Academic foundation for “Disrupting the Dichotomy” presentation[[1]](#footnote-1)

Dr. James F. Marriott

Music in general is a gift of God and a demonstration of God’s transcendence and God’s immanence.[[2]](#footnote-2) Music has the capacity to reveal God in relationship with humanity and the world.[[3]](#footnote-3) At the same time, music is made manifest *within* humanity, and thus, is a product of the cultural and contextual influences that distinguish human communities over time. As a cultural product, music has the capacity to represent and produce the values and practices of the culture. This includes values that may be consonant with the Christian faith and values that may be dissonant with the Christian faith, as well as various levels of intentionality or passivity in these associations. For example, music may be employed intentionally as a vehicle of cultural formation because of the values it produces and represents. Other times, music may be producing and representing cultural values more innocuously, with a subtle passivity that can often be masked as neutrality. Music can represent cultural contexts as an artifact of values, as a kind of intentional cultural ambassador or token. Other times, music can be taken for granted, a kind of cultural “elevator” music that is casually employed yet no less present or powerful. The music of Christian worship, then, is an inculturated entity, representing and producing the values of the Christian faith (“A”) in the intercultural matrix of various cultural contexts (“B”).[[4]](#footnote-4) As a hermeneutical instrument, music functions as a language and performance system that facilitates and marks the cultural continuity of a community. This continuity is consequently interpreted by individuals-in-community, an interpretation which itself is conditioned by the cultural context and experience of the individual and the community.

The hermeneutical conversations regarding music often quickly become oriented around “good” and “bad” music.[[5]](#footnote-5) Good music, for Albert Blackwell, seems to be that which acknowledges, abides by, and thrives within the created order.[[6]](#footnote-6) Good music, furthermore, transcends the ordinary in a kind of classic timelessness. Good music reveals God’s transcendent and immanent nature as “perfectly” as possible; bad music does not.[[7]](#footnote-7) Bad music is identified as “music too vacuous to mediate sacramental depths…which, I’m afraid, is quite a lot of music.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This acts as a continuum of quality, with some musical expressions achieving more success than others. All musical genres have the potential for this perfection; yet, in Blackwell’s opinion, some genres of music have more good than bad, while others more bad than good.[[9]](#footnote-9) For Blackwell, following the influence of Karl Barth, Mozart’s music achieves this type of transcendent perfection.[[10]](#footnote-10) The music of Mozart, for Blackwell, has a timeless character of transcendence, limited neither by Mozart's own cultural context nor Blackwell's cultural conditioning for comprehending Mozart's music, even if Blackwell acknowledges that context does matter. Blackwell’s teenage son acknowledges the excellence of Mozart, but sees similar greatness in the music of Paul Simon, which his father also concedes.[[11]](#footnote-11) Thus, the premise of Blackwell’s notion of transcendent perfection must be acknowledged as hermeneutically negotiated, a dynamic state of becoming rather than a fixed, homogenous entity. This dynamic subjectivity does not make evaluation impossible, nor does it condition the validity of an evaluation. Rather, it puts various interpretations and evaluations into communal dialogue with one another, and orients the whole notion of “transcendent perfection”—a modern construct—as something which is hermenutically derived—a postmodern construct. This limits the authority and normativity of individual hermeneutical contributions, consistently reinforcing the notion of culture and the “transcultural” as dynamic, not static. Thus, based on cultural and contextual preconditioning, one may deem a performance of a piece of music as “bad,” while another fellow audience member might see it as “good.” Each may be tempted to consider the other as incompetent or even “uncultured,” but that attitude only reinforces a pre-modern type of cultural understanding that posits one perspective as “better” than another. One may also be tempted to associate only with people who share similar sentiments, but this would limit the horizons of meaning and understanding to only one’s own narrowly conceived ideals. Alternatively, the mutual dialogue around hermeneutical difference will allow for a fusion of perspectives, allowing one to hear and appreciate the greatness previously discredited in a musical performance or genre, while also fostering an appropriate environment for musical critique and growth.

This dialogue, in macro form, is one manner through which music becomes associated with the Christian tradition: Music that is deemed to be good by an intercultural hermeneutic continues to be used throughout the life of the Church.[[12]](#footnote-12) The music has local origins and is hermeneutically renewed in each performance; consequently, it is constantly evaluated for its ability to consonantly communicate the values of the Christian faith. At the same time, the dynamicity of culture ensures that the interpretation of a performance will always be somewhat conditioned. This dynamicity of culture also allows the same song to be recast in new genres, timbres, and forms, just as the dynamicity of tradition allows new song genres, timbres, and forms to be included into the Church’s practice. Thus, there is music that, having been deemed “good” by the Church, exists as part of the church’s tradition; however, the dynamic nature of music, culture, and tradition ensure that “traditional” music is constantly in flux. "Good" music may come and go from the tradition. "Bad" music may occasionally be included in the tradition. "Good" music may become "bad" in its dynamic hermeneutical negotiation and relevance to culture, and "bad" music may grow to become transcendently "good" even if not appreciated in its own generation.

In many ways, the notion of musical “genres” as such is a modern product, demonstrating the homogenous, compartmentalizing nature of modern thought: Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Serialism, and other familiar eras of modern music history are identified by a consistent time period, formal structure, melodic/harmonic character, and often geographical location. Western Christian hymnody has the same trajectory, spanning from Reformation Chorales through Oxford and Victorian Hymns and into Revival hymns and Gospel Songs. Many Christian denominations have been established on a narrow canon of hymnody and liturgical music, and in a modern cultural model, these canons participate in the distinguishing between various Christian communities. Throughout the twentieth century, these boundaries have become increasingly blurred, both spawning new hybrid genres of music as well as facilitating the sharing of musical resources between communities. The porous boundaries and more fragmented nature of these postmodern developments create new questions of communal identity, formation, and representation.

Daniel Levitin also notes the practice of music listening as a uniquely Western phenomenon and cultural shift of the last half century.[[13]](#footnote-13) The capacity to record music and, subsequently, to listen to recorded music, has changed the role of music in culture in a number of ways. First, the present-day access to an unquantifiable amount of recorded music from various genres, cultural contexts, and time periods directly contributes to the cross-cultural and intercultural musical nature of many Western communities. Second, access to recorded music has become increasingly individualized and personalized, redefining the way in which music builds community. Third, the very act of listening to music as opposed to *making* music, whether individually or in community, changes the dynamic of music and its role in the formation of the individual. E. Byron Anderson notes the increased individualization of music consumption in the last few generations and the consequences of this shift not only for the hyper-individualized spirituality address above, but also for the role and function of music in the church as corporeal and communal.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, culture and context affect how an individual and a community even engage music, and, consequently, how music affects and forms the community.

**Inculturation and intercultural hermeneutics**

The model of intercultural hermeneutics and inculturation as meaning-making fosters a careful critique of the brokenness of culture that neither rejects cultural forms and rituals nor includes them uncritically. This model assumes that the culture of the church is dynamic and inclusive, constantly forming the culture even as it is formed by the culture. This model gives voice to those on the margins, working to foster liturgical egalitarianism. This model is governed and guided by various loci of orthodoxy that work to foster collective agreement and liturgical continuity, a unity of confession that is not dependent on the uniformity of rites. This model also acknowledges that cultural “consonance” is itself hermeneutically and contextually conditioned, meaning that a certain set of practices or forms of inculturation might not be applicable across contexts. This helps to prevent a cursory treatment of adiaphoric liturgical ritual, calling for the community to wisely steward their liturgical rituals in a way that enables cultural engagement without cultural capitulation. Music, as a cultural form and language tool, is capable of communicating the Christian faith as well as other cultural “faiths.” It is the manner in which these interact—the manner in which consonant practices enrich both the faith and the culture as well as the manner in which dissonant practices challenge both the faith and the culture—that gives music its beauty and power.

Thus, there is no transcultural music of the church; rather, the church’s performance of faith has been sustained through a variety of cultural musical forms throughout its history. These forms are dynamic, even as there is some level of continuity from one generation to the next. Likewise, there are no transcultural instruments, outside of the human voice (and even this might be expanded dynamically in communities for whom audible sound is not normative). Rather, instrumentation, like musical forms, reflect the cultural and contextual patterns of the community. The church has a wide history of musical instruments that have served to sustain the human voice, and the tradition is dynamically inclusive of historical practice and fresh innovations. The church as tradition perpetuates itself through musical forms and ritual behavior that are both historic and innovative, both “not entirely encoded by the performers” and self-referential, made new in each performance.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Christian faith is made new in each generation both through old and new songs, old and new instruments, and old and new forms, all contextually sensitive towards engagement and enactment of the faith in local communities as representative of the continuity of tradition that is the Christian faith in every time and place.

In light of all of this, the consideration of “good” and “bad” church music must be conditioned by these hermeneutical tensions: engaged with culture, seeking cultural consonance as place of exchange, open to cultural dissonance as reciprocal and mutual cultural critique, contextually conditioned with an understanding that various songs and genres may foster various meanings in various contexts, and mindful of tradition as enriched through continuity with historical practice and innovative incorporation of new practice. (7)

The emotional and devotional capacity of music also holds great potential for intercultural exchange. Music as expression speaks in ways that mere words cannot. Music as ritual teaches in ways beyond narrow cognition. Music as experience fosters ecumenism and community that political or ecclesial rhetoric can endorse but not achieve. This type of intercultural musical exchange is not merely cultural tokenism, where various cultural and especially musical elements might be juxtaposed against one another for the sake of token diversity. Rather, communities foster a shared unity based on the expression of humanity that comes through God’s gift of music. Music joins voices together audibly, joins people together corporeally, joins cultures together ritually, and joins the church together universally. This kind of intercultural exchange is also open to the range of emotions and enactments—the unity fostered by music is not simply “joyful” or “happy.” Rather, music can speak powerfully as voice of lament, voice of anger, voice of loss. Intercultural musical exchange can also intentionally critique exercises of power and privilege, giving voice to the margins of Christian practice that may be hegemonically silenced otherwise. Music especially has the capacity to nuance the assumption of “reverence” held by many. “Reverence,” as a form of intercultural hermeneutical exchange, might be loud, might be emotional, might be unsettling. Reverence is achieved in the invested participation of the community in the enactment of faith as discipleship for the world. Thus, instead of reverence implying a kind of “set-apartness” from the world, reverence is best served to look like the discipled life—in ritual and habit, in speech, and in music. The devotional understanding of music in the church shifts the paradigm of reverence away from the assumed Roman stoicism to an inculturated reflection of the human life.

1. Note: The content of this essay is borrowed and slightly altered from my 2017 dissertation project: *Reframing the Worship Wars in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod: An Analysis of Ordo and Music Through the Lens of Inculturation and Intercultural Hermeneutics.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Albert L. Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 16 and 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I say more about this in a previous section of my dissertation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Phan, “Liturgical Inculturation: Unity in Diversity in the Postmodern Age” in Keith Pecklers, ed. *Liturgy in a Postmodern World* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Blackwell, *Sacred in Music,* 17. The categories “good” and “bad” here are used in terms of music aesthetics, both in terms of taste and of cultural formation, rather than on “virtuosic” or “incompetent” performances. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Blackwell, *Sacred in Music,* 49-124 for the formation of his notion of musical perfection around the universal Pythagorean principles of music. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Blackwell, *Sacred in Music,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Blackwell, *Sacred in Music,* 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Blackwell, *Sacred in Music,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Blackwell, *Sacred in Music,* 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Blackwell, *Sacred in Music,* 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This is not to deny the role of authoritative ecclesial power in much of sacred music’s retention or dismissal throughout the history of the Church. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Daniel Levitin *This is Your Brain on Music* (New York: Plume, 2007), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. E. Byron Anderson, “Music and Meaning for the ‘Spiritual but not Religious,’” *Liturgy*, 30:3 (2015), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)