

HYMN PERFORMANCE

The Art of Listening in Multicultural Worship

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I recently played guitar for a women's preaching conference where the worship leader was criticized for performing a song that did not originate in her culture. A white woman, her decision to lead the song "Every Praise" by black gospel artist Hezekiah Walker was met with disdain and offense by some of the black women present at the conference. Among the criticisms were those of performance and representation; we didn't play the song right, and the wrong person led it. As a result, the song seemed to demonstrate how, once again, well-meaning white people had stolen the cultural goods from a less powerful group and leveraged it to feel better about ourselves.

This experience raised old questions of cultural appropriation, power, and authenticity to the forefront of my thinking. It also raised new questions about the character of the conversations we are having about cultural diversity in our churches. These are incredibly difficult and important issues for music ministers and worship leaders to work through, as so much is at stake: it seems that everywhere we look we see or hear systemic injustice perpetrated against the less-enfranchised members of society. Many of us in The Hymn Society in the U. S. and Canada work in churches that strive for cultural diversity, inclusivity, and justice—especially in our musical worship. And in equal measure, many of us are white people who work in predominantly white congregations. I count myself among that number. And so, what I am about to say is designed for me as much as anyone else, and I offer it with fear and trembling: white people need to stop trying to take the lead in matters of diverse worship. Our unmerited privilege and accidental power abuses mandate it.

Now before I lose you, let me explain. I am not on some clandestine mission to re-segregate the church. Nor do I think that multicultural worship is a fool's errand. In fact, I think diverse worship is the goal to which we should all aspire. But it is painfully obvious that we are not always going about it in the right ways. For instance, it is so hard for me as a cis-het (identifying as I appear, heterosexually oriented) white male who has reveled in the lap of privilege for his entire life to recognize how my best efforts at authentically inviting other cultures to worship with me come across as embarrassing, mocking, or thieving to those I am trying to worship with. In my default mind, the whole world is for sale and I am buying. But this is wrong! It's not mine to take.

Now that all my cards are on the table, let me tell you how I drew them.

I have been slowly realizing that I, as an academic and, as my wife likes to say, "professional Christian," live in a

world where my voice and voices like mine are the ones most often heard. In fact, our voices have framed the conversation. Maybe even *are* the conversation. But there are many who are excluded from this conversation, and many of us have been working hard to bring their voices into our conversation. Yet despite my and our efforts, I have been amazed to discover that many who are not naturally a part of my conversation do not wish to join; they've started their own conversation, thank you very much. And because of all the baggage my conversation carries—things like colonialism, racism, sexism, and all the other isms—they're not particularly interested in being party to it. So, I decided that I would try listening to their conversation, instead of trying to make them join mine.

I've asked friends who do not look or identify like me how I can be a better ally for them. Do you know what they've said? Listen. Listen to what they are saying without trying to rationalize or play devil's advocate. Since I began trying to do that, the strangest thing has happened: I've been invited to join other conversations. For example, I've been invited to sit in on electric guitar at a black Baptist church across town (I've yet to take them up on the offer, as their service meets concurrent with the church that I serve). I have heard other conversations and I like what I hear.

So. What should you do? Listen. Find a partner from a different cultural tradition and hear them. Allow them to show you how to play the song (if they are willing to share it with you, and remember they get to choose whether or not to). Don't get mad if they call you to account on something; listen again, trying to understand where they are coming from.

Also, understand that you are going to make mistakes and get it wrong from time to time. Admit that you do not have all the answers. Sometimes, it will go wrong and not be your fault: the white worship leader in my opening story had not planned to lead "Every Praise." A black worship leader was supposed to lead it. But when she had to cancel at the last minute, the white worship leader stepped up to lead the song. It was not either person's fault, but the results were both hurtful and problematic.

Finally, how does one actually go about *leading* multicultural worship? With great humility and honesty about one's own abilities, hang-ups, foibles, talents, and tastes. Own up to who you are and what you like, being honest with yourself and those you minister with and to about it. Ask yourself, "How might I begin listening better, loosening my hold on *leading* and move toward a more common *sharing*?" Talk to your congregation. Especially those who may believe

their voice does not matter as much as others. Tell them about yourself, and ask them to tell you about themselves. And most importantly, listen. 

Nathan Myrick is a theological ethicist and ethnomusicologist. He is fascinated by the intersection of ethics, theology, and music, and studies how people interact with God and each other through musical activity. Myrick studied at Baylor University, Fuller Seminary, and Providence University College. He has performed in prisons and churches, written films and rock albums, and produced a TV pilot.

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