


[Contents](#)
[Other Issues](#)

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The Impact of Global Christian Music in Worship

by Roberta R. King

The global tapestry of Christian music in the twenty-first century is weaving the strands of our lives together in stunning new ways. In the music of worship, the narratives of our lives are gathered up together as one before the throne of God. Centuries ago, the Psalmist declared, "All nations will come and worship before you, O God" (Ps. 86:9). Increased travel, large numbers of immigrants, and the changing sociological make-up of the evangelical church in North America make the Psalmist's long-anticipated reality one that is literally emerging within our churches as never before.

Whether we approve with its processes or not, we live in an era of increasing globalization. While multinational corporations are moving beyond the borders of continental North America in search of economic power, large numbers of immigrants and refugees are migrating into the Western Hemisphere. Shifting boundaries and exposure to peoples from the nations are interacting with one another in dynamic and fluid ways. Buddhist temples and Muslim mosques, once located on the other side of the world, have found dwelling places in the West. New configurations of culture are weaving their way into the warp and woof of North American society.

One of the major features of globalization is what scholars have termed *reflexivity*. The theory of reflexivity highlights the phenomenon of "what happens 'out there somewhere' has an impact on what happens here—in our schools, homes, and churches. . . . and what happens here reflects back on what happens there."¹ This heightens the sense that the touted "global village" has arrived.

Global church music is one of the many indicators of globalization's interactive principle of reflexivity. No longer is the global village at our doorstep, but the nations have moved in and are dwelling among us. The emergence of global church music simultaneously exposes us to multiple new musical cultures and connects us to families and a people's original local faith community on the other side of the world. The dynamics of reflexivity are reconfiguring the musical soundscape of the evangelical church at worship in North America. Or so it seems. The church is at a crossroads, wherein, as Stackhouse correctly points out, "Local communities need to be prepared for what is happening, and to decide whether to resist or embrace it."²

The question for every local church is, *what does this mean for us as a worshipping community in our local setting?* Perils and opportunities exist, leaving the church faced with critical decisions. My purpose is to consider key factors of musical reflexivity at work in the Church today, identify the impact these factors can make on church life, and propose a series of questions to guide us in ministering through the global music of worship. We begin with an initial definition of global Christian music.

Defining Global Christian Music

Global Christian music is defined as any music found in the Christian Church worldwide. Particularly, it specializes in cultural musics from the non-Western world where songs are



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often sung in vernacular languages and performance practices remain fairly loyal to their surrounding music traditions. In the evangelical church in North America, for example, there is a growing trend for hymnals to include global songs and indigenous songs that arise out of the burgeoning churches in the Southern Hemisphere. These songs are from church communities that have recently discovered their musical voices. Likewise, musical instruments, such as the West African *djembe* (hand drum), have become standard components of many contemporary worship bands. *Siyahamba*, the popular 1990s choral anthem from South Africa, launched many choirs into searching for additional anthems from the burgeoning church in the southern hemisphere.³ Such inclusions of cultural musics point toward the expressive influence and reflexivity of the global Church.

The phenomenon of global music in worship is so prominent that ethnomusicologists (i.e., scholars who study the relationship between music and culture) have recently published ethnographic field studies on *Music in American Religious Experience*.⁴ Bohlman affirms and summarizes the preponderance of global music in worship in the evangelical church and other religions. He observes:

In the twenty-first century, the publication of new prayer and songbooks continues unabated, and individual musicians seek out new prospects for the agency of faith, responding to each of the successive journeys across the face of America's sacred landscape. Music continues to crowd in upon American religious experience.⁵

Bohlman's thoughts suggest, and I agree, that this is not just an esoteric phenomenon to be sidelined or left for another day's reflection. Rather, it serves as an indicator that nations are coming together in worship.

What, then, are key considerations of musical reflexivity at work in the church? In order to begin to assess and understand the impact of this silent, yet full-of-sound phenomenon, we turn to three key principles when studying music cultures.

1) *Music is intimately linked to a people and their culture.* Global Christian music reflects the plural and multicultural era that defines our lives. Music is intimately bonded to people, functioning as an expressive element of each particular cultural grouping. When the Church gathers together in worship, each group of people brings heart music—the set of musical genres that speak to them in significantly profound ways. This means that when multicultural groups gather in worship, the need exists to enter into worship that is meaningful for them. At a recent Christmas music program in a large Southern California church, a Nigerian Christmas carol was sung and performed on twelve *djembe* drums. As the song was announced, an African cry of

excitement pierced the air in the filled-to-capacity 5,000-seat auditorium. Nigerian Christians were among the celebrating worshipers, responding with joy to the opportunity to worship in their own musical language. In fact, they were honored to have a Nigerian song in praise of the Christ-child performed in the large Western church, offering them an opportunity to share a very real component of their faith with believers in their present location.

With the increasing entry of non-Western peoples into the Christian church, no single universal music style is adequate. Indeed, the peril is that we are not adequately ministering to the wide range of worship needs in the ever-changing cultural make-up of our congregations.⁶

A restriction of the range of musical faith expressions misses the rich potential we have for learning about worship from the church around the world and the breadth and depth of the body of Christ. The situation is complex, evoking expanding philosophies of music ministry that embrace an increasing diversity of musics available for bringing people into the presence of God.

2) *Global music sounds and traditions are expanding the church music repertoire.* We

are seeing (“hearing”) the introduction of musical sounds and traditions from around the world. What were formerly considered exotic sounds are more common in places where new musical voices are

welcomed. With Western music as the broad historical base for worship, the ancient texts of the Christian faith will not change. Yet God’s Word and faith statements are being expressed in a broadening array of cultural musical styles and performance *praxis*. These newer musical threads will guide the church to incorporating new patterns into the tapestry of our musical worship. For example, the African church offers a holistic type of worship where music performance practice includes dance and drama at the same time. That is, singing worshippers must stand, move, and clap before a melody with text is considered a genuine song. As one Ugandan from East Africa, Walya Sulaiman, explains about his music,

In music, there is talking, but somehow in a different way. In music, there is also drama. So, you may sing about something and at the same time you are acting. People can hear what you are saying and also see a picture, you see? So they may think about what you are telling them when they actually see an example of it. So people can catch stories and pick messages better than merely telling it to them.⁷

Incorporating global Christian music into worship fosters multimedia events that simultaneously draw from several art forms and communicate in multivalent ways. They have the potential to energize worship where people come to view the majesty and holiness of God in new ways. African worship styles, for example, are known for their celebrative character. They most readily contribute to the joyful, festive occasions in the church. Thai Christian worship, on the other hand, is elegantly slow and measured with every gesture densely packed with symbolic significance. Subtle gestures, such as movement of the eyes and careful hand positions, engender meditation and reflection. When thoughtfully combined with sound theological lyrics, they have the potential to evoke theological reflection that expands the church’s expression of faith.

3) *New theological expressions contained in global song lyrics engender a more expansive understanding of the nature of God.* What I consider to be one of the richest contributions of global Christian music lies in the theological content of song lyrics. For example, the song below reveals the Thai value for showing respect to God:

Released by love to share new life,

we bow respectfully to God.

The melody we play and sing is from deep within our soul,

The harmony we have in Christ

leads to service sincere and sure.

Let us make God’s worship our one goal.⁸

As the singer proclaims a call to respectful worship of God, her slow elegant movements underline the depth of her statement. The content of the song text is profoundly embodied and visualized in ways that stimulate honoring God in majesty and holiness. Thus, the dynamics of reflexivity at work in global Christian music provide new theological pathways for understanding God in today’s contemporary society. It also cultivates intentional hearing of the biblical narrative in ways that evoke revitalization of our Christian faith.

Global Christian worship songs may also foster learning to praise God in the midst of suffering. A newly composed song from Rwanda based on Romans 8:38–39 serves as one example. Composed in 1999 by widows and orphans who survived the horrific genocide of 1994, the song text focuses on God’s love overcoming the atrocities that still haunt the survivors in body and mind. They sing,

Ese nilkicyadutandukanya . . .

What then can separate us from our God's love?

Nothing can hold us back from his love.

Not even death . . . not even life.

In the process of composing the song, the widows knew the traumatic experience of facing death, where they had been forced to watch their husbands butchered, followed by their own experiences of torture. By singing such songs of hope that arise out of suffering, believers in the North American church are able to identify with the widows and their suffering, to pray for their continued struggle of survival, and simultaneously allow Scripture passages to speak to their own unique situations. Such global Christian songs aid believers in recognizing anew the truth of our hope in Jesus Christ. The singing Church experiences and identifies with the widows' reality of "offering a sacrifice of praise" (Heb. 13:15).

Pursuing Unity in Diversity as We Worship

Finally, it is critical for the Church at worship to realize that global Christian music provides a platform for creating unity in the midst of diversity. Literally every church devotes large portions of time to musical worship. New challenges and opportunities stand before us in an era of globalization. It is imperative to take bold new steps towards fleshing out unity in the midst of diversity through the thoughtful appropriation of global Christian music in worship. As we do so, we give voice to the extended Kingdom of God. Embracing global Christian musics and the communities of faith from whom they have arisen, brings glory to God and his work among the nations.

As the church in North America plans for the effective ministry of music that weaves global Christian music into her worship, the following questions are suggested as guidelines in our discussions and considerations:

1. Does our music express and reflect the diversity of peoples who worship with us?
2. Does our music welcome newcomers in our midst?
3. Does our church music encourage each cultural or socio-economic segment of believers to authentic worship?
4. How do we incorporate global Christian music in ways that go beyond tokenism or exploitation of merely exotic sounds?
5. How do we employ global Christian music in ways that are respectful and honoring to Christ and his bride, the Church universal?

We minister in an era where new interactive spheres of music cultures swirl before us. In the music of global Christian worship, the nations are giving voice to *Yahweh*, the God of the universe. We find ourselves moving toward John's eschatological vision of peoples purchased by God "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9) coming before him in worship.

Remembering that "worship and prayer are the glue that holds civil society together."⁹The church in North America has the opportunity to flesh out and model within society the unity we have in Christ Jesus by embracing global Christian music. We are called to reconsider the manner in which we interweave the musical tapestry of global worship, looking for new configurations of church music that center God's people on the Lamb, the one who is worthy of our worship.

ENDNOTES

1. Max L. Stackhouse, Tim Dearborn, and Scott Paeth, *The Local Church in a Global Era: Reflections for a New Century*(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 7.
2. Ibid.
3. Note Calvin Institute of Christian Worship's website that models ways to embrace this phenomenon: <http://webapps.calvin.edu/worship/global>.
4. Philip V. Bohlman, Edith L. Blumhofer, and Maria M. Chow, *Music in American Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
5. Ibid., 19.
6. This is not a new phenomenon in the church. The worship wars of the last century were in essence the encounter of differing subcultures attempting to address God in their indigenous, musical mother tongues. The difference was that the subcultures were defined by generational groupings within the English-speaking world of the United States.
7. Gregory Barz, *Singing for Life: HIV/AIDS and Music in Uganda*(New York: RoutledgeTaylor & Francis Group, 2006), v.
8. Ruth Srisuwan, "Haomiichiiwitphrawphra jaohai," in *Sound the Bamboo: CAA Hymnal 2000* (Taiwan: Taiwan Presbyterian Church Press, 2000), 72.
9. Stackhouse et al., *Local Church*, 62.

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