

Holistic Worship: Music Therapy Techniques Applied to the Modern Worship Service

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Abstract

In a world in which loud and energetic distractions prevail, even pervading the modern Christian worship service, there is little research published concerning the issue of keeping the attention of the congregation member from beginning to end of the weekly church gathering in a manner that is calming, productive, and promotes the overall health of the individual.

Included in this research project is a presentation of current issues in modern worship that necessitate change, the benefits of music itself, an overview of the types of music therapy, and an implementation of music therapy techniques into the worship service. This is structured according to the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina* to best engage the individual intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

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“True worship is balanced and involves the mind, the emotions, and the will. It must be intelligent; it must reach deep within and be motivated by love; and it must lead to obedient actions that glorify God.”¹ In many modern churches, the time of musical worship and the delivery of the sermon can feel separate and disconnected in nature. For example, one is entering a church service in which the time of musical worship is at the forefront. The volume is overwhelming, leading to an impaired and hindered ability to focus on the lyrics and the true meaning of the song. However, for some congregation members, perhaps this volume helps them to engage more in worship, but they are unaware of the fact that the loudness of the music and its excitement is elevating their cortisol levels, causing them to have a subconscious, underlying feeling of anxiety.² Then, it is time for the pastor to deliver the sermon, typically immediately after the music ends, leaving the congregation little time to quiet their minds and assume a mental state in which the Word of God can be readily received and processed. Inarguably, the most invaluable aspect of the church service is the teaching of the Word of God, so this modern way of leading the congregation in worship might not be the best method to guide them into hearing it. A better approach would be to not only engage the emotions of the worshipper but to engage his or her mind in a manner that would be conducive to the work of the Holy Spirit through the communication of the Word of the Lord, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14:15: “I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my

¹ Lamont Turner, *The Moment I Worship*, (Sandy, UT: Aardvark Global Publishing Company, LLC., 2015).

² Betsy Mills, “Do Loud Noises Harm the Brain?”, Alzheimer's Drug Discovery Foundation, November 20, 2020, <https://www.alzdiscovery.org/cognitive-vitality/blog/do-loud-noises-harm-the-brain>.

understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding” (New International Version). This would also allow for the worship service to be more cohesive.

The premise of this essay is to argue that the use of music therapy techniques and elements in the modern worship service would be beneficial to calm members of the congregation and prepare their minds to contemplate and meditate on biblical teaching, enriching one’s worship experience intellectually through the lens of psychology.

Current Issues Within Modern Worship Services

Noise Level

The noise level of worship songs directly before the sermon in a service can have a causal, direct relationship with the elevation of stress levels. Dr. Betsy Mills writes in her article for the Cognitive Vitality Organization:

[Excessive] noise acts as a stressor by inducing a state of arousal in the body, which increases levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol. The brain is wasting resources on trying to tune out the noise, so the brain has less capacity to perform other complex tasks, leading to a temporary decline in cognitive performance.³

When the music in a service, specifically the song that directly precedes the pastor’s message, is full of excessive noise, this can lead to either conscious or subconscious stress in the body and an inhibition in being able to process and think clearly. The mind, at this time, should be ready to participate and immerse itself in what is being taught, not tiring itself out in a continuous attempt to shut down cognitive functions. What seems to be helpful and in alignment with the biblical message might be more counterintuitive and distracting. This music should not drown out nor overpower the biblical instruction it precedes but rather lead into it skillfully and gracefully with a motive of inspiring cognitive involvement and providing clarity. Pastor John Calahan, founder of online teaching ministry NeverThirsty, writes, “A

³ Mills, “Do Loud Noises Harm the Brain?”

balanced worship with strong teaching of the Word of God is what every Christian and non-Christian needs.”⁴ The balance of both elements is the goal that the modern church should strive to attain.

In addition to the problem of inattention to biblical teaching, the church needs to consider those who have existing mental health conditions and whether the noise level and constant upbeat energy might be more harmful to these listeners. The National Library of Medicine in its study on how “Noise Annoyance Is Associated with Depression and Anxiety in the General Population” concludes:

The demonstration of an association of noise annoyance with current depression and anxiety disorder is compatible with the hypothesis that annoyance induces stress, which in turn may precipitate or even worsen already existing depression and anxiety disorders... Thus, existing mental disease may deteriorate due to noise. As anxiety and depression are among the most frequent and burdening diseases in the general population, substantial parts of the population may thus be particularly vulnerable to environmental noise.⁵

The church is to be a safe harbor for anyone struggling with mental health disorders, not contributing to further neurological harm, even within the extremely uplifting genre of worship music. While not everyone can or should be catered to in a worship service, it should be noted that 1 in 5 adults in America experience a mental illness, and 1 in 25 adults live daily with a serious mental illness.⁶ Therefore, statistically, in a congregation of 200 members, 40 of those

⁴ John Calahan, “What Do We Do About the Volume of Our Church Music?”, NeverThirsty, Like the Master Ministries, April 22, 2022, <https://www.neverthirsty.org/bible-qa/qa-archives/question/what-do-we-do-about-the-volume-of-our-church-music/>.

⁵ Manfred E. Beutel, Claus Jünger, Eva M. Klein, Philipp Wild, Karl Lackner, Maria Blettner, Harald Binder, et al., “Noise Annoyance Is Associated with Depression and Anxiety in the General Population - The Contribution of Aircraft Noise,” Edited by Miguel A. Andrade-Navarro, *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 5 (May 2016): e0155357. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0155357>.

⁶ “Mental Health Facts,” NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d., www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/GeneralMHFacts.pdf.

members are struggling with mental health. Something that a fifth of the church is battling should certainly require the discussion and attention of the church leaders and elders.

Absence of Meditative Lyrics

Now it is the time to depart momentarily from the psychological discourse to address another pressing matter: the lyrics of the church's songs of worship. Author and creative consultant Nick Page writes of the distinguishing factors between Eastern religions and Christianity:

Worship springs from thinking about God, from contemplation and meditation on who God is. This intellectual content, this need for the mind to focus on truth, is one of the things that distinguishes Christian worship from worship in many Eastern religions. In Eastern religion, the aim is to empty the mind; to encounter the divine on a level that is almost subconscious...Christian worship is not about emptying the mind, but about filling the mind with God.⁷

A helpful illustration of what Christian worship and meditation are likened to is that told by Jonathan Pokluda comparing meditating to making tea:

Meditation is a constructive mental activity that fills the mind with God and His truth. It's the deep absorption of Scripture, not just the intake...meditating on God's Word is like immersing the tea bag and letting all the rich flavor and color change the water completely. When we meditate on Scripture, it completely colors our thinking about God, His ways, and ourselves.⁸

So, Christian worship is not emptying the mind but refocusing on the things of the Lord as the psalmist writes in Psalm 119, "I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word" (Ps. 119:15-16, NIV). However, a byproduct of this process is removing service elements that distract the hearts of believers from being in tune

⁷ Nick Page, *And Now Let's Move into a Time of Nonsense: Why Worship Songs Are Failing the Church*, (Bletchley, United Kingdom: Authentic Media, 2004).

⁸ Luke Friesen, "Don't Empty Your Mind - Fill It," The Porch, Watermark Community Church, April 4, 2016, www.theporch.live/blog/dont-empty-your-mind-fill-it.

with the heart of God, but there is never the elimination of these without the permeation of thoughts directed toward Him. It is one continual process.

Since both the Christian act and life of worship are centered around nurturing the mind with rich information about the truth of God's character and His glory, it is highly important that the songs of the worship service, in general, but particularly before the reading of God's Word, be doctrinally sound and in conjunction with what is about to be taught. Many modern worship songs opt for a catchy rhyme or beautiful melody rather than the substance of the God-breathed Word. Pastor and theologian John Piper comments on this discussion: "You can sing very thin songs that just repeat even great sentences like "his name is great." That's true, but does it ever say why it's great or how the cross grounds its greatness?... I commend every worship team to be vigilant over the lyrics of what their people are singing."⁹ What the church articulates about God must be cemented in a profound scriptural understanding of Him. Furthermore, the songs before and after the message should strive to communicate the same idea as what is being preached: acting in parallel nature rather than perpendicular, each within its own sector of the service yet still moving toward the same goal of allowing the congregation member to absorb the Word of the Lord and take it beyond the Sunday morning experience to allow its infiltration into his or her daily life.

Egocentric Prayer

Although this discussion primarily pertains to the role of music in the worship service, it is highly imperative to note that the task of preparing the heart, mind, and soul of the worshipper for biblical instruction is not solely left to the musical selection but also prayer. For the sake of argument, one can imagine that, in an upcoming Sunday service, there is no

⁹ John Piper, "When Worship Lyrics Miss the Mark," *Desiring God*, August 7, 2017, www.desiringgod.org/interviews/when-worship-lyrics-miss-the-mark.

other option but to include songs higher in volume or with less enriching lyrics on the service plan. What else can be instrumental in opening hearts to receive the Word of God? The answer is prayer. However, this can only be effectively implemented if church leaders and congregants have a right understanding of the purpose of prayer, as Julian of Norwich, renowned medieval theologian and spiritual counselor, once said: “The whole reason why we pray is to be united into the vision and contemplation of God to whom we pray.”¹⁰ Though it is emphasized throughout the Bible that God listens to and values the requests of His people, hyper-focus on the individual and his or her requests in the church service rather than on the God who will provide and sustain has been, not only scripturally, but psychologically proven to increase anxiety. In Laura Upenieks’ study at Baylor University on “Unpacking the Relationship Between Prayer and Anxiety”, she discusses how the direct affect prayer has on the anxious mind:

With regard to prayer efficacy (what people believe prayer can accomplish), we found that stronger agreement with prayer as the solution to personal problems was associated with higher anxiety...Prayers of devotion and adoration toward God involving prayer were associated with lower anxiety in our sample. Prayers of adoration have the benefit of shifting the focus from the individual to a more transcendent entity, which could help individuals place their personal problems in a different perspective... (These prayers) have been found...to have a negative relationship with anxiety and a positive association with overall well-being.¹¹

To clarify, followers of Christ do not believe in the complete avoidance of things that cause anxiety but rather embody the suffering as He endured on earth with a profound knowledge that God’s grace is sufficient in weakness, not running from hardship but enduring it as He

¹⁰ “Quotes about Prayer,” Xavier University, n.d., www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/quotearchive1/quotes-about-prayer#:~:text=%22The%20whole%20reason%20why%20we,God%20to%20whom%20we%20pray.%22&text=%22Do%20not%20forget%20that%20the,perception%20of%20their%20enormous%20value.%22

¹¹ Laura Upenieks, “Unpacking the Relationship Between Prayer and Anxiety: A Consideration of Prayer Types and Expectations in the United States,” *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 62, no. 3 (2023): 1810-1831. doi:10.1007/s10943-022-01708-0.

displayed on earth. However, to focus on requests and petitions alone and view prayer as an avenue for any given request to be granted is to have an incorrect view of its purpose and who God is. When prayer is communicated as a strengthening component of one's relationship with God, anxiety is lessened as trust in Him increases. Space and time given to pray in this manner before the teaching period can calm the minds of the congregation and lay the groundwork for the sermon delivery.

The Intrinsic Benefits of Music

Body and Heart

What are the general benefits of music in the church service? Music has many physical, emotional, and social benefits in and of itself. Physically and emotionally, it helps to reduce stress and blood pressure levels, regulate heart rate, strengthen the immune system, improve one's mood, and even manage pain.¹² Many things are occurring in the bloodstream when one listens to music. The blood flows more easily and serotonin and endorphin levels are increased in the blood.¹³¹⁴ When the majority of musical genres (metal or electronic dance music would likely be counterintuitive) are played at a reasonable volume, the body is relaxed and well-regulated as a result.

¹² "Healing Benefits of Music," Listen4Life Foundation, n.d., https://www.listenforlife.org/healing-benefits.html?gclid=Cj0KCQjww4 hBhCtARIsAC9gR3apoUgUoEy2A2Ux29b4-ttpQe71CyNQsNJ-RkDCrcMqgUQbkl oTpMaApWGEALw_wcB.

¹³ "Nine Health Benefits of Music," Endeavor Health, December 31, 2020, www.northshore.org/healthy-you/9-health-benefits-of-music/.

¹⁴ Serotonin is a type of neurotransmitter, sending messages from nerve cells to the brain and other parts of the body, and it is most closely associated with the emotions of happiness, focus, and serenity. Endorphins are proteins that perform the same functions as neurotransmitters, and these specifically reduce stress in the body ("Serotonin: What Is It, Function & Levels," Cleveland Clinic, n.d., my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/22572-serotonin; "What Are Endorphins?", Mental Health America, n.d., www.mhanational.org/what-are-endorphins.)

Mind

In addition, there are also many mental and intellectual benefits. In her TED talk on Intentional Listening, Donna Steoring, an award-winning recording artist and concert performer who has also studied both music and sociology, outlines how music directly affects and improves one's creativity, mood, psychological state, and ability to learn.¹⁵ She delves deeper into how, when one intentionally listens to music on a regular basis, it increases his or her capacity and will to intentionally listen to other things, such as lectures, or even just other people within the context of friendships and relationships. The combination of this information with the realization about the effects of excessive noise thereby implies that the music directly before the sermon would need to be void of unnecessary clutter and volume and be of the kind that the congregation can intently listen to mimic that same intentional attention during the time of biblical teaching and exposition.

Interpersonal Interaction

Finally, social relationships can also greatly benefit through music. Referring back to the discussion of music's physical advantages, both listening to music and singing also release oxytocin in the body. This is a "neuropeptide affiliated with breast-feeding and sexual contact and is known to play an important role in increasing bonding and trust between people...and affect(s) our ability to trust and act generously toward others."¹⁶ Since one of the main purposes of the church gathering is to come together and glorify the Lord with other believers, ("with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁵ Donna Stoering, "Intentional Listening: Music's Power as a Channel of Communication," TEDxLivermore, YouTube, uploaded by TEDx Talks, January 27, 2015, <https://youtu.be/aDFLP7og1bs>.

¹⁶ Jill Suttie, "Four Ways Music Strengthens Social Bonds," The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, January 15, 2015, greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four_ways_music_strengthens_social_bonds.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:5-7)), then worship leaders can utilize music to subtly support that core value. Music also affects one’s “theory of mind”, a social skill named by scientists that involves the comprehension of what surrounding people are thinking and feeling: empathy, in other words. In a 2012 study, one group of children was given musical games to play, while the other groups either did not play games or played games with drama or storytelling elements versus musical elements. At the end of the year, the children were tested on empathy, and only the group who had interacted with the musical games received higher empathy scores, “suggesting that music may have played a pivotal role in their empathy development.”¹⁷ Knowing this to be true, then not only will congregation members be more willing to be generous and trust those around them after a time of musical worship, but they will better empathize with one another’s feelings and concerns, certainly strengthening the relationships within the church as a whole. It should be noted that worship leaders and pastors should never take this psychological knowledge and use it to manipulate the minds of the congregation. All that is learned must be surrendered to the will of God and only be implemented for better communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Music Therapy: Definition and Background

Moving a step beyond all the health benefits of music is the practice of music therapy. The University of Minnesota defines the term as such: “Music therapy is the use of music to address the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of a group or individual... appropriate for people of all ages...struggling with illnesses or totally healthy.”¹⁸ Music

¹⁷ Suttie, “Four Ways.”

¹⁸ “What Is Music Therapy?,” University of Minnesota, 2016, <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/common-questions/what-music-therapy>.

therapy often goes beyond what traditional talk therapy can accomplish: “Bypassing that channel of communication and not needing to rely on spoken words, patients can express themselves more freely, interact with loved ones on a deeper level, and have a stronger sense of their place in the world...lyrics are an “easier gateway for expression.””¹⁹ This type of therapy is now utilized predominately in “psychiatric hospitals, rehabilitative facilities, medical hospitals, outpatient clinics, day care treatment centers... community mental health centers, drug and alcohol programs, senior centers, nursing homes, hospice programs, correctional facilities, halfway houses, schools, and private practice.”²⁰ The idea of music as a therapeutic device dates back to the works of Aristotle and Plato, but musicians began to be requested in hospitals after they played for World War I and II veterans, and the patients responded very well physically and emotionally.²¹ William W. Sears, one of music therapy’s early pioneers, organized the effects of the practice into three primary effects: (1) experience within structure, (2) experience in self-organization, and (3) experience in relating to others.”²² Music therapy encourages the development of abilities, time-ordered behavior, self-expression, verbal and nonverbal communication, responsibility, and more. Although music therapy has chiefly been used in medical contexts, it is possible that this practice could prove

¹⁹ Lia Peralta, “Understanding the Psychology and Benefits of Music Therapy,” Save The Music Foundation, November 20, 2023, www.savethemusic.org/blog/music-therapy-and-mental-health/#:~:text=Those%20with%20Autism%20Spectrum%20Disorder,%2C%20emotional%2C%20and%20social%20needs.

²⁰ “FAQ’s,” American Music Therapy Association, www.musictherapy.org/faq/#:~:text=Music%20therapists%20work%20in%20psychiatric,%2C%20nursing%20homes%2C%20hospice%20programs%2C.

²¹ Ibid.

²² William Sears, *Music---the Therapeutic Edge: Readings from William W. Sears*, edited by Margaret Sears, (University Park, IL: Barcelona Publishers, 2007). *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=3117632>.

to be beneficial for the worship service, engaging all dimensions of the individual prior to the sermon. This leads one to wonder which specific therapy techniques could be utilized in this way. Certainly, these methods would require modifications since they are often conducted in more of a one-on-one setting with groups or one person, but it is worth examining more closely and brainstorming how these therapeutic practices could be applied to the corporate worship setting, benefiting the holistic health and ability to engage in worship of both mentally healthy and unhealthy congregants.

Types of Music Therapy

Compositional

There are four primary types of music therapy: (1) compositional (composing music alongside the therapist) (2) improvisation (spontaneous singing and song creating), (3) receptive (therapist playing music to which the client responds), (4) re-creative (client imitating music played by the therapist).²³ The first type, compositional, involves songwriting and musical creating accomplished by either the client, the therapist, or both working together: Research indicates that the basic elements comprising music composition (i.e., making choices about melody, harmony, rhythm, volume, timbre, form, etc.) can significantly impact cognition and behavior in numerous areas of the brain.”²⁴ The practice of composition is typically used to treat patients with thought disorders to inspire predictability, focus, and more organized thought patterns. The necessity for a comprehensible structure of time that it requires directly impacts a patient’s ability to understand the world around him or herself. In addition, compositional

²³ “What Are the Four Methods of Music Therapy?,” Drury University, August 8, 2022, <https://www.drury.edu/music/what-are-the-four-methods-of-music-therapy/>.

²⁴ Tyese Andrea Brown, “The Role of Compositional Music Therapy in the Treatment of Adults with Bipolar Disorder,” (2015), *Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects*, 362, <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/362>.

therapy inspires creativity, forcing patients to dream up and perform songs of their own invention.²⁵ Kenneth Bruscia writes in his book *Defining Music Therapy* concerning compositional therapy:

Given all that is involved, singing and playing pre-composed music can be used therapeutically to establish, maintain, and improve the ability to use and control different parts of the body, to develop and integrate sensorimotor skills, to structure or modify behavior, to promote temporally ordered or time-appropriate behavior, to build self-discipline, and to teach working toward a goal with perseverance and self-confidence.²⁶

This therapeutic device is one of the ways that music therapy begins to stimulate the mind of the patient and encourage healthy behaviors that are to be repeated and developed both alone and with the therapist.

Improvisational

The second category of music therapy is improvisation. This sector of music therapy can be used to address goals of self-awareness in every dimension (physical, emotional, social, etc.), awareness of others and the surrounding environment, interpersonal relationships, and insight into sensorimotor areas of the body (involving what is perceived on a sensory level that produces a response in the nervous system).²⁷ It has also historically improved the health of those with neurological damage and mental health conditions, reduced anxiety, and developed communication and attention skills. Improvisational therapy is typically easier to implement with a patient because, at its most basic level, it does not require a vast amount of musical talent, since it is fundamentally different from traditional music improvisation:

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Kenneth E. Bruscia, *Defining Music Therapy*. 3rd ed. (University Park, IL: Barcelona Publishers, 2014).

²⁷ Kenneth E. Bruscia, *Improvisational Models of Music Therapy*, (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1987).

In clinical improvisation, client and therapist relate to one another through the music. Sometimes the improvisation results in a musical product of aesthetic value, however, this is neither a requirement nor is it often an essential aim. Music improvisation, on the other hand, is the process whereby musicians extemporaneously create a musical product that is most often intended to have aesthetic value.²⁸

Different implementations of improvisation music therapy include mirroring (playing what the patient plays), matching (playing music that accompanies what the patient is playing well, but is not exactly the same), empathetic improvising and reflection (the therapist playing a piece that expresses the patient's current emotional condition to empathize and relate with him or her), stabilizing techniques such as grounding, holding, or containing (bringing predictability by repeating a melody line or rhythm), dialoguing (taking turns interjecting melodies or ad-libs to music), modeling (giving the client an idea to which he or she responds), and accompanying (playing along with the client to give a sense of support and reassurance).²⁹ Within this type of therapy and all its methods is a sense of camaraderie, a shared experience of creating a musical piece that is fun and exciting yet does not have to be perfect.

Receptive

The third type of music therapy is receptive. This involves less activity from the patient and more involvement from the therapist. The therapist plays music to which the client responds and “works toward a desired goal by manipulating the qualities of the music which a client or patient receives non-actively.”³⁰ This therapy type aims to relax the listener, lower

²⁸ Robert Sinclair, “The Role of Improvisation Within Music Therapy,” GRIN, September 18, 2016, www.grin.com/document/341141.

²⁹ R.A. MacDonald and G.B. Wilson, “Musical Improvisation and Health: A Review,” *Psych Well-Being*, vol. 4, no. 20 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13612-014-0020-9>.

³⁰ Jaime Lawrence, “So What Does That Look Like Exactly? Part II: Re-Creative Music,” Harmony Garden Music Therapy Services, July 8, 2020, hgmusictherapy.com/so-what-does-that-look-like-exactly-part-ii-re-creativemusic/.

levels of anxiety, regulate heart and breathing rates, and soothe pain levels. What the therapist would typically do during this treatment is:

assess the client's needs, then provide appropriate music to meet them in their current state. From there, the therapist would slowly guide the client into a more desired state by adjusting the music in anticipation of and response to change in vital signs, facial affect, body language, and breath. Because music therapists most commonly provide live music, the therapist can quickly adjust to individual needs to provide the best mixtures of harmonic tension and release, instrumentation, meter, tempo, and dynamics.³¹

Receptive music therapy is normally used for non-responsive patients who have more severe conditions or find it difficult or even simply undesirable to participate. A common misunderstanding concerning this practice is that the music played has to be classical, but there is no substantial support for this claim, especially considering how loud, dissonant, and complex classical music can be, all of which could work against achieving goals of relaxation and regulation of the body and mind.

Re-creative

The fourth and final type of music therapy is re-creative. Included in this therapy type is the practice of the client imitating or "recreating" whatever musical excerpt the therapist plays for him or her first.³² Normally, the patient will either sing or play the instrumental sections of a piece. Recreative music therapy aims to develop motor skills and aid in physical and mental development. Whereas compositional and improvisational music therapy are more inventive and active and receptive is more on the passive side of the spectrum, recreative music therapy is a combination of both, still characterized as a participatory exercise of reinventing what has already been designed, but with emulation or replication as well as formulation by the patient.

³¹ Jaime Lawrence, "So What Does That Look Like Exactly?"

³² "What Are the Four Methods of Music Therapy?," Drury University.

Music therapists from the organization Harmony Garden sum up their experiences in enacting recreative music therapy, stating, “While pre-composed music can certainly be used in a receptive intervention, re-creative music interventions specifically highlight the element of active music making within a safe and guided therapeutic relationship. The beauty of music comes from the client’s growth and/or experience, not a perfect performance.”³³

Integration of Music Therapy in the Worship Service

Purpose

Why would music therapy be an effective medium to utilize within the context of the church worship service? In Julie Bøtker and Stine Jacobson’s article “The Experience of Authenticity Across Three Music Disciplines; Music Therapy, Music Teaching and Music Performance”, they quote one of their interviewees discussing the difference between music therapy and music performance: “when performing on a stage you can disappear into it [the music] and then you can...wake up afterwards. But here [in music therapy] there is a hyper-attention... or a fusion with what is there and those who are there.”³⁴ In the same manner, the leader of the worship service is to be attentive to what is happening in the congregation and respond accordingly. Constance M. Cherry describes the job description of a worship leader in her book *The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshipers in Song*:

That’s the role of the pastoral musician— to oversee, to cast a watchful eye on all the actions and participants of worship while discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit in real time... While leading worship, pastoral musicians will cast their spiritual gaze heavenward— watching for the movement of God’s Spirit; at the same time they will have an eye toward those under their care, praying for them as worship is under way,

³³ Jaime Lawrence, “So What Does That Look Like Exactly? Part II: Re-Creative Music,” Harmony Garden Music Therapy Services, July 8, 2020, hgmusictherapy.com/so-what-does-that-look-like-exactly-part-ii-re-creative-music/.

³⁴ Julie Ørnholt Bøtker and Stine Lindahl Jacobsen, “The Experience of Authenticity Across Three Music Disciplines; Music Therapy, Music Teaching and Music Performance,” *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.15845/voices.v23i1.3464>.

guiding them toward doxology. Pastoral musicians watch and listen; they guide and exhort as they lovingly lead fellow worshipers to the throne of God.³⁵

Combining the God-given science of psychology with the guidance of His Holy Spirit can help leaders effectively guide the congregation, watching, listening to, and serving them instead of taking on the typically detached or passive mindset of a stage performer.

Process Overview

These music therapy practices and more could be incorporated, through the collaboration and research conducted by the worship pastor and church leaders collectively, in the church service to combine musical worship and biblical teaching in a unified manner that flows in and out of one another smoothly. Worship encompasses both music and the Word of God, not just one exclusively, so musical worship should complement the time of sharing the Word, and vice versa.³⁶ This should be done in a way that reduces the stress of congregation members and promotes intellectual activity through musical as well as psychological mediums.

Regarding the various kinds of music therapy explained above, the one that would be most difficult to incorporate in some way in the normative worship service would be compositional since this method can only be utilized in a one-on-one setting, but it could be incorporated outside the regular service time through having a songwriting workshop or team that brainstorms and performs ideas for future anthems of the church. However, although the incorporation of compositional music therapy would require effort in events occurring in

³⁵ Constance M. Cherry, *The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshipers in Song*, Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2016, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=4633430>.

³⁶ For the purposes of this particular discourse, the primary aspects of worship mentioned have been musical worship and the reading of the Word of God. However, it is worth noting that there are many ways to worship the Lord, such as through generosity, prayer (noted above), intentional rest, etc.

addition to the weekly worship service, the other three methods could be molded to enhance the already present worship and teaching experience.

Improvisational Incorporation

Many churches already include a form of improvisation music therapy. The definition of improvisation typically includes the keywords “without preparation.” However, Gathering Worship music editor Tammy-Jo Mortensen argues, “But, really, are we completely unprepared? Have we not already learned theology and forms of prayer, or harmony and musical forms? Do we not rely on some kind of formula that our extemporaneous expression will fit into?”³⁷ Mortensen’s notion implies that while the practice of improvisation seems entirely spontaneous, it requires a noteworthy amount of preparation before the service: developing skills, practicing personal and corporate prayer, and reading the Word to sharpen one’s theological views, all to effectively lead the congregation to the Lord without distraction or hindrance. Therefore, acknowledging that much of the improvisation method would start before the actual service, during the service it could take the forms of empathetic improvising and reflecting, dialoguing, modeling, and accompanying with stabilizing techniques, all of which are used in improvisational therapy. Empathetic improvising would often require a great deal of attention to the overall mood of the congregation, coupled with reliance on the Holy Spirit, but this process could also begin before the worship service by researching what is happening in the surrounding community. Weather can have a significant impact on one’s countenance, so what is the forecast for today? Perhaps a tragedy has happened at a local high school, so the worship leader needs to be sensitive to how the congregation might respond. Whether the leader knows these things beforehand or assesses them in the moment, he or she

³⁷ Tammy-Jo Mortensen, “Prelude: The Art of Improvisation,” Gathering Worship, December 14, 2022, gatheringworship.ca/blogs/prelude-art-improvisation.

should play or lead in tandem with these emotions and not in contrary, because while emotional manipulation has no place in the church, emotions were created by God to lead people to Him. Dialoguing might take the form of a mild call-and-response in which the worship leader sings something that the congregation echoes. Modeling could directly precede accompanying as a period during which the leader talks briefly concerning an idea relating to the message on which the congregation should meditate, providing space to do so, and then accompanying the congregation, starting off a melody of a chorus and prompting the congregation to continue alone. The accompanying should use grounding and stabilizing techniques, such as playing the same melody the congregation members are singing alongside them, or playing an intro or outro that gives a clear signal that the improvisation time is either beginning or concluding. Given that improvisation music therapy enhances one's ability to communicate, be attentive, and interact with others, it could be beneficial to have this time either at the end of the service before the time of fellowship after the service or before the delivery of the message.

Receptive Incorporation

Receptive music therapy in the church service could involve the worship leader singing a song that the congregation does not sing along with but instead, sits and meditates on the lyrics and message, with a time of response and prayer immediately following. Due to the goals of this therapy method to relax, soothe, and regulate the bodily functions of the listener, this would also be a time most beneficial directly before the sermon. The reason that receptive music therapy should be included in the church, perhaps not every week, but still more often than it is now, is because although biblical teaching encourages worship through singing, repeating the same lyrics each week can sometimes lead to more absentminded repetition

rather than heartfelt engagement. If church leaders occasionally carved out time in the service for the congregation to sit and listen to someone else sing a song of praise and encouragement or triumph in Christ over them, the members might contemplate more thoughtfully what those lyrics truly mean rather than simply repeating them automatically, hence the importance of theologically enriched lyrics as mentioned above. From a more practical point of view, this method could also better prepare the church members for when that song is sung in the future, for research suggests that songs are learned more easily by listening and giving attention to the lyrics rather than focusing on the melody and trying to replicate it in real-time.³⁸

Recreative Incorporation

Lastly, recreative music therapy could be incorporated much like improvisation, but as more of an echo to a song that was already taught or sung previously in the service with a new added element. For example, if previously in the worship service, the worship leader led the congregation in “Great is Thy Faithfulness”, then later in the service after the message, the leader could lead the congregation in that chorus, but then play another instrumental chorus while directing a time of guided prayer. An example of how guided prayer has been incorporated with music is a new application called “Lectio 365”, which was created by the founders of the 24-7 Prayer Movement.³⁹ This application walks listeners through slow meditation of one passage of the Bible and then through an intentional, meditative time of prayer, focusing on specific prayer points and all the while accompanied by soft, uplifting music in the background. Having this time of transition from the time of worshipping the Lord in song to worshipping Him through personal supplication and concentration on His Word

³⁸ A. Racette and I. Peretz, “Learning lyrics: To sing or not to sing?,” *Memory & Cognition*, vol. 35, 242–253 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193445>.

³⁹ “Lectio 365,” 24-7 Prayer, March 20, 2022, <https://www.247prayer.com/resource/lectio365/>.

would soothe congregation members and captivate their minds to give more attention to what is being or what has just been taught.

To effectively incorporate any of these therapeutic methods, one needs space and time to process and move through song and exhortation, so the service cannot be rushed through quickly. Whether that means extending the service time or trimming down another element in the service, this music therapy in worship will need to have proper space in the schedule to be effective, partnering with the implementation of prayer centered on the Lord rather than self to align all elements of the service with their overarching purpose.

Proposed Model for an Ideal Service

An intentional way to structure a service with these music therapy methods would be through the design of *Lectio Divina*, an ancient practice of praying with Scripture on which the “Lectio 365” application was based. The objective of this practice is to implement an “expanding capacity to listen with the heart to the word of God in all of life’s situations, leading to a more constant awareness of God’s presence...a listening that leads to a new way of seeing and an integration of prayer, work, and relationship with others.”⁴⁰ Since this work’s aim in including music therapy within the worship service is to expand attention capacity, limit anxiety, and allow for congregation members to be in a mindset more conducive to the development of relationships with God and others, this design seems to be a favorable arrangement. This method of prayer is comprised of five steps: (1) *Lectio* (Reading and listening: poring over a passage of Scripture slowly), (2) *Meditatio* (Meditation: dwelling on what the Spirit is revealing through the passage), (3) *Oratio* (Prayer: engaging in conversation

⁴⁰ “Lectio Divina: Praying with Scripture,” St. Peters RC Church, tpetersrcchurchedinburgh.org.uk/prayer-skills/lectio-divina/.

with God), (4) *Contemplatio* (Contemplation: sitting in the presence of God), and the optional step of (5) Action (moving toward becoming more like Christ through obedience).⁴¹ Although this is primarily targeting the act of prayer itself, prayer is not just an action but is defined as, “spiritual communication between man and God, a two-way relationship in which man should not only talk to God but also listen to Him.”⁴² All of the Christian life is to be filled constantly with spiritual communication to and from God, as Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians to “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17, English Standard Version). Knowing this, then it would be right and fitting to structure the church services of Christ followers as if it is one flowing breath of prayer from beginning to end. Another way to think of this structure is as a model of the Old Testament tabernacle. As one progresses toward the holy of holies, worship becomes more intimate and reverent. Psychologist and speaker Dr. Anita Phillips writes in her book *The Garden Within*: “Your heart contains the holy of holies in the temple that Scripture says your body is.”⁴³ Because the Christian human heart that contains the Holy Spirit is now the holy of holies in Scripture, worship that engages the heart and mind can embody a progressive model similar to the order of the temple outlined in Leviticus. Below is an example of an ideal structure for a weekly worship service that incorporates traditional church elements with music therapy practices, all under the umbrella of *Lectio Divina*:

Suggested Service Structure with Music Therapy and *Lectio Divina*

Welcome/Scripture Reading (*Lectio*)

⁴¹ Fr. Luke Dysinger, “Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina,” www.oblatespring.com/Resources/LectioDivina.pdf.

⁴² “What Is Prayer?,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, n.d. <http://billygraham.org/answer/what-is-prayer/>.

⁴³ Dr. Anita Phillips, *The Garden Within: Where the War with Your Emotions Ends and Your Most Powerful Life Begins*, (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2023).

Song 1

Song 2 – Receptive or Improvisation

Message (*Meditatio*)Response (*Oratio*)Song 3 – Recreative or Improvisation (*Contemplatio*)

Benediction/Closing (Action)

At the beginning of this service, the pastor welcomes everyone, presents any necessary announcements, and reads either a related scripture passage or the exact scripture passage on which the message of the day will be based. This begins the first phase of Lectio Divina, in which the congregation practices listening intently to the Word of God. The pastor could ask the congregation to close their eyes or open their hands with arms outstretched as a sign of reverence to encourage listening with their entire bodies. During the *lectio* portion of Lectio Divina, it is recommended that congregation members are encouraged to fixate on a word or phrase that attracts their attention.⁴⁴ This, in turn, anchors them to the Scripture and enables them to more easily understand the sermon later.

The first section of musical worship follows this. While the first song should probably not be too different in nature from the second, this song is not as crucial in preparing the minds and hearts of worshippers as the second. However, doctrinally-sound lyrics that are centered around or sung directly to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are still essential. The second song, however, needs to introduce the message well, hence the incorporation of either receptive or improvisation music therapy. During this time, the worship leader can either have the

⁴⁴ “What Is Lectio Divina?,” Anglican Communion, n.d., www.anglicancommunion.org/media/253799/1-What-is-Lectio-Divina.pdf.

congregation sit and listen to a song that aligns with the sermon, or he or she can play instrumentally and guide the congregation in a time of improvisation either through prayer or spontaneous singing.

At the center of the service is the message, the *meditatio* section of Lectio Divina: “*Meditatio* is the process of allowing the Word to work within us and reflecting on what we have taken into the depths of our being...Meditation is not a process of analyzing or thinking about the words of the text, but rather a way of being with all that is stirred within you. It is the act of moving into relationship with the scripture passage.”⁴⁵ Each week during the church service, the pastor should emphasize to members that the message is not designed for passive listening, but active concentration with the intention of developing a relationship with the scripture passage that one has never possessed, even if he or she has previously read the excerpt.

After the sermon is the time of response, or *oratio*, consisting primarily of prayer. Since a relationship requires activity from both parties, and the congregation members have already allowed the Scripture to speak, it is now their turn to answer. This is prayer that is, once again, not egotistical in its content but continually acknowledging the power, grace, and love of its Recipient: “As *oratio* deepens, the soul gradually leaves the text behind and seeks God alone.”⁴⁶ The goal of this time is to allow the Word that was preached to penetrate the mind, body, soul, and strength to urge the individual toward the action of turning toward the things of the Lord.

⁴⁵ Christine Valters Paintner and Lucy Wynkoop, *Lectio Divina: Contemplative Awakening and Awareness*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2008).

⁴⁶ “Lectio Divina,” The Contemplative Life, n.d., www.thecontemplativelife.org/lectio-divina.

Approaching the end of the service is the time of *contemplatio* during the third and final song. This is a time of resting in God “beyond thoughts, beyond words, beyond images.”⁴⁷ Either recreative or improvisational music therapy could be beneficial here, but perhaps recreative would round out the service more fully, calling the congregation back to a song that was sung earlier before the sermon delivery. After singing a chorus, the worship leader could either allow the congregation to sing another chorus alone or lead them in a guided prayer, transitioning into the benediction.

Finally, is the time of benediction, during which the pastor provides an exhortation such as, “May the love of God embrace us, may the grace of Jesus challenge us, the power of the Holy Spirit renew us. Amen”⁴⁸ This benediction should be a statement of blessing that stems from the theme of teaching, but also a call to action that hinges on the time of response and contemplation. Congregation members should leave encouraged and empowered to perform the will of God the Father in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

This discourse, while it may serve to usher in more drastic service alterations for some churches, is not entirely meant to be revolutionary, but rather a model to aid church pastors and leaders in planning services, utilizing elements that they already incorporate, in a more thoughtful manner that with a more embracing rather than dismissive attitude toward psychology and music therapy. Christians are commanded, as the greatest commandment in biblical teaching, to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “Blessings and Benedictions,” Pilgrimwr.unitingchurch.org.au, n.d., <http://pilgrimwr.unitingchurch.org.au/?p=256>.

This truth reinforces the understanding that worship is not only spiritual, but physical, emotional, intellectual, and social. Music therapy can better aid church leaders in ministering to their congregations holistically, addressing all dimensions of the individual rather than simply one. Additionally, the inclusion of the Lectio Divina model with these methods will instill a prayerful, meditative, attentive mindset within the congregation and weave all aspects of the service together, replacing what might previously have been a disjointed and disconnected time of worship with one that is deliberate and captivating. The hope is that churches that choose to adopt either the entire service structure or even simply one of these music therapy techniques will train their congregations to engage in worship with their whole beings.

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