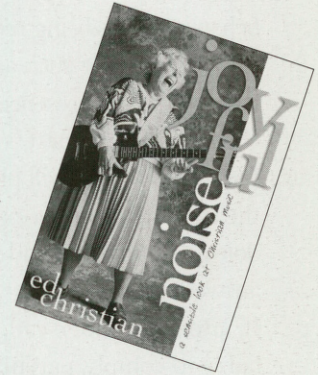
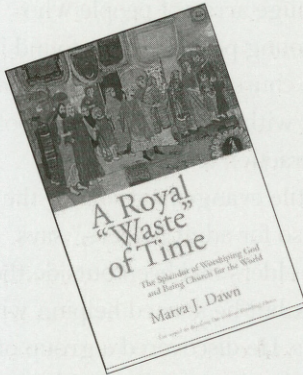


Discussed: Westside Story, marketing gurus, tolerance, blended services, words, congregational singing, simple approach to important truths, personal preferences, open mind

## Music Lessons

By Jeffry Kaatz

A Review of Ed Christian, *A Joyful Noise* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2003); and Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999)



**L**ike many in the Christian church, I have more battle scars over worship music than I care to recount. I guess it is part of the territory for a trained musician or pastor in an ever-changing society. Too often, we use musical taste and familiarity with musical styles as the primary determining factor for appropriate worship music.

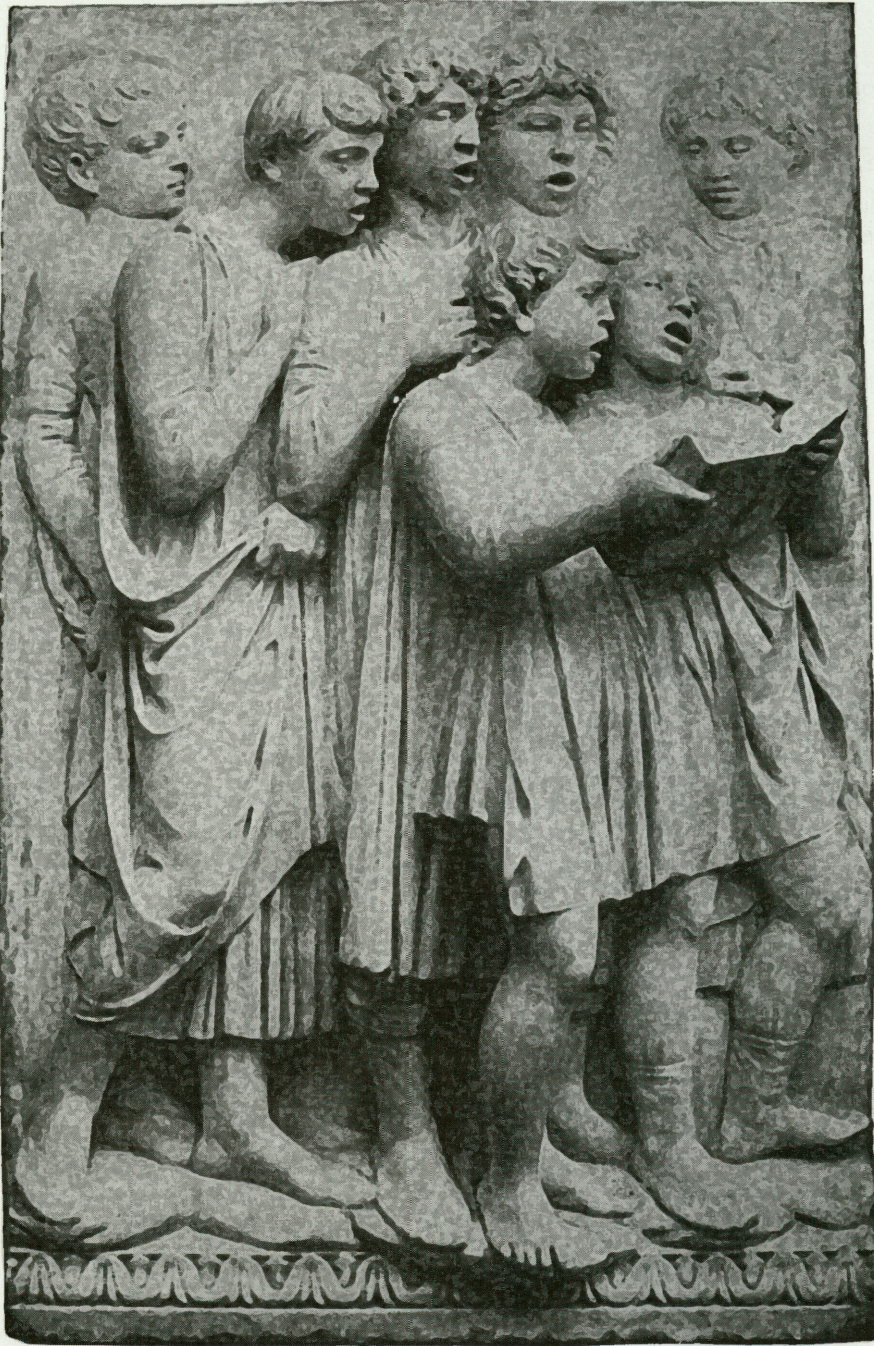
We all have lessons to learn. Over the years, my religious music lessons have come in discussions at home, during my classical training as a cellist, in experiences I have had at my home church (where any slow instrumental piece was deemed appropriately sacred), and in other churches, where I have held positions as a member of the staff or as a professional musician. These experiences made reading these two books on the topic all the more interesting.

Ed Christian's *A Joyful Noise* and Marva Dawn's *A Royal Waste of Time* provide illuminating discussions of issues related to sacred music that arise in homes and churches.

### Lesson I: Evangelism vs. Worship

My wife, Karen, and I supplement our income by working for two different churches that worship on Sundays. Karen plays the organ and piano for a Congregational church, and I coordinate the music program for a Missouri Synod Lutheran church. Both congregations are warm and friendly, and both are blessed with aesthetically pleasing sanctuaries.

But that is where similarities end. One congregation goes out of its way to make any unchurched person in the community feel com-



Singing Boys, a panel by Luca Della Robbia from *Singing Gallery*.

fortable about dropping in. Music and readings are very accessible and in many ways simple. However, the other service is quite structured and probably intimidating for some people on first visit.

Highland Congregational Church's approach to worship is to meet the community at its level. For example, it sometimes serves French fries and soda for communion services. Each year, it hosts a Chancel Theater worship service, which uses songs from Broadway musicals. Between songs, the minister weaves points of significance

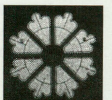
taken from the choral text into messages intent on improving everyday life. In the past, Chancel Theater services have included *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Westside Story*, and the *Sound of Music*.

The pendulum swings to the other end of the spectrum at Immanuel Lutheran Church. There, musicians and congregation enjoy a high church tradition, which adheres to the liturgical church calendar refined over many centuries. I am quite certain a song from *Fiddler on the Roof* has never been sung in this sanctuary. At Immanuel, the worship service is not so much about reaching out to the local community as about spending quality time in praise and worship of God.

Marva Dawn, in her book *A Royal "Waste" of Time, the Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*, discusses the difference between evangelism and worship. Dawn maintains that each has a time and place, and that evangelism should not take the place of worship.

Many churches have been torn apart because of conflicts generated by this serious confusion between worship and evangelism: that worship ought to be designed to appeal to the unbeliever or "unchurched" and therefore should make use of a certain kind of accessible "style." Deep at the root, the disagreements arise because declining numbers

have put congregations and denominations in a great panic over how to attract new members. Many pastors, lay leaders, and national church officers seem to be thoroughly disdainful of God's own instructions when they accept the false advice of marketing gurus to "throw out the traditions" of their churches in order to "appeal" to the world around them and thereby "grow." (122)



Dawn later continues,

If we choose a certain musical style or other elements simply to appeal to those outside our walls, then we are forcing worship to bear the brunt of evangelism, which is instead the task of all believers. Don't misunderstand: good worship *will be evangelistic*, but that is not its primary purpose, for it is directed toward God, not toward the neighbor. No passage in the Scriptures says, "Worship the Lord to attract the unbeliever." Rather, in countless texts we are commanded, invited, urged, wooed to worship the Trinity because God is worthy of our praise. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, *worship* can actually be done only by those who recognize that worthiness. (122)

This is not to say that Immanuel Lutheran Church has not used contemporary music. In fact, it was a hot topic when I arrived, the congregation having voted the year before to stop holding three traditional liturgical services and instead conduct two that were distinctly different. One of these followed the traditional format, with which the congregation was accustomed, whereas the other used praise songs and choruses more contemporary in format, the minister wearing a shirt and tie rather than a white robe.

My twelve years at that church have been a remarkable journey. I have learned more than I ever imagined about how congregations and individuals worship, and how music in various styles and forms can effectively move an individual closer to God. My personal palate of worship music has grown significantly, as has my ability to worship.

## Lesson 2: Congregational Singing

Christian and Dawn agree that congregational singing is important for corporate worship and both draw on Psalm 100: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing." Both recognize that singing in church is often lackluster, and that to be effective it needs passion and energy.

I grew up in a small Adventist church that often had no more than one hundred worshipers on any given Sabbath. However, that was a time when the congregation really sang—children, parents, grandparents... everyone. People sang in harmony, too. My late grand-

mother, Gladys Smouse, had a particular way of carrying the alto line of most hymns.

Physically, singing is an invigorating activity. It is conducive to the praise and worship of God. But in general, congregations do not sing with the same enthusiasm they once did. I think this may be a phenomenon of the culture I am part of, for I am aware of many others that currently sing with the same conviction that mine did a generation ago.

For this reason, a number of congregations have moved to a contemporary worship format, including more upbeat praise songs. In general, I do not disagree with this, and enjoy worshipping on occasion in this style of worship. However, just as in many traditional worship services, I often find that the same proportion of people in contemporary services observe rather than participate. The music in general is louder, which is often misinterpreted as participation.

So the question comes around to this: What makes a song appropriate for worship, whether a traditional hymn or a contemporary praise song or chorus?

Christian focuses on congregational unity and evaluating ways that singing can enhance corporate worship. Thus, he leans toward music with words, and that brings us to lesson three.

## Lesson 3:

### Instrumental Music vs. Music with Words

In chapter four of his book, Christian outlines seven "Guidelines for Our Music, Congregational Worship." To a large extent, I find them helpful and insightful, but I would challenge a few points, particularly the use of instrumental music in a worship service. Guideline one states:

Music is not of itself sacred or secular, whatever its style. Classical and sacred are not synonymous. Quality of composition or performance does not make music without words suitable for the worship service. When instrumental music calls to mind sacred lyrics, it can lead to worship, though generally less efficiently than music with words. At best, from a spiritual viewpoint, music without words in the worship service provides a background for meditation. However, many listeners don't make use of this opportunity. (38)

Christian supports instrumental arrangements of hymns in some cases because participants can meditate



on the text while listening. He also asserts that, without the textual association, the hearts and minds of individuals in the congregation may tend to drift away from the purpose of worship

“Some people assume that any classical music is appropriate in the worship service because it

has no words and its beauty and excellence praise God,” he writes. “However, while such music may be so beautiful that it makes us thank God, we are more likely to enjoy it simply because it is beautiful, with no conscious thought of God” (38).

I concede that some people may need a text to be sung with the music to bring them into a state of worship. However, I also recognize text can be just as distracting as music for worship. I believe that in some parts of a worship service, for example as the congregation assembles and during communion, instrumental music can be as effective as hymns or songs, for it allows members of the congregation to meditate on God without text interrupting their thoughts.

I think that during worship we need time to contemplate and meditate, time to sort out our thoughts and focus. Once that starts, music with text can unify the congregation. I also believe that music—with or without text—can assist the congregation in its reflection on the spoken word. For those who have a worshipful attitude when they come to church, the issue of text or no text becomes less relevant.

This notion runs somewhat contrary to Christian’s second guideline:

Any style of music can entertain. Entertainment is not in itself wrong, in its place, but the worship service is not the best place for entertainment, because the more we are being entertained, the less we are worshiping. Thus the worship service will be more spiritually profitable if we avoid music that entertains. “Special music” in the worship service can sometimes provide an opportunity for meditation or allow God to speak to the listener, but primarily, I believe, it entertains the congregation, despite the performers’ desire to give glory to God. (39)

I agree that in some instances music can distract us from worship, especially if it supercedes the focus of

worship. This seems to be Christian’s perspective when he advises caution in choosing a classical instrumental selection over a hymn arrangement that has a recognized text associated with it.

Personally, I struggle with this perspective, for I can accept an offering of praise to God by a musician who performs a classical work. For me, this is an added bonus of being a Christian and a musician, for I can appreciate and use music in ways beyond those of non-Christian musicians, who often appreciate this genre only from an aesthetic perspective.

Christian’s third guideline focuses on the need for congregational unity, with which I agree. I believe that elements of worship that detract from this unity should be changed or eliminated.

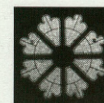
Karen and I are regularly asked to play for worship services, and we find it a challenge to come up with a varied selection. One direction we have turned is toward instrumental arrangements of recognizable hymns. Some of my favorites tend to be choral arrangements that I adapt for cello and piano, such as *It is Well With My Soul*, arranged by J. N. Beck, or *Amazing Grace*, arranged by W. Hall.

I still enjoy playing songs like *Arioso* by J. S. Bach, and in doing so feel I have given God something more meaningful than a hymn arrangement I might have offered. If Christian’s perspective on the use of this type of music is correct, then I may have done a disservice to the congregation as a whole, although it has blessed me and I have offered God something meaningful.

## Lesson 4: The Value of Repetition

One complaint about contemporary Christian praise songs and choruses is that the words are often repetitive and trite. Taken as a whole, this is probably correct compared to much of what we consider “high” church music. Repetition can be an effective way to reinforce important truths, even though too much of even a good thing can be bad.

One of the most meaningful worship services in which I have participated as the conductor of a choir was in a performance of Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” from *The Messiah* at the conclusion of an Easter morning service.





Speaking of repetition, altos alone sing the word *hallelujah* more than forty times in this composition. If repetition of text were the only factor used to decide appropriate worship music, we would probably need to eliminate this masterwork.

Another example is Randall Thompson's glorious setting of *Alleluia*. The short chorus *He Is Our Peace* by Kandela Groves, which is often sung in both contemporary and blended worship services, repeats its four-word title eight times. Led by an organ, piano, or contemporary praise band, this chorus is an effective song for a congregation to sing in preparation for prayer.

It is helpful to step back and take a more simple approach to important truths. This is often done effectively in contemporary songs and choruses. It can also be done with awe, grandeur, and majesty in the music of Handel and Thompson.

## Lesson 5: Different Services for Different Music

In recent years, some congregations have chosen to support two or more distinctly different worship services that cater to the variety of tastes. Immanuel Lutheran Church went to this format twelve years ago, and so have a few Adventist churches in my community.

Christian and Dawn strongly oppose this arrangement. Christian goes so far as to state: "If a church can't agree on music, it's better to split a church physically into separate congregations than to split it spiritually by imposing the tastes of one faction on another" (55).

Dawn states in response to the use of musical "taste" as a reason to support two styles of worship: "Not only is taste as an entry point wrong biblically, but also it is extremely destructive of genuine community, fosters an independent view of the local congregation, and reduces worship simply to a matter of preferences instead of an entering into God's presence in the company of the Church throughout space and time" (187).

Furthermore, Dawn refers to a 1995 study in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America that dealt with effective ministry and membership growth: "A mere 1 percent joined a congregation because of its musical style. The largest proportion, 28 percent,

joined because of faith and beliefs, 22 percent because of family and friends, 5 percent because of the hospital-ity ('atmosphere'), and 19 percent because of the location of the facilities" (187).

In my experience at Immanuel Lutheran Church—where both traditional and contemporary services are supported—I have found both forms to work quite effectively. During the early years of transition, several families chose to move to other congregations. Some members truly believed that contemporary forms of music were inappropriate for a house of God.

Time has healed the emotional chasm and very few scars remain from past battles over musical style at that church. Gracious leadership, understanding, tolerance, and open-mindedness are moving the congregation forward. I am spiritually fulfilled worshipping God in both services. However, I do not believe this is the best solution for every congregation, especially smaller ones where critical mass is essential.

I consider these five lessons an important part of my journey as an Adventist, teacher, and professional musician. Personally, I need to give more thought and study to the roles of evangelism and worship. In my mind, there is some room for them to overlap. At present, churches may be blending these two activities into one out of convenience.

Although I have personal preferences for worship and worship music, I have also learned much from participating in and studying a variety of worship styles. The main lesson I have learned is to keep an open mind because there is often more to see—and hear—with greater understanding. If we do, we will be better able to "Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name," as the Psalmist states matters.

Reading the perspectives of Christian and Dawn helped clarify several questions in my mind. Their books also revealed new questions that will require further thought and study. It may be that one lesson from these books transcends the others—the fact that there are always more lessons to be learned.

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