Songs Formed by Cultures, Culture Formed by Song: Evaluating and Using Song Genres in Evangelical Lutheran Worship

Robert Buckley Farlee
Senior Editor for Worship and Music
Augsburg Fortress Publishers

When we open our hymnals on Sunday morning, what do we sing? Old favorites? Newer praise song? A piece from the global church? Such questions have long been with us, but with the publication of Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) they have a fresh urgency. This new primary worship resource for the ELCA continues the move toward a broader collection of hymn and song resources for our worship. Lutheran Book of Worship included hymns from locations such as India, Czechoslovakia, and Liberia in addition to the usual European and American suspects. The supplement With One Voice took bold steps (for Lutherans) especially in the direction of Spanish-language song and pieces from Africa. It also opened the door to at least a conservative sampling of music from what has been labeled the “contemporary” stream.

With this new resource in ELW, though, it becomes difficult to ignore the presence of the global church among us. (It might be noted that although I was involved in the preparation of music for that publication, I had only a minimal role in the selection of that music.) Many African traditions are represented, as are many countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean. The Asian church, too, makes inroads, though more tentatively because the structure of much Asian song makes it more difficult for untrained Western singers. And there is more contemporary song. The selection may not satisfy many who use that style of music on a weekly basis, but it must be remembered that this is a “legacy” resource—one intended to be used for 25 years or so—and that complicates the inclusion of music which almost by definition is not intended to be used for a long period of time.

Nor is this opening up of global and stylistic voices limited to the hymn and song section. Both within the liturgical musical settings and especially in the extensive Service Music section (#151–238) in ELW, one’s interest is piqued by numerous fine examples of global voices and lyrical contemporary song. Because these are more likely to be overlooked for the time being while assemblies are learning primary settings and newer hymns, it would be worthwhile to point to such examples as Swee Hong Lim’s flowing Kyrie (#158), Thomas Pavlechko’s driving Gospel Ac-
clamation (#170), James Capers’s offering song settings from Liturgy of Joy (#183, #185), the haunting Lamb of God setting by Matti Rantatalo (#197), and Rawn Harbor’s moving setting of Into Paradise May the Angels Lead You (#222).

But, to get to the point of this article, we must apply to this catalogue the good Lutheran question “What does this mean?” On its face, this wonderful variety of music could be seen simply as reflecting the reality that our world has shrunk, to the point that it would seem odd if we Lutherans limited ourselves to a narrow canon of Northern and Western European-heritage hymnody. (And yes, it would have been a travesty if, in an attempt to reflect global realities, large numbers of core Lutheran hymns had been left out, although people can and will disagree on such distinctions.) But there are deeper realities at work.

First, what is the significance of these varieties of assembly song? They are, after all, only songs—and there are significant Christian traditions still today that place little value on such extra-liturgical congregational singing. Look at the Eastern Orthodox traditions, in which the song of the assembly is often limited to, at most, brief liturgical responses, a far cry from the hymns to which Lutherans are accustomed. Even in the Roman Catholic Church, which has undergone a remarkable musical renaissance in the decades since the Second Vatican Council, hymnic expressions (as opposed to music that is integral to the liturgy) are still officially relegated to a secondary position. A new statement by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, after providing guidelines for dialogues and acclamations, antiphons and psalms, and refrains and repeated responses, addresses hymns in this way:

At Mass, ... congregational hymns of a particular nation or group that have been judged appropriate by the competent authorities ... may be admitted to the Sacred Liturgy. Church legislation today permits as an option the use of vernacular hymns at the Entrance, Preparation of the Gifts, Communion, and Recessional.

Not to denigrate the Roman Catholic understanding of the relative merits of kinds of church music, which has a well-developed logic and tradition, but this is a far cry from the enthusiastic embrace of hymnody by Martin Luther and his followers down to the current generation. While Lutherans are by no means alone in this respect for the power and the pastoral utility of the assembly hymn, this branch of Christianity has worked hard at providing a theological rationale for it. A brief look at some of those underpinnings will be helpful as we prepare to look at the discrete hymnic voices present in ELW.

It is widely known that Luther valued music highly, on its own as well as within worship. He saw it as a vehicle for God’s word. In 1523 he wrote to George Spalatin,

Our plan is to follow the example of the prophets and the ancient fathers of the church, and to compose psalms for the people in the vernacular, that is, spiritual songs, so that the Word of God may be among the people also in the form of music.

Earlier that year, in his first revision of the Latin mass, Luther had written,

I also wish that we had as many songs as possible in the vernacular which the people could sing during mass, immediately after the gradual and also after the Sanctus and Agnus Dei. For who doubts that originally all the people sang these which now only the choir sings.

Luther’s wish was soon fulfilled as the Reformation produced an extraordinary number of fine hymns. Soon an understanding developed that such singing was not mere ornamentation, not a frilly, merely pleasing add-on to the service, but a core part of the proclamation of God’s word. As a document adopted by the ELCA puts it, “The assembled congregation participates in proclaiming the Word of God with a common voice. It sings hymns and the texts of the liturgy.” The Principles for Worship developed to guide the preparation of ELW underscore this view of assembly song as being essential, adding, “A healthy tension between simple and complex music enriches the worshiping assembly.”

Clearly, then, Lutherans expect to be fed richly through their song. But what sort of song shall that be?

Categories of songs
In a denomination whose members are still overwhelmingly connected ethnically to Germany and the Nordic countries, albeit buffered by several generations in the diverse United States, we are invited to sing three types of song that may lead us to a “Hmm…” or “What does this mean?”

The first of these is that which is most familiar to the greatest number of us: the well-known metrical hymns from 16th- to 20th-century Germany, Scandinavia, and England. Many of us tend to accept these as our natural song, as if we were born humming their tunes. But whether it’s “Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word,” “Thy Holy Wings,” “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” or “Lift High the Cross,” why do these hymns from previous generations work in our context? Or do they not really work, except in a sentimental, bygone-era sort of way? (Because we do not consider them separately within this essay, we might also add onto this category hymns written in our own day that have been cast either musically or textually, or both, in a style that hearkens back to an earlier syntax.)

The second large category of song is global song, described earlier in broad strokes. Whereas the first, though from earlier eras, is at least tied to most of us in an ethnic way, this group comes from cultures with scant representation in North American Lutheranism. This is not to say, of course, that Christians or even Evangelical Lutherans are scarce in these areas; we all know about the explosive growth of Christianity especially in the southern hemisphere. But, because most Lutherans in the United States are descended from Europeans, a lot of these global songs still strike us as somewhat alien. Not only are the words and melodies new, but so are the rhythms, performance practices, and instrumentation. Why would we put ourselves through the singing of songs that are not our own? (To paraphrase Psalm 137: How can we sing someone else’s songs in our own land?) Naturally, this question may well have been asked by those who wrote these songs, earlier in the missionary movement, when many were asked to sing Victorian English hymns or the like because they were normative for the missionaries. Now the tables have turned. Now, because of the work of missionaries and pastor churches that have developed in these areas, we have the chance to receive back that same gospel, now dressed in clothing exotic to our ears. Questions of “Why?” still linger, however. Are these, finally, mere curiosities? Do we have the right to sing these songs, and if so, within what pastoral framework?


And now, to the third genre, so-called contemporary song. (Not to beat a dead horse, but much of what would be classified as "non-contemporary" is more "of the day," more recent, than much of what is called "contemporary." Nonetheless, we understand at least generally what the title means.) Unlike the other two categories, this song type is undeniably closely related to many of those who sing it. It was born in recent decades, it features a musical style that is known (if not always liked) by Americans living today through its similarities to popular music, and, although some examples may come from England or Australia, it certainly is rooted in American culture. (Despite having glibly said that we know what "contemporary song" means, I will clarify that I am not speaking of recent Roman Catholic song of the Haugen-Haas mode or of contemplative song such as that arising from the Taize and Iona communities. I see those as distinct subsets that are not addressed in this essay.) Here is music of the popular love song but with words expressing devotion to God or Jesus. Granted, it would be oversimplifying to claim that nothing more is going on. The great majority of such song performed in churches is skillfully written and clearly heartfelt. It is intended as a genuinely contemporary way of addressing our devotion to God. Yes, I believe the genre has significant built-in weaknesses, not least of which is its often individualistic tone. The question at hand, however, is the same as for the other genres: Is this appropriate song for use in today's American Lutheran worship? And, perhaps oddly, the distinguishing focus this time is not whether it is too far removed from our daily culture and life but whether it is too closely connected. Is there such a thing as assembly song that is not sufficiently differentiated from the "ordinary" song of the culture?

Questions around culture and worship practices are not new. In many ways they can be traced through the entire history of the church: how much to borrow from Jewish synagogue practice; the extent to which it is permissible to borrow from Greek and Roman culture; Luther's solution of combining established liturgical forms with vernacular language.

The conversation reached new levels of urgency and fruitfulness in the late 20th century. The urgency resulted from the aforementioned increased awareness of the riches present in the Christian Church around the world. With that awareness, along with memories of the church's often colonialist approach to mission, came some fundamental challenges. Already in the 1970s, Mark Bangert, among others, was raising issues of appropriateness. Is it fair for Western Christians, still the dominant voice in world Christendom, to make use of, and in effect make their own, the faith expressions born of other Christians' unique experiences? We, who haven't had to deal with apartheid, or death squads, or interreligious violence—where do we get off singing songs that have been forged in such fires? Some will say such concerns are too fastidious by half; we have always borrowed others' hymns and songs. And that is true, but because in some recent cases we may have been more closely allied with the oppressors than the oppressed, the question is worth asking. Overwhelmingly, however, the response of Christians from whose communities the songs come has been one of welcome, encouraging Western Christians to make use of these pieces, trusting that we will not abuse that privilege through disrespect.

The conversation on worship and culture has been taken up and broadened in consultations sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation. These consultations (in
which Bangert was again a core partici-

8. Nairobi Statement on Worship and

and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and

Opportunities (Geneva: Lutheran World

Federation, 1996), 1.3.

3. What Does Multicultural Worship


7, ed. Gordon W. Lathrop (Minneapolis:

Augsburg Fortress, 1996).

level, it is close. The impulse to raise our

voices in song of praise to God, or in

moments of lament, is so nearly universal,

despite its varying forms, that it could fairly

be labeled transcultural. And, of course, all

culture.

Three identified genres of song share in this
description.

Assembly song as contextual

Here is where matters begin to get more

complex and interesting. This point in-

volves giving worship a home in the local

context, often using dynamic equivalence
to reexpress a given facet in terms that

speak and work equally well in the new

context. How does this work with assembly

song? Luther established congregational,

vernacular hymnody as an equivalent to
certain parts of the Latin liturgy, such as the

canticle of praise (Gloria in excelsis),

Gradual, Creed, and Sanctus. The principle

established there seems to be that the

assembly's response of praise can and

should be sung, at least in part, by that very

assembly in their own voice and in their

own language, rather than on their behalf

by clergy or choir in a privileged language.

Moving to today, we look at our three
categories. Does Song from the Past work

as contextual song? The key question in

this case would seem to be whether, as a

genre, it speaks to this context. The answer

has to be yes. The language, for whatever

variants it may show from the past few

centuries, remains our own. Its concepts

still speak to us, often very deeply. Musi-

cally, the genre is conservative, to be sure.
But it is far from being incomprehensible to today's American worshipers, even those raised exclusively on popular song. It may require some adjustment, but it also will strike some as refreshingly distinctive.

Global Song poses an obvious question in that, by definition, it originates in a foreign context. Can it, then, work in ours? In some cases, generally speaking, the answer would be no. Some pieces are too difficult either in language or in musical structure to work in America except in rare situations. Presumably, such examples have been vetted out of the collection in ELW—though, naturally, not all pieces will work in all places. The commonplace descriptions of the United States as a melting pot or salad bowl hint that exotic aspects of song will not be too great an impediment. Indeed, much of popular song is built on the rhythms of Africa and Latin America. Requiring that the pieces must be sung in their original languages probably would be fatal for the contextual judgment. But full English translations are provided for all non-English texts. The melodies and harmonies are accessible enough that, when combined with the fresh rhythms and textual charms, these songs from around the world do seem to work in American worship.

For Contemporary Song it is clear, as has been mentioned, that the connections with our culture are close. Here the question is more akin to judging the appropriateness of indigenous song from outside the Christian Church for use within Christian worship. Some would say that the close identification between secular popular song and Christian contemporary song makes the latter unfit for use within the Christian assembly. In light of other examples of successful contextualization, though, it would seem difficult to make that assertion stand. Popular musical styles can be made to work in Christian worship (but stay tuned for the countercultural argument). And yes, some examples that are "out there" do not meet basic theological standards; but the choices in ELW, if not all sublime, do at least pass such basic muster.

Assembly song as countercultural

The Nairobi Statement points out that Christians are called to oppose those elements of culture that contradict the gospel. Can assembly song do that? Certainly texts can be prophetic, and one could cite examples in all genres of that, although we will see that it is harder for Contemporary Song. More likely, in this regard, the telling point will be the negative: When assembly song, in one way or another, seems to yield to harmful cultural influences, it has failed the countercultural test. Of course, this often is a matter of individual judgment.

Song from the Past in general has been through the theological hoops, and so comes across well in relation to this measurement. Most of the texts that supported imperialistic attitudes have been eliminated or edited. True, there remains significant "king" language referring primarily to Christ, and some will be bothered by that. They also may notice, however, the balance in ELW of more alternative images for God than in previous collections.

Musical expression plays less of a role in this countercultural realm, although if one wanted to go out on a limb it could be argued that a heavy dependence on crowd-pleasing tunes and harmonies (those that push all the predictable "warm fuzzy" buttons) would fail the countercultural test.

Most of the Global Song in the ELW collection passes the countercultural test easily, having paid its dues in the countries and churches from which it originates. Can we inherit those virtues just by singing the songs? No, but we can expose our
communities to the insights of those who have suffered for their faith and emerged with a radiant sense of joy and community. To look at just one example, “The People Walk” (#706) has the ring of authenticity as it speaks of the poor ones of the world suffering oppression and awaiting hope. If a song like this helps lead assemblies to better understand both their complicity in the plight of the poor and their call to work for justice, it will have justified its presence in the collection.

The challenge faced by supporters of Contemporary Song is that this music originates in and reflects the heart of the world’s dominant culture, often labeled “consumerism.” Because it starts there, it is difficult for this kind of song to make a move toward counterculturalism. It may be telling that there are no songs in the “Justice, Peace” or “Lament” sections from the mainstream Contemporary genre, although, to be fair, such assignment is of course an editorial decision. Because Contemporary Song often displays such a cloud-free disposition, it is no surprise that much of it can be found in the “Praise, Thanksgiving” section. Even in such company, however, it can be startling how many of the classic examples of this genre, those most widely loved, are strongly individualistic. The “Jesus and me” syndrome is strong. Other hymns also use first-person singular, of course, but often it is easier to understand those texts as representing a community. Again, it is a matter of interpretation.

Some Contemporary Song texts take a more corporate view of worship and at least leave room for the possibility that the church has a role in the world. An example of that is “Build Us Up, Lord” (#670). One hopes that the style will continue to mature and provide more theological meat.

Assembly song as cross-cultural

The final Nairobi Statement point calls us to be cross-cultural. It explicitly refers to hymnody: “The sharing of hymns and art and other elements of worship across cultural barriers helps enrich the whole Church and strengthen the sense of the communio of the Church.” As members of the worldwide church, and especially being in a part of that church where it is easy for us to ignore our neighbors around the world, we are helped to become better fellow members of Christ’s body when we expose ourselves to many sung expressions of that shared faith—both those from foreign cultures and those from cultures not so far-flung, yet also not our own.

As we seek to do that, however, we have a duty to be judicious. Many are the challenges in choosing songs for the assembly to sing, and encountering unfamiliar material is by no means chief among them. Unfamiliarity can be dealt with through skillful introduction and leadership. But we who are charged with exercising theological discernment need to do so with regard to sung theology as well as spoken. The compilers of ELW have made a good beginning, and this essay has been only a cursory look at that—not even touching such major genres as chant and African American song. We in the congregations now are called to take up the challenge, sort through the cultures—foreign and domestic—and help give voice to the whole church, the catholic church, of all times and places. May God strengthen us in that task!