

## Demystifying the role of contemporary worship music by Rob Newton



### WHAT IS 'TRADITIONAL' AND WHAT IS 'CONTEMPORARY'?

To identify the **similarities between traditional and contemporary worship**, it's worth asking two questions: "What is music for?" and "What does it allow us to do?"

#### "What is the music for?"

1. For congregational involvement: particularly for Methodists, as we love to sing our faith and feel part of the service right from the start.
2. To create the right atmosphere to enter God's presence: we so often enter the worship room busy from our outside lives, yet this time should be special and completely focused on God. To sing can help clear our minds and enable us to concentrate on the one important matter.
3. It can create an emotional connection between God, ourselves and each other: singing isn't a mere physical act; we engage with our hearts as well as our voices and we can tune in with our emotions not only to God but also with each other.

#### "What does it allows us to do?"

Music allows us to:

- **pour out and release our emotions:** how many times have you heard the expression "It brought me to tears"? – and often about a song that meant so much. Music has a way of unlocking our deep emotions and allowing us to express how we really feel: about God, about Jesus and all he means to us, and about the Spirit and how we love him being with us
- **ask for forgiveness** without having to struggle for just the right words
- **pray with hymn writers' poetic words**, calling out loud and making them our own, as with Ryan Delmore's "Come to me":

You are the light that shines  
in the dark for all to see  
You are the love that takes  
a broken heart and sets it free

- **affirm our faith** as the body of Christ, as in Marc Nelson's "I believe in Jesus":

I believe in Jesus  
I believe He is the Son of God.  
I believe He died  
and rose again,  
I believe He paid for us all.

- **reinforce our theological understanding:** much of what we understand from scripture about the mystery of our faith is explained in the words of our hymns
- **help us remember the word of God:** many of our hymns are scripture set to music e.g. Romans 8: 38 *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,"* in Darren Clarke's hymn becomes:

I am convinced, death nor life  
 Neither angels nor demons  
 Not the present, nor the future  
 Nor any other power, height nor depth  
 Not anything in all creation  
 Shall keep us from the love of our God

What about the **differences between traditional and contemporary worship?**

We often hear generalised comments about the differences between traditional and contemporary hymns. For example:

"Older hymns have more 'we'; newer hymns have more 'I'"  
 "Older hymns speak 'of' God; newer hymns speak 'to' God"

Having looked through the repertoire of my band (ranging from *Hymns & Psalms* to the latest Christian music CDs), these and similar statements seem to me to be urban myths. Using indexes of first lines, *Hymns & Psalms* [the 1983 Methodist hymn book]: just two per cent begin with 'I' and less than one per cent 'we', and *Songs of Fellowship* has three per cent 'I' and five per cent that begin with 'we'.

Similarly I couldn't find any difference in the way they spoke either 'of' or 'to' God. It is likely that one or two disliked modern hymns were set against a few favourite old ones and the myth was born.

The real difference between traditional and contemporary worship is how the hymns are used.

In a traditional service, hymns are often used (perhaps unconsciously) to separate other worship items, whereas contemporary hymns are seen as the worship items themselves. This is a very broad comment and not accurate in every context but, generally speaking, a traditional service will use the hymns to reinforce the spoken items, whereas in more contemporary worship, hymns will be used either instead of or as part of the spoken items.

This would be true of items such as opening prayers, the call to worship, prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of adoration, pleas for forgiveness, assurance of forgiveness, and celebration of God's blessings. (See Sam Taylor's comments in [Making musical partnerships.](#))

## SERVICE STYLES

It is appreciated that many services now are a blend of the old and new and that the following extremes may not exist in such stark forms; but they will allow us to demonstrate the difference between traditional and contemporary worship formats.

### Traditional: **“the hymn sandwich”**

This will often be built around the following structure:

Call to worship  
Hymn  
Prayers of adoration and confession  
Hymn  
Reading(s)  
Hymn  
Sermon  
Hymn  
Prayers of intercession  
Hymn  
Blessing.

There is nothing at all wrong with this style of service. It has all the elements of worship within sound structure. Advocates of this style will be comfortable about what is happening and when. A contemporary worship service shouldn't be just about replacing old hymn with new within the same structure.

### Contemporary: **“the 4 Ws”**

**Welcome:** introduction, call to worship, opening prayer

**Worship** with music: hymns, prayer, encouragement

**Word:** scripture, sermon, drama, interview, presentations

**Witness:** our response through prayers of intercession, an offering, and promises, call or appeal

One important aspect of this style of worship is that those on stage or at the front playing the music only get up and down twice. Because the band is clearly visible (unlike a mostly unseen organist) it is less distracting if the musicians aren't forever getting up and down but, rather, playing “in blocks”. As a result, there may be different requirements of the musicians than simply playing from the intro to the end of a hymn.

## MUSICAL REQUIREMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

The music leader needs to move with the Spirit, working within people and being aware of the preacher, the worship leader and the congregation. Hymns may need to change during their playing for some reason or other. When played in groups (see above), they also need to be linked together.

### Links

Linked hymns give an uninterrupted flow to the service and either move worshippers from one theme or mood in the service to another or keep them in the same 'place' for longer without over repeating the same hymn.

### Why?

If you stop playing, people wonder what's next; and with a mostly traditional congregation, if you stop they will all sit down. If you continue seamlessly there's no need to wonder "What next?", and this will maintain the flow of worship and hold the atmosphere, retaining continuity and the concentration on the most important part of the service – God.

### How?

There are many ways to link hymns. Listen to any band in concert and you'll notice there are few actual gaps in the show. Here are a few suggestions:

- use similar hymns in pace, style and key and move seamlessly from one to another
- use different hymns and have a dead stop and instant restart. (It helps if you use the right hymns for this or it may have the wrong effect.)
- use spoken voice-over while maintaining a quiet guitar / keyboard or bass / drum accompaniment
- use congregational a cappella end and restart out of the quieter atmosphere – this is particularly effective during prayerful hymns

Avoid silence, unless it's part of the mood. Even a simple light tap from the drummer will indicate that the section hasn't finished. During quiet times beware of distractions: keep the band still and be aware of what is on the screen.

(For more about "bolting together" hymns and songs, see [Making musical partnerships](#))

### Extending hymns

Sometimes it may be necessary to keep a hymn going.

### Why?

- if people need more time to enter God's presence or if people are there

and want to stay there longer. People are not all the same and some take longer than you may have allowed for to get to the right point

- conversely, sometimes everyone is either praising God with all they are or they are waiting on God's word to them. To do anything else but carry on would lose that moment
- often the Spirit will call to emphasise a lyric to make sure the message or point comes across or sometimes the unexpected happens and if it is Spirit-led then we shouldn't stifle what is happening just because the hymn has finished

### How?

- add an instrumental section: the chorus, a verse, middle 8, bridge, or just a chord sequence from part of the hymn
- repeat part or all of the hymn. This does entail having good communication with the band or music group so everyone knows what's happening and what is expected of them. It is helpful to rehearse the possibilities so it's less of a surprise at the time
- change the tempo, style, emphasis or volume. By altering which instruments play what part you can create a completely different sound. With a band or music group do not be tempted to change key: most congregational hymns are set within the average vocal range of most people and to change key may take it outside some people's capabilities. For the less musical it can also be off-putting: just when they think they have the tune, it changes.

### Reprise

Following another worship element (an appeal, a prayer, a word/picture), it may be helpful to restart the hymn. The most important issue is to decide where to re-start from and make sure everyone knows. This includes the band, of course, but don't forget the techies doing the visuals, and the congregation.

If the hymn has an easily recognisable chorus, then that is possibly the best place from which to re-start, although it can be very effective to go again from the theme verse.

## MOOD SETTING

As with all worship elements, the effectiveness of a hymn is often down to the right mood having been created. To create the right atmosphere the leader must have something to aim for in the overall in the service as a whole or one part of it, e.g.:

- Celebration: joyful, triumphant
- Thankful: praise, adoration
- Prayerful: lament, pleading
- Thoughtful: contemplative

Many hymns can reach across a variety of moods but some may not; therefore the hymn choice can be very important to the overall atmosphere.

Some hymns can change during the playing of them if the need arises or as planned as part of a 'build-up' or 'calming-down' of the service (see below).

## ENDINGS

We must always be aware of how and where people will be emotionally when you finish either a hymn or the section of the service. Try not to bring people down with a bang or leave them frustratingly in need. Try to make sure the end of a section links smoothly to the start of whatever is next – or if there is nothing next then bring the music to a satisfying conclusion. (This can be difficult for those of us used to secular performances. Remember: it's not like a gig when you leave an audience wanting more.)

## TOP TIPS

Over many years of leading people in worship, and particularly exposing people to contemporary worship for the first time, there are some things I have noticed work well:

- Never assume a hymn is well known. Even some of the more modern classics may not be known.
- Always have a good vocal lead for the tune. It's often lovely to go off and improvise but always leave someone holding the tune for the less vocally able.
- Have a good groove section. It is important that people can feel the style of music they are to sing to, so a good rhythm section with strong bass and drum section really helps.
- The music leader should be identifiable to all. One person should be 'in charge' of what is happening musically, so make sure everyone knows who to look to for that leadership.
- And finally - **Relax and Worship**. It's your worship time too.