

the theology and practice of music in church

making great music | making music great

Have you ever wondered what role music and musicians should play in church? MIKE HAMMOND takes a look at the purpose of music in church as well as giving some helpful tips for church musicians and music directors ...

When the controversial rap artist *Eminem* toured Australia recently there was a great deal of public discussion on the merits of a performance ratings system. Since he couldn't legally be kept from entering the country and performing, it was suggested that his concerts should be rated R to prevent those under 18 from hearing him. It is thought, with some justification, that Eminem's particular brand of rap is likely to encourage violent and promiscuous behaviour in our young people. Of course, people said the same thing about the Beatles in the 60s, Elvis in the 50s, jazz in the 20s and even Mozart when he was new on the scene.

This reminds us of two things that are important to remember as church musicians: firstly, that music can be a source of concern and division in a community, and secondly, that music has power to influence people's thoughts and, therefore, also their behaviour. Clearly then music must be used carefully and wisely in the covenant community.

One of the things I've been fortunate enough to do as a musician was work on a cruise ship for a while, playing in the cabaret show-band. A cruise ship is an interesting environment because everything is done for one reason: to please the passengers. That's the purpose of the whole ship. If the passengers aren't happy, pretty soon everyone's out of a job. So everyone, from the captain in the wheelhouse to the engineers down below, has that goal in mind: give the people what they want. So, when the band is performing and someone comes up and requests *In the Mood* for the fifth night in a row, you smile sweetly and say, "Sure, we love that one!", and you play it as cheerfully as you can. When someone wants a country number, you play country. If someone wants a polka, you give it your best shot. Everything is done for the sole purpose of making the passengers have a great holiday.

Churches are just like cruise ships: they are there for a purpose, though not the same one! And, if people in the church aren't clear what that purpose is, then they are going to have trouble fitting their various

activities into the church in a way that serves that wider purpose.

Another reason that churches are like cruise ships is that they have musicians. So musicians, if they are going to play and sing music at church in a way that helps the church to achieve its goal, need to know what that goal is and the role that music can play in reaching it.

That's the purpose of this article: to remind church musicians of the purpose of church and the place of music in serving that purpose. Fortunately the Bible gives some guidance on this subject and often deals with the two issues together. This makes sense because what church music is for is determined by what church is for.

So, we are going to try to put together a little theology of music by studying what God says about it in his word. I call it a 'little' theology because it really doesn't rank up there with the great and central doctrines of Christianity, like the incarnation or the atonement, but it will still be a helpful thing to work through and, hopefully, a useful thing to remember and to be guided by.

It will be helpful before we begin to understand what is and isn't there in the Bible. If we go looking for a chapter in the Bible that spells out everything we need to know about music, we'll be disappointed. There isn't a place where Jesus or Paul or any of the other Biblical writers said "and about what music to have at church..." It's not an issue that came up that way. So, we have to work a little harder than that and engage in a little *systematic theology*. To many this may sound like some ancient form of torture, but it isn't really. Systematic theology is just starting with a topic or question and gathering together all the relevant verses from wherever they appear in the Bible and seeing what they say about the topic.

We begin by looking at the New Testament – as all Christian theology should. You can't understand the Old Testament without first understanding the message of the New Testament. So, if you want to put together a theology of music, or baptism or creation or anything else, you go to the New Testament first.

What does the New Testament say about music? I want to look quickly at five passages where the Apostles mention singing and draw four points from them that will instruct us on what church and music at church are for.

Music in the New Testament

Ephesians 5:19-21

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

What are we doing when we sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs? We are speaking to one another, making music in our hearts to the Lord, and giving thanks to God.

Speaking to one another is a big part of what church is for – we are built up (edified) through words of encouragement. This might be in the form of a sermon, or a song, or a prayer, or a Bible reading, or just some well-chosen words over morning tea. Words are powerful, they can change us, and they can build up – or destroy. So, when we sing, we should make sure our words are encouraging – and true! Not all encouraging songs are true, and probably not all true songs would be encouraging! For example, it's true that people who reject Jesus are headed for a lost eternity, the Bible is very clear on that. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we should sing songs about how bad hell is or how many people are going there! And why not? Because it won't encourage anyone – and people who have relatives or friends who aren't Christians (which should be everyone) will be seriously discouraged. We don't sing about hell and judgment. Those are issues that need to be handled carefully and are best tackled in the sermon where the preacher has time to show the Bible's teaching and explain things more thoroughly. When we sing, we generally sing the good news of salvation, to build one another up.

That's what the word edify means: to build. An edifice is a building. Edify doesn't just mean to build up, it really means to build strong. Our music and singing at church, like everything else we do, should be done carefully and deliberately to strengthen God's people.

That's our first point: church, and singing, is for speaking to one another, for edification.

Colossians 3:16-17

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

What are we to do as we sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs? (There's those three categories again! Don't ask me the difference between a hymn and a spiritual song—I think Paul might just be covering all the bases. Who knows?!) We are to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, with gratitude in our hearts to God.

The word of Christ, of course, is the Gospel. We go to church, and we sing at church, to remind ourselves of the Gospel, and to reflect on God's incredible love and mercy to us in Jesus.

You might be hearing it for the first or second time, or the 10 000th time, but it doesn't matter. It's still good and it's still news. That's why a real Christian never tires of hearing the Gospel. We go to church to be reminded of the good news and to reflect on it – to “let it dwell in us richly” – with gratitude in our hearts to God.

A few years ago I heard Jerry Bridges interviewed, the author of the classic books *The Pursuit of Holiness* and *Transforming Grace*. Jerry was being asked about quiet times: how he does them and what he aims for in his devotional life. He responded by saying, “The thing I try to do is to preach the Gospel to myself.” It sounds strange to preach the Gospel to yourself. But because of our forgetfulness, and how easily distracted and tempted we are, we need to be reminded of it regularly so that we will persevere in living by grace.

That's another reason why we go to church and why we sing together. We ‘preach the Gospel to ourselves’, we reflect on God's love for us in Jesus and we respond with grateful hearts.

1 Corinthians 14:6-15

Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?

So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church. For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.

Here Paul has been writing about what should happen at church and he has come to the subject of speaking in tongues. The subject of speaking in tongues involves much the same issues as singing. Paul acknowledges this by referring to singing as well.

We need to speak and sing intelligible, instructive words that engage the mind – not just the spirit. There's a fair bit of Christian music around that seems to be aimed at generating feelings. Music is a good vehicle for doing that. However, if the mind is neglected, we risk falling into a touchy-feely kind of Christianity that is all about how God makes us feel. Following Jesus isn't about how it makes you feel, it's about what he has done for you and how you respond to that.

The Gospel isn't a feeling it's a truth. You don't catch Christianity like a disease; you decide to follow Jesus after hearing the Gospel, through words engaging the mind. Unfortunately it seems that many churches are going down the ‘feelings’ path and are directing not only their singing but sometimes their preaching and praying at the emotions rather than the mind. That's a shame because the result is like the seed sown in rocky soil in Mark 4. It produces a Christianity that doesn't grow because it isn't rooted in truth. Having said that, there is a place for emotional expression in church and in singing. It just needs to be seen in a proper perspective.

James 5:13

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

Acts 16:22-25

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

It is right to express happiness by singing and it is even right to try to lift your spirits by singing hymns to God as Paul and Silas did in prison in Philippi. Just because the mind is more important it doesn't mean that feelings are completely barred from being expressed in music. It's just that they need to be based on a right understanding of the truth of the Gospel.

When Paul and Silas sang in their prison cell it wasn't out of an unrealistic appraisal of their circumstances and it wasn't out of self-congratulation over the suffering they were enduring. Paul knew that nothing could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Because of this fact he was able to have real joy in all circumstances! It's right and good to express our joy in singing – but let it be joy over the Gospel.

So, from the New Testament we get four clear instructions on singing and music at church:

- (1) Sing words that speak to one another for mutual edification.
- (2) Sing to remind ourselves of the truth of the Gospel, and to reflect on it.
- (3) Sing words that engage the mind, not just the emotions.
- (4) Sing to express our joy and wonder at God's goodness to us in Jesus.

All of these instructions are designed to help music contribute to the wider purpose of church, the preaching of the Gospel, and the fellowship and encouragement of Gospel-based unity.

Having seen what the New Testament says about music and singing at church and having a good understanding of what it teaches and why, we can now turn to the Old Testament for further clarification.

Music in the Old Testament

1 Chronicles 16:4-12

He (David) appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the Lord, to make

petition, to give thanks, and to praise the Lord, the God of Israel: Asaph was the chief, Zechariah second, then Jeiel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obed-Edom and Jeiel. They were to play the lyres and harps, Asaph was to sound the cymbals, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests were to blow the trumpets regularly before the ark of the covenant of God. That day David first committed to Asaph and his associates this psalm of thanks to the Lord:

'Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always. Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced.'

This is a very interesting passage, where King David 'commissions' Levites to minister before the ark playing music, including Asaph the psalmist. This passage gives us kind of a 'job description for a psalmist' before going on to provide a 'best of the psalms' as David describes some of the wonders God has done among his people up to that time.

What were David's instructions? Give thanks to the Lord; sing praise to him, tell the nations what he has done; glory in his holy name, and let the hearts of those who seek him rejoice; look to the Lord, and his strength.

Does this sound familiar? The same themes are coming up here in the Old Testament that we found in the New Testament! We sing to express thankfulness to God, to praise him among the nations and to focus our minds and hearts on his saving power. What does David say to sing about? The things God has done for his people - his faithfulness and mercy.

The Psalms

Similar themes come up again and again in the Psalms – and there are way too many verses relating to music to cover them all here. Which makes sense because Psalms is, after all, a songbook. Psalms tells us that we should:

- Sing as a response to God's goodness and mercy with joy and thankfulness (Ps 28:6-7).
- Sing about God in the congregation, proclaiming his goodness and what he has done for us (Ps 57:9-10).

- Sing from the heart and soul – mean what you sing, and follow it up with committed action (Ps 108:1-2, 61:8).
- Sing new songs and play skilfully as well as joyfully. (Ps 33:2-3).

The same themes keep coming up. Our singing should proclaim God's greatness to one another and outsiders, remind us of what he has done for us, and encourage us to respond in joy and gratitude that shows itself in active service of God and his kingdom. That's what church music is for because that's what church is for.

The Praise and Worship Enigma

At this point I need to say something about what I call the *praise and worship enigma*. It seems that wherever you turn people are talking about praise and worship as if they were just other words for music and singing. You can buy an album of 'praise and worship' at your local Christian bookshop and some churches have what they call 'praise and worship times' when they sing and some even have 'worship pastors' who are really glorified music directors. However, when you find the terms praise and worship in the Bible they don't seem to be talking about music or singing a lot of the time. So, why have we gotten so confused? And what do the words really mean?

Praise means words or actions that honour someone. You can praise anyone and we often use the word to describe talking about someone in a very complementary way. A boss can praise the efforts of his employees or we can receive 'high praise' from someone when we impress them. So, praising God means speaking words or doing things that honour God.

The psalmists use the word 'praise' all the time and they give us another clue to its true meaning. They are always saying things like "praise his name among the nations." So, praising God isn't something that's only directed at God. We also praise him by telling other people how great he is. That's praise – bringing honour to God's name.

Worship comes from the older expression of 'worth-ship', which just means ascribing worth to something. If something is very valuable to you, you express its worth-ship. If it's a person you might do it by telling them how much they mean to you or by doing things to please them. If it's a thing, then you might devote your time to it or talk about it to your friends all the time. Some people do worship other people, maybe

their girlfriend or boyfriend, a famous sports-person or Hollywood star. Some people worship things, like sport, their car, or their career. You worship that which is most valuable to you and you show it by serving that thing or that person. Worship, then, is service.

Notice that neither of those definitions has involved the word music. Praise and worship are much bigger than just music and singing and bigger than the things we do at church. Yes, you can worship God while you sing but you're also supposed to do it when you pray, and when you study the Bible, and when you go home and relate to your family, and when you work or study, and when you tell your friends about Jesus. These are the areas in our lives where we show how much we value God and our relationship with him and where we can respond to his love for us by serving and obeying him.

Our 'Little' Theology of Music

What do we have church services for? The answer is in the question: the church service is for serving the church. If we come as musicians, to play music and sing at church, our aim should be the same as the preacher, and the service leader, and the flower arranger, and the person who vacuums the floor before the service. We come to serve the church by allowing the Gospel to be heard, understood, remembered, reflected upon, and responded to in faith, joy and grateful obedience. That's our theology of music – it's not exactly earth shattering, and it might even be disappointing to people who want to make music more important than it really is.

Music at church, properly understood, is a servant of the Gospel. Music is a great servant of the Gospel because it can be used in lots of ways to help God's word stay with us and change us. But music is a lousy master. If we let music become more than it should be, and this does seem to be happening in a few churches, then the Gospel suffers.

Our little theology of music that we've been putting together is going to help guide us as we seek to serve the Gospel and the church through music. This will only happen, though, if we apply it! This is a very important step, this is where we get it all together and work out what the things we have just learned from the Bible will look like in practice (no pun intended!).

A theology that is inactive can never be a

true theology. God's word, rightly understood, always prompts us to action – whether it's changing something we're doing, starting doing something we're not doing, or stopping doing something we are doing!

So, if the purpose of music at church is to serve the Gospel purpose of church, to edify people with the Gospel, to remind us of God's goodness to us, to express joy and gratitude, and to move the mind and the spirit to greater devotion and service, then what is the place of music at church?

The most important thing at church is the ministry of the word (which normally happens most thoroughly and clearly in preaching), so music – and everything else – should serve the preaching of the Gospel. If anything will detract from the effectiveness of the Gospel message, then don't do it.

Our services should be planned so that nothing distracts people from hearing the preaching of the Gospel. That's why you never let anyone do an announcement at the end of the service – it takes people's minds off the Gospel message they've just heard.

That's why preachers try to find songs that relate to their message – to reinforce what they have said if possible, rather than steer people's thoughts onto a different topic. That's why a musical item needs to be carefully chosen.

Musical Items

A vocal performance is probably the safest kind of musical item, but it needs to be a good and relevant song. It also needs to be done well. If you do have a really great singer in your church by all means have an item every few weeks. If you don't have anyone like that then be careful, it's hard to be encouraged by the words of a song when you're embarrassed for the person singing. An item needs to be good and it needs to be done in humility. The singer, like the song itself, should be there to serve the words and the words should serve the Gospel.

I've also seen instrumental items, which can be unhelpful and just distracting because nobody knows what it means – like speaking in tongues without interpretation. Anything like this, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14, where the meaning is unknown, isn't appropriate for church. However, sometimes an instrumental item can be good. For example, if the song is a very familiar one where people can be thinking the words in their minds, with them shown on an overhead or something like that. It

has to serve the Gospel not the music.

I've also seen dance used in church services, both really badly, just like a show, and also really well, telling a story that pointed to the Gospel. Everything is measured by how it affects the preaching and the hearing of the word.

Choosing Songs

The same principles apply to choosing the kind of songs you're going to sing. Songs are made up of words and music, and the two need to be compatible. Music is a vehicle for words and emotions, and it needs to help the words to be meaningful and the emotions to be genuine.

What criteria should we use when choosing or evaluating a song? Firstly, the words need to be truthful and edifying, not unbalanced, and not confusing. Some songs are unhelpful because they use metaphors that may reinforce misunderstandings about the Gospel. For example, singing "he healed me" to mean "he saved me" might confuse someone who is looking for physical healing or it might discourage someone who is very ill. Some songs are unhelpful because they're unbalanced. For example, talking about how much we love God (and, therefore, in the end praising us!) instead of about his love for us. Those are the main problems with some of the modern Christian songs we sing. So we need to choose songs that reinforce correct teaching and understanding of the Gospel!

Some of the old hymns are also unhelpful because of a third problem: they use language that people don't understand anymore. The words might have a beautiful meaning and be deep and insightful and everything like that, but if I need a dictionary just to understand what I'm singing, how am I going to be edified? When I became a Christian and started going to church, it took me ages to work out that "How great thou art" wasn't talking about painting! What are visitors and seekers going to think of when we get them singing about a first-born seraph, battle-shield and sword for the fight, potentate of time, sceptre, or a terrestrial ball? It's a different language to the one we use today. I am not saying we should ditch every old hymn, some of those ones I just quoted are magnificent examples of Gospel lyrics and some of them even have music that still sounds good. But we need to make sure that the words are understandable and edifying. If that means re-writing a line or

explaining the language before singing the song then we must do it.

The second consideration is then the music. Does the music help people to sing and hear the words? The dangers here are music that is too hard to sing or that just doesn't suit the lyrics.

A song might be too hard to sing if it has a wide range, or lots of tricky intervals, or it's too fast (this one is just as often the fault of the band, not the composer!). Music that doesn't complement the words is more rare because most songwriters know what they are doing. But you'd find it hard to sing about God's awesome power if the tune sounded like a nursery rhyme. You'd find it hard to reflect on the peace of knowing God if the music was racing at 200 beats a minute (once again, this is often the fault of the musicians – see below).

Choosing Musicians

Choosing the right musicians is also really important. Who makes the best church musician? Well, given that our music is service to God and his people, we need musicians who are humble, loving servants – not performers. The most important thing is the right attitude – the attitude of Jesus, who was humble, and made himself nothing even though he had everything.

Musical ability and other things are secondary because without love our best efforts are just clanging cymbals and gongs. You might be a Joe Satriani on the guitar, but if you're there to play to the people instead of for the people, you – and especially they – would be better off if you'd stayed at home.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with musical ability, it is a good thing, and a gift from God, and we should try hard to make our music sound as good as it can.

So it's worth moving down another step and discussing some of the practical things we can do as music teams to make our music better. What do we need to have (and do) to get the music in our churches happening – or keep it happening and improving?

Music Ministry

I think the first thing we need is to see music at church as a ministry. We need to realise that music is the same as any other kind of ministry - it's not something you do for you, it's a service we give to God and to his people out of gratitude and joyful

obedience. And we need to remember that in ministry, the most valuable things are the things that God provides, not the things we bring ourselves. So what things should we be praying for and working towards in our music ministry?

I think one of the first things we need is vision. This word has been hijacked lately; people are always talking about having a vision as though it means knowing the future. I'm not talking here about a grand plan for music in your church for the next 100 years, like "In 10 years I want a full symphony orchestra and a mass choir." By vision I just mean seeing clearly, recognising what music is and what its role is in the church, and understanding from the Bible how we are to use gifts like music for the building of others in the Gospel. We need to have a clear vision for what music should be for, and then deciding what it should sound like will be easier – it will flow on from knowing what its purpose is.

You're also going to need some kind of commitment from your team. If you are a church musician, you need to turn up, and you need to be ready on time. It's very hard when you're trying to practice a new song before church and the drummer hasn't turned up, and the guitarist is still trying to get his guitar in tune, and there's 5 minutes until the service is meant to start.

You need people who are reliable, who are ready to play at the beginning of practice time. Wouldn't it be great if the 10 minutes before church starts wasn't taken up by last minute rehearsal?! It would be great if that time could be used for people to come in and sit quietly and pray before the service, or read the Bible passage to be preached on, or just reflect on the week they've had and prepare themselves to hear from God's word!

When I was working on the cruise ship, there was a very strict rule: there were to be no sounds from any instrument during the 10 minutes before a show. Not one note! If you made a musical sound during that time – one note to check your tuning, one accidental cymbal crash, or anything – then the penalty was you had to buy a round for the whole band after the show.

It made me realise how valuable silence is during that time before you are meant to start, and if a cruise ship band can do it, then a church band should be able to do it. We need to be committed to turn up on time, every time.

You're also going to need leadership, and

this should probably be worked out by your minister or elders. The best leader may not be the best musician. In any kind of Christian service, a good leader is humble, and is someone who knows what is important in ministry: the fact that the Gospel is proclaimed and Jesus is glorified.

Sometimes I have to choose people to ask to be youth leaders, and then train them in how to do effective ministry. Sometimes people approach me and ask to be leaders. I have a great test for someone who wants to be a youth leader: I ask them to come and help by doing the dishes.

When I started out in youth ministry the youth pastor I was leading under once told me that a large proportion of youth work is cleaning up after kids (I can almost hear the youth leaders agreeing!) - and it's true! The best leaders are the humble ones, who don't mind the humble jobs. I think if someone is super keen to be a leader, then there's a fair chance they aren't the right person. But if I have to ask someone, and they say "I'm not sure I'm up to it", then that makes me even more sure I've asked the right person.

Christian leadership is humble servant leadership because that's the way Jesus was. Your music leader needs to be a servant. That doesn't mean they should be a weakling. Jesus was very strong, tearing down hypocrisy, and turning over the tables of exploitation. Sometimes the music leader will need to be strong too, and tell someone as lovingly as they can that they aren't ready to play in church yet, or that they need to turn down, or that the song someone wants to sing isn't appropriate.

We need leadership, and the other side of this is that we need to submit to leadership. Don't let your pride get in the way of co-operating with the music leader – even if you think 'Be thou my vision' would sound better as a rap version or whatever else you'd like to do differently.

And then you need to put in the hard work. You need to practice every week. Maybe you'll practice for an hour before the service, or maybe it will be on Friday or Saturday. But you need to do it if your music is going to improve and you want to learn new songs. Maybe you'll have a special seminar on a Saturday afternoon once in a while, or even a weekend retreat for rehearsing, learning new songs, and freshening up your music.

Don't neglect individual practice either. No one can be a serious musician who doesn't practice at home. By those standards I

haven't met many serious musicians playing at churches! If you don't practice, you don't improve. If you don't improve, you hold back the whole band. Do the hard work, and learn how to play better.

The need for humility is a constant theme in all of this. And humility, like music and most aspects of Christian living, is something you learn through practice. The more you act and respond to people and situations with humility – putting others ahead of yourself – the easier it gets. Humility, love, patience, and godliness are not things that you stumble upon when you become a Christian. They are things that you cultivate in yourself, as you respond to the Gospel in gratitude, and as the Holy Spirit teaches you – usually through the Bible – to praise and worship God in your daily life.

Finally, we are going to need prayer because, unless the Lord builds the house, the workers are wasting their time. We need to approach our musical service with prayer, asking for God's help in what we do, and committing ourselves to playing and singing for his purposes and for his glory. Praying is a great way to align our thoughts and attitudes more closely with what God is doing - that's one of the reasons God has given us the gift of prayer. So pray together as a team and ask him to work through your music to build people in the Gospel.

The Bible gives us a lot to think about when we go to play music at church! And there is a lot more that could be said on top of all that. But a helpful further step is to talk about some very concrete, practical things we need to take care of to make our music great. These won't be from the Bible, they will just be from a musical perspective, and from my own training and experience at that, so you might like to adapt or ignore this information as you gain experience yourself.

Practical Issues for Church Music Teams

Firstly, what do you do when it's just you on the accordion and Agnes on the organ? (Sorry to any accordion players or Agneses who read this!) I think the best way to improve any music is to put some energy into it. People will only get out of your music what you put into it, and energy is often what makes music enjoyable, even more than technique. There are lots of ways to add energy, from your rhythm and attack to your body language when you play. If you're bored, you'll bore everyone else too.

So, put some energy into it, or move so no one can see you!

It seems to me that whenever a church band thinks a song is lacking energy, or it's a bit boring, the answer they come up with is always the same – play it faster! But it doesn't work, it never makes a song better to play it faster, it just makes it harder to sing and harder to consider the meaning of the words – which is making the singing less helpful. More energy does not mean faster. Most songs are actually written for a particular tempo, and the melody and words are often constructed in such a way that to speed it up removes their beauty. Some songs are better a little faster or slower, but it takes experience to know. So, I think that church musicians and bandleaders need to master tempos. So many times you hear a song being played too fast, or too slow, and it can be really off-putting.

One of the greatest big band leaders of the jazz era was Count Basie, who had a band working continuously for over 50 years. When the musicians who played with him were asked, after he died, what was so special about the Basie band, one of the things that came out was that he was a genius at tempos. What a thing to be remembered for after a half-century musical career! Getting the tempo right makes a big difference to how music sounds.

One of the big pitfalls for church bands is the count in. If there's no count in, then the problem is even worse! You can't just start playing and hope the tempo will be right. It needs to be set up at the right tempo before a note is played. And to do that, you need 2 things:

- (1) You need someone to count the song in at the right tempo, and
- (2) The band needs to be able to come in at the tempo of the count in. This sounds too obvious to mention, but it really does take some practice.

To get the count in right in the first place, the first thing you need is a someone who is going to do it – don't just leave it to whoever starts first. That person should be thinking through the next song well before they count it in, singing through the chorus in their head to adjust the tempo, and clicking a finger or something to keep that tempo going until everyone is ready and they count it in. The other way to do it is with an electronic metronome – at rehearsal, write down the tempo that the song works best at, and then when it comes time to play it, just get the tempo off the metronome. It

doesn't take much to get the tempo right, but it makes a big difference!

Another sadly neglected area in all contemporary music – not just church music – is dynamics. Bands these days often suffer from the disease that an old bandleader of mine called “terminal *mf*.” With rock bands it's more often terminal *fff*, but the problem is the same. If we play at the same volume all the time, it's going to be very difficult not to be boring – dynamics are one of the easiest ways to add variety to a piece of music. So use them, let a song build up in intensity, and bring it down after the chorus so you can start the next verse softer and leave yourselves somewhere to go.

Another skill that we need to develop in church music groups is ensemble playing. We are not playing in the classical music tradition where everything is worked out beforehand and written down. Our church music and our mode of playing comes mostly from the jazz tradition – passed down through blues and rock – where the framework of a song is provided and we have to add appropriate parts. So we must develop the ability to communicate to other people in the group and respond to what they're doing – and I don't mean by shouting out in the middle of the chorus “Hey, I'll play a harmony part now, okay?” I mean we have to listen more than we play, we have to be discerning about what to play when, and how loud.

Practical Issues for Church Musicians

This is where I get to say some of the hard ‘home truths’ about players of different instruments and what they need to remember - you've been warned!

Bass Players

You are the timekeeper – don't pass the buck to the drummer. The most important thing for a bass player to practice is time. Play the wrong note if you like, but play it in time! (Playing the right note in time is even better!) Practice your attack so that it's accurate, and then the group can build on the time foundation you lay down. The bass is the foundation, if it's wobbly, then the whole thing is going to be wobbly.

Drummers

You are to the group what a conductor is to an orchestra. You can most easily direct the band – you can control dynamics by playing

louder or softer, you can signal endings easier than anyone else, and you can add variety easier than anyone else – for example by swapping between double and half time feels from choruses to verses of a song. You can also mark the sections of a song, indicating by your fills when the next verse is going to start, whether or not the chorus is going to repeat at the end, and so forth. So a drummer needs to lead, not just follow. You need to know the music, and know ahead of time what's going to happen so you can direct the rest of the band. Of course, none of that is going to help if no-one's listening. So drummers, you have to practice these things, and everyone else, you have to listen to them!

Pianists

The first thing to learn when you are playing piano at church is that you don't have to play the piano arrangement of the song 'as written' when you're playing with a band. Those arrangements are usually written for solo piano, so they have bass lines, harmony and melody all together. But if you've got a bass line from a bass, and the melody from a singer or another instrument you don't need to play those parts – and it might sound better if you don't. Try to learn to read chord symbols so you can just provide the harmony, and don't feel you have to play all the time, either – particularly if you've got a guitar in the band as well.

Guitarists

Guitarists need to use a bit of space, too, and not just play clunky chords all the time. Sparse melodic riffs just one 1 or 2 strings, or subtle fills between phrases of the melody are a great way to add to the music. And don't play all the time, drop out occasionally and leave a bit of space. Also, guitarists need to watch their volume (you know the old joke – how do you get a guitar player to turn down? Put music in front of him) – that's not always true, but you do need to be careful with electronically amplified instruments.

Horn Players and Other Melodic Instrumentalists

The same things apply. Leave some space, don't play all the time, especially when there's more than one of you. A melodic instrument can add a great deal of variety and interest to a song, but if you blast your way through the whole thing, then there's no variety. It's also very important to play a

melodic instrument in tune – not just tune the instrument, but also **play** it in tune. No wind instrument can be tuned and then just played, each note has to be played carefully in tune, and you need to practice this and listen to yourself as well as the rest of the band.

Vocalists

You need to sing simply, you're there to help the congregation by leading them, so don't change or embellish the melody. Don't overdo the vibrato, it can be very distracting, and **don't** overdo harmonies. Never use a harmony all the way through a song – save it for later so it can add contrast. And don't do harmonies at all if they don't sound good – ask someone who wouldn't be afraid to tell you it doesn't sound right. Don't do anything that might distract people from the words they are singing.

Conclusion

I gave this article the title "Making great music, making music great", because there is a difference between the two. Having great music in your church doesn't mean that music will be great at your church. What I mean is this...

Imagine that you are a master sculptor, and you make the most beautiful piece of sculpture anyone ever saw, a truly great piece of art. But then at your exhibition I come along and buy it, and take it home and use it as a toilet roll holder. Not so great anymore, is it?

Or imagine you write a book of poetry that would fill the heart with joy and move the soul to longing for eternity, and I take the book and use it to prop up my wobbly table. The greatness of the writing is wasted, and its potential is unrealised.

Greatness is not only an internal quality; it also has to do external things, like the place and function of the art form in the context of its surroundings.

Music is the same. You might practice hard, and have the best music team and the best singing at church – and you should try to make it as good as you can. But having great music isn't enough. To make music truly great you also have to think about the purpose of music – and the purpose of church. You need to reflect on the Bible's teaching about music at church, and about serving the church. Then we can begin to put our church music to the high purpose

for which it is intended by God: to glorify and proclaim him by pointing people to the Gospel, and reminding them how wide and long and high and deep the love of God is in Christ Jesus.

Mike Hammond studied jazz at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and worked as a trumpet player in Sydney and Europe before completing a Bachelor of Ministry at the Sydney Missionary and Bible College. He is now the Assistant Minister at the Maclean Presbyterian Church in northern New South Wales. This article was adapted from a talk that Mike gave at the annual Music Camp organised by the Presbyterian Church of Queensland in 2001.