



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Worship Music by Jeanne Torrence Finley



Worship music can range from Bach to Hillsong and from southern gospel to Taizé. What is the purpose of music in worship? What are the challenges in choosing appropriate worship music, and what criteria can help us choose music that best fits our theology?

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The Power of Music

“This is my song, O God of all the nations, a song of peace, for lands afar and mine.”

As a teenager, I learned “Finlandia” in church, but it really took hold of me when I was a camp counselor. As we sang it around campfires and in the dining hall, it taught me that God’s world is much bigger than the “cloverleaf and pine” in my own backyard and that God loves every land, not just mine. Years later, shortly after the United States invaded Iraq, I attended an Indigo Girls concert. Throughout the evening, the energized audience danced and sang along with the exuberant folk-rock music. To the audience’s surprise, the concert closed with an a cappella version of “Finlandia.” I was stunned at how still and quiet the concert hall became as the song seemed to bind us—people of different faiths and none—together in a prayer for peace. Such is the power of song.

In their book *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*, Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls and her dad, Don Saliers, write: “The act of singing praise, lament, thanksgiving, or prayer to God goes beyond the surface of words and beyond the passing sound of the voices. . . . If the words and the musical forms are adequate to the mystery of being human—to suffering and joy—then the sound itself becomes a medium of formation and transformation.”

As Professor Emeritus of Worship and Theology at Emory University, Don Saliers is widely known in ecumenical circles for his writing about worship and

music. In writing about “the integrity of sung prayer,” he says that music is “not an ornament,” but “an embodied form of praying.” For Saliers, music offered in worship shapes and expresses the patterns of emotions which constitute Christian life. Music helps the worshipful embody the full range of our spiritual experience, from gratitude and joy to humility and even to our sorrow over sin.

REFLECT

- Listen to “Finlandia” performed by the Indigo Girls with Missy Higgins: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LD1t6tzbp-Y>.
- What is the message of this hymn? How is the message amplified or deepened by “Finlandia” being a sung prayer?
- How would you describe your congregation’s understanding of the purpose of music in worship?
- What would you add to Saliers’s comments about the integrity of sung prayer?

Criteria in Choosing Worship Music

A basic challenge in music selection, given the wide range of genres available today, is singability. Drew Willson, a United Methodist pastor and singer/songwriter in Richmond, Virginia, says he relies mainly on *The United Methodist Hymnal* (UMH) and *The Faith We Sing* (TFWS) because of their singability—a trait missing from much of the music sung by recording artists. In addition to the hymns, Willson draws from highly singable Iona and Taizé spirituals, civil rights anthems, and occasionally, some contemporary music.

Worship music selection is also complicated by the theology embedded within the lyrics. Michael Hawn, Professor Emeritus of Church Music at Perkins School of Theology, says that the focus of most contemporary worship music is “almost totally” on “love God” (a personal relationship) and very little on “love your neighbor.” Music has a way of strongly influencing us, so what we sing in worship helps form what we believe.

If our beliefs influence our actions like they are supposed to, the theological integrity of worship music becomes essential. As we worship, we want to be formed into disciples of Jesus who stand with and for the good of our whole community. So, it’s important that we sing songs of justice and social concern alongside the tried-and-true songs about our personal relationships with God.

Discipleship Ministries, an agency of The UMC that provides resources for church leaders, has published criteria on its website aimed at helping congregations choose theologically sound as well as singable contemporary music. Diana Sanchez-Bushong, director of music ministries for Discipleship Ministries, explained that the tool was created because pastors and song leaders were asking, “Should we be programming this, putting this [song] into our worship?” Their response was to develop a tool to vet the songs in the Christian Copyright Licensing International’s (CCLI) Top 100 list. Jackson Henry, a member of the vetting team and director of music ministries at Franklin First UMC in Tennessee, clarified that, “The end goal . . . was not to create a list of approved songs,” but to provide “criteria by which [worship leaders] would then do their own analysis.”

REFLECT

- When thinking about your favorite songs to sing (whether they are worship music or not), what makes them enjoyable for you? What about them speaks to your life?
- Do you listen to Christian music regularly, perhaps on radio stations like K-Love or JOY FM? Do you find the music to be singable? theologically sound? Why or why not?

The Adequacy of Worship Music

Yet another aspect of selecting good worship music is whether the songs are able to truly speak to the lives we live and the real challenges we face, both individually and communally. Joe Stobaugh, pastor of modern music at Grace Avenue UMC

in Frisco, Texas, says that selecting adequate, appropriate music requires wisdom and compassion. He says hymn writer John Thornburg's questions have been a guiding light for him: "What is God calling the church to sing to become what God is calling the church to be? . . . What is God calling us to be in our discipleship out in the world? What do we need to sing to do that? . . . sometimes that's a song from Kenya [and] sometimes that's a song from India. And other times it's [songs] that the Taizé Community can provide. And sometimes we do need a block of praise."

Michael Hawn adds, "We need to be considering how music can shape the faith not only of the individual worshipper, but also build up the gathered body of Christ. Right now, if we aren't addressing the hate that is filling our country and if we're not addressing ecological issues, I'm not sure why we're existing as churches. We have something to say about those two things. Otherwise, I think we're just twiddling our thumbs on the Titanic."

Core Bible Passages

"Psalm 137 begins with one of the more lyrical lines in the Hebrew Bible . . . and ends eight lines later with one of the thorniest," writes David Stowe in the preface to his book *Song of Exile*. This psalm, which has elements of both lament and vengeance, remembers the Babylonian Exile. Because the last three lines call for graphic violence, they are often omitted from church music.

During his research, Stowe interviewed Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, who contends that psalms such as this have a place in worship and that "they may point a way out of slavery to revenge and into the freedom of forgiveness." In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf writes, "[b]y placing unattended rage before God we place both our unjust enemy and our own vengeful self face to face with a God who loves and does justice."

Psalms of anger and vengeance are ways of being honest with God about our hurts and wounds. If our prayers are to be honest, we need to express the full range of our emotions in our worship. Of course, we need to do this in appropriate ways which do not harm others in our community. But expressing anger appropriately is not the same as never expressing it at all.

REFLECT

- Here are three musical settings of this psalm. Which ones best express and deal with lament and anger? Which ones connect the most with you? Why?

"By the Babylonian Rivers" (TFWS #2217): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1Zypy47uew>

"Psalm 137" (2017) by Jason Silver: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqYIMLH5NMI>

"On the Willows" (1972) from *Godspell*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-b4Q_kanRc

REFLECT

- What do you think about Stobaugh's and Hawn's insights?
- What are some other concerns you have about the adequacy of worship music?
- What are the challenges you and/or your community are facing right now? Is popular worship music able to adequately respond to these challenges?

The Music of Iona and Taizé

The music of the Iona and Taizé communities are alternatives to contemporary worship music. The small village of Taizé in Burgundy, France, is a Protestant monastic community focused on prayer and reconciliation. Taizé worship music is repetitive prayer set to simple musical lines and core biblical texts. These songs are simple enough to be sung by the thousands of pilgrims from across the globe who make their way to Taizé each summer. Many Christian communities in the US adapt the music of Taizé to their own contexts.

Here are three Taizé songs frequently sung in the US: (1) “Bless the Lord”: <https://youtu.be/t4Svh-9ohg4> (#2013 TFWS); (2) “In the Lord I’ll Be Ever Thankful” (#2195 TFWS): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAx8giQrsOY>; and (3) “The Summons” by John Bell (#2130 TFWS): <https://youtu.be/V0aAkOe87mo>.

The Iona Community is an internationally-dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community, and the renewal of worship. There are Iona centers on the Inner Hebrides isles of Iona and Mull as well as in Glasgow, Scotland. For over fifty years, Iona has welcomed people from all over the world to share in a daily life of prayer, work, creativity, song, and storytelling. Much of the community’s music has been written by John Bell and Graham Maule, but other songwriters are involved through the Wild Goose Resource Group.

REFLECT

- What are the benefits of using music that is known and sung by the international faith community?
- Pilgrims to Taizé are primarily young adults. What might this show about the spiritual needs and desires of young people?

United Methodist Perspective

Christian Copyright Licensing International is a licensing service which allows songs to be reproduced for use in worship. The CCLI Top 100 list contains the copyrighted songs that subscribing congregations use most. Most of the songs in the CCLI list are written by artists outside of the Wesleyan tradition—especially evangelical, Pentecostal, and Calvinist traditions—which sometimes take positions opposite to Wesleyan theology.

As noted in an earlier section, Discipleship Ministries evaluates CCLI’s Top 100 list and designates each song as “Green” for no or minor reservations, “Yellow” for some reservations, or “Red” for songs which they do not recommend for Methodist worship. Each song is evaluated according to the following five core commitments of The UMC: (1) an understanding of salvation in which ongoing sanctification and making use of the means of grace are seen as crucial; (2) a practice of corporate worship and discipleship in which sacraments are central; (3) an attentiveness to doctrinal and biblical accuracy in lyrical form; (4) the importance of congregational singing; and (5) the use of language for God that is expansive, inclusive, non-patriarchal, and that consistently respects persons of all cultures, ethnicities, and physical and mental abilities.

REFLECT

- One song identified as “green” was “Blessed Be Your Name” by Matt and Beth Redman (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du0il6d-DAk>). Using the criteria above, discuss what have might have put this song on the green list.
- One song designated as “yellow” was “Indescribable” by Chris Tomlin (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IIVfkY5q54>). Using the criteria above, discuss what might have put this song on the yellow list.

Helpful Links

- The Worship Planning section of Discipleship Ministries offers resources for worship planning and music ministries as well as articles about music in worship:
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning>
- The Center for Congregational Song is the resource and programmatic arm of The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. Its site offers resources, meaningful conversations, and support for hymn/song writers: <https://congregational song.org/>
- [Hymnary.org](https://www.hymnary.org) is an online hymn and worship music database for worship leaders, hymnologists, and amateur hymn lovers alike. At [Hymnary.org](https://www.hymnary.org), you can search or browse hymns by title, tune, meter, key, Scripture reference, and more.

About the Writer

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You can visit Jeanne's website at: www.jeannetorrencefinley.com.*

Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Caregivers

by Jessica Petersen

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought increased attention to the vast number of people who serve as caregivers. Who are the caregivers in our society? What new challenges has the pandemic presented for caregivers? How can communities of faith work together to care for caregivers?



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