David and all the house of Israel were making merry before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

2 Samuel 6: 5 (description of David leading the Ark of God into Jerusalem)

- *sometimes, in exile, the anguish is so extreme that singing is impossible*

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept:

when we remembered Zion.

As for our harps we hung them up:

upon the tress that are in that land

For there those who led us away captive required of us a song . . .

saying 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Psalms 137: 1-4

- *to join together as a worshipping community*
be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

Ephesians 5: 19-20

- *to join with the worship of heaven:*
And round the throne . . . are four living creatures . . . and day and night they never cease to sing: "Holy , holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"

Revelation 4: 6, 8

Module 1 mentioned the way in which different kinds of music can be used to help make the structure of a service come to life. Every liturgy has its own structural rhythm created by moments of reflection, preparation and intensity. One function of music's use in liturgy is to help to signify and place in relief the more intense moments, making a definition and therefore punctuating the rhythm within the shape of liturgical form. This helps those taking part to be more aware of the shape and meaning of the liturgy in which they are participating.

Particular attention was paid to the Eucharistic Prayer (based on the presentation in Gelineau, *Voices and Instruments*). The discussion drew attention to the following uses of music:

- as praise, joining the celebrant and assembly with the company of heaven (Sanctus);
- to ratify and give consent to what has gone before (the final Amen);
- to underline the climaxes of the liturgical action with the acclamations of the people, 'who thereby express their active faith in the mystery being celebrated'
- to prolong (the Sanctus is seen as prolonging the Preface)
- to express unanimity (the Sanctus, the Amen)

In addition, it was noted that, 'the prayer of the celebrant is always preceded by a call to the congregation ['The Lord be with you . . .] so that they may unite themselves with it, and the prayer is terminated by a formal conclusion that they may ratify it: *Amen*.'

Quotation

music . . . is also political in the sense that it may involve people in a powerful shared experience within the framework of their cultural experience and thereby make them more aware of themselves and of their responsibilities toward each other . . . music is not an escape from reality: it is an adventure into reality, the reality of the world of the spirit. It is an experience of becoming, in which individual consciousness is nurtured within the collective consciousness of the community and hence becomes the source of richer cultural forms.

[John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?*](#) Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973, p. 28.

Singing the Word: the relationship between words and music

Because Christianity is a religion of a divine Word made flesh, it is not surprising that most music used in Christian worship is closely associated with text.

Different ways in which words can become song:

- formulaic intonations and chant patterns which can be adapted to many different texts (e.g. plainsong intonations for prayers and readings, psalm tones in various styles, including Anglican chant);
- the repetitive mantra-like use of a musical phrase based on a single word or group of words, in which the sound of the word becomes as important as its meaning;
- strophic settings in which the same music serves for a number of different verses within a single verse composition; indeed, the same music may be used for a number of different texts so long as their metrical structure is the same; the music is not neutral, but nor is it so strongly reflective of a single text that appropriate interchange is impossible (hymns are the most obvious example of this type);
- strophic settings where it is assumed the musical setting belongs to one text only (most songs and choruses are of this type);
- through-composed settings of existing texts (most anthems are of this type; the complexity of the setting can vary enormously);
- the addition of a text to pre-existing music;
- a composition where words and music are the product of the same creative mind.

Some points:

The relative contribution of words and music will obviously affect the way in which the combination of text and music is perceived. A sung gospel is heightened speech: the music serves the function of helping to project the text in a large building, and lends solemnity by creating a sound world which differs from casual speech.

The power of music to colour a text, as well as the strength of certain associations between words and musical settings, can be illustrated by interchanging the words and music of two well-known hymns, such as 'My song is love unknown' and 'Ye holy angels bright'.

More significant is the effect of different musical settings of frequently used texts, particularly those of the Ordinary of the Mass and the Canticles of Morning and Evening Prayer. Here a change of musical setting (or even the use of a chant of contrasting character) can cause the text to be heard afresh, evoking new associations and enabling new meanings to be found.

Music also helps to make the text more memorable, and to fix it in our minds for future meditation.

At its most profound, music is capable of giving new meaning to the incarnate Word. It provides a limitless range of possibilities with which to flesh-out either that Word itself, or our human response to it.

Quotation:

Among the many signs and symbols used by the Church to celebrate its faith, music is of pre-eminent importance. As sacred song united to words it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy. Yet the function of music is ministerial; it must serve and never dominate.

from [*Music in Catholic Worship*](#), 1972; rev. ed. 1983

Who should sing?

Some useful quotations:

To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bearing. And at all times all should observe a reverent silence.

Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) 30 1963

Worship without music does not easily soar; and wherever the Church has been concerned to make worship really expressive of truth, music has been used: simple music for the untrained worshipper, more elaborate music for a trained choir. The music of a cathedral choir is the counterpart of the architecture and the stained glass of the building: it is a finely wrought music, in which the musicians offer on behalf of the people what the people would wish to do themselves, if they had the ability.

From the Introduction to *The Communion in Coventry Cathedral*, 1973

In a reaction to an historic liturgy in Latin, where the style of celebration obscured most of the ritual from the congregation, the Roman church took a radical stance at the Second Vatican Council, which was expressed in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. From a musical point of view, this necessitated a new start and forced congregations and composers to think about the place of music in worship. At the centre of this was the idea of 'active participation'. As a priority, it was felt desirable the assembly should sing the Gospel Acclamation, the Sanctus, the memorial acclamations in the Eucharistic prayer, and the Amen with which the prayer ends.

The Anglican experience of liturgical change has been a more evolutionary one. Particularly in places with good musical resources, where some traditional music has been retained, the distinction between what 'belongs' to the congregation, and what might legitimately be sung by a smaller group of more confident singers may be made more from a musical than a liturgical standpoint. Cathedrals have rich resources, but they sometimes sit uneasily with post Vatican II ideas about the priority given to the place of the assembly in the celebration. The quotation from Coventry Cathedral's service book reveals one way out of the dilemma: the choir is regarded as a musical representative of the assembly, enabling the music offered to be of the highest standard.

In the last thirty years, many Roman commentators have tried to adopt a more balanced view of participation, which allows some music to be shared through attentive listening, not just through vocal participation. Reformed traditions, including our own Anglican church have often relied on hymnody as the main means of congregational involvement. This has had the unfortunate effect that many congregations do not sing the liturgical rite as such. Perhaps we are now at a point where the adoption of *Common Worship*, and some of the resources which are available for it, encourage us to think again about a more comprehensive and balanced consideration of musical participation in the liturgy.

What do we sing?

What models of participation and community do the following kinds of music reflect?

- unaccompanied unison singing, such as plainsong;
- harmonised music, such as a hymn;
- polyphonic music, where the different voices do different things at different times;
- responsorial music, led by a cantor or small vocal group;
- an act of shared listening.

What do they suggest about the nature of the body of Christ, how do they reflect a balance between unity and diversity, how do they reveal that 'we, though many, are one body'?

Does quality matter?

Music in Catholic Worship suggested that three judgements should determine the appropriateness of music for liturgy:

- the musical judgement
- the pastoral judgement
- the liturgical judgement

How would you make these judgements?

Final Question...

What has this session added to your understanding of the fundamental issues about the use of the singing voice in worship?

Further recommended material:

[*The Singing Thing*](#), John L. Bell, Wild Goose Publications 2000.

[*The Singing Thing too*](#), John L. Bell, Wild Goose Publications 2007.

[*Sound, Speech, and Music*](#), David Burrows, University of Massachusetts Press, 1990.

[*Music and Liturgy: The Universa Laus Document and Commentary*](#), Claude Duchesneau and Michel Veuthey, Trans. Paul Inwood, The Pastoral Press, 1992.

['When in our music God is glorified'](#), Timothy Hone in *Creative Chords, Studies in Music, Theology and Christian Formation*, ed. Astley, Hone and Savage, Gracewing 2000.

[*From Sacred Song to Ritual Music: Twentieth-Century Understandings of Roman Catholic Worship Music*](#), Jan Michael Joncas, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1997.

[*In Tuneful Accord - Making music work in church*](#), James Whitbourn, SPCK 1996.

[*The Milwaukee Symposia for Church Composers: A Ten-Year Report*](#), The Pastoral Press, 1992.

Written work for this module

If you are presenting a written piece after working through this module, perhaps use the final question as a starting point. Email your work to be registered to rcfielding@googlemail.com and this will then contribute to receiving your certificate. You will also receive a brief and positive commentary on your work.

Tim Hone

2003

Revised 2006

Revised Robert Fielding 2010